



Matthew 12:1-8 *At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. ² But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath." ³ He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: ⁴ how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? ⁵ Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? ⁶ I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. ⁷ And if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. ⁸ For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath."*

I used to love Saturdays, just as I'm sure most of you do. Growing up, Saturday meant waking up at my leisure, watching Saturday morning cartoons, only changing out of my pajamas sometime in the early afternoon. That was my ideal Saturday, anyways. Didn't usually happen that way because my parents' idea of a restful Saturday included getting caught up on the chores around the house, cleaning the bathrooms, mowing the lawn, weeding, raking, and so on. And that always meant that my days-of-rest were spent working alongside the rest of my family, usually grumbling about whatever task I was given. But I've noticed, I've become a lot more like my parents. I don't find it very restful at all anymore to sit around doing nothing on a day off, because then I spend the entire time thinking about all the chores I need to get done. And so, nowadays I too am making to-do lists and working on off-days, and I find that rather restful.

I guess we could say, we all have different ideas of what a Day of Rest should entail. And that was true also of the God-ordained Day of Rest known as the Sabbath Day. When God instituted it, He had in mind the true rest which every human soul requires. But by Jesus' time, the Sabbath had turned into nothing more than a day of work. What about you, have you found yourself needing some rest recently? Have you been feeling burned out, just waiting for a day when you can finally take a breath? Well look no further, because your time has come. Today, we will be finding that Sabbath rest which God alone can give. We'll do so as we consider the theme:

Finding Our Sabbath Rest

- I. Our version of "rest" involves only self-care
- II. Jesus' version of "rest" involves only you-care

As students of Scripture, I'm sure you are all at least somewhat aware of the many rules that were in place regarding what you could and could not do on the Sabbath Day during Jesus' time. The list of prohibited activities included: planting, plowing, reaping, sifting, kneading, baking, shearing sheep, threading needles, tying a knot, untying a knot, hunting, cutting, building, lighting a fire, extinguishing a fire, writing, erasing, constructing, demolishing, and the list goes on and on. By extension then, in our day, practicing Jews are prohibited on Saturdays from: adding water to a vase of flowers, separating good fruit from spoiled fruit, cleaning mud from shoes, cutting hair or nails, applying makeup, braiding hair, lathering up soap, sharpening a pencil, painting, drawing, typing, opening an umbrella, using a telephone, turning off a light, and that list goes on and on as well. I'm thankful we don't have to worry about all of that, truly we don't.

Now, it's not like this was all just *totally* made up; at least initially the laws surrounding the Sabbath Day were based in Scripture. After all, in our Old Testament reading, God declared that on the Sabbath, not even your animals or visitors should work so that even your servants get an opportunity to rest. (cf. Deuteronomy 5:14) Clearly, God was serious about Sabbath rest.

It's not surprising then, when in our sermon text, Jesus and His disciples catch some flak for breaking Sabbath regulations. Let's set the scene: ***"At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath."*** Now, we might look at what they were doing and think that clearly, the disciples were in the wrong. After all, they're walking through a stranger's farm fields, plucking the crops, and eating them! That's stealing, isn't it? Not exactly, no. Actually, God's law allowed for this type of thing. In the Mosaic Law, we can read, ***"If you go into your neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor's standing grain."*** (Deuteronomy 23:25) Basically, you were allowed to help yourself to whatever could be harvested by hand as you were passing through, you just couldn't actively harvest the crop for yourself. So, the Pharisees weren't upset that they were taking grain that didn't belong to them, not even the owner of the field would be upset at that! They were upset at the mere act of plucking grain on the Sabbath.

Now the problem with these Pharisees and the long list of do's and don'ts which accompanied them was the attitude behind it all. Deep down, every person on earth is trying to find rest. Not just physical and mental rest after a busy week, but the rest of having your guilt taken care of. Perhaps you've heard of the natural knowledge of God. That's the knowledge that every human being is born with: that there must be a God out there somewhere and that He will hold people accountable for their wrongdoing. That's why there are so many religions in this world that are designed around the concept of doing good to make up for your wrongs. People naturally know some things about God, and they want to be able to rest with the thought that they're "ok" in His book.

And there are really two ways that stick out as the methods that most people will use to find that rest from their guilty consciences. The first is creating a list of manageable rules that you can sort of check off as you go through the day—if you do all those, then you should be ok before God. That's the idea anyways. The second method is then comparing yourself to others, and so long as you're not as bad of a person in comparison, then again, you should be just fine. These were also the methods of the Pharisees. They made these long list of things not to do on the Sabbath, and so long as they did not do them, they figured that meant they were ok with God. And then they were quick to point out anyone's shortcomings, not because of a genuine concern for their souls, but because this would elevate their own status as rule followers. And Jesus would later say about these same men, ***"This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."*** (Matthew 15:8-9)

Sadly, it's not too hard to see the many ways in which we follow along in the error of the Pharisees. For we too can be easily tempted into thinking we are "better Christians" **BECAUSE** of what we do or don't do, especially in comparison with one another. How frequently we will find any excuse to invalidate the law when we do wrong, in other words, to write off and excuse our own sins as not being all that bad, but then demanding a pound of flesh when someone else does the same. How easy it is, when confronted with our own sin, to then point to someone else's errors and say, "Well what about them!?"—as if that excuses our bad behavior.

Now, certainly, it is good for us to look out for one another and to warn people when they've fallen into sin. That's one of the benefits of Christian fellowship, that we keep watch not only for ourselves, but also for one another and strive to steer each other away from sin. Jesus tells us again and again in Scripture to do this very thing. **"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother,"** Jesus says. (Matthew 18:15) But do we always do this with that attitude of gaining our brother through repentance and forgiveness? If we look into our own hearts, I think we'll find how often we might simply gain self-satisfaction at the failings of others, it's often more about caring for ourselves than for them.

This is just the Pharisaic mindset of trying to find our rest only through means of self-care and at the expense of everyone else. In this way, we show just how far *our* hearts are from the Lord. Seeking to find rest for our guilty consciences in *these* ways means that, in reality, we'll have no rest at all. But Jesus has another method of providing rest for your souls, of freeing you from the guilt that burdens you. It doesn't involve any sort of self-care on your part. No, the Sabbath rest that Jesus provides involves only His care for you. And we see this clearly in His defense of the disciples in this account.

The Pharisees pop up, rebuking the disciples through their self-inflated pride, and Jesus defends them by doing what He always does—going back to Scripture. He brings up two different accounts to defend them. First, He reminds them, **"Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests?"** He's referring to the account found in 1 Samuel 21, when David and his men were fleeing for their lives from the sword of King Saul who wanted to kill them. They were starving and in need of food when they came to the tabernacle and asked for the showbread which was designated by God as food only for the priests. And yet it was given to him, and he ate, and in this he did no wrong.

Next, Jesus says, **"Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless?"** What does he mean that the priests profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? Well, when He says, **"Read in the law"** that should send you back scrambling to the first five books of the Old Testament. And what do we find? There we can read about God's Laws regarding the work in the Temple, like in Leviticus 24 when God gives directions about the showbread. There He says that even on the Sabbath the priests were to sift out the flour and make dough and kneed it and bake it and arrange it on the altar, in short, do all those things which that list of Sabbath Laws forbade! Similarly, they taught on the Sabbath. They read the Scriptures, they preached, they offered the sacrifices, they were *working* on the Sabbath! And yet it was ok, because they were doing what God told them to do, even if it meant they were to Labor on that Day of Rest.

In both these examples, Jesus' point is that even these men who were technically breaking the Ceremonial Sabbath and Temple Laws that God had set up specially for His people Israel, it was ok, because they were doing what the *Lord* of the Sabbath had told them to do. They were guiltless because they were acting on God's direction, God who had set up those laws in the first place. So, Jesus defends His disciples' actions, pointing out this truth, and then dropping this bomb on the heads of the Pharisees, **"I tell you, something greater than the temple is here."** Woah! Minds blown! Something greater than the temple? In the Jewish mindset, the only thing greater than the temple is the one to whom the service of the temple was dedicated: God Himself. And that's Jesus' point.

He's telling the Pharisees that He is God. He's the one to whom all these ceremonies and feasts and temple customs were dedicated, He was, as He says in our last verse, **"The Lord of the Sabbath."** He

alone has the right to dictate the law as He pleases, and He tells the Pharisees, they'd gotten it all wrong. In fact, in the parallel account from Mark, Jesus says at this point, **"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."** (Mark 2:27) While the Pharisees had become obsessed with everything they could or could not do on the Sabbath, striving to follow all of these lists to the T and standing in prideful judgment against anyone who mis-stepped—Jesus was obsessed with one thing: People. He's fanatically devoted to you and to me. And when God said, **"Remember the Sabbath Day,"** it was for our benefit, not His. He tells us to do this because He knows how much we need rest. And we find our rest in Jesus our Savior; in His Holy wounds we may finally rest from our guilt.

One curiosity of the Gospel of Matthew is that he rarely mentions any sort of time element, rarely is there any sort of chronology to his accounting. And that means that when we find one, it's worth paying attention to. Like the first verse of our text, **"At that time..."** What time exactly? Well, just go back a few verses, and you find it's at that time when He said this: **"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."** (Matthew 11:28-30)

The Sabbath was not meant to be something we **do**, it's something we **need**. In fact, God made this clear in our Epistle reading, where Paul wrote, **"Let no one pass judgment on you in questions of . . . Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come."** (Col. 2:16-17) That which *has* come was Jesus, the One who has already checked off every box, and who has done all the necessary work FOR YOU!

Another nuance of the Gospel of Matthew is that it quotes the Old Testament more than any of the other Gospels. There are some 68 direct quotes of the Old Testament in addition to many more indirect references. And in the book of Matthew, Jesus Himself makes some 58 exact quotations and direct references to the Old Testament Scriptures. Now you might think that perhaps several of these references would pop up again and again. But there is only one quote used twice by Jesus in the entire book. It's found in verse 7 of our text as He's defending His disciples, and it's a direct quote from the Prophet Hosea. **"I desire mercy and not sacrifice."** (Hosea 6:6)

The other time He quoted that verse was in Matthew chapter 9, where He's defending the tax collectors and sinners whom He was dining with. **"I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."** (Matthew 9:13) We might say this could be Jesus' favorite passage since He quoted it more than any other. And isn't it beautiful? That we see Jesus, time and again, speaking up to defend His own against their detractors. Almost like a picture-prophecy of how He is your advocate and speaks good things on your behalf right now at the right hand of the Father, as your Mediator. Clearly, this same Jesus is the one whose idea of true Sabbath Rest involves only His care for you. And that is where our true rest lies.

Yes, there may be many areas of life in which you need to find rest: rest from work, a night of sleep, maybe a bit of a mental break. But when it comes to finding rest for your guilty consciences in the form of being able to stand not guilty before God—look no further. You have the Savior who has done all the necessary work for you, who defends you, who speaks well of you—even before the Father in Heaven. Speaking of you before His Father's throne, He points to His sacrifice, the only sacrifice that was done not pleading for mercy but filled with mercy, and love, and full and free forgiveness. This Savior invites you today, **"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."**

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

(Philippians 4:7) Amen.

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