



World Christian Fellowship

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Can you do good on Sabbath!

Matthew 12:9-14

Matthew 12:9-14, *Now when He had departed from there, He went into their synagogue. ¹⁰And behold, there was a man who had a withered hand. And they asked Him, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"—that they might accuse Him. ¹¹Then He said to them, "What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? ¹²Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." ¹³Then He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he stretched it out, and it was restored as whole as the other. ¹⁴Then the Pharisees went out and plotted against Him, how they might destroy Him.*

The fight really began to take shape when Jesus and His disciples were passing through a grainfield. The disciples walked along with Him; and because they were hungry.

They reached out their hands, picked the heads of grain off the stalks, rubbed the grain in their hands, blew off the husks, and

munched on the kernels. This caused the Pharisees who apparently were following along and watching them.

They said, *“Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!”* (**Matthew 12:2**).

As far as the Pharisees were concerned, the disciples were breaking the law of God by working on the Sabbath day. In the strict interpretation of the Pharisees, the disciples were 'harvesting', and 'grinding', and 'threshing', and 'preparing a meal'—and all on the day in which they were supposed to rest from all forms of labour.

Jesus, however, answered their accusation wisely such a way to turn their attention to the real issue.

The key to understanding that story was the affirmation Jesus made about Himself in it.

He said that, *“in this place there is One greater than the temple”* and affirmed, *“for the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath”*.

It was a remarkable assertion. He was saying that the reason for His freedom to do as He did was found in who He Himself is.

He is the One that the temple served.

He is the One to whom the Sabbath law pointed.

Sabbath has,

- a) No restriction of necessity
- b) No restriction to Serve God
- c) No restriction to show mercy.

The commanded “rest” of God had its ultimate fulfilment in Him.

Hebrews 4:3, *For we who have believed do enter that rest, as He has said: “So I swore in My wrath, ‘They shall not enter My rest,’ ” although the works were finished from the foundation of the world.*

Today we come to yet another story about the Pharisees' controversy with Jesus over the Sabbath.

The Holy Spirit led Matthew to immediately follow up that first story with a second one.

As we have found in our study of Matthew's Gospel, the opposition against our blessed Saviour grew stronger as the story progressed.

- First incident the Pharisees merely confronting Jesus with a criticism,
- Second incident the Pharisees openly seeking to trap Him so they can accuse Him of sin.

- First incident Jesus making an assertion about who He is in relationship to the Sabbath,
- Second incident Jesus proving it before His accusers in a bold, public demonstration of His divine power on the Sabbath.

- First incident ends with the Pharisees frustrated and humiliated by Jesus' rebuke,
- Second incident ends with them plotting together to kill Him.

People who consider themselves to be “religious” need continually to be reminded of. That principle is suggested to us in those very important words of our Lord.

“Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.”

The principle that God counts acts of genuine mercy and goodness toward people higher than mere practices of religious ritual and ceremony.

There's no doubt that the preaching of His word is important to Him. He would never accept His word being handled before His people in a careless and flippant way.

Jesus would never accept His worship being conducted in an anything but an honourable and orderly manner.

But do you know what else is important to Him?

People.

The preaching of His word is meant for people and not the other way around.

Matthew 19:13-15, *Then little children were brought to Him that He might put His hands on them and pray, but the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴But Jesus said, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven." ¹⁵And He laid His hands on them and departed from there.*

I understand what the disciples were trying to do. They were trying to protect the dignity of the moment.

What could be more dignified than the Son of God teaching the truths of the kingdom to His followers?

Frankly, no one has a way of interrupting a feeling of man-made religious dignity like a little child.

Those little children were noisy and distracting.
Some of them were probably messy.
Some of them had their little fingers up their noses.
Others were playing with bugs they caught.

They all wanted to crawl on Jesus and sit on His lap as He taught the people. Yet, He welcomed all the little children, and loved them, and insisted that they be permitted to come to Him whenever they wanted to.

This is because people, even little people, and the mercy that they need shown to them, are far more important to our Saviour than rituals or programs or religious ceremonies.

In fact, rituals, programs, and religious ceremonies are meant to serve people's needs and not the other way around.

This is a lesson that is deliberately repeated in this section of Matthew's Gospel. We had just been given one version of it.

Perhaps it's because it's something we “churchgoing” people need to constantly be reminded of.

What's important to Jesus is not that we perform our religious rituals in such a way that protects the dignity of the ritual at all costs.

What's important to Him is put the people first and religious ceremonies be next.

Rather, what's important to Him is that the spirit of genuine grace and mercy, which is always a part of the true worship of the Lord Jesus Christ takes precedence over mere outward rituals and religious observances.

This was a principle expressed by our Lord, infuriated the Pharisees and religious leaders of His day.

It may even infuriate people today who are committed to religious ritual.

But it is the truth that is being illustrated to us in this morning's passage.

1. Trap.

Our Lord and His disciples had departed from the “Sabbath in the grainfield” situation and had moved on.

Luke 6:6, *Now it happened on another Sabbath, also, that He entered the synagogue and taught. And a man was there whose right hand was withered.*

Precious truths about our Saviour are expressed in the details.

V 9, *Now when He had departed from there, He went into their synagogue.*

It is specifically called “theirs” and the “they” that are being referred to is the very Pharisees who had just confronted Him in the grainfield.

Wonderful truth about our Lord in this. He had no fear of confronting those who opposed Him. He only withdrew from them when it became clear that they plotted His death.

But He not only did not hide from them. He even went to the very place where they were into, as it were, “their” territory. To the very place where those who opposed Him would be found.

Here, we see our Lord's confident courage.

His faithfulness to the duty of worship on the Sabbath. There was absolutely nothing that the Son of God could have ever learned by attending services in the place of worship.

But He set the example for us by faithfully gathering with the people of God in the place of spiritual instruction when it was time to do so.

We must not, for the sake of private feuds and personal piques, draw back from public worship.

Satan gains the point if, by sowing discord among the brethren, he prevails to drive them the communion of the faithful.

Jesus' example shows that at least part of Sabbath observance includes gathering with God's people, even if some of them have been harshly judgmental of you and entering into the teaching of God's word together anyway.

So, Jesus went to the synagogue.

V 10, *And behold, there was a man who had a withered hand. And they asked Him, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"—that they might accuse Him.*

In that place of worship was found a man who had a withered hand.

It was crippled and deformed in some way perhaps by birth, or by accident, or by illness.

Luke 6:6, says that it was his "right hand".

A very important and needful hand.

The Pharisees were also there watching the Lord, to see what He would do.

They saw in the presence of this poor man, an opportunity to trap our Lord in such a way as to bring an accusation against Him.

The word that Matthew uses was one that referred to speaking against someone in a court of law.

So, it may be that they were even hoping to use this opportunity, later, to bring formal charges against Him as a Sabbath breaker.

So, seizing up the situation, they asked Him, saying, *“Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”*

There was some legal precedent that stood behind their question. The Rabbis had studied the law of God given by Moses and had attempted to give some definition as to what sort of work of healing could be allowed on the Sabbath.

Much of what they said is rather complicated but in general, they taught that medical care was allowed on the Sabbath in situations that involved the actual danger of life.

But that certainly wasn't the case with this man.

His hand was crippled.
His livelihood was probably impacted.
But his life certainly wasn't in danger.

Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?

If Jesus had simply said “yes”, then He would have positioned Himself to be against rabbinical law in the eyes of the people.

But if He simply said “no”, then he would have appeared unmerciful and uncaring.

All of this simply underscores the deep-seated cruelty of the Pharisees with respect to this poor, crippled man. Their concern was not for him.

They weren't interested in showing mercy to him at all. Their only concern was how they could use this poor man's disability to trap Jesus and gain the advantage over Him.

So that they can maintain the authority of their stance with regard to the Sabbath.

In other words, they were seeking to make this poor man serve the cause of the Sabbath. Rather than seeking to serve the man on the Sabbath.

That is why we are told that Jesus knew their thoughts.

Luke 6:8, *But He knew their thoughts, and said to the man who had the withered hand, "Arise and stand here." And he arose and stood.*

Mark 3:5, *And when He had looked around at them with anger, being grieved by the hardness of their hearts, He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored as whole as the other.*

What an evil thing it is when people place the emphasis on the rituals and ceremonies and make other people suffer in order to serve the cause of religion!

Now, before we go any further, do you notice how perhaps unwittingly they were making some very remarkable affirmations about our Lord?

They were seeking to trap Him, but they tried to do so by putting this poor, crippled man before Him knowing, first, that if the Lord saw the man, He would surely show mercy to Him on the Sabbath. This was the whole basis of their trap!

They knew that He would not leave the man unhealed. They clearly knew that it was in the power of our Lord to actually heal the man!

What wonderful things they were saying about our Lord, in spite of themselves!

How remarkable it is that our Lord can make even the opposition of His enemies resound to His own glory!

Psalm 76:10, *Surely the wrath of man shall praise You; With the remainder of wrath You shall gird Yourself.*

2. Rebuke

Their hypocrisy is being rebuked here.

Have you ever noticed how often Jesus answered the questions of His accusers by asking them a question?

Jesus often did this to get the issue back on what is important. They asked about a particular fine-point of the law in order to catch Him in His words and accuse Him.

Jesus responded by asking them a question that made them look into the mirror and measure themselves against the higher principle of mercy.

V 11, *Then He said to them, "What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out?"*

Jesus suggests a situation in which a man has one sheep. Perhaps it is his only sheep, and it is a very valuable piece of property.

The sheep fell into a pit. It cannot get out by itself. To leave it overnight would be to subject it to the possibility of being eaten by a predator.

The sheep itself would be struggling to climb out of the pit perhaps injuring itself or even killing itself in the process.

The Sabbath commandment states that it is to be a day of rest, not only for a man, but also for his animals.

Exodus 20:10, *but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates.*

Deuteronomy 5:14, *but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female*

servant, nor your ox, nor your donkey, nor any of your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you.

Certainly, wouldn't be a restful day for the sheep!

Even if the owner wouldn't be motivated by mercy on the animal, he would certainly be motivated by the desire to protect his property.

So, such a man wouldn't even think twice.

He would get a rope, lower himself down, lay hold of the sheep, and lift it out of the pit on the Sabbath.

Then he, and the sheep, would have a true day of rest!

Every one of those Pharisees who were trying to trap our Lord would have done the same.

Mercy would demand it. They knew the answer to Jesus' first question, and it rebuked their hypocrisy.

So, Jesus follows it up with another question.

V 12, *Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."*

Jesus answered the question the way a farmer would have answered it.

Not the way a theologian would have answered it.

Sometimes a farmer can make better sense of the fine points of practical theology than a theologian.

It's fascinating to think of how often this sort of thing came up in Jesus' dealings with the leaders of the Jewish people.

Luke 13:10-17, *Now He was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. ¹¹And behold, there was a woman who had a spirit of infirmity eighteen years, and was bent over and could in no way raise herself up. ¹²But when Jesus saw her, He called her to Him and said to her, "Woman, you are loosed from your infirmity." ¹³And He laid His hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and glorified God. ¹⁴But the ruler of the synagogue answered with indignation, because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath; and he said to the crowd, "There are six days on which men ought to work; therefore come and be healed on them, and not on the Sabbath day." ¹⁵The Lord then answered him and said, "Hypocrite! Does not each one of you on the Sabbath loose his ox or donkey from the stall, and lead it away to water it? ¹⁶So ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has bound—think of it—for eighteen years, be*

loosed from this bond on the Sabbath?"¹⁷ And when He said these things, all His adversaries were put to shame; and all the multitude rejoiced for all the glorious things that were done by Him.

Luke tells us of another story very much like the one we are studying this morning.

Only this time, the Lord didn't wait to be asked the question. He asked it Himself!

Luke 14:1-6, *Now it happened, as He went into the house of one of the rulers of the Pharisees to eat bread on the Sabbath, that they watched Him closely.² And behold, there was a certain man before Him who had dropsy.³ And Jesus, answering, spoke to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"⁴ But they kept silent. And He took him and healed him, and let him go.⁵ Then He answered them, saying, "Which of you, having a donkey or an ox that has fallen into a pit, will not immediately pull him out on the Sabbath day?"⁶ And they could not answer Him regarding these things.*

The fact that the Lord had to deal with this kind of hypocrisy several times causes me to wonder if it's not more prevalent among 'people of religion' that we tend to think.

Are there ways in which I place religious ceremony and purity over the needs of the people around me?

Are there times when I would be more upset with the fact that my ideal of what a worship service should be is interrupted?

3. Truth

Jesus taught them the truth.

Now remember that the healing of the man's hand on the Sabbath day was not necessary to save his life.

Jesus could have told the man to go home, and then to come back the next day so He could heal him.

But it's very important to notice the truth that Jesus was teaching in all of this.

V 12, *Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.*"

There was no breaking of the Sabbath in acting in mercy toward the poor man.

It was perfect keeping with the intention of the Sabbath day. It would have been the keeping of the true spirit of that day, rather than the keeping the strict letter of the law.

Think of what that Sabbath day was supposed to be about!

When God gave His good commandment regarding the Sabbath, it was to reflect His own pleasure over His rest from the work of Creation.

He saw it all, and rendered the verdict that it was “very good”
(Genesis 1:31)

On the sixth day, He rested and took pleasure in His work
(Genesis 2:2-3).

So, in that spirit of taking rest and enjoying that which is “good” God commanded that His people also rest.

Exodus 20:8-11, *“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labour and do all your work, ¹⁰but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. ¹¹For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.*

It is not a day that was meant to be a burdensome thing. It was meant to be a blessing for the good of people and for the creatures that serve them.

God Himself, through the prophet Isaiah, has already spoken authoritatively about His true intention for His Sabbath.

Isaiah 58:13-14, *“If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, From doing your pleasure on My holy day, And call the Sabbath a delight, The holy day of the Lord honourable, And shall honour Him, not doing your own ways, Nor finding your own pleasure, Nor speaking your own words, ¹⁴Then you shall delight yourself in the Lord; And I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth, And feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father. The mouth of the Lord has spoken.”*

So, acts and works of mercy and of doing good were absolutely in keeping with the observance of the Sabbath.

Sabbath becomes the most significant day of ceremonial worship and ritual of the Jewish people.

Once again, reminds us that God places mercy over ceremony. He places people over programs. He places the doing of good over the protection of ritual.

And look at what Jesus then did. He acted in a very public way.

As it tells us in the other Gospels,
He actually called the man forward.

Mark 3:3, *And He said to the man who had the withered hand, "Step forward."*

Made him stand before all.

Luke 6:8, *But He knew their thoughts, and said to the man who had the withered hand, "Arise and stand here." And he arose and stood.*

Then, He commanded the man to stretch out his hand and the word used indicates a very visible act.

Luke 6:10, *And when He had looked around at them all, He said to ^{to}the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he did so, and his hand was restored as whole as the other.*

When the man stretched it out, it was found to be as whole as the other.

All of this was a threat to the position of the Jewish leaders.

- It would mean that their authority was being undercut.
- It would mean that they no longer had control over the practices of the people.

- It would mean that their “holiness” was mere outward conformity to a religious ritual, and that they were not “more holy” than everyone else after all.
- It meant that people would look less and less to them, and more and more to Jesus.

4. Hearts revealed.

Three things happened that revealed the hypocritical nature of the Pharisees.

a) Filled with rage.

Luke 6:11, *But they were filled with rage, and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.*

They were told that they were “filled with rage”.

Imagine that!

This man was healed before their very eyes and yet, these Pharisees, who presume to be the defenders of God's law were deeply unhappy about this wondrous display of mercy from God.

Instead, they were furious at what God did through His Son!

They were outraged that the true spirit of the Sabbath was kept and that they were shown to be on the wrong side of it.

b) Joined the Herodians.

Mark 3:6, *Then the Pharisees went out and immediately plotted with the Herodians against Him, how they might destroy Him.*

The Herodians was a political group that stood behind the reign of King Herod Agrippa and that was pro-Roman.

The Pharisees and the Herodians were not friends, but they were joined together in their hatred for Jesus.

c) Plotted to kill.

V 14, *Then the Pharisees went out and plotted against Him, how they might destroy Him.*

How ridiculous they were?

Jesus had performed a great miracle, but they were offended that He broke their rules of the Sabbath in the way He did it.

He healed and they responded by seeking to kill.

May God keep us from such foolishness and narrowness!

I believe that God sought to teach me long ago, through that little children, not to fret so much about whether or not I keep things dignified and honourable when it comes to His worship. He has seen fit to include people in this great task of worshiping Him.

The needs of people make it all a bit messy at times. But He doesn't seem to mind.

We are given a reminder of what is truly important to our Lord Jesus. He desires that genuine grace and mercy toward people be placed over mere outward rituals and religious observances. We must remember that, in His worship, it is always lawful to do good.

Perhaps a good way to apply this passage to our lives—and to genuinely keep His day of rest in a manner that pleases Him.

Keep our eyes open to someone in need, and to meet that need in genuine love today.