

Sabbath Controversy Continues

Matthew 12:1-14; Mark 2:23-3:6; Luke 6:1-11

The Religious Leaders had lost the debate with Jesus after the healing of the lame man in John 5. Christ was allowed to leave Jerusalem because of His popularity with the people, but the Jews would now watch and hound Him at every step. Scholars are confident the next **two incidents** happened chronologically in the life of Christ, and they continue the Sabbath day dispute. At this time Jesus will give six lessons concerning the Sabbath they had forgotten or needed to learn.

The Religious Leaders had declared war on Jesus and His message. They had been humiliated by Jesus as He pointed out the inconsistencies of their traditions and the truth concerning their prideful ways. They could not answer Him, for they had nothing of truth to say. The only action they had was to watch and hope they could find something to accuse Him. But realize, they didn't know they were dealing with the sinless Son of God, their Messiah. They will not find anything wrong in Him. In the next two events in Christ's life, we find the Jewish Elitist both in the field and in the Synagogue watching Jesus closely.

Incident 1: Plucking of Grain – Matthew 12:1-8; Mark 2:23-28; Luke 6:1-5

I. The Setting and Question from the Pharisees

“At that time Jesus went on the (“second sabbath after the first,” Luke 6:1) sabbath day through the corn (Lit. - wheat/barley) (“fields” Mark 2:23); and his disciples were an hungered, and began to pluck the ears of corn (“rubbing them in their hands.” Luke 6:1) and to eat. ²But when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto him (“them,” Luke 6:2), Behold, (“why do ye” Luke 6:2) thy disciples do that which is not lawful (Lit - Traditional Law) to do upon the sabbath day.” Matthew 12:1-2

- “second sabbath after the first,” – This phrase must have been understood by the readers, but to us, in the 21st century, it is not clear. Most scholars believe it was the first Sabbath after the Passover week. So, about a week after the Jerusalem “unknown feast” of John 5. This is another indication that the “unknown feast” was a Passover and the beginning of Jesus’ second year of ministry. All of this makes sense because of the aggressive nature of the Religious Leaders at this time after the John 5 discourse concerning Jesus’ authority and deity. Also, ripe grain would also indicate a time close to Passover.
- “pluck the ears of corn” – The Old Testament allowed travelers to eat grain while traveling. (Deut. 23:24-25) Once one was off the main roads, travel was done on rough paths between fields, along water, ditches, or hillsides. Taking a handful of grain was not considered stealing, only if you cut and collected. One of my commentaries called it more like snacking – cheap granola!
- “Pharisees saw it,” – This was a pretty obscure place, yet here were the Pharisees in their flowing robes and pious faces, keeping a close watch on Jesus and His followers looking for any flaw in their behavior!
- “Why do ye....that which is not lawful to do upon the sabbath day.” – The “law” these Pharisees and Scribes were speaking of was not from Moses, but their own traditions handed down over the years. On any other day their actions would have been lawful, but not on the Sabbath. These were the very laws

Jesus was taking target against. They called “plucking” with the hand a type of reaping, and “rubbing them in their hands” was threshing but of course, this was not work for profit! As mentioned before, these traditions were ridiculously extreme. I read how sailors would not save themselves in a storm being held to only a small amount of effort on the Sabbath. And how in battle soldiers would rather die than defend themselves on the Sabbath. So, the disciples and Jesus plucking and rubbing a handful of grain was very offensive to the Pharisees. This was desecrating a badge of honor Jews wore proudly but was not based on Scripture!

II. Lessons from Jesus

“But he said unto them, Have ye not read (“so much as this,” Luke 6:3) what David did, when he was an hungered (“had need,” Mark 2:25), and they that were with him; ⁴How he entered into the house of God (“in the days of Abiathar the high priest,” Mark 2:26), and did eat the shewbread, which was not lawful (Lit. – Mosaic Law) for him to eat, neither for them which were with him, but only for the priests.” Matthew 12:3-4

1. **Lesson from David’s Life – I Samuel 21:1-6 – The Principle of Necessity** Human need and moral obligations supersede all ritual and ceremony.

Jesus did not argue but went directly to the Scripture and an incident from David, one of Israel’s greatest heroes. Christ points out how David directing broke one of the Mosaic laws. Fresh bread was put out each Sabbath in the Holy Place. Only priests were to eat the week-old bread, but David requested it because of hunger. David was blameless, not punished or rebuked, for as an anointed king he had a need and because of necessity was allowed to break this God-given directive. Jesus’ opening statement, “Have ye not read” was a sarcastic and stinging reprimand to these scholars who should have known and understood this principle. Jesus will use a statement similar to this several more times in this narrative and matter of fact will say something like it over and over again to the Religious Leaders – Matthew will record it elsewhere over six times alone. Here both David and Jesus were taking care of their men, “If you condemn me, you must condemn your hero, David.” They had no discernment or compassion.

The next two points are given **only in the book of Matthew** for they deal with the priesthood and prophets. The readers of Mark and Luke would not have been as interested or familiar with these while Matthew’s book was written directly to the Jews to convince them that Jesus was their Messiah. The next two points are important truths for Jewish readers to grasp!

“Or have ye not read in the law (Lit – Mosaic Law), how that on the sabbath days the priests in the temple profane the sabbath, and are blameless? ⁶But I say unto you, That in this place is one greater than the temple.” Matthew 12:5-6

2. **Lesson from the Priesthood – Numbers 28:9-10, 18-19 - The Principle of Service to God** Sacred restrictions were not moral absolutes.

Jesus takes them again to the Scripture and the priests’ obedience to God in fulfilling their sacred tasks. All Sabbath day long the priests worked in the Temple: slaying the sacrificial animals, washing, cutting, and burning. This was real work and certainly would generate weariness. Jesus throws out the statement to these Religious Leaders about how these priests, “profane the sabbath,” but of course, these actions were holy work! But it was work, work on the Sabbath! Then Jesus adds, “That in this place is one greater than the temple.”

Jesus just tagged His own deity and authority to the argument, and they definitely would have caught it! He was there and He, the Messiah, the Son of God, was greater than the temple! With this sovereign authority and position Christ should be allowed the same liberty as the priests, and His disciples the benefit of the grain as they were in the service of the Messiah!

“But if ye had known what this meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless. Matthew 12:7

3. Lesson from the Prophets – Hosea 6:6 – The Principle of Mercy and Compassion

Jesus had already used this quote from Hosea with the Pharisees after the call of Matthew. These religionists complained about Jesus eating with publicans and sinners and Christ used this same Old Testament phrase teaching the need for mercy toward the sinners. On this day, Jesus was giving a direct scolding to the Pharisees and scribes for their attitude against Him and the innocent disciples even though it was a Sabbath Day. The Jews were so tied to their ceremonial duties and rituals that the moral and natural laws of love and mercy were totally forgotten! But the reality is, God desires mercy and love, not sacrifice or legalism! This is a God principal found throughout the Bible! I Sam. 15:22-23; Ps. 40:6-8; Is. 1:11-17; Jer. 7:21-23 Matt. 15:16-20; John 4:21-24; Heb. 13:9; 15-16 When our heart is right before God, then our worship will be right!

“And he said unto them, The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath:” Mark 2:27

4. Lesson of the Intent of the Sabbath – Man vs. Sabbath – The Principle of Superiority of Man

We find this amazing statement only in the book of Mark. The intent of the Sabbath was for man’s betterment in rest, a sign to Israel of God’s hand on them, and for worship to Him. It was never intended to be a burden causing hardship and even death! Matter of fact, the Rabbis had a quote very close to this when defending the allowance to work when seeking to save a life on the Sabbath. Jesus is using their logic in His teaching to remind them of the intent of the Sabbath.

“(“therefore” Mark 2:28) For the Son of man is Lord even (“also” Mark 2:28/Luke 6:5) of the sabbath day.” Matthew 12:8

5. Lesson of Rights of Interpretation – The Principle of Christ’s Authority

Every Gospel narrative of this event ends with these words! Notice the use of “even” and “also.” Jesus was teaching these religionists that the final authority, was Himself, the Son of Man. He was the Lord, the Creator, the Controller, and the Interpreter, of all things, and that included the Sabbath day! He was not asserting His freedom to violate the Sabbath but rather His qualification to interpret! It was Jesus’ desire to remind Israel of God’s intention of the Sabbath. Did they understand Him? Yes, but as we will see, they will reject Him and view it as blasphemy. Mark Strauss, in his book Four Portraits, One Jesus had this to say about this incident of Christ, “Again, the significance of Jesus’ claims about the law and the Sabbath must not be understated. They go beyond the words and actions of a prophet who merely speaks for God. Unlike other rabbis or prophets, Jesus places himself in authority over these two foundations of Judaism. He judges the law, rather than vice

versa, and does so on the basis of his role in salvation history. He is not just the law's interpreter but its fulfillment." p. 567

Not much time will pass, and Jesus will further challenge the watching Pharisees. He will illustrate these principles with the bold and confrontational healing of the man with a withered hand and in doing so, further expose the Jewish Leadership's godless attitudes. We will continue to see them make Christ their enemy instead of their Messiah!

Incident 2: Healing of the Withered Hand – Matthew 12:9-14; Mark 3:1-6; Luke 6:6-11

I. The Setting and Question from the Pharisees

“And when he was departed thence, (“it came to pass also on another sabbath,” Luke 6:6) he went (“again” Mark 3:1) into their synagogue (“and taught” Luke 6:6): ¹⁰And, behold, there was a man which had his (“right” Luke 6:6) hand withered. (“And the scribes and Pharisees watched him, whether he would heal on the sabbath day;” Luke 6:7) And asked him, saying, Is it lawful (Lit. – Mosaic Law) to heal on the sabbath days? that they might accuse him. (“But he knew their thoughts, and said to the man which had the withered hand, Rise up, and stand forth in the midst. And he arose and stood forth.” Luke 6:8)” Matthew 12:9-10

- Jesus in the Synagogue – Again, we see the normal schedule of Jesus, attendance at the synagogue. Though He was critical of the Jewish misuses of the Sabbath, He still was present at the synagogue on the Sabbath Day. Notice the specific language of Luke, he tells us this incident happened on “another” Sabbath in contrast with the plucking of grain event even though Matthew and Mark did not make the sequence clear. Also, Luke tells us Christ was teaching in the synagogue. He certainly wasn't hiding from the glaring eyes of the Pharisees and Scribes.
- Scribes and Pharisees in the Synagogue – The words “watched him,” from the book of Luke means, “sitting on the side persistently, closely, maliciously, watching to trap.” Their desire was not to sit at their Messiah's feet and learn but to “accuse him” of some wrongdoing. Most scholars believe this synagogue was in Capernaum, Jesus' home base, and that the Pharisees that day, belonged to this synagogue. Matthew calls it “their synagogue.”
- Man with a withered hand in the Synagogue – Here is the individual who will be part of the day's main event! Let's only deal with the facts we have in the text about this man at the synagogue: we don't know if he came to be healed; we don't know if he was a plant by the Jewish Leadership (several commentaries believed he was put there by the Religious Leaders); we don't know if he simply came to hear Jesus that day; he wasn't dangerous ill; he had a “withered” right hand – we are not told how this came to be (birth defect; accident; paralyzed; deformed; diseased) What we see here is the Jewish Leadership using this unfortunate man as a weapon against Jesus!
- “Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath days” – Please notice, Jesus has done nothing out of the ordinary in the synagogue, it is the Religious Leaders who begin the discussion with this question! Notice the clear ironic admissions of the Religious Leaders concerning Jesus when they asked this question! 1) Admitted to Jesus' ability to heal 2) Admitted to Jesus' heart of compassion for those in need 3) Admitted to Jesus' pattern of healing. These enemies of God, the Jewish Religious Leaders, understood the

wonderful character of Jesus. But don't lose sight of the heart of Jesus, He still has the ability to heal; He still is full of compassion; and He still has a pattern of healing! Even in the 21st century!

- The Illustration – To avoid a confrontation, Jesus could have waited and privately healed this man on another day, this man's life was not threatened by disease or injury; he didn't need immediate attention! But instead, Jesus knowing what the Pharisees and scribes were thinking, asked the handicapped man to come from his place in the synagogue and stand where everyone could see him. It is then Jesus went on and gave another lesson on God's intent concerning the Sabbath. As John McArthur says, "Jesus gave the Pharisees a living illustration of scriptural Sabbath observance and His Sovereign authority over both man and the Sabbath." JMcA p. 129

II. Lessons from Jesus and Miracle

“And he said unto them, (“I will ask you one thing;” Luke 6:9) What man shall there be among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on the sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out?

¹² **How much then is a man better (Lit. - “more value) than a sheep? Wherefore it is lawful to do well on the sabbath days (“or to do evil? to save life, or to kill? But they held their peace.” Mark 3:4) Matthew 12:11-12**

6. Lesson of Doing Good – Principle of Discernment

Here Jesus elevates the issue from a legal to a moral problem that they were having trouble discerning! Now, picture the scene: the crowded synagogue, this poor handicapped man standing very uncomfortably in the middle, the glaring Pharisees and scribes, and Jesus standing before them all! He asked them a very pointed question, loud enough that everyone would hear, “If a sheep falls in a hole, what man, even if it were the Sabbath, would not pull it out of the pit?” Of course, everyone in the room could answer, “Surely, I would.” But He goes on by asking, “How much better is a man than a sheep? Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath or evil?” Suddenly, the room goes silent. With His questions, Jesus had forced them all to examine their traditions and every person in the synagogue knew the answer, “Of course, the law called for doing good on the Sabbath.” But no one dares answer. Any answer would be damaging to the logic of the traditional law that the Religious Leaders held dear. The Religious Leaders were shamed both before the people and God. The Jewish Elite had not applied the principle of mercy and aid to that of another human, only to a beast! They refused to want help for this man yet would think nothing of pulling a sheep out of a hole. They would have been quick to retrieve and merciful to their own property but would not use discernment to allow this man's handicap restored if possible. Christ points out their terrible moral confusion – Based on a religious ritual they valued an animal more than a man. Jesus had read their minds and exposed their traditions as inconsistent and their hearts full of pride. The Old Testament never restricted medical care or physical aid. It was always lawful to do good and help a fellowman! Again, Jesus is emphasizing one of the intents of the law - mercy, compassion, help to men, and not living by the letter of the law! (Mark 7:5-9)

“(And when he had looked round about on them with anger (Gk - brief without grudge or malice), being grieved (Gk - verb form of continual action – continually grieved) for the hardness of their hearts,” Mark 3:5) Then saith he to the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it forth; and it was restored whole, like as the other.” Matthew 12:13

- “looked round about on them with anger,” – Jesus asked His questions, and then scanned the crowd giving them time to answer. I'm sure it was a very awkward silence that settled in the synagogue as no

one would dare reply to Him. As we study the life of Christ, we see Him angry at times. It is an interesting study to look at what made our Savior angry and how He demonstrated anger. Here we see His anger directed at the hard hearts of the Religious Leaders: hardness against the truth, hardness against the need of this man, hardness against the evidence that Jesus was their Messiah! But the Greek word for “anger” is in the tense meaning brief and without grudge or malice. Jesus’ heart was that of love and a desire for all men to come to Him, He was not capable of holding a grudge! What a lesson we can learn about not only Jesus’ love for man but also how He directs anger! Eph. 4:26; Ps. 4:4; 37:8 Brief anger is a principle taught throughout the scripture. It is not a sin to be angry at sin but a sin to hold on to anger. Anger kept within the heart can give the devil the opportunity to turn anger into bitterness, revenge, and hatred! Eph. 4:27

- “being grieved for the hardness of their hearts,” – Here again, it was the blind Jewish Leadership that was leading the Israelites away from God and His truth! (Ps, 95:8) Forty-two times the Scriptures speak of the hardness of hearts toward God and His ways, and it always grieves God. But when the word “anger” had the idea of brief anger, this word in Greek has the idea of consistent, long-term grief. The hardness of the human heart and unbelief always grieves the heart of God!
- “Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it forth;” – Here’s the miracle! Jesus simply spoke, with no dramatic words or actions. Christ asked the man to do something he normally could not do but in faith he did. Just as Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water, and the lepers left for the temple and were healed on the way, this man stretched out his hand to its full length, and as he did, it was healed! No medicinal applications, physical therapies, remedies, or even Jesus’ touch, just His words, and the man’s “hand was restored whole as the other!”

III. Reaction of the Pharisees and Scribes

“Then (“they were filled with madness (Gk - insane rage); Luke 6:11) the Pharisees went out, and (“straightway” Mark 3:6) held a council (“with the Herodians” Mark 3:6) against him, (“what they might do to Jesus.” Luke 6:11) how they might destroy him.” Matthew 12:14

- “they were filled with madness” – Again the Religious Leaders had been exposed as hypocrites, without basic Scriptural knowledge, and even cruel. They were speechless and outwitted. And when Jesus healed this poor man with His word, instead of throwing themselves at the feet of Jesus in repentance and belief, they were filled with “madness!” John 3:19 proves itself true again, “...men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.” “Madness” is a very interesting word in Greek, other definitions I read were “filled with rage,” “irrational hatred,” “foolishness boarding on insanity,” and “blind fury.” They lost their minds with anger! Isn’t this a strange reaction to a wonderful miracle?
- Herodians – The Herodians were a smaller sect than the Pharisees that tended toward political opportunity. They sought to obey and stay in the graces of Rome. The Pharisees and the Herodians were at opposite ends of the spectrum in all things! The Herodians were a secular political party and the Pharisees a very conservative religious body. The Pharisees would view the Herodians as disloyal to their nation. But here we see the issue of Jesus bringing them into a league. Why would the Religious Leaders lower themselves to work with the Herodians? The belief that where their law couldn’t touch Jesus, perhaps the Roman law could. That will be exactly what will happen at the trials of Jesus before Pilate. The Religious Leaders will try to accuse Jesus of breaking Roman Law, but it will not succeed.

The phrase “held a council” can also be translated, as “plotted.” It means they worked together to carry out a decision already made. They were plotting how to commit murder! The Wycliffe Commentary said, “Men who called healing a Sabbath violation felt no qualms about plotting murder.” p. 949

- “what they might do to Jesus”/“how they might destroy him.” – So, at any cost, the Religious Leaders desired to eliminate Jesus. They had been beaten in argument and discredited. They were insanely jealous and fearful of losing their power with the people and their position with Rome. The emotion given in Greek within these phrases is “excitedly.” “excitedly” they joined with the Herodians; “excitedly” they began their murderous plot; “excitedly” they desired to be rid of Christ! How sad!

Believers Application:

Jesus’ doctrines were in complete contrast to the Religious Leaders’ pride, hypocrisy, and worldly interests. In his comments concerning the Sabbath controversy, Edersheim, the converted Rabbi of the 1800s, wrote how everything about Jesus’ words, life, and attitudes were “strangely un-Jewish” to those elite scholars of His day.

1. In the event of Jesus’ disciples plucking the grain, we find Jesus reminding the Religious Leaders they should have known the truth from the Scriptures. He used phrases like, “have ye not read,” and “if ye had known.” Matter of fact, this is a reoccurring theme of Jesus when speaking with these religionists. They should have known and applied the Scriptures, what principles can we learn from this lesson?

When Christ was born, Israel had gone without a voice from God for four hundred years. The Jewish people were left depending on the leaders of the synagogues and Temple for the truth and direction of the Scriptures. Unfortunately, many of these men were not careful in their study of the scripture and did not have an obedient heart toward God. There were always a few faithful ones, but most men only desired their own betterment and cared little for others. How do we protect ourselves and the next generation from falling into the same pattern? Actually, Jesus is addressing this issue in the incidents about the Sabbath controversy. He tells us we must know the Scriptures! We must be careful to:

- 1) Beg God for Holy Spirit leading and understanding. – 1 Cor. 2:6-14 Learn the heart and intent
 - 2) Beg God for an Obedient Heart. – Ps. 19:7-10 Wonderful benefits of obedience!
 - 3) Beg God for wisdom as you teach the next generation! Eph. 4:11-16
2. Read Isaiah 1:11-19. What sin is Isaiah speaking against during His lifetime? Very religious and busy in ritualistic activity, but God saw them as evil and miserable. Is.64:6 Their hearts were far from Him.

Name how Israel was still sinning in these ways during the life of Christ. Give Gospel references. Most Jewish people were busy with sacrifices and feasts, in synagogues and the Temple, working hard to fulfill all the rules and regulations related to Sabbath, food, and sacrifices, yet most had no heart for God. The leadership was prideful, elitist, money-hungry, and adulterous hypocrites. He will continually point this out throughout His ministry.

Can we see these sins today? If yes, how can we safeguard ourselves against becoming like God's people, the Jews? Yes, it is man's default to love structured religion with lists of dos and don'ts: times we must be involved, places we must go, activities we must do, restrictions clearly posted, and expectations reiterated. We feel secure when we can check off duties on a list. But there is no place in this kind of religion for love toward God, mercy, compassion, and service from the heart to both God and man. We would be too busy checking our lists and looking around for those who are either living better at the list than us or criticizing those who aren't living by the lists. Paul – Phil. 3:1-10 Jesus – Sermon on the Mount introduction = Matt. 5:17-20 → Matt. 5:21-6:18 it's the heart not the exterior

3. When reading the incident of the healing of the man with the withered hand, what overwhelming sin do you see in the life of the Religious Leaders? (Jesus will point it out!) Can this sin take over in your life? What are several protections for our hearts and minds that can help against falling into the same human default? Their issue was the lack of mercy and compassion as they focused on their agenda of laws and traditions.
1. **Awareness of the prideful, hardhearted default of man.** Jer. 17:9 “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it.” We can get so into our own selfish world and place value on our petty agendas that in doing so look right past people, completely mindless of their needs. Evidence of a relationship with Christ is a love for others. Love, mercy, compassion, time involvement. Like the Religious Leaders at the synagogue that day, we too can easily have misplaced values. When they put more value on a sheep stuck in a hole instead of a needy handicapped man, Jesus said, “How much then is a man better (Lit. - “more value) than a sheep?” They had gotten it wrong! Eph. 4:32
2. **Knowledge of God's heart and mind and then obedient commitment to it.** Jesus finished His challenge of the Pharisees and Scribes, “Wherefore it is lawful to do well on the sabbath days (“or to do evil? to save life, or to kill?” Mark 3:4)” And then He let those words hang in the room! There was silence! How Christ desired repentance and obedience from those men but instead we read of Jesus' grief over the hardness of their hearts! How about us? Grieve Jesus or please Him? Will we commit to obedience or harden our hearts to stay spinning our earthly agendas and wants, and ignore the needs of others – the gospel, discipleship, encouragement, assistance. Galatians 6:7-10