Matthew 12:1-8

Lord of the Sabbath

Sermon final

It's easy to miss the forest for the sake of the trees. It's easy to miss the weightier things of God for the sake of the minor things. People can become snobs about the minors when it comes to things they care deeply about. Coffee snobs – "You drink Starbucks…that's not REAL coffee". Pet snobbery – "You don't feed your dog raw-organic-free-range kibble made from wild salmon? Poor thing." Organic food snobbery – "Grass-fed, free-range, shade-grown, cruelty-free, biodynamic kale." Language snobbery – "It's data, not data!" My wife and son were both arguing this point in the car the other day. They were both very frustrated to find out that it could be either. Last week I talked about golf. Some golfers have forgotten that golf is a game that is meant to be relaxing, enjoyable, and fun! The golf Pharisees. "***the game is for the golfer, not the golfer for the game***." Some people are so serious about their hobbies and passions they lose sight of the actual purpose of the hobby – enjoyment and rest. Because of their strict rules developed over centuries, the Pharisees lost sight of the true heart and purpose of the Sabbath – rest and enjoyment in God.

"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mk. 2:27)

The Sabbath was given by God as a gift to His people. It was a day for them to rest and be restored in fellowship with God and one another. The Pharisees turned it into a day of strict rule keeping.

Jesus, the Oral Law, and the Mishnah – In order for you to understand the debates that Jesus often engages in with the religious leaders you have to know about the "oral law". The ***oral law*** was a tradition of rules added onto the law of Moses that was verbally passed down among the Jews alongside the Hebrew Scriptures. The ***Mishnah*** was written to collect and codify these interpretations and rules. One subject of interest was the Sabbath. The law of Moses (Genesis-Deuteronomy) commanded that the people honor the Sabbath by ceasing to work but it was a very broad command. What constituted work? In the Mishnah there are 39 activities that are deemed work (**2 Mishnah Shabbat 7:2**). Jesus did not elevate this oral tradition in the same way the Pharisees did, and so they constantly debated over the particulars. Their charge against Jesus was usually regarding the oral law – "you aren't washing your hands correctly, you are eating with the wrong people, you told that man to move his dwelling, you healed on the Sabbath – that's work! Jesus loved to break the rules of the Pharisees. He didn't swing His golf club the way they felt He should…and He would often break their rules on purpose to make this point: "**you are forsaking the commandment of God in order to follow the traditions that are set by men." (Mk. 7:8**) They were missing the weightier things of the law – love, mercy,

redemption – for the sake of small details like hand washing techniques. They turned the law into a structure of rule keeping and they missed the heart of the Sabbath. We can do the same thing with the rules we set…and we need to especially be careful when we set rules that God's word doesn't explicitly set.

This is a disease known as "legalism" - setting excessive or strict standards that are *not prescribed by God* on yourself and onto others. Jesus brought to the people "rest from rule keeping". There were a lot of legalists in Jesus' day…there are a lot of legalists in the church today as well. God wants us to have the freedom to wisely discern how to live God's truth out faithfully in our lives. God's law for Israel was broad enough for them to have the freedom to make wise, discerning choices, and narrow enough to protect them from error. When truth is broad (honor the Sabbath), it requires us to cry out to God and to pursue His heart and will…we would much rather create a checklist or a series of "blacks and whites", "do this…don't do that"….check. ***Legalists add rules on top of rules, and they hold everyone to their convictions***. This is a disease…with the appearance of godliness, but underneath it's rooted in fear and it strips people of their rest in God.

Discovering the heart of God in everyday decisions takes effort and time with Him…we'd rather just keep the rules

This is a great story to illustrate this problem. Matthew is teaching a larger lesson about resting from Pharisaic rule-keeping and walking by faith with Jesus who is our Sabbath rest. In our passage, Jesus is seen as the greater rabbi to follow because He is the Lord of the Sabbath. Let's look at the setting in our passage in vv.1-2.

> **At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. 2 But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath." (Mt. 12:1-2)**

The Jews love to debate about the Scriptures and rabbi's debating was a very common thing. I almost titled my sermon, "The Clash of the Rabbi's". Here is the Pharisees accusation: "your disciples are reaping grain and that constitutes work!" Reaping grain from someone's field was permissible and encouraged in the law (**Lev. 19:9-10; Deut. 23:24-25)** but reaping ON SABBATH is one of the 39 specifics in the Mishnah so Jesus and His disciples were "lawbreakers" because the Pharisees elevated the oral law to the same status as the law of Moses. Jesus, doing the very Jewish thing, now is going to argue back. In arguing back, He exposes two major flaws of the Pharisees: 1. They missed the heart of the Sabbath; 2. Jesus, the One standing before them, was the Lord of the Sabbath.

1. **The Pharisees missed God's heart regarding the Sabbath**

Jesus is going to show this in a masterful way by making three arguments regarding Sabbath. The Jewish people divide the OT into three sections: Torah (law); Prophets; Writings (called the Tanak). Jesus makes an argument from each of the three sections in the Tanak as to why His disciples reaping on the Sabbath is permissible. In making His argument, he exposes the fact that it was the Pharisees who were getting the Sabbath wrong.

Argument from the Writings: David and Ahimelech (vv.3-4; 1 Sam. 21:1-6)

> **He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: [4] how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? (Mt. 12:3-4)**

This story is found in **1 Samuel 21**: David is running for his life from Saul, and he and his men are **"hungry" (v.3).** Notice Matthew points out in v.1 that the disciples too were **"hungry" (v.1)**. David comes to the priest Ahimelech to find refuge and food. He asks for the "**bread of the Presence**". This was the shewbread commanded by Moses to be placed in front of the Holy of Holies that was only "**lawful for the priests**" to eat (**Lev. 25:5-9**).

Ahimelech, as a vested priest of God, has to make a wise and discerning choice between two important commands: 1) to obey the Levitical law of shewbread; 2) to aid David and his men and sustain life. He chooses to sustain the life of David and his men. Jesus is choosing to sustain the life of His disciples by allowing them to reap grain on Sabbath. "you're concerned with us eating in a way that breaks your oral tradition. David ate in a way that broke the law of Moses!" No where are David and Ahimelech criticized for this…probably because there was a very real need which would take precedence over the law of shewbread. Jesus Himself is affirming that what they did was kosher and right.

Argument from the law: The Levitical priesthood (vv.5-6); Num. 28:9-10)

> **Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? [6] I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. (vv.5-6)**

This is a simple argument…every Sabbath the priests provide sacrifices for the people (**Num. 28:9-10)** and this clearly could be seen as work! If the priests sacrifice on the Sabbath, which is their normal duty, doesn't that mean that they **"profane the Sabbath"?** And yet they are **"guiltless" (v.5).** This is their normal routine (Sabbath commanded the people stop their normal daily routines) and it was essential… How much more important is the ministry of the Messiah and His disciples with Him?

Argument from the prophet Hosea: Mercy over sacrifice (v.7; Hos. 6:6)

And if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. (v.7)

Here Jesus is quoting the prophet Hosea to show the fundamental principle that while the ceremonial laws of sacrifice are important, the weightier matter of mercy is more important. Often times, making wise decisions requires choosing one weightier command over a lesser – this is hard for legalists. Earlier in Matthew 9 Jesus was accused by the Pharisees of eating with **"tax collectors and sinners" (Mt. 9:11).** Jesus wasn't partaking of their sin…but the Pharisees viewed eating with someone as partaking and approving of their lifestyle. **If the Pharisees had known that they too were sinners, they might not have criticized Him.**

Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. [13] Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." (Matthew 9:12-13)

Jesus warned His disciples, **"beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees!" (Mt. 16:6).** They continually missed the heart of God for the sake of their traditions and rules! Don't be like them! The law was made for man, not man for the law. The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. Following God means seeking the heart of God in all of our decisions and often it means choosing to follow one commandment while forsaking another.

"Rules are made for the child, not the child for rules". Often times the greatest legalists can be parents and grandparents in the home. For the sake of protecting our children, we "helicopter parent" we put them on short leashes, and we hold them to the letter of every strict rule we set. We need to set rules and boundaries, but excessive focus on the rules of the home rather than the heart of the child will push your child away from God…or it will simply clone another Pharisee. Sometimes parenting feels SOLELY like "getting your kids to abide by the rules". That's the error of the Pharisees. Parenting is about steering your child's heart towards their Savior Jesus. That goal has to be on the front of your mind in everything you do – and it takes fierce trust in God's plan for their lives. ***Do you really trust that God is the one who must save your kids and that He has a plan for them better than your plan? If not, you will parent out of fear. We have to rest in God's plan for our children. Here are some things I want to do better:***

- ***Set good rules and boundaries, but focus less on their keeping the rules, focus more on their keeping the faith. If your children trust in Jesus, obedience over time will follow…just as it does for you! Would you want for someone to hold you to the rules as strictly as you hold your children to your rules?***
- ***Don't view yourself as the "police" of your children, view yourself as the "servant" of your children. They are God's not ours, and we are to steward them towards Jesus.***

The Pharisees saw themselves as "law enforcement" officers and they failed to love and serve the people of God.

- ***Take the time to draw out the motives of their heart through asking questions. Don't just discipline their behavior, shepherd their heart and point them to Jesus.***
- ***Pick your battles. You really can let some things go and still be doing your job as a parent. The Pharisees felt like they had to address every single law that was broken. Wisdom is majoring on the weightier things and minoring on the minors.***
- ***Don't assume you understand "why" they did what they did. Sometimes there is disobedience on the surface but with a good motive underneath. Honor the good motive, discipline the disobedience. For every 1 thing you must correct, try to find 4 things they are doing right and encourage them. Be an encouragement even in your discipline.***
- ***Don't parent out of fear, trust in God's sovereign hand to guide them towards His good eternal plan. The Pharisees were afraid…Jesus was walking all over their rules. The rules made them feel safe. God calls us to walk by faith and to parent by faith.***

2. Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath

I tell you, something greater than the temple is here… For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath. (vv.6,8)

Jesus clearly elevates Himself in this story and it drove the Pharisees mad. In **v.14** Matthew tells us the Pharisees "**went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him." (Mt. 12:14).** In only 6 verses Jesus elevates Himself above the Pharisees, above David, above the priesthood, and even above the law making Himself equal with God. By using the story of David Jesus is placing Himself on par with David, but by giving Himself the title**, "Son of Man" (v.8)** He is elevating Himself above David. The title **"Son of Man"** was a title for the Messiah given in **Daniel 7:13-14.** Later in Matthew, Jesus will show that David himself called the Son of David, the Messiah**, "Lord" (Mt. 22:41-46).** Jesus, the Son of Man, is the Lord of David. He also elevates His ministry above the ministry of the Levites in the temple by claiming **"something greater than the temple is here." (v.6).** But His greatest statement in this passage is that Jesus is **"Lord of the Sabbath" (v.8).** The main reason that Jesus' disciples can reap grain on the Sabbath is because Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath – He can do whatever pleases Him on the Sabbath. The Sabbath was given by God Himself to Moses (**Exo. 20:8-11**), by claiming Himself to be Lord of Sabbath Jesus is claiming to be equal with God. In **John 5** when Jesus heals a man of blindness on the Sabbath and tells him to **"take up [his] bed, and walk" (Jn. 5:8).** The Pharisees

accused him of breaking the oral law of moving your place of dwelling from one location to another – this constituted work (**2 Mishnah Shabbat 7:2**).

> **The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him. [16] And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. [17] But Jesus answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I am working." (Jn. 5:15-17)**

God the Father never rests. He is always working. Sabbath laws do not apply to Him. ***By making this claim, Jesus made Himself to be equal with God. Sabbath rules don't apply to me guys! I am the Son of God. God the Father never ceases to work and I, God the Son, never cease to work either!***

The "Yoke" of Jesus – Matthew records this story right after Jesus' words in **Matthew 11:28-30** and that isn't coincidence. Every rabbi had their interpretation of Torah as well as their disciples who followed their interpretation. This became known as a "yoke". A yoke was a tool used to tie together two oxen to pull a cart or plow a field in the same direction with the same cadence. So to walk alongside a certain rabbi as your teacher was to take upon yourself his "yoke" – His interpretation of Scripture and His manner of living. As you can imagine, the "yoke" of the Pharisees was burdensome. Jesus speaks of His yoke as a rabbi in this way:

> **Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. [29] Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. [30] For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Mt. 11:28-30)**

Jesus' yoke is a yoke of rest – I wonder if you truly believe that this morning? Maybe you feel differently. Jesus taught some very hard things! In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gave his "yoke", His interpretation of the law. Jesus didn't come to abolish the law but fulfill it, and His standard of righteousness (His "yoke") exceeded that of the Scribes and Pharisees of their day (5:17-20). Jesus summarized His "yoke" on Torah by saying:

> **You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Mt. 5:48)**

That's a HEAVY yoke. Be perfect! How is this an easy, light, yoke? First, Jesus teaches us that God is far more concerned with a relationship with you than with you keeping a set of rules. He wants your heart…and He wants you to find rest in Him. If you give Jesus your heart, obedience will follow and He gives you the power of the Spirit to obey Him. **Second, our penalty for breaking the rules was paid for by Jesus on the cross.** Jesus offers me forgiveness with God for breaking the rules through taking His yoke. **Third, Jesus gives you His perfection as a gift. Jesus lived a perfect life. He Himself was perfect as His heavenly Father is perfect.** The Bible teaches that through faith in Him, through taking His yoke and saying, "I will follow you!", God sees the perfection of my rabbi Jesus as my own perfection. This is the miracle of

being ONE with Jesus through faith and not through works – there is nothing you can do to earn this. ***But you must follow Him***. When Jesus called His disciples to follow Him…they ceased from their work – He became their perpetual Sabbath from work. Matthew left his tax collectors booth, Peter and John dropped their fishing nets…and they surrendered to the teaching of their new rabbi. They took His yoke and started a new life with Him. That's what it means to follow Jesus. This is what is required of everyone who would take the yoke of Jesus.

What booth do you need to leave this morning? What net do you need to lay down at the foot of Jesus this morning?