

Lord of the Sabbath

Matt. 12:1-14

Intro. Let's begin by reading vs. 28-30 - **"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."**

Twice in **Matt. 11:28-30** Jesus promised **rest** to those who come to Him and learn from Him. The word **rest** in **v.28** means *to refresh or revive*. The effort required to live by the volumes of regulations drawn up by Israel's religious leaders, was exhausting and burdensome. Like people who try to do enough good to compensate for sin and win God's favor, the average Galilean was weary. Law-keeping offers no rest, just endless duty. In total contrast, Jesus said **come to me. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me...and you will find rest for your souls**. The **rest** Jesus promised is the definition of what God intended the Sabbath to be for His people. The seventh day was God's merciful provision for all of His creation...for man / for beast / and even for the land. In **Ex. 20:9,10 – The Lord said, Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates**. The Sabbath precedent dates back to creation. After six days of creative activity, God rested on the seventh day. Later, under Moses, He instructed the Jewish people to follow His example and practice this rhythm of 6 workdays followed by a day of rest. The wisdom and mercy of this provision is unmistakable. When the day of rest and refreshing came, God's OT people said, TGIS...Thank Goodness It's Saturday! But in the hands of Israel's legal experts, Sabbath laws were expanded, defined and codified. The simplicity of God's design was distorted in a complex system that made the Sabbath a burden instead of a blessing. Under man-made regulations, the Sabbath was more onerous and burdensome than the other six days of the week! How do you spell back-wards?

As we consider our text for the morning, we need to understand that Jesus and His disciples didn't violate God's Law. Let me say that more forcefully...never on any occasion did Jesus violate God's Law! God's Law was Christ's Law because Jesus is the Incarnate Word of God. If Jesus violated His own law, He would have been a hypocrite...a transgressor...a sinner...a lawless man. If there was any trace of iniquity in Jesus, He was not God and would not have qualified to be the perfect sacrifice whose death paid the penalty for our sins. But having said that...we need to understand that Jesus refused to observe or validate certain man-made traditions when doing so was contrary to God's nature. On seven occasions, Jesus angered the Pharisees by ignoring their frivolous Sabbath regulations. When interpreting these passages it's essential that we recognize the distinction between God's Law and rabbinical traditions because they're not the same. Some mistakenly insist that Jesus excused violation of God's Law on the basis of situation ethics. Like moral relativism, situation ethics is the idea that right or wrong is not absolute, but can only be determined in light of the situation. They claim Jesus believed human necessity trumps our obligation to obey God's Law. This is incorrect, misleading and dangerous. Jesus never violated God's Law! Just imagine where this mistaken philosophy leads. Moral relativism allows each individual to decide what is moral or immoral in a given situation. This makes every person his own arbiter of right and wrong. We must reject this philosophy if Christ is Lord of our lives. So it's not OK to run a red light because you're running late for church. It's not OK to cheat on your taxes because you feel the tax code is unfair. And it's not OK for couples to live together before marriage because they're in love and it works out better for them financially. The end does not justify the means! It's wrong and heretical, to suggest Jesus broke God's Law and practiced a philosophy that allows circumstances to dictate right and wrong! As the Word of God, Jesus lived in total conformity to the will of God and the Law of God of which He is the author! But as we'll see this AM, there are occasions when the holiness of God's character trumps or supersedes a ritual or detail...not of His moral law, but of His ceremonial law.

The theme of **chaps. 11-13** is the rejection of Jesus and His message. All four Gospels indicate that the controversy over the Sabbath was the breaking point between Jesus and the Pharisees. In our text this AM, two accusations were made against Him and both charges centered around Sabbath violations. The key verse in our passage is **v.8** where Jesus said, **"For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."** But let's see how the events unfolded.

1. The First accusation made against Jesus - unlawful reaping on the Sabbath – vs. 1, 2 - At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath."

As itinerant missionaries, Jesus and His disciples were supported by gifts they received from people they ministered to. In those days roads were scarce. Paths linking villages often crossed grain fields. If scholars are correct, this first controversy took place on the first Sabbath after Passover. The grain ripening in that early spring season was barley. It was common for folk to pick and eat the grains of barley or wheat. God's Law given through Moses allowed travelers to pick small amounts for personal consumption. **Deut. 23:25 - If you enter your neighbor's grainfield, you may pick kernels with your hands, but you must not put a sickle to his standing grain.** This provision reminds me of the sign typically posted at an all-you-can-eat buffet. We're invited to eat all we care to in the restaurant, but we're not allowed to box or bag extra portions to take home. Years ago Peggy and I faced a dilemma...what to do with our daughter and the purse she'd filled with candy at Ryan's on Miller Rd. For all she knew, the candy was there for the taking! She went into that field with a sickle!

So there was nothing illegal about picking and eating some grain in a neighbor's field. The charge leveled against Jesus was that His disciples were doing it on the Sabbath. According to Rabbinic law, (not God's law) to pick any amount grain was reaping. To separate the grain from the chaff by rubbing it in your hands was considered threshing. To blow away the chaff was winnowing. In other words, what the disciples did was work...the kind of work reserved for the other six days of the week. It was work prohibited by their traditions. As you read this account, don't you wonder how the Pharisees were able to catch the disciples doing this? Were they trailing behind? Had they erected an elevated blind to police the fields? Were they hiding in the grain like rats? We don't know. I favor the rats idea.

Now we could spend the rest of the day and tomorrow illustrating restrictions the Jews added to God's law. The Talmud (which is the major compilation of Jewish traditions), has 24 chapters of Sabbath regulations alone! Say, "that's a lot!" Here are just a few examples: Baths were not allowed on the Sabbath. Please tell me why? Because...the rabbi's felt any water spilled on the floor was the same as washing the floor...and washing a floor was work. On the Sabbath, a Jew was not allowed to carry a load heavier than a dried fig. Oh, but listen...if an object weighed half that amount, it could be carried twice. The Talmud also insisted it was illegal to move a chair. It couldn't be lifted because it weighed more than a dried fig. But it was also illegal to drag the chair. Why?...Because in doing so, the legs might carve a little furrow in the ground which was considered plowing. And of course, plowing was strictly forbidden along with sewing / grinding / baking / sifting / dying / shearing / spinning / kneading / weaving two threads / and tying or untying a knot. One regulation limited travel to 3,000 yards from an owner's house. But if a rope was stretched between a house and some other building, that building was considered an extension of the house which meant its owner could travel 3,000 feet from that building. (this rule resulted in the first extension cord... joking!) But this is a sample of the minute and silly regulations they added in an effort to keep the Sabbath day holy.

In one sweeping statement Jesus corrected their mistaken notion about the Sabbath. He said, **"The Sabbath was made for man, (or for man's benefit) not man for the Sabbath."** – **Mk. 2:27** These rules made people slaves to the Sabbath...that's what legalism does...it enslaves!

And listen...what they were doing was so terribly wrong because observing their man-made rules had become more important than loving God. The rules turned the focus on rule-keeper and his performance instead of on God and His goodness. In **Mk. 7:6-8** Jesus quoted Isaiah and said, **“These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.”** Friends listen...beware of legalism. Beware of every temptation to exchange rule-keeping and performance for a true heart relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. Rule keeping can’t save anybody, nor can rule-keeping sanctify or make us Christ-like. God has a better way. **Gal. 2:16 - ...we know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.** Jesus then responded to this charge against Him two ways.

First, He responded with **An answer from historical precedent – vs.3, 4 - 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.** The event spoken of here is recorded in **I Sam. 21**. The Pharisees must have cringed when Jesus said, **“Haven’t you read what David did?”** I mean, Pharisees were the Bible experts...they were custodians of God’s revelation. Under their breath they humphed and said, *“Are you kidding me...why, of course we’ve read that story...You read it, didn’t you Yitzhak?”* Instead of snooping around a grain field, maybe they should have been reading their Torahs. I’m just saying.

Now remember, King David was Israel’s all-time, national hero. David was the giant slayer and man after God’s own heart. As the story goes, David and his men had nothing to eat as they fled from King Saul who wanted them dead. When they arrived at the Tabernacle in a town called Nob, they went to the priest for help. Ahimelech had nothing to offer except for some week-old loaves of shewbread that had just been exchanged for fresh loaves. According to **Lev. 24:6-9**, this bread was to be consumed by the priests. Because the 12 loaves had been dedicated to the Lord, they were not to be offered for sale or consumed by just anybody. David was given the 5 loaves he asked for and neither God nor centuries of rabbi’s were offended by it. (make a note, 5 is the number of grace)

The reason God wasn’t offended may be something like this...While the shewbread was reserved for the priests, an earlier command in **Lev.19:18** instructs God’s people to **love your neighbor as yourself**. The command ends this way...**I am the LORD**. In other words, God said, “to love your neighbor is to be like Me. Loving kindness is who I am.” How can you love your neighbor and send him away hungry? So even though the regulation of **Lev. 24** prohibited this holy bread from being sold / or consumed by just anybody...a ceremonial rule could be superseded by a gesture of kindness that emulates the holy character of God. The 12 loaves symbolized God’s faithfulness to provide daily bread for His people. So on this occasion, God may have allowed the symbol to be set aside for substance. In other words...there are occasions when God’s moral law may trump or supersede rituals or details of His ceremonial law. In the Sermon on the Mount this principle appears again when Jesus rebuked those who gave an offering according to the law, but withheld assistance from needy parents or family. He said, **“...you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.” (7:11-13)**

In **v.7** Jesus gave the scriptural principle that supports His response. Here for the second time in Matthew’s Gospel, He quoted God’s prophet of love, Hosea. **If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent.** In this verse, **mercy** is steadfast love. It represents God’s holy attribute. He is compassionate, kind, loyal and faithful. The Lord’s greatest desire was that His people love Him and learn to be merciful and compassionate just as He is.

Sacrifice, on the other hand, represents justice and the legal obligations of the Law. The whole sacrificial system was God's remedy for Israel's sin and failure to love Him as they should. Yet in the OT, sacrifices were never more than symbolic. The rituals were a like signs that pointed to God's gracious and future provision of Jesus as the final and ultimate provision for our sin...something no man or animal could ever accomplish.

Matt. 12:7 brings Christ's answer into focus. God was not offended by Ahimelech's merciful act because He delights in mercy more than sacrifice and compassion more than ceremony. If the Pharisees had even an ounce of mercy, Jesus said, they **would not have condemned the innocent** (His disciples). Write this down...legalism and mercy, have nothing in common! Legalism makes demands...mercy provides. Legalism is harsh and inflexible...mercy is gentle. Legalism finds fault...mercy extends grace. Legalism is judgmental...mercy is forgiving. So Jesus reasoned this way, if God acting in mercy, allowed David and his men to set aside ritual to satisfy their need for food...shouldn't men (who are not God) set aside their man-made traditions to satisfy the need of some hungry disciples? Were they greater than God? Were their traditions more binding than God's Law? Who died and made the Pharisees judge over such things? And oh by the way, what about David? Jesus then responded with...

An answer from priestly function – vs. 5-6 - Or haven't you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent? I tell you that one greater than the temple is here. The Pharisees no doubt cringed a second time when Jesus said, **Or haven't you read in the Law?** I mean...*“Didn't He already ask that?”* If these men were aware of **Num. 28:9,10**, they might have remembered the list of duties their priests engaged in every Sabbath. Let's read that passage...**“On the Sabbath day, make an offering of two lambs a year old without defect, together with its drink offering and a grain offering of two-tenths of an ephah of fine flour mixed with oil. This is the burnt offering for every Sabbath, in addition to the regular burnt offering and its drink offering.”** Holy smoke! This business of offering sacrifices required rolled up sleeves and a bunch of hands on labor! The work the priests engaged in was much like the work done by a chef preparing a banquet. And notice which day of the week this work was to be done. v.9 begins...**On the Sabbath.** Right about now, the Pharisees should have been thinking...*“Huston, we've got a problem! Our Sabbath regulations disallow priests from carrying out their duties! Last time I checked, a lamb weighs more than a fig and I bet they wash the floors too! Every Sabbath, our priests desecrate the day!”*

Jesus then said...**“yet they are innocent** (that is according to your judgment). In other words, *“Your expansion of God's Sabbath Law is in direct conflict with the Sabbath duties God entrusted to His priests. But you give them a pass just as you gave David a pass. They work hard on the Sabbath, but you excuse them. So why won't you extend the same merciful consideration to my disciples? They didn't slaughter a lamb / build a fire / roast meat / or do any of the work the priests do! As we were walking along, they just picked some grain, rubbed it in their hands and ate it! And you're hot under the collar and all over them for doing it!”* By His first answer, Jesus showed how their accusation contradicted their understanding of God's judgment in a similar situation. Then by His second answer, Jesus showed how their accusation was inconsistent with their own judgment regarding the work their priests did every Sabbath. This illustrates something more about legalism. For one thing, those who add regulations to God's law, presume to be more separated and holy than God. But the rule-makers also tend to be hypocritical and inconsistent with themselves.

I was raised at a time when many evangelicals held that Sunday was sort of a Christian Sabbath... no work / no ball playing / no shopping / no games / no smiling / just church. There are at least five problems with that view. *First*, the Sabbath was distinctly Jewish and never applied to Gentiles. *Second*, Jesus said, the Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath.

Third, nowhere does the NT urge Christians to keep the Sabbath because Christ fulfilled the Law and released us from it. And *fourth*, in **Rom. 14**, Paul presents the new and improved attitude to "sacred or holy days." Now having said that...I believe it's wise and beneficial to recognize the divine rhythm of six workdays followed by a day of rest. Too many of us burn the candle at both ends. I also believe it's entirely reasonable and profitable to offer the first day of the week to God. In the first century, Sunday was called **the Lord's Day**...a day when believers gather to declare and celebrate Christ's glorious resurrection. We say, T.G.I.S...Thank Goodness It's Sunday! But there's one more point...#5...a point I've never figured out. If Sunday is the Sabbath when all work is to cease, what have I been doing every Sunday for the past 40 years? If you think teaching and preaching isn't work...you haven't tried it! If Sunday is the new Sabbath as some teach, church workers have this backwards. The most intense workday for all who serve in the church is sundown Saturday to sundown Sunday! Amen? It's during these hours that preachers preach / teachers teach / ushers usher / deacons deak / and musicians rehearse and make music. Let me tell you, few situations are more contradictory and stressful than to be a legalist in a legalistic environment! So many eyes are hoping to catch you picking grain!

Before concluding His answer, Jesus elevated the whole conversation to a higher level. At the end of **v.6** He said, **I tell you that one greater than the temple is here.** To the Jews, nothing was greater than their Temple. MacArthur writes, *"Even if the Pharisees didn't understand that Jesus was referring to Himself, they were horrified – because nothing, other than God Himself was greater than their temple."* Any uncertainty about what Jesus meant was lifted in **v.8** when He said, **"For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."** Make no mistake, Jesus here claimed equality with God. He is forever greater than the buildings we erect in His honor!

2. Second accusation – unlawful healing on the Sabbath – vs. 9, 10 - Going on from that place, He went into their synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"

We're not sure if this next event happened the same day or the following Sabbath. What we do know is that it happened in the same vicinity. **v.9** says, **He went into their synagogue**...the synagogue belonging to this same group of Pharisees. If this next event happened a week later, the man with the shriveled hand may have been "a plant"...a man brought in as part of a sting operation aimed at trapping Jesus. So Matthew informs us in **v.10 - Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"** A shriveled hand was a hand that had suffered some sort of neurological damage or disease. Over time the muscles had atrophied and the tendons had shrunk. A **shriveled hand** often appears more like a claw. This man's useless hand was symbolic. It symbolizes the inability of our flesh to keep God's Laws or work our way to heaven.

At this point, we need to remember something about Jesus. Jesus is Lord! Amen? He is omniscient and sovereign over all things. Nothing takes God by surprise and no circumstance is outside of our Savior's control. If the Pharisees plotted to trick and accuse Jesus...He knew it beforehand. They felt He'd walked into their trap. But Jesus went to this synagogue with full knowledge of what would happen there. He was in complete control. If anything was staged, it was staged by Jesus. The whole event was orchestrated by Him to prove He is Lord of the Sabbath and Lord of everything.

Jesus then answered their question with **An answer from merciful allowance – vs. 11-13 - He said to them, "If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."** Then he said to the man, **"Stretch out your hand."** So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other.

Note that Jesus said, **if any of you has a sheep...**He didn't say "if any of you happens to see a sheep." The sheep in the pit isn't any sheep...it's a sheep that belongs to you. **You** in the analogy is the owner...the Pharisee. On the flip side of the analogy is the man with a shriveled hand. He isn't just any man. He isn't detached from family...He isn't unwanted or unclaimed. This man belongs to Jesus by virtue of creation. Through the subtlety of the analogy, Jesus claimed this man belongs to Him. It's as though Jesus said, "Like your sheep, this man is mine. Like every man, woman, boy or girl, he was created by Me. He is known and loved and owned. His welfare is My concern!"

The commentator William Hendriksen suggests there was a particular legislation that permitted a Jew to rescue a helpless animal on the Sabbath. Throughout the Bible we see evidence of God's mercy toward animals. **Deut. 22:4 - If you see your brother's donkey or his ox fallen on the road, do not ignore it. Help him get it to its feet.** Whether this question referred to some law or was simply rhetorical, the answer was obvious. Of course you'd **take hold of your sheep and lift it out.** "Sheep aren't cheap!" (Say that with me) Even the most rigid, uptight Pharisee would answer this way. The conclusion of the matter is stated in **v.12 – "How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."** Like the wicked Haaman who was hanged on the gallows he built for the godly Mordecai, I'm thinking the trappers got caught in their own trap.

Then, like so many hundreds of miracles Jesus had already done to demonstrate He is the Messiah, He **said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other.** The miracle was complete, instantaneous and undeniable. It was a "grade A" miracle that proved the power of God resides in Jesus. Let me simply say this...while the work of our own hands contributes nothing to our salvation...when Jesus saves us, He makes us new creatures and gives us work to do for His glory. **Eph. 2:10 - For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.**

3. The Pharisee's tragic resolve – v. 14 - But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.

This is the first explicit mention of the murderous designs of Israel's leaders against our Lord. **Lk.6:11** says, **"they were filled with madness, and communed one with another what they might do to Jesus."** Mark's account is more definite: **"Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus."** – **Mk. 3:6** They were certain they had to get rid of Him...they just didn't yet know how to do it. But isn't it ironic...they were incensed that somebody picked and ate a few grains on the Sabbath, and irritated that someone healed a shriveled hand on the Sabbath...but they were OK with murder. They were so determined to get rid of Jesus they were willing to team up with the wicked supporters of Herod's dynasty. Let me say it again...legalism will make you a hypocrite. The legalist is never able to live up to his own standards.

Let me finish with 7 statements about legalism.

1. Even if we keep all the rules...we're all filthy sinners in the sight of God. The only remedy for our sin is the blood of Jesus shed on Calvary's cross. God requires every one of us to admit our sin and trust His Son to save us.
2. If it were possible to be right with God by law-keeping, Jesus died needlessly. We dishonor his sacrifice when we presume to think there's something we can add to His finished work on the cross.
3. Mercy and legalism have nothing in common. Legalism makes us critical, fault-finding, and judgmental of others. God delights in mercy.
4. The rule-maker and rule-keeper not only presume to be more holy than God, but their lives will invariably violate and contradict their own rules. In the process of performing, they will fail to love God. The passion to be self-righteous will turn our focus inward and away from Him.

5. There is no peace for those who try to earn God's favor by rule-keeping. It's an exhausting and endless quest.
6. Since the Law is a unit, it's all or nothing for the rule-keeper. We can't pick and choose. To violate one law is to be guilty of the whole.
7. God's way is the best way! Listen to it again. In **Matt. 11:28-30** Jesus said, "**Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.**"