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Matthew 12:1 - 12:8



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this passage, Steve Gregg examines the controversies raised by Jesus' conduct on the Sabbath, and argues that Jesus' actions were motivated by a focus on moral issues rather than ritualism. Drawing on the story of David, Gregg makes the case that it is more important to be merciful and do what God wants than to strictly observe human traditions. In Gregg's view, the work of the temple priests is of great importance and should not be restricted to just one holy day. Ultimately, Gregg suggests that Jesus' authority as Lord extends to every day, including the Sabbath.

Transcript

In Matthew chapter 12, we are introduced to some stories of Jesus and his conduct on the Sabbath day, which raised controversies. You need to, in order to appreciate these stories, understand how the Jews felt about the Sabbath day. The Sabbath day, of course, is defined in the Ten Commandments.

The fourth commandment of the law said that in six days you shall do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord, and you shall do no work in the Sabbath day. Now, that was one of the Ten Commandments, and of course the Jews defined their religion in terms of those commandments. And yet, of the ten, that one commandment is the one that is more ritualistic than the others.

The commandments to avoid murder, and adultery, and theft, and bearing false witness, and that kind of thing, are all moral issues. That is to say, they have to do with intrinsic justice and goodness. Whereas to keep one day special was something that God could have ordained otherwise.

He could have said keep Thursday special instead of Saturday if he wanted to. Or he could have said keep two or three or four days special. There is nothing intrinsic in the nature of God that required the Sabbath day, in the same sense that there was something intrinsic in the nature of God that required faithfulness to one's wife, or justice in dealing with another person's property or their life.

That is to say, in the Ten Commandments, nine of the commandments were intrinsically

of a moral nature. But the Sabbath day was more like the days that they kept special during the year, the festivals and the new moons. It was just a special day, and therefore it falls into the category of ritual law.

At least that is what Jesus taught, and that is what Paul taught, as we shall see. But the interesting thing is that the Jews tended to neglect the moral aspects of their religion in order to keep the ritual aspects of their religion. And therefore of the Ten Commandments, the Sabbath was the one they liked the best.

Now Jesus pointed out this tendency in the Jews in Matthew 23, 23. He said, Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees, for you pay your tithes of mint and anise and cumin, but you neglect the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faithfulness. Now notice Jesus said there are matters of the law, and then there are weightier matters of the law.

Some things in God's law were more important than others. But ironically, the Jewish leaders tended to exalt those things in the law that were less important and neglect those that were more important. In particular, the less important aspects of the law were the ceremonial things, paying tithes, offering sacrifices, keeping special days, avoiding ritual defilement.

These were the ceremonial issues, and they kept those meticulously, but they neglected the weightier matters, which were the moral issues, justice and mercy and faithfulness. And so we see that Jesus basically analyzed the religious spirit of his day as one that embraced ritualism and neglected the moral issues of God's law. So it should not surprise us when we see the Ten Commandments that nine of them are moral in nature and one is ritualistic in nature, that they emphasize the ritual, and they neglected the morals.

They would commit murder and adultery and theft and bear false witness. We find them doing all those things in the story of the Gospels. But they would not neglect the Sabbath, because that was a ritual, and that was the way they defined religion, was by ritualism.

Now Jesus came with just the opposite approach. He essentially said rituals don't matter. Morals matter.

Doing what's right in the sight of God in terms of holiness and justice and merciful and right and loving, those are moral issues. But keeping religious rituals and ceremonies, they rank much lower in God's priorities. And that's something where Jesus locked horns and contrasted and conflicted with the Pharisees a great deal in his ministry.

The story at the beginning of Matthew 12 presents a notable example of what I've just said. As we begin reading in Matthew 12, it says, At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath, and his disciples were hungry and began to pluck heads of

grain and to eat. But the Pharisees saw it, and they said to him, Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.

Then he said to them, Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him? How he entered the house of God and ate the showbread, which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests of the temple profane the Sabbath and yet are blameless? But I say to you that one is in this place that is greater than the temple. But if you had known what this means, I desire mercy and not sacrifice, you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.

Now, this is a very important teaching of Jesus on the Sabbath day, and you know, there's still controversy among Christians about this. There are Christians who believe that the Sabbath was changed to Sunday, and that we should keep a Sunday Sabbath. There are others who argue, well, no, the Sabbath was never changed to Sunday.

It's still Saturday. Always was. Always will be.

And therefore we need to keep a Saturday Sabbath. And there are Christians who feel very strongly about these things. But in my understanding, the keeping of the Sabbath was something that belonged to the old covenant, and it is never commanded or repeated in the new.

And this is because the Sabbath was a ritual law. And the rituals of Judaism have not carried over into Christianity. The morals have, but the rituals have not.

And we see that taught in many places in Scripture. But let's look at this story in particular and see how Jesus enlightens us on the Sabbath issue. It says that Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath, and his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat them.

Now, you might say, well, whose grain field was this? Were they stealing somebody else's grain? Well, actually, in the law, in Deuteronomy chapter 24, there was specific permission given to any Jewish person. If they went through a grain field, they could pluck heads of grain and eat it. They could not take a basket in or a box and take home several heads of grain and harvest their neighbor's field.

That would be theft. But if you're just walking through and you're hungry, it specifically says in the 24th chapter of Deuteronomy that they could do this kind of thing. So they were not violating any law by eating, when they were hungry, some heads of grain.

The problem was, as Luke chapter 6 and verse 1 tells us, which is parallel, they were plucking the grain and rubbing the heads of grain together in their hands. That was, of course, they were doing that to break up the head into a separation of the kernels of

grain and the chaff, this light, hairy stuff that you don't want to eat. And they were eating the kernels, but they had to separate the chaff from the wheat by rubbing it in their hands first.

So on a very small scale, this was like harvesting and threshing or winnowing grain. Now, these were activities which, when they're done on a large scale, were ordinary agricultural activities and the kinds of things that farmers would have to not do on the Sabbath. Because six days of the week, they would do their harvesting and they'd do their winnowing, but they were supposed to stop doing those kinds of things on the Sabbath.

So here the disciples, in a very, very micro scale, were harvesting and winnowing, and that's just the kind of thing that farmers were not supposed to do on the Sabbath. And so the Pharisees, always looking for trouble, always looking to find fault with Jesus, noticed that his disciples were doing this, and they said to him, Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath. Now, they meant this, although they criticized the disciples, they meant it more of a criticism of Jesus.

These men who were neglecting the Sabbath were Jesus's disciples. They were no doubt reflecting his influence on them, and look at what his influence was doing. He was encouraging a neglect of the Sabbath day.

He let them do, without criticizing them, things that were not lawful to do on the Sabbath. Now, were the disciples violating the Sabbath day, or were they not? There are some who say that the disciples were not violating the Sabbath, but they were only violating the Pharisees' traditions, the rabbis' traditions about the Sabbath, and that that is why Jesus did not criticize his disciples. These people would say that Jesus, of course, did require his disciples to keep the Sabbath day, but what they were doing was no violation of God's law.

It was only a violation of human tradition, and therefore the disciples were not in violation of the Sabbath, and that's why Jesus didn't criticize them. However, if that is true, then Jesus' answer doesn't fit very well. Jesus should have said to the Pharisees in that case, You hypocrites, you are imposing the traditions of men on your Sabbath observance.

My disciples have not broken any law of God. They have not done anything that God forbids. They are only doing what your traditions forbid.

And if Jesus had said something like that, then we would have to assume that this is the correct interpretation of the deal. That Jesus did, in fact, require his disciples to keep Sabbath, but they were not really breaking it on this occasion. They were only violating the traditions of men, not of God.

But that's not what Jesus said, and therefore that is not the correct interpretation of the story. Jesus said, Have you not heard what David did when he was hungry? Now David went, when he was fleeing from Saul, into the tabernacle, and asked the priest for bread. The priest said, We don't have any ordinary bread, but we have the show bread.

But only the priests, under the law, only the priests were allowed to eat the show bread. And David said, That's okay, I'll take it. Now David was not a priest, and therefore he broke the law.

He ate the show bread. But the Pharisees were not critical of David for that, because he was hungry, he needed food. This was a ceremonial law, the law of the temple, the law of the tabernacle, the show bread, so it was not a moral issue, it was part of the ritual law.

And David essentially violated a ritual law in order to satisfy a legitimate hunger. Now Jesus said that that is equivalent to what his disciples had done. That's essentially what he's saying.

He's saying, My disciples have done something parallel to what David did. Now what did David do? Did David violate human traditions? No, he violated the law of God. However, the law he violated was a ritual law, and there are certain priorities in God.

Jesus says, If you had learned what this means, I desire mercy and not sacrifice, you would have not condemned the guiltless. What does it mean, I desire mercy and not sacrifice? This is a quotation from Hosea 6.6. But do you see what it says? God says that he prefers mercy over sacrifice. Now sacrifice was commanded.

The law commanded the Jews to offer sacrifices. But sacrifice was part of the ritual law also. Mercy is part of the moral obligations of man, to love one's neighbor as themselves.

What God was saying in Hosea was that although God has commanded the Jews to keep certain rituals, there is a hierarchy of concern in God. He is more concerned about human need than he is about ritualism. That's what he meant when he said, I desire mercy rather than sacrifice.

I mean, God desired people to offer sacrifices, but he preferred some things more than that. It was more important that we are merciful to people when they are in need than that we strictly observe the rituals that God commanded. And David is a good example of that.

David violated the rituals that God commanded. He ate the showbread, which he was not allowed to eat. But there is no suggestion that he did what was wrong because he was in need.

The priest was right to give David the food because he had mercy on David's condition.

And God desires mercy more than he desires ritualism. What Jesus is saying is that certain rituals, though they are commanded by God as part of the Jewish religion, they can be sacrificed to a higher need.

For example, David when he was hungry. For example, the disciples of Jesus when they are hungry. They could break the Sabbath because it is a ritual law, just like David ate the showbread and violated a ritual law.

Same thing. You see, what Jesus is saying is that the Sabbath is not a moral law, it's a ritual law. And we could have deduced that anyway even if Jesus hadn't said it because it is a law that resembles, in its nature, other laws about keeping new moons and festivals.

You see, the Jews had festivals they kept once a year. They had new moons that occurred once a month. And they had Sabbaths that occurred once a week.

And these things were all sort of the same kind of thing. The requirements were that you do no work on these days and you have a special way of honoring God on those days. You had to do it on the Sabbath, you had to do it on the new moons once a month, you had to do those things in the festivals, so once a year.

Now Paul, in Colossians 1 and verse 16 says, Let no one judge you in matters of food and drink, nor with respect to observance of festivals or new moons or Sabbaths. He said these things were a shadow for the time being, but the body is Christ. Now what he is saying is that these ritual laws, which included the festivals, the new moons, the dietary restrictions of Israel, and also the Sabbaths, he lists the Sabbath in there.

These things were a shadow. They were not permanent. They were not the essence of God's requirement of man at all times.

Alright? What he is saying is that this is part of the ritual law. And while ritual law should not be ignored completely, as long as it was in force, it can be sacrificed for something higher. Now of course the ritual law of Israel came to fulfillment in Christ.

And we no longer, at least I believe the New Testament teaches, we no longer have to offer animal sacrifices, we no longer have to abstain from unclean food, we no longer have to keep the festivals of Israel. These things are not part of Christianity. And therefore the Sabbath, which Paul and Jesus both included, among the ritual laws of Israel, is not commanded in the New Testament.

It's not part of Christianity. Now, Jesus gave another illustration of the inconsistency of his critics, because he says in verse 5, Or have you not read in the law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? Now what does it mean the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath? It doesn't mean they do something wicked. It just means profaning the Sabbath was working on the Sabbath.

The requirement on the Sabbath is that you do no work. But the priests work on the Sabbath. You know, if a farmer would go out and work on the Sabbath, he's profaning the Sabbath.

The word profane means to render it ordinary, to render it common. The Sabbath was a holy day in the Jewish ritual. And it was not a common day.

There were six common days and one holy day. And yet if you treat the Sabbath like a common day, you profane it, you make it common. Okay? Now, Jesus said the priests in the temple, they profane the Sabbath, they treat it like a common day.

That is to say, they offer the sacrifices. That was their job. That was their work.

They offer sacrifices Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and also on Saturday, also on the Sabbath. And why did they do this on the Sabbath? Well, because it was something that had to be done every day of the week. Offering sacrifices, serving the interest of the temple, had to be done every day, not just once in a while.

And that is because atonement for sin had to be done every day. People sin every day, people need mercy and atonement every day. That's what the temple was there for.

That's what the temple was about. Now, when Jesus said that the priests of the temple profane the Sabbath and they're blameless, he means they work on the Sabbath just like they work on other days. But he anticipated that the Pharisees would say, ah, but that's an exception because the temple, you know, the temple is a very important thing.

Its work has to go on on the Sabbath as well as other days. So Jesus, anticipating that, said, but I say to you that in this place there is one greater than the temple. Now, what he meant by that is that Jesus himself was greater than the temple in terms of importance and, you know, significance.

He had a higher authority than the temple itself. Now, some people would have been offended by that suggestion, but it's true. He is the God of the temple.

It was his house. He has a higher authority than the temple, but his point is this. The Pharisees who were criticizing his disciples would be willing to excuse the priests in the temple for working on the Sabbath day because, after all, they were doing the work of the temple.

And the temple is so important that its work even precludes, or supersedes, I should say, the requirements of keeping the Sabbath. All right? Now, Jesus says, ah, but I am more important than the temple. One greater than the temple is here.

What is his argument? Here's what he's saying. If you will excuse the priests for doing their ordinary work on the Sabbath day because they are serving the interests of the

temple, then you should excuse my disciples for treating the Sabbath as an ordinary day because they're doing the work of one greater than the temple. They're doing my work.

They're going about my business. And if doing the work of the temple supersedes the requirement to keep the Sabbath, then doing the work of one greater than the temple supersedes the requirement of keeping the Sabbath. And now that's a very important thing.

He's basically saying that his disciples, so long as they're doing his work and doing what he wants them to do, don't have to pay attention to what day it is. Just like the priests in the temple, because they were doing God's work in the temple, they didn't have to look at the calendar and say, uh-oh, it's Saturday, we can't work today. No, they had to work that day too.

Because God's work must go on every day. In another place, in John chapter 5, Jesus was criticized because he healed somebody on the Sabbath day, the man who was lame. And when he was criticized for it, he said, well, my father works every day and I work every day.

I just do what he does. You see, the work of God continues seven days a week. And those who do the work of God must do it every day.

To the Christian, there's not one day that is God's day. Every day is God's day. And we must do the will of God each day, not just six days a week.

And so Jesus said in verse 7, But if you had known what this means, I desire mercy and not sacrifice, you would not have condemned the guiltless. He's kind of scolding them a little bit because earlier in Matthew chapter 9, they had criticized him for eating with tax collectors and sinners. And he said, well, you go and learn what this means.

This is Matthew 9.13. Go and learn what this means. I desire mercy and not sacrifice. In other words, Jesus quoted this verse from Hosea 6.6 to them back in chapter 9 and told them to go learn what it means.

Apparently, they didn't because he said, if you had known what this means, later on, he says, if you had learned what I told you to learn, if you had known what this means, I desire mercy and not sacrifice, you would have not made this stupid mistake of condemning innocent people. He says, for the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath. What does that mean? Why does he say the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath? Why didn't he just say the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath? Because even of the Sabbath means the Sabbath also, not just the other six days, but even the Sabbath day.

What he means is this. The temple where the priests work is of such great importance, and the work of God there is of so great importance, it doesn't matter what day of the week it is. The work must go on.

The temple work must go on even on the Sabbath, as it does on other days. Well, likewise, the Lordship of Jesus and the life of his disciples is a bigger issue than the authority of the temple itself. He's greater than the temple.

And the disciples who are doing his will are following his Lordship, and they must do so even on the Sabbath. He's the Lord even of the Sabbath. You see, the point that he's making is this, that the follower of Christ must be submitted to the will of Christ all the time.

Everything we do every day, we do as servants of Christ, as those that are doing his will, carrying out his wishes. We must do this on Sunday and Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday and Thursday and Friday, and even on the Sabbath, even Saturday. So that the right thing to do about the Sabbath is the same thing that's right to do any other day, and that is to live under the Lordship of Jesus.

He's the Lord of every day. He's even the Lord of the Sabbath day. That's what Jesus said.

And what that means is that the Sabbath day, to the Christian, doesn't stand out as a different day than any other day, because what I must do on the Sabbath day is the same thing I must do every day. I must know the will of Christ. I must do the will of Christ.

I must be a faithful follower of Christ. And if I am, then I don't have to look at the calendar or my watch to see what day it is. The only thing I have to look at is Jesus and my own actions and see if I'm doing what he wants me to do.

That is my obligation every day of every week.