

THE SON OF MAN IS LORD OF THE SABBATH

Matthew 12:1-21

Key Verse: 12:8

“For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”

In the last passage we heard Jesus’ marvelous invitation to come to him, take his yoke, and find rest. Today’s passage teaches that Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath. Sabbath means “rest.” We will see that Jesus gives us rest from legalism, from the power of sin and death, and from all infirmity. Where Jesus reigns in mercy, there is real rest. Let’s accept Jesus as Lord of the Sabbath and find rest for our souls.

First, Jesus gives rest from legalism (1-6).

Look at verses 1-2. “At that time Jesus went through the grainfields 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.’” Jesus’ disciples must have cringed when they heard this. They were doing their best to follow Jesus, leaving their families and jobs. They were often hungry. This time, as they passed through the grainfields, their hands inadvertently came out of their pockets and moved toward the grain. Then they began to pick them and eat them. It was a kind of Jewish drive-thru, like McDonalds. Soon, the disciples’ munching sound began to echo into the distance. Upon hearing it, the Pharisees popped up in the grainfields with bony index fingers pointing at the disciples. Then they began to rail against them. It was not for picking others’ grain, for this was legal within limit (Dt 23:25). But the Pharisees condemned the disciples for working on the Sabbath day. According to their interpretation, by picking the grain the disciples were harvesting, by rubbing it together in their hands, they were winnowing, and by separating the kernels from the husks, they were threshing. The Pharisees objected like a referee calling a foul, or a police officer stopping a speeding motorist. They were ready to punish Jesus’ disciples.

We can understand the Pharisees’ seriousness toward the Sabbath Law. God made man to work hard for six days and worship God on the seventh day. In Genesis 2, God blessed the seventh day and made it holy and rested on the seventh day. God made keeping the Sabbath holy one of the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:8-11). God wanted his people to honor his presence and find rest. God wanted them to renew their strength and keep their identity as God’s people. It was their practical expression of loving God. So they took it seriously. In fact, one time a man was caught gathering wood on the Sabbath. He was put to death at God’s own command (Nu 15:32-36). Frequently, God sent prophets to exhort Israel to keep the Sabbath holy (Isa 58:13; Jer 17:21-27). When they failed to truly honor God by keeping the Sabbath holy, God finally sent them into Babylonian exile, where they suffered greatly (2 Ch 36:20-21). When men keep the Sabbath holy, God is pleased and blesses their land. When they do not, God may punish them. In our time, many do not keep the Lord’s day holy. Many do not work hard during the weekdays and then spend a two day weekend indulging their flesh. They become very sick spiritually and spread it to others. A few work hard seven days a week. They burn out and lose the meaning of life. God made man to work hard six days and worship God on the Lord’s day.

The Pharisees were right in regarding the Sabbath seriously. However, there was something wrong with them. They ignored Jesus. They ignored the godly life purpose of the disciples. They focused on one small act, applied their own legal interpretation, and condemned the disciples. They used the law to condemn the innocent. No wonder the people of Israel were so burdened. They had enough trouble just to survive in the hard world under Roman oppression. But on top of that, they had to endure the legalistic condemnation of the religious leaders. This is not only the problem of their time. Throughout history, the Christian church has been infected with legalistic people who usurp the place of God and exchange man-made rules for the truth of God’s word.

How did Jesus handle the Pharisees’ rude intrusion? Jesus acknowledged that they were right to uphold the Sabbath. However, their Bible understanding was too short. In addition to the rule, they needed to know the exceptions. Jesus gave them two. Look at verses 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.’” To put it simply David broke the ceremonial law by eating holy bread in his time of need. He also gave some to his companions. This shows that feeding hungry men of God during a spiritual crisis is a fair reason to relax the ceremonial law.

Jesus gave another example. Look at verses 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 priests were bound to perform certain functions on the Sabbath day such as burning incense, changing the bread of the Presence (Lev 24:7-8), and making a double burnt offering (Num 28:9-10). Thus, the Law recognized that serving in the temple worship superseded resting on the Sabbath. Now one greater than the temple was there. Anyone serving this “greater one” could be exempt from the strict observance of Sabbath law.

Jesus’ comment must have shocked the Pharisees. They regarded the temple as God’s dwelling place, and the most holy place on earth. Yet Jesus said one greater than the temple had come. It meant Jesus himself (Jn 2:19). The book of Hebrews explains how Jesus is greater than the temple. The temple was constructed after the pattern of heaven as God revealed it to Moses. But Jesus is God who came from heaven. The temple was the place where offerings for sin were made. Jesus is the Lamb of God, the once and final sacrifice for sin, in whom all other sacrifices find fulfillment. The temple duty was carried out by priests in the order of Aaron. Jesus is the Great High Priest of whom their priesthood is just a shadow. The temple operated under the terms of the Old Covenant. Jesus brought a New Covenant in his blood. Jesus changes the hearts of men and makes people holy from the inside out. Jesus brings us into a relationship with the holy God. Jesus makes us holy children of God. The disciples were following Jesus. They were not breaking the law, but serving God. Jesus sets us free from legalism.

Second, Jesus’ mercy as Lord of the Sabbath gives rest (7-8).

Look at verse 7. “If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent.” Mercilessness was a big problem for the Pharisees. God is full of mercy and abounding in love and kindness (Ex 34:6,7). When they did not know God’s mercy, they misused the law to condemn others.

When God gave the Law to the people of Israel, he prefaced it with these words, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Ex 20:1). They were God’s people by his grace of deliverance. God’s grace and mercy are foundational to the Law. It is the same for Christians. Romans 5:8 says, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” When we remember Christ’s suffering and death for us while we were wretched and undeserving, we can know the mercy of God. Then we can practice mercy toward others.

St. Paul was once a self-righteous man who severely persecuted Christians. Risen Christ could have smashed him like a bug. Instead, Risen Christ visited him personally and revealed love and saving grace. Risen Christ healed Paul’s spiritual blindness until he could see the living God. Risen Christ called Paul as his servant. After that Paul worked harder than others. But he always said, “By the grace of God I am what I am” (1Co 15:9). When he received mercy, he could practice mercy. He became a mother-like pastor for many problem people. It is important for each one of us to realize God’s mercy and to practice mercy toward others. I was once a self-righteous Catholic boy. I argued against evolution and condemned the immoral lives of “others.” Then I became one of the “others” and was totally condemned. At that time, Jesus’ word spoke to me through a sacrificial missionary, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mk 2:17). Jesus forgave my sins and healed my wounds. Since then, I could practice mercy toward others. When we know the mercy of God we can grasp the spirit of the law. Then we can build others up, and not condemn the innocent.

Look at verse 8. “For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” Jesus summed up his teaching with a clear declaration of who he is. Jesus calls himself “the Son of Man.” Jesus humbly acknowledged his humanity; he was one of us. When we could not reach up to him, he came down from heaven to be with us. He is gentle and humble in heart; anyone can approach him and find mercy. Jesus became the Son of Man to have a relationship with us. This Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. The Lord of the Sabbath is the Creator God who made the heavens and the earth. The Lord of the Sabbath is the Savior God who died for our sins to restore our relationship with him. Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath. Jesus invites us to rest in his mercy on the Sabbath. Since Jesus rose from the dead on a Sunday, Christians have celebrated it as the Lord’s day. This is why we have worship service on Sunday. The main point is to meet Jesus who is full of grace and mercy. When we do so, he gives us rest. There is a song called, “The Heart of Worship,” by Mark Redman. He confesses that his worship had become habitual, a matter of going through the motions. He felt restless. So he repented and focused on meeting Jesus through his worship music. Merciful Jesus

restored his spirit and he found rest. Jesus' merciful reign as Lord of the Sabbath gives rest to our souls. Thank you, Jesus.

Third, Jesus gives rest by healing our infirmities (9-14).

Jesus was not deterred. Jesus went into "their synagogue" to worship God on the Sabbath. However, the devil's trap was waiting for him. Look at verses 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?'" This man with a shriveled hand was suffering terribly. Many have suffered from unemployment recently. A man who does not work can lose his meaning of life and feel useless. He can lose his dignity as a father, husband and provider. This man had no hope of working even if the job market was really favorable, for he had a shriveled hand. Though this man was suffering so much, the Pharisees did not care about him at all. To them, he was nothing more than bait in a trap. They wanted to use him to accuse Jesus of breaking the Sabbath law.

At a glance Jesus knew the situation. Jesus decided to save this man at the risk of his life. Jesus also found a way to help the Pharisees. Though they had been malicious toward him, Jesus wanted to help them to renew their minds and get well. Look at verses 11-12. "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.'" Jesus talked to them about reality, not just theory. In reality, they would not hesitate to rescue their sheep on the Sabbath. It was mostly because their sheep were like money. Jesus was not criticizing them. Jesus appealed to them on the basis of practical Biblical reason to give a fellow human being the same consideration. The Pharisees should have valued this precious man. They should have had compassion on him and tried to help him. Jesus wanted to restore their basic humanity as people. On this basis, Jesus said it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.

Jesus demonstrated his power and authority by his action. Look at verse 13. "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." It is interesting that Jesus merely spoke and when the man obeyed, he was healed. Jesus could have made some kind of motion, or spit on the ground, or done some other action to perform the healing. But Jesus did not. Jesus revealed the power of God. It was God who healed the man with the shriveled hand. This healing proved that Jesus' teaching was right and that Jesus had authority from heaven.

To the man who was healed, it was the best Sabbath ever. When Jesus told him, "Stretch out your hand," it was a challenging command. The man had to extend his shameful handicap for all to see. He had to humble himself and trust Jesus. By faith he reached out his hand, and it was completely restored. He could work hard and support his family. His dignity as a man was restored. He was healed physically, emotionally and spiritually. He found true rest in Jesus who healed his life problem. However, the Pharisees did not accept Jesus' teaching. They plotted to kill Jesus. The mercy of Jesus must be accepted with faith. Only those who accept it with faith can find rest for their souls.

Fourth, Jesus gives us rest through spiritual victory (15-21).

Look at verses 15-16. "Aware of this, Jesus withdrew from that place. Many followed him, and he healed all their sick, warning them not to tell who he was." Jesus withdrew from conflict with the Pharisees and continued to quietly heal the sick. Those who were healed recognized the Messiah in Jesus. But Jesus warned them not to tell who he was.

Look at verses 17-21. "This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: 'Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope.'" Jesus' ministry fulfilled exactly what Isaiah prophesied of the chosen servant of God. He had an obvious love relationship with God. He demonstrated the power of the Spirit. But he was not a political or military figure. He did not rally crowds and troops with nationalistic pleas. He could have stirred up a bloody revolution in Israel. Instead, he quietly healed the sick and cared for the broken hearted. He humbly obeyed God's will to die on the cross for the sin of the world. Through his cross, he leads justice to victory.

Jesus still heals the sick and binds up the brokenhearted. Tim's parents divorced, breaking his heart. He was fragile like a bruised reed. But Jesus gently touched him with love. Jesus healed his soul and gave him new life. Now he is a strong man of God, the husband of Angie, and the father of three children. Jesus heals us from our wounds and binds up our broken hearts. Someday, Jesus will come in power and glory to destroy all unrighteousness and establish the kingdom of heaven. This Jesus is the hope of the nations.

Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath. When Jesus reigns over us we have real rest—rest from legalism, rest from the power of sin and death, and rest from infirmities. We can work hard for the glory of God and practice mercy toward others. Let's accept Jesus as Lord in our hearts today.