

Matthew 12:1-8

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[0 : 0 0] We're going to look again at Matthew chapter 12, verses 1 to 8. And when I say again, I'm, of course, referring to the fact that we looked at it already this morning, and we're going to look at it from a different point of view this evening, as I said. Now, it's a whole passage we're going to take in, but if you want key words, you'll find them in verse 7. If you had known what these words mean, I desire mercy, not sacrifice, you would not have condemned the innocent.

I desire mercy, says Jesus. Now, just to recap, it's not just what Jesus says here that counts, it's the way that he says it. It's not just his teaching about the Sabbath that we've got here, it's his teaching about himself. And we've seen three things about Jesus here. He's one who supplements the Scriptures. He says, haven't you read? But I tell you. Enlarging upon the Scriptures, adding to the Scriptures, bringing the revelation of God to a new level. Secondly, he's superior to the sanctuary. One greater than the temple is here. Here's the priestly ministry in the temple, offering sacrifices day by day that can never take away sin. But he's come, the final great high priest, offering himself up once and for all. He's superior to the sanctuary, his ministry is.

He's sovereign over the Sabbath. Now, when we think of this in this way, we've got to bear in mind that this is the one who is now addressing us about the meaning of the Sabbath. And that's something really quite weighty that falls upon us when we consider who he is. So let's open up what he says here about the Sabbath, bearing that in mind. Now, as I indicated this morning, really, we are going to bring in here the background of our understanding of the Sabbath. Because we have this tradition, which I suspect most of us are familiar with, and probably most of us still embrace ourselves.

The large day is to be sanctified by a holy resting all that day, except so much as is to be taken up in the works of necessity and mercy. And when we're asked, where does it speak about works of necessity and mercy? I'm pretty certain we would say, well, this is the passage that speaks to us about that.

And so it does. But I don't really think that that's the main thing that Jesus is trying to say here. He takes these points in. He goes beyond them, it seems to me. And that's what we want to grasp.

[3 : 09] And if you think, oh, this is just about the Sabbath. Well, I don't think it is. It's about our whole attitude to the Christian life. The principle, I think, that is operative here can be applied to the whole of the Christian life. So if you're put off by having a whole sermon on the Sabbath, well, think again, because I think there's an awful lot more here than can be simply applied to the Sabbath question. Well, let's see the situation here. And we've got it sketched out in the first verses. Jesus, on the Sabbath, goes through the cornfields. The disciples are hungry, and to satisfy their hunger, they pick some ears of corn, they rub them in their hands, and they eat them. And the Pharisees don't like this. And they say, look, your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath. That's the starting point for what Jesus says. I think it's worth just pointing out the point that is at issue. It isn't that the disciples are being accused of theft. Some people might think that. What right have they to go through the cornfields and to pick the corn and eat it, because it isn't their corn in the first place? But actually, the law of the Old Testament did deal with that point. And in Deuteronomy, we're told this, if you enter your neighbor's cornfield, you may pick the ears with your hands, but you must not put a sickle to a standing corn.

So there's no question that they're doing something wrong in itself. That's provided for by the law. But what they are being accused of doing is something that is inappropriate for the Sabbath, because after all, aren't they reaping? Aren't they winnowing? Aren't they, in effect, harvesting on the Sabbath? And isn't this something that is condemned in the Old Testament law, specifically in Exodus?

Six days you shall labor, but on the seventh day you shall rest, even during the plowing season, and harvest. You must rest. You can't say to get in the harvest is a necessity. You can't say that.

You must rest even in harvest time on the Sabbath. So reaping is not appropriate on the Sabbath, according to the Pharisees. What's at issue is a very strict interpretation of the letter of the law, and that really is what Jesus is addressing himself to. So how does he tackle this? Well, it's not good generally to say what Jesus doesn't say, but I think if we use that idea with caution, it can be useful to us. And what he doesn't say is the law of the Sabbath doesn't apply in this New Testament age that I'm introducing. He doesn't tackle the question from that point of view.

Now, you see, some people, and maybe some amongst us even, think this, that the fourth commandment, the law about the Sabbath, is just one of these Old Testament laws that are ceremonial in their nature, and therefore have passed away, and are no longer applicable today. Now, I can't go into that in detail. It's not the time or the place to do so. But I do think it rather strange that if that's the case, then Jesus didn't resolve the problem by saying that. If the law of the Sabbath is to lapse in this new era which Jesus introduces, I would have thought it was somewhat misleading that he doesn't say so. He misses an excellent opportunity of making things plain, but he doesn't do so. And I think that's quite interesting and important, what he doesn't say, because on other occasions, he's quite ready to say this sort of thing. Here's the Samaritan woman, you remember, in John chapter 4, and she's engaging in some debate with Jesus. And as a distraction, I think, she introduces this question about where people should worship. Is it the temple of the Samaritans on Mount Gerizim, or is it in Jerusalem, the temple there that people worship? And Jesus is quite happy to say the time is coming, and now is, when those that worship God worship in spirit and in truth. And so he's really saying, look, this question of where you worship, of a temple and the ministry of the temple, that's not the thing that matters in this new age that is here. These things are material in their nature. The physical building of beautiful stones and decorated, the animal sacrifices, the incense, the vestments, the musical instruments, they're all physical things, outward things. A new age has been introduced. It's an age that's in accordance with the character of God. He's spirit, and therefore we are going to worship from here on in spirit and in truth, not with these Old Testament material outward things.

[8 : 29] But Jesus doesn't take that approach here. He doesn't say the time is coming, and now is when all days are going to be alike, and you can do in one day what you can do in the other, because all employments are legitimate in the eyes of God. He doesn't take that line, and in my opinion, that means that he's legitimating the principle of the Sabbath. He's indicating that in the kingdom age, in this new age that he's introducing, the same principles are applying, but not in accordance with the legalistic interpretation of the Pharisees. So there is something, I think, to be learned in what Jesus doesn't say here. If the Sabbath was abolished, it's extraordinary that he didn't say it here.

Well, what does he do? Well, first of all, he introduced two examples which follow the same sort of lines, at least in principle. And the first of these is in verse 3 and 4, and it's a story that we read in, what was it, 1 or 2 Samuel, in 1 Samuel chapter 21, and we read that here. So we know what he's talking about here. Here is David and his men. They're hungry. They go to the tabernacle to see what supplies there might be, and the only supplies of food there are supplies of consecrated bread, and they were not legitimate that others should eat them. And according to the strict interpretation of the law, these consecrated loaves should not have been given to David and his men. If you've got that sort of strict approach to the law, then it was forbidden to do so. But the bread was given to him, and they did eat that consecrated bread, although it was not right in accordance with a strict application of the law. And what Jesus, of course, is teaching is there are other considerations that come into the situation, and these override this sort of legalistic interpretation. And clearly, the aspect of mercy, or necessity and mercy, we might even see, is clearly there. If you look at it, not from a legalistic point of view, but from the point of view of these men, they're suffering.

They're suffering hunger. They need to have their physical needs supplied for. And that's of more pressing significance than to keep to the details of the law. And that's effectively what Jesus is saying. There are bigger issues than simply keeping the details of the law. And you can see how this is shaping out, and how it can be applied to the situation that is before him there. He's saying, you've got to show some mercy. You've got to bring into consideration the demands of mercy, and not just interpret things in a strictly legal fashion. The second example, which actually we did touch on more this morning, is in verse 5. Haven't you read in the law that on the Sabbath, the priests and the temple, desecrate the day, and yet are innocent? And there again, you see, the idea is, as we said, there's some sort of system of priorities. And what the priests do is of such pressing significance that it overrides the strict demands of the law. The law says don't work on the Sabbath, but the priests do work on the Sabbath, and yet they're not held guilty for that.

Why? Because it was very necessary that in the way of doing things at that time, there should be this daily sacrifice, this constant atoning ministry conducted. And that was an act that was of such importance that a strict interpretation of the law could not be applied in that situation. So in these two examples, you know, we do have what is part of our tradition and pretty clear to us, I think, and I'm not going to say more about it. Here we can see Jesus is pointing out works of necessity and mercy. And he's saying to these Pharisees, you didn't take these into consideration when you condemned the disciples for satisfying a legitimate human need, the need for food, and your interpretation of the law is overridden by the demands of mercy. And there we've got something that surely is quite satisfying to know that something we've always believed is actually taught nicely in the Scriptures, as I think this passage does do. However, the point is this, that

Jesus doesn't stop there. If he had stopped there, we could all have gone home with a rosy glow that our tradition is nice and biblical after all. But if we go on here, I think we do get a significantly different picture. Because Jesus comes to the climax of this teaching about the Sabbath in verse 7.

[13 : 41] If you had known what these words mean, I desire mercy and not sacrifice, you would not have condemned the innocent. I desire mercy and not sacrifice. This is a quotation from the Old Testament. It comes from the book of Hosea, and it's quite an important one because it's repeated in another part of Matthew.

It seems to be a key idea in the prophet's mind and in Jesus' mind. Mercy, not sacrifice. Now, this does not mean to say that Hosea was running down sacrifice as if it was in itself a bad thing.

The sacrifices were ordained by God. They were means of representing atonement. Jesus himself was to fulfill them by offering himself up as a sacrifice. So we cannot say, oh, sacrifice, never do it. It's a bad thing. For the people of that age, it was a thing ordained by God. But what is important is that it's a matter of priorities. And the thing that really matters in God's sight is not blind obedience to a code of sacrifice or anything similar. What matters to God is the aspect of mercy. That is of overriding consideration. They might engage in sacrifice. But if they do so in a routine fashion, if they do so in a wrong attitude of mind, what's the point of that? The thing that counts is that they should know mercy and be merciful. I desire mercy. Mercy here is enshrined as a basic principle.

And if you think of the situation in which Jesus is speaking here, it seems to me that what he is saying is this. You folks, you know, you're looking at that law just as a law. And you're seeing nothing in it except a legalistic enactment that has to be applied literally and fully and strictly.

But God isn't interested in that outlook because the outlook that dominates in the mind of God, even in the giving of legislation about sacrifice and obedience, the thing that matters in the mind of God is mercy. And the basic note of the Sabbath legislation is not that it is a legalistic enactment, but it is a merciful provision. And what he's criticizing here is the basic outlook of these Pharisees. All they can see is a law to be obeyed instead of a merciful provision to be enjoyed.

[16 : 42] And if they had seen the enactment of God in those terms, they wouldn't have condemned these innocent disciples who were simply feeding their body in a way that the law permitted. And therefore, Jesus is saying, when you get down to the real thing, the bottom line is mercy. That's what the Sabbath is all about. Now, I've tried before an illustration here, and I'll try it again. I'm not convinced really. It's worked very well before, but I'm still going to try it. When I left school, I went to university to study to be a geography teacher. And we went to do fieldwork in the north of England. We went around seeing the scenery and getting an interpretation of the geology and so on. And one thing that we were meant to look at were some erratics.

And an erratic, apparently, is a boulder, say, that originated in one area. It was gathered up during the ice age on a glacier on a glacier or on the top of a flow of ice. And as the ice gradually moved, the boulder moved with it. And then when the ice melted, the boulder was deposited. And it's called an erratic because it came from another area. It was one type of rock, and it was deposited on another type of rock. So you've got the bedrock of one nature and the erratic, a boulder of another nature on top of it. Now, let's just try and apply that picture to what's going on here. And the way I look at it is this, you know. Here are the Pharisees, and what for them is the bedrock of the Sabbath?

And to them, all that they can see is it's all about a law that God has given and that we've to obey as strictly as possible. And that's the bedrock of the Sabbath for them. And for them, there's no erratics in that scenery. There's no room for works of mercy, because these are erratics out of keeping with the bedrock, which is a legalistic provision by God. That's the Pharisaic outlook. Now, roughly speaking, there may be folks that didn't see it this way. But I suggest that, generally speaking, our tradition was a bit different from that. Because what happened in our outlook, I think, is this, that we still saw the bedrock of the Sabbath provision as being the law. God had said it, we had to obey it. If we didn't obey it, we were transgressing the law. And the bedrock was obedience to legislation laid down. But what we did see was this, on this bedrock, there are erratics.

There are acts of necessity and mercy that are quite legitimate. So on the bedrock of legislation, acts of mercy are permitted. And that, I suggest, was, I think, looking at myself, that was the way I was brought up. So assume that as I was brought up in the free church fashion, all free church people were brought up in much the same way. Think about it yourself and see. But you see, what alarmed me when I first saw this, is I think that what Jesus is saying, look, you've got it all wrong. The bedrock of the Sabbath provision is not legislation. The bedrock is mercy. That's what it's all about.

That's its basic ingredient. Okay, you may say there's an aspect of legislation there, undoubtedly. But the bedrock is mercy. So that when acts of necessity and mercy are conducted, what's the big deal? Because that's what the Sabbath is all about. They're not erratics at all.

[20 : 47] They're just part of the bedrock. And that, it seems to me, indicates a very different approach to the Sabbath. It's a merciful provision. That's its basic nature. It was given for the good of man.

Man was not, oh, dear me, man was not made for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath was made for man. It was given for the benefit of the human race. It was a merciful provision. And if you think about it, you know, that's the way it comes across, it seems to me, in the Old Testament. What a merciful thing the Sabbath is. It stops us damaging ourselves. If we work seven days a week, we're going to suffer because of the sort of people that we are. And God, in His mercy, foreseeing what we might do to ourselves, said, okay, work six days, but rest on the seventh. It's for your own good. It's an act of mercy. And when you're at it, make sure that your family rests as well. You and your wife and your sons and daughters too. And the good that you would do to yourself, make sure that you do to others.

So don't let your manservant and your maidservant work either. That was merciful, because otherwise you would get some oppressive landlords who would rest themselves on the Sabbath and enjoy their time of refreshment, but their workforce would be obliged to work on the day of rest. And so the Sabbath command says, as you enjoy this act of mercy from God, you show that same mercy to others and let them rest. And even your beasts have got to be allowed to rest, says the command. God has mercy upon them. Lord, thou preservest man and beast. What we were singing, only that's in the old version.

You preserve man and beast. That's what the Sabbath command is all about. Mercy towards the beasts that work their fields and so on. And even the stranger that comes in their gates, he's to rest as well. Because, you know, you can't rest unless everybody's rest. You can't rest properly unless everybody else is resting as well. And therefore, God says, I want you all to rest, to rest as families, to rest together, because that's a merciful provision for you. And that's the way we've got to see the Sabbath. And that, it seems to me, is what Jesus is saying here. Mercy is not an erratic, out of keeping with the basic bedrock of the Sabbath. Mercy is the bedrock of the Sabbath.

And that is Jesus' teaching here, it seems to me. Now, what difference does that make to our outlook? Well, I do suspect that if we think about this, it will make quite a big difference. But let me say this, you know, I'm not saying, okay, the Sabbath is something of mercy. We can be as lax and relaxed about it as we like, and keep it or not, whether, you know, in any way we like. I'm not saying that at all.

[24 : 11] Because I do believe that if we really saw it as a merciful provision, we really ought, as Christians, to be more keen to uphold it than if it were simply a legislative requirement.

If mercy is so important to us, we're going to make sure that everybody reaps the maximum blessing from this act of mercy which God has given. However, one or two points in this connection.

If we look at this from this point of view, we'll see the Sabbath not just as a duty to God, but as a duty to others. Now, I do think that we've got something a wee bit out of balance here.

We speak about the two tables of the law, and the traditional interpretation is that on the first table there's commands one to four, and on the second table there are commands five to ten.

And one to four tell our duty to God, and five to ten tell our duty to man. But really, can that be right if you look at the Sabbath as a merciful provision? It is a duty to God, but is it not also a duty to others? And it seems to me that it doesn't fall naturally, or at least completely, into the first table of the law. And that we ought to see it basically not as something that God requires of us for His sake, but something that God requires of us for our own sakes and for the sakes of others. It belongs to the second table of the law, if we're going to make that traditional distinction. At least it does in that aspect. And some ways in which this is put over in the Old Testament actually leads us to take that perspective. Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest, and the slave born in your household and the alien as well may be refreshed. Does that sound like a duty towards God or a duty towards others? And it seems to me it's quite plain. It's a duty towards others we're speaking about here. It's a responsibility to rest, and to let others rest as well. Then again in Deuteronomy, remember that you were slaves in Egypt, and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.

[26 : 47] Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day. He's saying, in other words, do you remember that terrible time when you were slaves in Egypt, and they made you work seven days a week, week after week, week after week, no Sabbath rest for you then, constant and remitting toil. It was slavery for you. And that's why you have to keep the Sabbath now, and you have to enjoy your day of rest that you didn't have in Egypt, and you have not to submit others to the same slavery that you were submitted to then, constant and remitting toil without a necessary break. You have to keep the Sabbath, remembering what it was like to be a slave, and you have not to submit others to the same slavery that you yourselves enjoy, that you yourselves knew. You're not to submit them to that slavery by requiring them to work for you on the day of rest. And that means that the Sabbath is not a legislative requirement by a God who has chosen to lay it down for whatever reason. It's been laid down as an act of social justice. If we require the work of others on the Sabbath, it's an act of social injustice, because it's a merciful provision designed for the well-being of the whole community.

So let's not just think, oh, in keeping the Sabbath, I'm honoring God. That's quite true. But in keeping the Sabbath in the way that it seems to me Jesus is teaching us to do, we're showing mercy, we're showing grace to others, and giving them the opportunity of rest and refreshment that we ourselves enjoy so much. Now, so we put this sort of into the second table of the law and not just into the first. Then again, it enlarges our understanding of what God requires, and it gives emphasis not to us keeping the Sabbath, but us letting others keep it.

He requires us to rest and to let others rest as well. And that, in general, means refraining from using the services of others on the day of rest. And I think here it's worth saying it's not sufficient to say everyone needs a day of rest, which we all would say, I'm sure, Christian or non-Christian. I think most people would acknowledge that. But the biblical pattern is that if one person is going to rest properly, then everybody else ought to rest as well. I didn't get a Sunday afternoon snooze this afternoon, and my host and hostess know two reasons why. But there was actually a third reason when I was about to nod off, a plane passed over, and I thought if they only kept the Sabbath day as the day of rest, I might be able to get a snooze on Sunday afternoon. You can't rest properly unless everybody else is resting. And that's written into the law of God. The stranger within your gates has got to rest as well, because if he doesn't rest, he's going to disturb the peace of others.

And if I may be autobiographical again, I'm not usually autobiographical, but I've got another wee incident from my own limited experience of working in the secular world. For six months, I worked as a clerk for Scottish Gas years and years ago, after I came back from Peru, before I went to WIC as a minister. And I was working in a large open plan office with 200 or 300 people, all shuffling papers together. In those days, there was no computers in the offices. And we were allowed to take our rest break whenever we wanted. We could sit at our desk drinking our coffee. And that was permitted by the unions, because there was a fairly restful atmosphere around us. But there was one office where there was 30 girls typing away at typewriters, and they had set times for their coffee breaks, so you couldn't go with any work at a certain time because they were all off work together. And the principle there is a very simple one. These girls couldn't have rest unless the other girls were resting as well. Whereas in the big office, where there was relatively quiet, anybody could rest at any time. And the principle, therefore, was very simple. You can't rest properly unless everybody else is resting. And that's a very reasonable way of looking at things. And it seems to me that that would be the outlook of Jesus in this matter. We've got to think on the well-being of others, and we're not only to rest ourselves, but we've got to make sure that they rest as well. Because the mercy of God is not for some at the expense of others. It's for everybody together as a community. And then, again, I do feel that this way of looking at things, oops, let me see, leads us to adopt a different attitude to the situation where the Sabbath is not kept. Now, most of us have got so used to the Sabbath not being kept that it no longer disturbs us. But there was a day that most people here will remember when keeping the Sabbath was a pretty general thing in our communities. And if somebody didn't keep the Sabbath, look at that person not keeping the Sabbath. And we blamed them for it. I don't know that I would be so censorious in that respect as I probably once was. Whose fault is it if they're required to work on the

Sabbath? Is it the person that's working, or is it the person that requires them to work? And that to me is probably the big thing in the mind of God. Is the person working on the Sabbath, the person that's going to get the blame, or is it the person that didn't let them rest on the Sabbath that is going to get the blame for it? And I do really feel that we've got to shift the emphasis a wee bit away from the person that breaks the Sabbath to the people that make them break the Sabbath.

[33 : 19] And that's us all, that's society in general. There's not just the greedy men of industry that require their machinery to be kept going 24-7, and men working constantly, or women working constantly, due to financial restraints, or perhaps even a wee bit monetary greed.

There's especially in the service industry, the selfish person that says, on my day of rest, I need the supermarkets to be open so that I can do my shopping when I want.

And on my day of rest, I want to be able to look at the big football match, or the big cricket game, or the big tennis match, or the big golf occasion on my day of rest. And I want all the services of transport and eating out to be open to me, because on my day of rest, I want these services to be available. It's that selfishness that is to be blamed, not the people that are caught up in it.

Because that person says, I want to rest, and these people have got to serve me so that I rest. And they don't think about the sporting officials, and the wardens, and the policemen that have got to go into duty, and the ambulance men that are in standby, and the caterers, and the media men, and all the hustle and bustle in the surrounding areas, and all the disturbance that is caused by supermarkets opening, and women that would normally be at home with their families enjoying their day of rest, working, because the selfish person says, I want all these services available to me on my day off. And that's the root of the matter nowadays. The blame is not lying upon the person that's breaking the Sabbath. The blame is lying on the community that insists that they must have certain people to serve them for their enjoyment on their day off. It's the greed and selfishness of society that is to blame for the breach of the Sabbath, not those caught up in that process through no wish of their own. And I think if we look at this as an act of mercy, we'll see it in that way more and more.

Well, these are just a few thoughts. But the basic thought is just this. The bedrock of the Sabbath is not that it's a legalistic requirement laid down by God to be obeyed strictly. It's not mainly that.

[35 : 56] The bedrock of the Sabbath is this. This is an act of mercy that we ourselves have to enjoy and let others enjoy as well. And if you think that this just applies to the Sabbath, I don't think that's on.

Here's the keynote to Jesus' approach. I desire mercy. This is written into his own character. There. Mercy. That's the thing that's important in the way that he deals with us.

Mercy. It's not just about keeping the Sabbath. It's about other things as well. And we might well ask then, what is our Christian life built on? Are we just saying, well, I inherited this tradition and I keep it as strictly as I can, and I try and keep up the way that I was brought to keep the Sabbath and to do other things as well? Because that's what's laid down by the law of God and in the tradition that I've been brought up with. Or do we say, it's not that that counts. It's the experience of mercy. It's the practice of mercy that counts. Mercy is central to the Christian experience, not the mere keeping of an external law.

So don't try and get right with God by striving and striving to obey the commandments. Don't try and progress in the Christian life by merely trying to do good and trying to keep the law.

But make sure that mercy is the keynote of your experience. You come to Christ for mercy, motivated by that mercy. You do what God wants you to do in a spirit of mercy.

[37 : 39] I desire mercy. I desire mercy about the Sabbath and about the whole of life. And that's what the Pharisees had forgotten. Let's make sure that we remember it. Now, let's conclude. We'll sing in Psalm 23.

This, in the Sing Psalms version, it's on page 28, and we'll sing the whole of the Psalm and the tune of the Psalm.

The Lord is my shepherd.

The Lord is my shepherd.

The Lord is my shepherd. The Lord is my shepherd.

[40 : 04] The Lord is my shepherd. In the sight of my enemies, I take on you's shepherd. The oil of rejoicing, you pour on my head.

My couple of goals have Thine graciously fed. So surely your covenant, mercy and grace will follow me closely in all of my ways.

I will dwell in the house of the Lord all my days.

Now may grace, mercy and peace from God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be with us all now and forevermore. Amen.