

Luke 6:1-5 Mt 12:1-8

NIV Harmony 67-68; Compassionate 73-75; Loyal 98-100

Introduction

1. Do you remember the days of blue laws when most businesses were closed on Sundays?
 - a. Did closing most businesses on Sunday keep us from meeting some real needs?
 - b. Does the absence of blue laws today impact our observance of a Sunday sabbath?
2. How are we to keep the Sabbath holy?
3. Jesus came into conflict with the Pharisees over His disciples' harvesting of grain on the Sabbath.
4. **Read Mt 12:1-8.**

A. The Disciples' Sabbath Dinner (Mt 12:1-2; Lk 6:1-2)

1. Mark gave full accounts of many events related to Jesus' ministry in Galilee that we will not cover in our examination of the unique material in Matthew and Luke.
 - a. He reported Jesus' cleansing of a leper (Mk 1:40-45; Mt 8:2-4, Lk 5:12-16).
 - b. He recorded Jesus' healing and forgiving a paralytic (Mk 2:1-23; Mt 9:1-8; Lk 5:17-26).
 - c. He also documented the call of Matthew and a question about eating with sinners asked by the Jewish leaders (Mk 2:13-22; Mt 9:9-17; Lk 5:27-39).
 - d. Charles Erdman concludes, "Jesus had aroused the anger of the Pharisees by his claim to forgive sins. He had further enraged them by this treatment of sinners. But he brought their hatred to a climax of fury by his attitude toward Sabbath observance. Henceforth they sought to destroy him" (Charles Erdman, *The Gospel of Luke*, 65).
2. Mark also recorded this controversy over picking grain between Jesus and the Pharisees (Mk 2:23-28) to which Luke and Matthew add some additional details worthy of study (Lk 6:1-5; Mt 12:1-8).
3. All three synoptic gospel writers recorded the setting of this conflict between the Pharisees and Jesus.
 - a. It was the Sabbath.
 - b. Jesus and His disciples walked through a grainfield.
 - c. The hungry disciples picked and ate some of the grain.
 - d. The Pharisees confronted Jesus and the disciples with an accusation of wrongdoing.
 - 1) "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath." (Mt 12:2)
 - 2) "Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" (Lk 6:2)
 - 3) "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" (Mk 2:24)
 - e. In Luke's account the Pharisees made their accusation against Jesus personally, whereas in Matthew and Mark they accused Jesus' disciples. However, an accusation made against His disciples would have also been an accusation of Jesus.
 - 1) Notice that Jesus had not rebuked what the disciples were doing, and there is no record of the disciples asking His permission to eat the grain.
 - 2) The disciples knew by now that Jesus' attitude toward the Sabbath was different than that of the legalistic Pharisees.
 - f. Why was what the disciples did unlawful?
4. What unlawful thing were they doing on the Sabbath?
 - a. Perhaps it was walking, since the Sabbath was a day for rest and limited walking? I don't think so.
 - b. Perhaps they were accusing them of stealing grain?
 - 1) No. The Law made allowance for this small harvest for personal needs in another person's field (cf., Dt 23:24-25).
 - 2) Warren Wiersbe writes, "It was lawful for a Jew to eat from a neighbor's vineyard, orchard, or field, provided he did not fill a container or use a harvesting implement (Deut.23:24-25). The disciples were hungry, so they picked the heads of wheat, rubbed them in their hands, and ate them. But in so doing, according to the rabbis, they broke the Sabbath law, because they were harvesting, winnowing, and preparing food!" (Warren Wiersbe, *Be Compassionate*, 74).

- c. Luke is the one who gave the key to understand their accusations: "...and his disciples began to pick some heads of grain, rub them in their hands and eat the kernels" (Lk 6:1).
- 1) The fourth of the Ten Commandments states "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy" (Ex 20:8).
- 2) To this law of God, the Jews had added layers of manmade protection to help them keep the law.
- 3) In fact, they had added 39 prohibitions to help keep this one commandment regarding the Sabbath. One of their manmade laws was "Reaping is work; threshing is work."
 - a) According to this manmade law no non-essential work was to be done on the Sabbath.
 - b) The disciples were harvesting and threshing grain as they rubbed it in their hands to release the grain so that they could eat it.
 - c) It seems to be a rather fine point interpreted to the extreme, but that is the way with Pharisees.
- 4) In adding these prohibitions, the Jews had lost sight of the heart of God's law regarding the Sabbath. It was meant to bring life and relief into people's lives and not hunger and hurt. They had perverted the heart of God's law with their additional manmade prohibitions.

B. Jesus' Response to the Pharisees' Accusations (Mt 12:3-8; Lk 6:3-5)

1. All three synoptic writers state that Jesus answered by calling the Pharisees' attention to the story of David and his followers in 1 Samuel 21:1-6.
 - a. "He answered, 'Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions'" (Mk 2:25-26)
 - b. "Jesus answered them, 'Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and taking the consecrated bread, he ate what is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions'" (Lk 6:3-4).
 - c. While Matthew said the same thing as Mark and Luke, he added some additional details related to Jesus' response: "He answered, 'Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. Or haven't you read in the Law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent? I tell you that something greater than the temple is here. If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent'" (Lk 6:3-7, underlining mine).
 - d. Warren Wiersbe notes Jesus made a threefold response:
 - 1) An Appeal to a King (Mt 12:3-4),
 - 2) An Appeal to the Priests (Mt 12:5-6), and
 - 3) An Appeal to a Prophet (Mt 12:7). (Warren Wiersbe, *Be Loyal*, 98).
2. Appeal to a King (Mt 12:3-4)
 - a. All three accounts agree that Jesus' primary argument was based on the actions of David and his companions, who entered the tabernacle and ate the consecrated bread (Mt 12:3-4; Lk 6:3-4; Mk 2:25-26).
 - b. The events in 1 Sam 21:1-6 did not necessarily occur on the Sabbath, but Jesus raised this as an example of law breaking by King David and his followers.
 - c. Notice that only Mark mentions the name of the high priest, Abiathar.
 - d. Only priests were to enter the Holy Place and then only to tend the bread, lamp, and altar of incense.
 - e. The bread was consecrated to God and not for human consumption except by consecrated priests (cf., Lv 24:5-9).
 - f. Wiersbe notes, "...David and his men ate the loaves, and what Jew would condemn Israel's great king? 'He was God's anointed!' they might argue, *but that was exactly what Jesus claimed for Himself* (Luke 4:18). Not only was He God's Anointed, but He was also the Lord of the Sabbath! When Jesus made that statement, He was claiming to be Jehovah God, because it was the Lord who established the Sabbath. If Jesus Christ is indeed Lord of the Sabbath, then He is free to do *on* it and *with* it whatever He pleases. The Pharisees did not miss His meaning, you can be sure" (Wiersbe, *Be Compassionate*, 75).

- g. Jesus argued, if it was good for great King David, then why not for the Messiah and His followers?
- h. Of course, the question that would have arisen next in the minds of the Pharisees would have been, "Well who are you? You are certainly no King David!"
- i. Matthew's record of Jesus' response includes additional insights that add to Jesus' revelation of His true identity.

3. Appeal to the Priests (Mt 12:5-6)

- a. Matthew added a second argument made by Jesus who said, "Or haven't you read in the Law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent?" (Mt 12:5)
- b. The priests desecrated themselves on the Sabbath by doing the work of offering the sacrifices.
- c. Wiersbe writes, "The priests had to offer a given number of sacrifices on the Sabbath (Num. 28:9-10) and yet were not condemned. In fact, their service was in obedience to the law given by God. This suggests that man's traditions about the Sabbath were wrong, for they contradicted God's own law" (Wiersbe, *Be Loyal*, 98).
- d. Matthew also added, "I tell you that something greater than the temple is here" (Mt 12:6). The priests should be serving Jesus, who is greater than the temple where they make their sacrifices.
 - 1) Jesus is greater than David and even the temple where the priests served.
 - 2) G. Campbell Morgan states, "And if the priest in the Temple is freed from guilt, when he appears to break the Sabbath, how much more these men journeying with Me if they satisfy this hunger by plucking ears of corn! The vindication of what I do is in Myself. The vindication of what My disciples do is in the underlying purposes of My ministry" (G. Campbell Morgan, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 126).
 - 3) Craig Blomberg notes, "But Jesus was not of Levitical, priestly lineage; nor is there any evidence that his life was in danger or his needs nearly as urgent as David's. Jesus' point is not that analogous circumstances exist to warrant exceptional practices but that 'one greater than the temple is here' (v. 6). By implication the point of v. 4 is there also that 'one greater than David is here' (cf. 22:41-45). It is not, therefore, the particular situation in which Jesus finds himself that justifies his disciples' behavior but his very nature and authority which can transcend the laws and make permissible for his disciples what once was forbidden. . . . Jesus' sovereign authority will determine how the Sabbath is now fulfilled in the kingdom age" (Craig Blomberg, *Matthew* in NAC, 196-97).

4. Appeal to a Prophet (Mt 12:7)

- a. Matthew added a third argument as Jesus quoted scripture, "If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent."
 - b. Wiersbe notes, "The quotation is from Hosea 6:6, one that Jesus had already quoted (Matt. 9:13). The Sabbath law was given to Israel as a mark of her relationship to God (Ex. 20:9-11:31; 31:13-17; Neh 9:12-15). But it was also an act of mercy for both man and beast, to give them needed rest each week. Any religious law that is contrary to mercy and the care of nature should be looked on with suspicion. God wants mercy, not religious sacrifice. He wants love, not legalism. The Pharisees who sacrificed to obey their Sabbath laws thought they were serving God. When they accused Christ and His disciples, they thought they were defending God. How like religious legalists today!" (Wiersbe, *Be Loyal*, 98-99).
 - c. Blomberg concludes, "[Jesus'] approach is not arbitrary but based on God's priorities of putting compassion above ritual, which Sabbath-keeping can so often hinder" (Blomberg, 197).
5. Finally, all three accounts agree with Jesus' final statement, "For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" (Mt 12:8; Lk6:5; Mk 2:28) to which Mark added the important precursor statement, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mk 2:27).
- a. Wiersbe says, "To call Sunday 'the Sabbath' is to confuse the first day and the seventh day and what each signifies. The Sabbath is a reminder of the completion of 'the old creation,' while the Lord's Day is a reminder of our Lord's finished work in the 'the new creation' (2 Cor. 5:21; Eph. 2:10; 4:24). The Sabbath speaks of rest *after* work and relates to the law, while the Lord's Day speaks of rest *before* work and relates to grace. The Lord's Day commemorates the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead as well as the coming of the Holy Spirit and the 'birthday' of the church (Acts 2).

...By their strict and oppressive rules, the Pharisees and scribes had turned the Sabbath day into a burden instead of the blessing God meant it to be, and Jesus challenged both their doctrine and their authority. He had announced a new 'Year of Jubilee' (Luke 4:19), and now He would declare a new Sabbath" (Wiersbe, *Be Compassionate*, 73-74).

- b. Erdman notes, "[Jesus] was justified in relieving the Sabbath from the narrow and burdensome observances which had been bound upon it by the Pharisees and to restore it to mankind as a glad day of rest and of refreshment and of fellowship with God (Erdman, 66).
- c. By claiming to be the Son of Man and Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus stated that He had God-given authority over the Sabbath and would define it according to God's original intent rather than according to the laws and traditions of man.
- d. Jesus declared Himself as deity with divine rights. The Pharisees and teachers of the law really had something to worry about now and to plot against!

C. Reflections

- 1. How do you keep the Sabbath?
- 2. How are we like the Pharisees in testing the limits of God's love and grace toward others by placing legalistic burdens upon them?
 - a. How do we turn what God has meant to be a blessing into a burden for ourselves and others?
 - b. The Lord's Day, our Sabbath, is meant to be a blessing for all, never a burden to anyone.
- 3. How well we do keep the heart of God's law which is to love Him and others as ourselves?
- 4. Instead of finding faults in other people, we must find ways to commend and encourage them.