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Matthew 12:9 - 12:14



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this study of Matthew 12 by Steve Gregg, he explains how the Sabbath is not regarded as a moral law in the Old Testament but rather a ceremonial law. Compassion overrides the Sabbath law, and Jesus defends his disciples' actions by likening it to what David did. The story of the Sabbath conflict in Matthew 12:9-14 tells of how the Pharisees criticized Jesus for healing a man's withered hand on the Sabbath. However, as Gregg explains, the Sabbath was made for man, and not the other way around, and thus the healing was not evil but a good thing to do.

Transcript

Today we're turning to Matthew chapter 12 and continuing our study in the life of Jesus. And in chapter 12 we have, at the beginning of the chapter, a couple of stories separated from each other by perhaps a week or two, but both of them having the same subject matter as far as the lesson that they underscore, and that is, it's related to the Sabbath day question. The Jews, you know, observe Sabbath on a Saturday, at least the observant Jews do.

Saturday is the seventh day of the week, and according to the fourth commandment, in the ten commandments, all work and all labor was to be done in six days, and on the seventh day, rest was to be observed from labor. And in the tradition of Israel, following as they understood the law, they set up a synagogue service where observant Jews to this day still gather on Saturdays, which is their Sabbath, and they were doing so in Jesus' time as well, 2,000 years ago. Now, we found in the opening verses of Matthew 12, last time, that Jesus and his disciples had been walking through a grain field, and the disciples had been hungry and plucked grain with their hands, rubbed the heads of grain in their hands, and ate the kernels that were left after the chaff had been separated and blown away.

These actions were interpreted by some of the religious observers as a violation of the Sabbath day, since they did this on the Sabbath day, and their activities were technically harvesting, and what would be called winnowing, harvesting the grain and winnowing it to separate the wheat from the chaff, were activities that, obviously, farmers would do

on a grand scale at harvest time, and therefore was ordinary labor, and the kind of thing that a farmer would have to desist from doing on the Sabbath day. However, the disciples were doing this, obviously, on a very small scale on the Sabbath day, and because it was essentially the same kind of activity, the scribes and the Pharisees criticized Jesus' disciples for this, and Jesus defended them by likening this to what David did. When David was fleeing from Saul and hungry, he came to the tabernacle and, seeking food, found that there was no food there that the priest could give him, except for the showbread, which, according to the law, was not to be given to anybody except the priests.

And David was not a priest, but he took the showbread anyway and ate it and continued on his journey, and Jesus brings this up, how that David violated this law when he was hungry and was faultless, or at least was regarded to be such. Nobody, including Jesus, has been critical of David for doing so. Now, Jesus was obviously saying that the disciples, when they took the grain and ate it, even if it was a violation of the Sabbath day, it was a violation in the same sense that David violated the law of showbread.

It was a case where human need came into conflict with ceremonial observance. It was a ceremonial law that David violated, it was not a moral law, and it was a ceremonial law that the disciples violated, not a moral law. Sabbath, of course, Jesus likened to a ceremonial law, and I think so did Paul.

In Colossians 2, verses 16 and 17, Paul listed Sabbaths along with laws that had to do with clean and unclean foods and keeping various festivals and so forth, so that Paul and Jesus both seem to teach that the Sabbath is not to be regarded as one of the moral laws of the Old Testament, but one of the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament. And the violation of the Sabbath by his disciples was like the violation of another ceremonial law of showbread by David at an earlier time. And Jesus said to the Pharisees on that occasion, in the story that we've already covered before, he said, 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 that scripture he quoted from Hosea 6.6, I will have mercy and not sacrifice, he had earlier in chapter 9 of Matthew confronted the Pharisees and said, go and learn what this means, and he quoted the same scripture to them. Now he says, if you had known what this means, and by saying it that way, of course he is saying, I told you, you should go and learn what this means. And you apparently didn't, because if you had known what it meant, you wouldn't be making this error in judgment that you were making.

And that error, he said, was that they were condemning the guiltless. Now here were some followers of Jesus who were violating the Sabbath day, and Jesus said they were guiltless, just like David was regarded as guiltless. Or Jesus also gave the example of the priests, who also work on the Sabbath day, and they're blameless or guiltless.

So there are ways in which the ceremonial law, the Sabbath law and other ceremonial law of the Jews, could even in the Old Testament times be violated justly, if it was a matter of meeting some need of compassion for human need. And so compassion overrides ceremonial law, it's what sacrifice is, I'll have compassion, not sacrifice. God is saying that he prefers that human compassion overrule the observance of ceremonial laws like the sacrificial laws, for example.

And Jesus applies it to the Sabbath law as well. Now his final statement in that segment that we studied last time was, the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath, and as I was saying when we ran out of time last time, what he is saying is that the obligation of Jesus' disciples who acknowledge him as Lord, is to do whatever he wants them to do, to do whatever pleases him, that's what a Lord is all about. Jesus said elsewhere, why do you call me Lord, Lord, and you don't do the things that I say.

The idea of having a Lord is that you obey him, and if he is your Lord, then you are his slave, his servant. And if you are his slave, then you have no obligations except to do what pleases your master, your Lord. Now that was true of the disciples.

They did not have an obligation to do anything except what pleased their Lord, and as they were picking grain on the Sabbath, this apparently did not displease him. They did it in his presence, he did not raise an objection, and therefore they were doing something that he was allowing, and he was the Lord over the Sabbath regulations. He was the Lord even of the Sabbath day, and by saying even of the Sabbath day, I think what he's saying is that every day, even the Sabbath day, the disciples of Jesus are to observe his Lordship, and not put anything else above it.

So if he wants you to do a certain thing on the Sabbath day, the very fact that it's the Sabbath day does not provide an argument against doing that thing, because he's the Lord even then, even on the Sabbath. The Sabbath day does not cancel out his Lordship. It's not a matter of we have to do everything Jesus wants us to do six days a week, but on the seventh day we simply can't do his will, we can't follow him, we can't obey him, because the Sabbath day requires us to stop doing things.

He says no, the Lordship of Jesus transcends the law of the Sabbath, as it transcends, of course, all ceremonial law. Now, the next little story here in Matthew 12 is also about a Sabbath conflict. Jesus ran into conflicts on this matter frequently.

Now, it should be pointed out that much of what Jesus did on the Sabbath days, he could have done a different day of the week. That doesn't apply so much to these stories, but there are other stories in the life of Christ where Jesus did something to heal somebody or do something for someone on a day that happened to be the Sabbath, but he could have done it on a different day, but it seems he deliberately did it on the Sabbath in order to make a point and in order to raise the opportunity for him to teach a new concept concerning the Sabbath. That was true, of course, of the story in John 5 where

Jesus healed the man of the pool of Bethsaida, or Bethesda, excuse me, and he did it on the Sabbath day.

He could have done it on some other day, but it raised a tremendous controversy that gave Jesus an opportunity to confront the Jews with their wrong understanding of Sabbath. Well, Jesus seemed to make that one of his basic missions in teaching in the midst of the Jews because we read again and again that Jesus publicly did things on the Sabbath day that bothered the Jews and gave opportunity for him to show where they were wrong in their thinking about Sabbath. Now, this story in Matthew 12, verses 9 through 14 is another example.

It says, now when he had departed from there, he went into their synagogue. Now, it says in Luke 6, 6, which is the parallel of this, that this particular story occurred, as Luke tells us, on another Sabbath. So, although it sounds, the way Matthew tells it, as if he just went right from the grain fields where this controversy occurred right into the synagogue, but Matthew is simply not telling us that some time had elapsed.

This was now another Sabbath. Jesus went into the synagogue, and behold, there was a man who had a withered hand, and they asked him, saying, Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, that they might accuse him? Now, they were trying to get Jesus in trouble here. They knew that Jesus was inclined to heal a man, no matter whether it was a Sabbath day or not.

Jesus already had gone on record as having a disagreement with them in terms of the correct observance of Sabbath, and Jesus was known to be a man who healed just about everybody in sight, and here on a Sabbath day was a man in the congregation who clearly was crippled. He was disabled. He had a hand and an arm that was withered and did not function.

Now, you see, the Jewish tradition about Sabbath was that a physician could not do any cures on the Sabbath day unless it was upon somebody who had a life-threatening circumstance, which perhaps they would not survive until the next day for. Now, the idea, of course, it doesn't come from Scripture. All that the Old Testament Scripture said was you shall not do any labor on the Sabbath, but because that's not very specific, the Jewish rabbis had come up with all kinds of specifics that they added to the law, telling what kinds of things could and could not be done on the Sabbath day, and one of those things was that a physician, if he, you know, if somebody was injured and bleeding to death, and it was a Sabbath day, and they would probably not live to the next day if they didn't receive treatment, then the rabbis permitted a physician to attend to that need on the Sabbath, but anything that was not life-threatening and not urgent was not to be done on the Sabbath day.

Now, here we have a man in the synagogue. It's the Sabbath day, and this man has a handicap. He's been disabled possibly for maybe since birth.

It's clear that he could be healed any other day of the week than this. It was not life-threatening. There's no reason why it had to happen on the Sabbath day, and therefore, because of that, if Jesus was in the role of a physician, he would be forbidden by the rabbinic traditions to do a cure on the Sabbath in this case.

Now, Jesus, of course, was not a physician, but he certainly was looked to as doing the work of a physician much of the time because of his healing ministry, and so we have those critics of his. They see a situation here where they anticipate that Jesus is no doubt going to perform a healing, and here it is the Sabbath day, and they raise the question, is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath? And it says they ask this question that they might accuse him. I think they knew that he was going to say yes.

They knew that he believed in healing on the Sabbath, and they did not, and so they were trying to raise an issue of contention that they might find fault with him, and it says in verse 11, Then he said to them, What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not lay hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. Then he said to the man, Stretch out your hand, and he stretched it out, and it was restored as whole as the other. Then the Pharisees went out and took counsel against him, how they might destroy him.

So here he really got them angry by right in their face doing the thing on the Sabbath day that they did not approve of. Now when they asked him, is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath? He did not, they were trying to put him on what we call the horns of a dilemma, where either answer he would give would present difficulty for him, because if he said no, it's not lawful to heal on the Sabbath, in answer to them, then of course he would be forbidding his own actions which he had himself conducted. They had seen him heal on the Sabbath before and he was just about to do so again.

And so they did not expect that he would in good conscience be able to say no, and yet if he said yes, it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath, he would be putting himself at odds with the respected rabbis who held the contrary view, and therefore he was supposed to be put here in a position that was on the horns of a dilemma. Now this story is not told in the same detail in Matthew as it is in Mark. However, in Mark we are told that Jesus turned it on them, and he said to them, is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath or to do evil? Now see, by saying that to them, he put them on the horns of a dilemma.

Instead of himself being trapped by their remarks, he trapped them. He said, is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath or to do evil? Well, obviously they couldn't say it was lawful to do evil on the Sabbath, because it's never lawful to do evil. On the other hand, if they gave the other answer, well, it's lawful to do good on the Sabbath, then he could easily say, well, healing this man is certainly good, isn't it? Therefore, they would be giving him permission to do the very thing that they wanted to accuse him of wrongdoing for doing.

And so they said nothing. And according to Mark's gospel, in the parallel there, it says he looked on them with anger, being grieved at the hardness of their heart, and he went ahead and healed the man. But what Jesus says here is very interesting.

In all the accounts he says this. He says, what man is there among you who has one sheep? In Luke's gospel, he says, who has only one sheep. And if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not lay hold of it and lift it out? Now, Jesus was speaking of a situation that apparently he knew represented their own sentiments and their own policies.

That if they had some livestock, of course, livestock has financial value to them. And if some misfortune happened to their only animal, their only sheep in this case, and it fell into a pit and it would clearly, you know, die if it was not lifted out, but it happened to be the Sabbath. There is a law, or at least the tradition of the rabbis forbade the lifting of any kind of heavy weights on the Sabbath.

But the lifting of a lamb out of a pit, he, Jesus, was quite confident that even the scribes and Pharisees would go that far as to help a valuable item of livestock from perishing on the Sabbath day. In other words, they would want to save their own financial interest rather than lose this sheep if it fell into a ditch on the Sabbath and therefore they would rescue it. And then Jesus says, well then, of how much more value is a man than a sheep? And what he's saying, of course, is you would show compassion and concern for the well-being of your sheep, then you certainly should have no objection to my showing compassion and concern for the well-being of a man who, Jesus says, is of much more value than a sheep.

Before we go any further here and talk about the lesson that Jesus is teaching about the Sabbath day, we might just notice the incidental things that he teaches, not so much as something he's intending to teach as what he takes for granted. He takes it for granted that man is of much more value than animals. He said, of how much more value is a man than a sheep, implying that there's a great deal of value that anyone would acknowledge.

On another occasion, Jesus spoke of the fact that not a sparrow falls to the ground without the will of your father. He said, how much more value are you than of sparrows? Now, Jesus and his contemporaries, of course, took it for granted that people are more valuable than animals. And the only reason I pause on this point before going further is that we live in an age where that's not taken for granted.

There are many people who value animals more than they value people. And, you know, it's certainly not original with me, and many of you have heard the disparity illustrated in the fact that there are certain protected animals, endangered species, which if you will kill one of them, you will go to jail and pay a huge fine. But if you kill an unborn human child, you'll experience no penalty for that.

In other words, if you get an abortion. And that humanity, human life is valued less than animal life. If you take an egg from the nest of a bald eagle, for example, and destroy that egg, you have destroyed an unborn bald eagle and you will go to jail and pay probably \$100,000 fine.

You do the same thing to an unborn human and you'll have no penalties to pay. In fact, you can get paid for doing so and you can get government subsidies for doing so. This illustrates, I think, how far our own society has drifted from the common sense that was common knowledge in even a less sophisticated age.

Jesus himself acknowledged that man is of much greater value than an animal. And yet many people who believe in animal rights, and by the way, I'm not opposed to animals being treated kindly. The Bible says in Proverbs that a righteous man is kind even to his animals.

And I don't think there's anything wrong with being considerate to your livestock or to your pets or even to wild animals for that matter. But at the same time, those who would place animals above men will protect wolves, for example, which are predators. I mean, if you kill a wolf here in Idaho where I live, there's a \$100,000 fine for killing a wolf, even if it's killing your livestock.

The animal rights people would like to see the wolf preserved as part of the food chain, even though he kills animals. But if man kills animals, many of those same people feel that man is doing a great crime of some form. In other words, if a wolf kills a moose and eats it, well, that's part of nature.

That's just the food chain in action. If man kills a moose and eats it, somebody's going to complain that man should not be molesting the wild animals in that way. So that man is even below the animals in terms of rights.

A wolf has a right to eat a wild game, but a man doesn't in the eyes of some. I'm not saying there are laws that forbid a man from doing so, although I will say this. A wolf is not required to get deer tags before it kills a deer, and a man is.

So in a sense, our society has conferred upon animals rights that even men are deprived of. And it just represents a flip-flop in the understanding of the way God made things. Man was made last of the animal kingdom, and was given dominion over it, and was made in the image of God so that he is of far greater value, as Jesus himself says, than animals.

Now Jesus goes on. His main point is not, of course, anything about human rights or animal rights. His real point is this.

He says in verse 12, Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. Now Jesus' comment answers the question, I would think, once and for all for Christians. What are

we to do about the Sabbath day? Well, Jesus told us, it's lawful to do good on the Sabbath.

Okay, well what am I supposed to do the other days of the week? Bad? No, I'm supposed to do good every day. We're supposed to be rich in good works. The Bible indicates that our whole life is to be a life devoted to good works, which God has foreordained that we should walk in them.

And therefore, if I'm to do good works Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, how does Saturday differ? It's a day I'm supposed to do good works also. It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. It's the same thing as saying, Jesus is the Lord, also the Sabbath day.

I'm supposed to do what he wants me to do, no matter what day of the week it is. And both of these stories teach us that the Christian doesn't have to consult the calendar to decide what he's allowed to do. He's supposed to do the will of God.

He's supposed to do good. He's supposed to obey his Lord every day of the week. And there is no day different than another.

And so Jesus commanded the man to stretch out his hand. And of course, in the act of commanding, gave the power to do so. The man could not, in his own strength, stretch his hand out.

It was withered. But by the very command of Christ, the man was enabled to do it, and he was healed. Which illustrates, of course, that when God commands you to do something, even if it's impossible humanly, his command carries with it the promise of the ability to do it.

And God miraculously healed this man. We'll look further at the life of Christ when we come back to our study in Matthew next time. I hope you'll be able to join us as we continue our studies in the life of Christ through this book.