

Lord of the Sabbath

Louis rubbed both his eyes with his huge hand. It was late. He was tired. He was sitting alone on top of one of the picnic tables outside of the cabins—thinking.

It was his annual trip when he took the boys camping in the West Tennessee woods. Louis, the youth minister at his church, had first broached the idea with his pastor three years prior. Pastor Edwards loved the idea but raised some concerns. The most important one was that anyone accompanying the boys would have to undergo background checks.

Years one and two had gone well. However, this year, Louis had trouble with two volunteers. There was Jabari, who—maybe in his attempt to relate to the boys—was full of worldly “wisdom.”

Louis told Jabari that the point of the retreat was to point the boys to Christ. “They get enough worldly advice from the world,” Louis had said. Yet, Jabari’s crude humor increased and seemingly intensified. Then there was Ghaleen, who was either sleeping in or wandering away from the group.

Louis sent Jabari home the day before. Then Louis warned Ghaleen that if he didn’t shape up, he’d be going home too.

Louis knew neither of the men were happy with him. And some of the other staff might not have agreed with his decision. But he had to protect these boys.

Louis swung his head toward the footsteps he heard nearby. “Want to get some rest? I can take a watch for a few hours,” said Ghaleen.

- 1. What does holding authority look like for you?**
- 2. What are some characteristics of a godly leader?**
- 3. How do you submit to Christ’s authority?**

The Disciples Glean; the Pharisees Complain

Matthew 12:1–4 KJV

1 At that time Jesus went on the sabbath day through the corn; and his disciples were an hungred, and began to pluck the ears of corn, and to eat. 2 But when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto him, behold, thy disciples do that which is not lawful to do upon the sabbath day.

3 But he said unto them, have ye not read what David did, when he was an hungred, and they that were with him; 4 How he entered into the house of God, and did eat the shewbread, which was not lawful for him to eat, neither for them which were with him, but only for the priests?

Matthew 12:1–4 NIV

¹ At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. ² When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath."

³ He answered, "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? ⁴ He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests.

It is the Sabbath, and Jesus and his disciples are hungry as they walk through a field. The disciples "began to pick some heads of grain" that had spouted up in the field "and eat them" (v. 1). Although there is no indication that Jesus joined them, there was nothing wrong in the disciples' actions, let alone any suggestion that this was stealing. The Mosaic law permitted gleaning by and instructed farmers to harvest crops so as to leave a remainder that travelers could eat (Deut. 23:25).

However, this was the Sabbath, and the Pharisees had apparently followed Jesus and His disciples through the fields. Upon watching the disciples pluck the grains to eat, they pounce on the opportunity to condemn these actions. "Look!" they say to Jesus. "Your disciples are

doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath" (v. 2). In essence, the Pharisees are declaring that by gleaning the fields, the disciples were working on the Sabbath day—which forbidden by the Law (Ex. 20:8–11; Deut. 5:12–15).

Jesus, however, saw it differently and responded to the Pharisees by pointing them back to the Scripture. At no point in His responses will Jesus downplay the importance of keeping the Sabbath holy, which, after all, was one of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:8–11). Jesus says during His Sermon on the Mount, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matt. 5:17). Jesus is careful to show that He is not contravening God's own instructions in the Sinai covenant. Jesus is going to argue that there is no violation of Sabbath by His disciples. Moreover, He is going to show that the rigid interpretation of Sabbath reveals more about the distorted mindset of the Pharisees, who lack a sense of gracious mercy in this circumstance.

Jesus begins by raising an example about David, when he and his fighting men were fleeing from King Saul (see 1 Sam. 21:1–6). Since they were in desperate need and required food, the future king "entered the house of God" and took "consecrated bread" for himself and others (Matt. 12:4).

So why was David allowed to do this? One explanation is that David was God's anointed king, chosen for a particular role of leading the people of Israel. Like David, Jesus is a king. And like David, Jesus and His disciples are on a mission, but their mission is devoted to the proclamation of the kingdom of God. David had the authority to share this bread in a time of need, and Jesus has even more authority to permit His disciples to glean grain.

4. *What do Jesus' disciples do on the Sabbath day? Why might this be considered controversial?*

5. *How does Jesus respond to the Pharisees?*

6. *How is Jesus in any way like David?*

Mercy Greater Than Sacrifice

Matthew 12:5–8 KJV

5 Or have ye not read in the law, how that on the sabbath days the priests in the temple profane the sabbath, and are blameless? 6 But I say unto you, that in this place is one greater than the temple. 7 But if ye had known what this meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless. 8 For the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath day.

Matthew 12:5–8 NIV

⁵ Or haven't you read in the Law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent? ⁶ I tell you that something greater than the temple is here. ⁷ If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent. ⁸ For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

Jesus continues His defense of His disciples' actions by making a second comparison to what His disciples are doing. For context, not all labor and work is impermissible. The traditions of this day permitted saving a life, as in the rescue of an animal from a pit (see Matt. 12:11–12).

But there is a more common exception: one of the tribes of Israel, the Levites, are given the role of priests for the people. For priests, work does not stop on the Sabbath. In fact, they have added work to make an additional burnt offering (Num. 28:9–10). Temple work included the preparation of fires and slaughter of animals—acts explicitly forbidden on the Sabbath (Ex. 20:10; 35:3). Given a rigid application of Sabbath rules, according to the Pharisees' logic, the priests are chronic breakers of Sabbath law (v. 5).

Now, the priests are not doing anything wrong by the labor they perform on the Sabbath. Jesus says they are "innocent" (v. 5). Their actions are conducted at the request of God and on behalf of His people (Lev. 6:9–13). These "desecrators" are innocent of any wrongdoing.

Then Jesus makes a remarkable declaration: "I tell you that something greater than the temple is here" (v. 6). The

Pharisees are probably flummoxed by this statement. The temple is the center of worship, the place of God's holy presence. But Jesus fulfills the function of the temple; He is Immanuel, "God with us" (Matt. 1:23). By implication, Jesus' disciples are like priests in the service of the temple, wherever He and His disciples go.

Jesus uses the words of Hosea 6:6 to upstage the Pharisees: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (v. 7). This is not the first time that Jesus has quoted these words. He shares the same response when He is criticized for dining with "tax collectors and sinners" (Matt. 9:10-13). Jesus criticizes the hypocrisy of claiming to worship God while displaying none of the "justice, mercy, and faithfulness" that are more important to the Father (Matt. 23:23).

Jesus concludes with what are perhaps the most audacious words of all. Not only does He defend the disciples' actions, but he puts an exclamation point on His own authority to decide and declares Himself "Lord of the Sabbath" (v. 8). Sabbath was a gift from God and not an arbitrary set of rules, but here Jesus claims authority to interpret it. He is not simply a commentator; He is the author of Sabbath. As Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus can resolve any disputes about interpretation.

If the Pharisees had not yet grasped who Jesus claims to be, there was no longer any mistaking it. Immediately after these words, the Lord of the Sabbath will take debate to the Pharisees in their own synagogue and continue His restorative work (see Matt. 12:9-14). Every aspect of worship, when viewed from Jesus' perspective, should lead God's people to show mercy.

7. *How could Jesus say that His disciples were in any way like the priests who work in the temple?*

8. *What values does God say are most important when we approach Him in worship?*

9. *What sort of authority does Jesus claim for Himself in this text?*

On Whose Authority?

"I cannot wait to be a grown up. Then I'll be in charge."

My daughter and I were having a difficult afternoon. I had told her to finish her schoolwork before doing something else, and she was not having it. But in the end, she relented and went back to writing sentences.

Later that night I had to tell her the truth. "You know what," I said, "no matter how grown up you get, there will always be a greater authority."

I reminded her of when I got a speeding ticket for driving too fast and that I have boss at work who holds me accountable if I don't do what I am asked.

"But the greatest authority of all is Jesus," I said. No matter what my plans and desires might be, I have to submit them to God. His authority goes beyond any earthly government or organization. All that context probably went over the head of an eight-year-old.

But maybe I was using those words to remind myself. When I look at the diversity of Christian churches and denominations, it would be easy for me to apply my own standards of evaluation. Sometimes it is hard to step back and to say to myself, "Jesus can work out our differences in the end."

As Lord and king, Jesus invites people to join His redemptive mission. While Jesus' followers might respectfully disagree about many things, Jesus says to them all, "How are you doing at your job of showing mercy?" That is how Jesus exercises His authority.

10. *What is a time that you have reacted negatively to someone else's show of authority?*

11. *How do you relate to the way that the Pharisees in today's lesson were more obsessed with rules than with showing mercy?*

12. *What does it look like to submit to the authority of Jesus in this world?*

Time Enough to Show Mercy

In the lesson today, Pharisees criticize Jesus' followers, but Jesus calls attention back to what is central in God's eyes: whether or not we are showing a compassionate care and understanding for one another.

► *What, if any, tradition or rule feels especially important to you?*

► *What is a compassionate way that you can look at anyone who holds a different standard? What would Jesus ask of you?*

KEY VERSE

But I say unto you, That in this place is one greater than the temple.
—Matthew 12:6 KJV

I tell you that something greater than the temple is here.
—Matthew 12:6 NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Week of July 14 through July 20

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* for devotionals on these passages.)

Mon. Isaiah 56—God Gathers Outcasts to the Temple.

Tues. 1 Timothy 2:1–8—Prayer and Holiness.

Wed. Ecclesiastes 5:1–7—Guard Your Steps in God's House.

Thurs. Acts 17:22–34—God Doesn't Live in Human Shrines.

Fri. Jeremiah 7:1–15—The False Security of Religious Posturing.

Sat. Malachi 3:1–6—The Messenger's Arrival.

Sun. John 2:13–25—Zeal for God's House.