

# Matthew 12:1-8

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-12/matthew-121-8/>

*Matthew narrates the first of four confrontations between Jesus and the Pharisees. Who is in charge of the Sabbath: Jesus or the Pharisees?*

The parallel gospel accounts of this event are found in Mark 2:23-28 and Luke 6:1-5.

Following Jesus's coded confirmation that He was the Christ in the previous chapter, Matthew resumes his narrative of the Messiah.

He begins with the phrase *at that time* to show that what follows occurred during the same overall *time*-frame of the previous events (Matthew 11). Matthew uses the word "kairos" to describe this *time*-frame. "Kairos" means season. In this context, "kairos" describes a general period of *time* rather than a specific moment.

But Matthew is keen to point out that the particular day of the week that this interaction happened on was *the Sabbath*. This is important because *the Sabbath* was a holy day for the Jews that was set apart by God. *The Sabbath* occurred at the end of the week. It began at sundown of the sixth day and lasted until the sunset, 24 hours later. *The Sabbath* was a day of rest. Its observance was commanded by God and handed down through Moses in the Ten Commandments. The Sabbath is mentioned many times in the Old Testament. It is the fourth of the Ten Commandments. The original command to honor the Sabbath is found in Exodus:

"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. For six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord your God; on it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male slave or your female slave, or your cattle, or your resident who stays with you. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and everything that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day; for that reason the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy." (Exodus 20:8-11)

Of all the Jewish practices, the weekly observance of *the Sabbath* was perhaps their most familiar distinctive, since it occurred weekly, and included all classes of Jews. All their work was done during the first six days of the week, but on *the Sabbath* all work activity ceased in order to give space to rest, which was an integral part of worshipping God in their deliberate rest. Its rhythms served as a constant reminder to all Jews that God is the Creator, they were God's people.

One day, *Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath with His disciples*. The fact that His disciples are with Him indicates either that the twelve *disciples* had returned from being sent out (Matthew 10:5-15); or that this is a broader group of *disciples with Jesus*. As they went, *His disciples became hungry*. Naturally, they began to pick the heads of grain and eat them.

*But when the Pharisees saw that His disciples were doing this, they accused Jesus. This indicates that the Pharisees were tracking Jesus, following along with Him, even as Jesus' disciples followed. They said to Him, "Look, Your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath." It appears from the tone of the interchange that follows that the Pharisees' purpose in following Jesus was not to learn from Him and His ways. Rather, it seems the Pharisees had adopted a goal to undermine Jesus, and His teaching.*

The main tact of *the Pharisees'* accusation against *Jesus* at this point seems to be to attack His credibility. Their argument was because *His disciples* violated their *Sabbath* customs (with Jesus's approval no less) that this exposed that *He* was either a fraud or at least a shabby Rabbi. The accusation was serious; keeping the Sabbath was a vital issue, and is treated in the Old Testament as a non-negotiable. One of the offenses God cited against Judah that led to their exile to Babylon was their neglect of the Sabbath (Jeremiah 17:19-27).

The *Pharisees* not only accused *Jesus* of breaking the law. They were also offended by Him. They were not offended that Jesus's *disciples* broke God's law on the Sabbath. (They hadn't.) *The Pharisees* were offended because Jesus's *disciples* violated their laws concerning *the Sabbath*. (They did.) But beneath *the Pharisees'* offense was the dangerously mistaken assumption that their rules were God's laws. *The Pharisees* had dangerously put themselves in the place of God.

How did this come to be?

In a word, gradually. After the Jews' returned from the Babylonian exile, they had a renewed veneration for God's law (Nehemiah 8:8). Among the commands and customs the Jews observed more seriously was *the Sabbath*, and Nehemiah played an important role in restoring this observance (Nehemiah 12:15-22). But whereas Nehemiah merely reinstated the observance of the law of God, others later added man-made edicts. In the centuries that followed, religious regulations multiplied. *The Pharisees* were at the forefront of advancing these regulations. Their rationale for the new observances were likely put in place as an extra hedge to protect Jews from even approaching a transgression. This would be understandable, given the drastic price the Jews had paid for their lack of observance of the Sabbath, among other offenses (1 Chronicles 9:1). As is often the case, over time the rules became a source of power for the institution, and the original intent became secondary. Following the rules became more important than the Law it was meant to support. It grew into a kind of legislation that superseded the law of Moses. So, in a great irony, it led to another form of breaking the Sabbath law, one that Jesus will point out. It is a common occurrence that institutions are formed as a means of protection, but they end up being more concerned with perpetuating their own power and influence. This certainly seemed to be the case with the Pharisees.

In the third century A.D. many reforms that had developed after the Babylonian exile were codified in the Jewish Mishnah, which reduced the oral tradition to writing. But the oral tradition already had a powerful influence during Jesus's lifetime and was commonly referred to as "the tradition of the elders" (Matthew 15:2). But even if these traditions began with God-honoring intentions, in practice their rules had replaced and effectively nullified the heart of God's original

commandments (Matthew 15:6). Their focus had shifted from following God to retaining and advancing their own importance, prestige, and power.

Perceiving *the Pharisees'* accusation and offense, *Jesus* reframes the question.

The *Pharisees* take offense and make the accusation that *Jesus' disciples do what is not lawful on a Sabbath*. *Jesus* responds with a story and a claim. *He* asks *them* a rhetorical question that begins with an interesting phrase, *Have you not read what David did...?* Of course, *the Pharisees*, whose expertise was the scriptures, had read *what David did when he became hungry*. When *David* and his loyal companions were fleeing from Saul, they came to Abimelech, the priest, for assistance. They were starving. Abimelech had no ordinary bread to give them, but he did have some *consecrated bread*. This *bread was not lawful for him to eat nor for those with him, but for the priests alone*. But Abimelech offered them the holy *bread* to *David and his friends* so long as they had abstained from sexual relations. *David and his companions* had abstained from sex, and so the priest gave them the holy *bread* to eat. This story is found in 1 Samuel 21:1-6.

Scripture does not condemn *David*, nor Abimelech for this action. Normally this would not have been allowed, but the exception was granted because of who *David* was (the anointed King of Israel) and the desperate situation that he was in as he pursued his calling righteously. By citing this example, *Jesus* shows *the Pharisees* how the scripture makes room for grace. God's law is intended as a benefit, not a burden. Even though it is absolute, there is a hierarchy, and loving and caring for people will always come above mere compliance. As the Messiah, *Jesus* too is an anointed King. *He* too is following *His* calling in righteousness. *He* too is granted an exception to *the Pharisees'* *Sabbath* customs. It is worth noting that the people are just plucking and eating the grain, they are not executing a commercial harvest. This has a corollary with the story of *David*, in that subsistence is in view; people need to eat.

*Jesus* follows with another rhetorical question. *Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and are innocent?* This comes from Leviticus 2:1-3 and Leviticus 6:14-18. Both of these passages describe grain offerings that are presented to the LORD. When they are offered on the Sabbath, the priest, in the process of administering these offerings has to cook the grain, which is technically a type of work and therefore a "breaking" of *the Sabbath*. But clearly, God does not consider this priestly work to *break the Sabbath*. And neither do *the Pharisees*. But that is *Jesus'*s point. *The priests* remain *innocent* even though they work and fulfill their office as *priests on the Sabbath*. The sacred nature and function of their office as *priests in the temple* absolves them.

But after laying the groundwork for *His* arguments with the story of King *David* and the legal reference concerning *the temple priests*, *Jesus* makes an astonishing claim:

*But I say to you that something greater than the temple is here.*

*Jesus* makes this bold claim on *His* own authority as God: *But I say to you*. And *His* claim is that *He* is nothing less than God. In the eyes of the Jews the only thing *greater than God's temple* was God Himself. So, when *Jesus* tells these Jewish leaders *that something greater than the*

*temple is here, He is in no uncertain terms saying that God is here among them. And all the indicators point to Jesus as God.*

This is a much *greater* matter than who can pick and eat *grain on the Sabbath*. If *Jesus* is in fact God, then *He* can do as *He* pleases. If God allows *His temple priests* to “break” *the Sabbath* as they serve in their office as *priests*, He certainly can allow Himself to “break” *the Pharisees’* traditions regarding *the Sabbath*.

*Jesus* then chastises *the Pharisees* for missing the *greater* picture when it comes to *the Law*: *But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire compassion, and not a sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent.* God’s law is intended to bless people. Any human organization that operates according to the principles in the Ten Commandments will be an effective, supportive place where people can thrive. Who doesn’t want to be a part of a group that honors one another, tells the truth, and celebrates and works to see the success of others? Therefore, if there is any application of the law that does not have *compassion* on the welfare of people, the flourishing of people, then it is a bad rule.

*The Pharisees* knew these words, but they did not live by them. In that sense, they did not know what the words meant. *I desire compassion, and not a sacrifice* comes from two sources in the Old Testament: King David and the prophet Hosea.

Psalm 51 is a psalm of David’s contrition and effort to realign his heart with God’s:

“For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it;  
You do not take pleasure in burnt offering.  
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;  
A broken and a contrite heart, God, You will not despise.”  
(Psalm 51:16-17)

“For I desire loyalty rather than sacrifice,  
And the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”  
(Hosea 6:6)

Jesus’s point is that God cares far more about loving Him and others and obeying Him from the heart rather than obsessively keeping religious rules (represented by the reference to “sacrifice”). If *the Pharisees* had *known this*, they *would not have condemned the innocent*. *The innocent* whom *the Pharisees* *condemned* certainly includes *Jesus and His disciples* in this matter of picking *grain on the Sabbath* and eating it. But *the innocent* also includes all those who are weary and heavy-laden (Matthew 11:28) by the oppressive burdens and social threats *the Pharisees* used to manipulate the people and hold onto power. *The Pharisees* are spiritually abusive to the very people they are supposed to shepherd.

*Jesus* ends His rebuttal with another divine claim. *For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath*. God established *the Sabbath* and is the only rightful *Lord of the Sabbath*. *The Son of Man* is a veiled but definite Messianic term ([see commentary for Matthew 9:6](#)). It was Jesus’ most

frequent term to describe Himself. When *Jesus* said that *the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath* He was declaring “I am God and I decide *what is lawful to do on the Sabbath*—not you!”

### **Biblical Text**

**At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath, and His disciples became hungry and began to pick the heads of grain and eat. But when the Pharisees saw this, they said to Him, “Look, Your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath.” But He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he became hungry, he and his companions, how he entered the house of God, and they ate the consecrated bread, which was not lawful for him to eat nor for those with him, but for the priests alone? Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and are innocent? But I say to you that something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire compassion, and not a sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”**