

**“Sabbath Master”**  
**Matthew 12:1-21**  
**March 11, 2018**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

For a few years when our son was young, I coached his little league baseball team. I remember one particular game when he was probably 7 or 8 years old, and we were playing a team quite a bit better than us. We ended up losing that game something like 26-2. When the game was over, one of the boys on my team came up to me and asked with enthusiasm, “Did we win, coach? Did we win?” “No, not today,” I told him. “Maybe next time.”

As I reflect back on that, I find myself admiring and longing for the childlike playfulness evidenced in the enthusiastic question of that boy. I don’t think his week was destroyed by losing that game. I’m confident he lost no sleep over it. He also couldn’t wait to get back out there and play again, enjoying the pure experience of play, unsullied by the more serious attitude that destroys playfulness and makes serious business out of what is really just a game.

At the end of the previous chapter, Jesus promises rest to any who come to him and take his yoke upon them. Today’s passage further develops this theme of rest through the institution in Israel God designed to be a picture of the rest he gives, the Sabbath. As Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus brings Sabbath rest to us. There is a very real sense in which Sabbath rest is the ability to play. God created the heavens and the earth in six days, and then rested on the seventh. After each day, God celebrated, which is a kind of playing, and said “It is good.” The seventh day was a day of nothing but celebration, play and rest. And he invites us into this rest, to play and celebrate with him.

Under the legalistic leadership of the Pharisees, the Sabbath had become anything but playful rest. What God had intended to be a refreshing rest, even a taste of eternity, had become a burdensome taste of hell. Jesus will not let that stand. He declares himself to be the “Lord of the Sabbath,” and he will go to any length to restore rest and play to his people. As we’re going to see, the culprit is legalism and the solution is Jesus.

**I. Legalism, the Rest Thief**

We need to begin by defining legalism. It is the effort to be right with God through law-keeping rather than through God’s gift to us of forgiveness and the righteousness of Christ. The Pharisees were legalistic in their attempts to keep the Sabbath laws. Two Sabbath incidents are described in these verses. In the first one, Jesus and his disciples are walking through a field with ripened

grain, and they are hungry. So they each take some grain from the stalks, rub it together in their hands to remove the outer husks, blow away the dry husks and put the raw grain into their mouths to satisfy their hunger. When we read something like that, we think that perhaps this practice would violate the eighth commandment, “thou shalt not steal.” But Old Testament law allowed such a practice, as long as you ate anything harvested in another’s field and didn’t carry anything out with you. But the Pharisees go to the fourth commandment about keeping the Sabbath day holy. They regard the act of the disciples as doing the work of harvesting, threshing and winnowing of grain. So they accuse Jesus of being a Sabbath-breaker in allowing such behavior on the part of his disciples.

Jesus answers with Scripture their accusation that he has violated the Scriptures. He takes them to the example of David eating of the bread used in the tabernacle service on one occasion when he was hungry. Though this bread was normally reserved for the priests, and David was not a priest, it was not wrong for him to eat this bread on the principle of mercy. Jesus tells the Pharisees that they don’t know the Scriptures as well as they think, because they have forgotten a very important principle. It is the principle found in Hosea 6:6 – **“I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.”**

That verse speaks of the need to appreciate the priority that needs to be given to certain commands in the Bible. It’s not that sacrifice is unimportant, but that mercy is more important. Let me give you an example. One of the traffic laws we are under is one forbidding you to cross a solid yellow line in the middle of the road. It means that the traffic engineers have determined that it is not safe to move into the lane of oncoming traffic at that location. Suppose as you are driving along, you come to a place where there is a yellow line in the middle of the road, and just at that place, a small child runs out onto the road while chasing a ball. There is not time to stop to avoid hitting the child, and your only options are either to violate the law by crossing the yellow line or to hit the child. No one would have any doubts about the right thing to do, because we have an innate sense that there is a priority in the law. The principle of mercy requires that we violate a less important traffic law in order to keep a far important law of mercy.

Legalism is radically self-centered, because it says, “Run over the child so you can know that you were right to keep the whole law. It’s the child’s fault that he ran out into the street without first looking.” Legalism cares for self more than for people. It wants to keep the law so the legalist can feel good about himself. We can see the same thing in the next Sabbath story. Jesus enters a synagogue and encounters there a man with a withered hand. The Pharisees are looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they bring up the topic of healing on the Sabbath. It seems that they are hoping Jesus will heal the man so they can accuse him of a Sabbath violation. Jesus’ answer exposes the hypocrisy of these legalists. If a man has only one sheep and that sheep falls

into a pit on the Sabbath, won't all of them lift it out? He then proceeds to heal the man with the withered hand, reasoning that people are of greater importance than sheep. These Pharisees care nothing for a man with a handicap, only about maintaining a good feeling of being right.

Not only is legalism self-centered, but it is also focused on externals. The reason is that we all know we can't change our own heart, but we can control our external behavior. So legalism substitutes external behavior for a right heart attitude. Sabbath laws are particularly susceptible to externalism by merely outlawing inappropriate external behavior. The Sabbath laws of the Pharisees had multiplied to the point of being ridiculous. For example, it was against their law to spit on the Sabbath. The reason is that if the moisture drenches the soil, the spitter would be guilty of plowing on the Sabbath. And if a seed should be there, he is also guilty of sowing. The Bible prohibited the carrying of loads on the Sabbath. So the Pharisees said that wearing clothes was okay on the Sabbath, but not carrying clothes. So if your house caught on fire on the Sabbath and you wanted to save your clothes, you were not allowed to carry them out. But you could put them on and wear them.

Legalism not only multiplies laws, but it also multiplies sin. The irony of these Sabbath incidents is that the Pharisees, in their zeal to protect the Sabbath, were doing far more work than those they were condemning for Sabbath violations. They were busy being the Sabbath police when Jesus' disciples were eating the grain. They were busy trying to trap Jesus when he healed the man with the withered hand. And then the passage ends with their plotting to kill Jesus. So apparently they thought it lawful to plot a murder on the Sabbath, but not lawful to heal a handicapped man.

Are you guilty of legalism? Legalism is the natural state of the human heart, seen in our efforts to be right. And when you are working hard to be right, you are not resting. Jesus' antidote to legalism is to learn the meaning of Hosea 6:6. **"I desire mercy, and not sacrifice."** We're going to talk more about that in our next point, but for now I want to mention that our attitudes toward the poor are an accurate indicator of legalism. Ministry to the poor that is done from a heart of duty instead of mercy wants to do only enough to keep guilt away, rather than doing enough actually to help the poor. It is legalistic and self-centered. This attitude will often blame the poor for our decision not to provide help to them. "They're lazy. They are in their predicament because of bad decisions they've made." With the legalistic heart, the real reason behind the lack of generosity to the poor is the self-centered heart instead of a heart of mercy. We want to feel that we are right, but at the same time not have the burden of giving away our money. Years ago I had lunch with a man at a restaurant. I was planning all along on picking up the check and paying for the lunch. So when the waitress gave us the check, I reached for it to pay it. As soon as this man saw me reach for the check, he made a very half-hearted

reach for it. It was obvious to me that he wanted to think of himself as generous, but he didn't actually want to be generous.

## II. Jesus, the Rest Giver

Jesus gives us rest by delivering us from legalism, and he delivers us from legalism by giving us a heart of mercy. But how does he give us a heart of mercy? There is only one way we will ever get a heart of mercy, and that is to receive mercy from Jesus. The healing of the man with the withered hand speaks powerfully of the mercy of Jesus. The position of the Pharisees regarding performing healings on the Sabbath was that they were permitted only in life-threatening, emergency situations. Jesus could have given an answer to the Pharisees that went something like this: "My position is that it is biblical to treat emergency cases on the Sabbath, but all other non-emergency cases must wait until after the Sabbath, out of reverence for the sacredness of that day." He could then have told the man with the withered hand that his was not an emergency, and promised to heal him the next day if he would return to Jesus. But Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath, and he knows that the whole purpose of the Sabbath is to bring rest to the soul. He will not allow these nit-picking legalists to define what is appropriate or not on this day. It is his day, a day when God brings rest.

But Jesus paid a price for his bringing of mercy to this man. **"The Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him"** (v. 14). When the choice was between delaying mercy and dying, Jesus chose death to himself. He will not withhold mercy, no matter the cost to himself. Have you seen yourself as the beneficiary of Jesus' mercy? We are the handicapped healed by Jesus and the hungry fed by Jesus.

What's more, we are the legalistic Pharisees spared by Jesus. Notice Jesus' response to the conspiracy of the Pharisees. **"Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there"** (v. 15). This is unexpected behavior on the part of a Messiah. What kind of Messiah retreats when threatened rather than taking action to defeat his enemies? A merciful Messiah gives time and space for repentance, and that's what he is doing with the Pharisees.

Jesus is also gentle, as indicated in the quote from Isaiah. He does not **"quarrel or cry aloud."** **"A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench."** Bruised reeds are good for nothing. They are like eyeglasses with cracked lenses and frames. We would all not hesitate in throwing away such a worthless item. Not Jesus, he keeps such things. More than that, he makes them like new again. We are all nothing more than broken eyeglasses that Jesus has restored. He has done so at great cost to himself, showing us mercy in the process.

We learn to rest as we receive the mercy of Jesus. What does God require of us now in the Sabbath laws? Kevin DeYoung says, “It seems like most Christians are either oblivious of the Sabbath and treat it like Saturday interrupted by church, or they advocate a strict Sabbatarianism that tries hard to apply to Sunday the details of the law of Moses.” The Heidelberg Catechism has it about right, I think. It says that God’s will for us in the fourth commandment is:

First, that the gospel ministry and education for it be maintained, and that, especially on the festive day of rest, I regularly attend the assembly of God’s people to learn what God’s Word teaches, to participate in the sacraments, to pray to God publicly, and to bring Christian offerings for the poor. Second, that every day of my life I rest from my evil ways, let the Lord work in me through His Spirit, and so begin already in this life the eternal Sabbath.

We begin today the eternal Sabbath, resting in God. As you probably are aware, the Christian Sabbath is no longer the seventh day of the week, as it was in the Old Testament. It is now the first day of the week. In the Old Testament, the rest came after the six days of work. After the death and resurrection of Jesus, the rest comes first. But it is also important to remember that the good works come after the rest. Good works don’t earn our rest but they do flow from the rest God gives.

## **CONCLUSION:**

The Sabbath is a gift, not something we have earned. It is an entering into the rest of God. It is learning to play with God. Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath who invites us into his rest. Will you come? You do so by laying down your legalism and trusting instead in Jesus. Two weeks ago, we babysat our two year old grandson for four days while his parents celebrated their anniversary with a trip to California. Hastings would often come up to me with a request to play with him. “Play, Pops,” he would say. By his definition, to play with him required that I get down on the floor with him. If I wasn’t on the floor, I was watching, not playing. God gets down on the floor with us, inviting us into his eternal rest. He is a playful God who takes his play quite seriously and loves to welcome us into that. We enter that rest only through faith in Christ.

**Small Group Discussion Questions**  
**Matthew 12:1-21**

1. Sunday is the Christian Sabbath. What is your idea of a perfect Sunday?
2. The Bible teaches that the Sabbath laws of the Old Testament have been fulfilled in Christ (Col. 2:16-17). Nevertheless, it is widely agreed by Bible students that since the first idea of the Sabbath arose in Genesis 2:2 prior to the Mosaic Sabbath laws, that there is still some sense in which we are to keep Sabbath. At the very least, that means avoiding constant work and busyness 7 days a week, to take a day off for rest. What obstacles in your life prevent you from doing so?
3. Legalism is a great enemy of rest. Where do you see temptations to legalism in your life?
4. Jesus wants the legalists to learn what it means that God desires mercy, not sacrifice. That speaks of a heart attitude over mere duty. Do you see any ways in which Christians want to do their duty to the poor in place of having a heart of mercy toward the poor? Think of some examples of this.
5. Is duty a bad thing? What should be our view of doing our duty?
6. “A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench” (v. 20). Have you (or anyone close to you) ever felt like a bruised reed or a smoldering wick? How did Jesus meet you during that time? How could he meet you if you are currently experiencing such a time?
7. What might it look like for you to have more of a heart of mercy? Describe that if you can.