

Jesus' Authority is Challenged (12:1–45)

(Mark 2:23-28; Luke 6:1-5)

This story is another example of the problem created by the chapter/verse divisions in the Bible. Because of the chapter division, almost without exception we read this section without thought to the prior material. But in fact, Matthew continues with the subject of those who labor and are heaven laden (Matthew 11:28) under an incorrect interpretation and application of God's law. At this point, Matthew gives an illustration of this problem, one dealing with the Sabbath. This reminds us again of the importance of context. This story has greater meaning if we do not forget the prior verses that deal with the burden of Pharisaic interpretations of the law.

We left off in chapter 11 with Jesus calling people to rest:

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 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. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”
(Matthew 11:28–30, ESV)

Conflicts Over Keeping the Sabbath (12:1–14)

We begin chapter 12:1-8 with Jesus explaining the purpose of the Sabbath. **The Sabbath is an act of God's mercy providing mankind with rest.**

“And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done.” (Genesis 2:2, ESV)

“So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God,” (Hebrews 4:9, ESV)

What the Pharisees provided with not rest, under their teachings the Sabbath is a great burden. Jesus provides rest in both time and especially in eternity.

Jesus went out of his way to do various works and miracles on the Sabbath. By doing this, he was able to give real life illustrations on the problem of adding to God's word.

“Jesus' arguments attempt to restore the “rest” to what was in danger of becoming, under the weight of scribal elaborations of the law, more a burden than a blessing.”¹

Jesus Is Lord of the Sabbath

(Mark 2:23–28; Luke 6:1–5)

¹ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 455). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

Matthew 12:1 *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.*

At that time.... This phrase indicates a continuity of thought with the preceding material. This is important; **Jesus offered to give people “rest” in (11:28). Now Jesus deals with “regulations” that in fact result in people being “heaven laden” and denied rest (11:28).**

Jesus went through the grainfields.... It would appear that the disciples were very hungry and Jesus intends to meet their needs in this Biblically approved way.

“If you go into your neighbor’s vineyard, you may eat your fill of grapes, as many as you wish, but you shall not put any in your bag. If you go into your neighbor’s standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor’s standing grain.” (Deuteronomy 23:24–25, ESV)

In one sense, this was God’s welfare program. You don’t have to starve, but neither is anyone required to reap for you and deliver the crops to your door. It was workfare.

“For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.” (2 Thessalonians 3:10, ESV)

on the Sabbath.... “The sabbath is mentioned seven times in this one chapter (verses 1, 2, 5, 8, 10, 11, 12), each mention having to do with the problem of what a person was permitted to do on this holy day of the Jews.”² They Old Testament laid what was expected on the Sabbath.

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates.” (Exodus 20:8–10, ESV)

“You shall kindle no fire in all your dwelling places on the Sabbath day.” (Exodus 35:3, ESV)

“While the people of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day. And those who found him gathering sticks brought him to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation. They put him in custody, because it had not been made clear what should be done to him. And the LORD said to Moses, “The man shall be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp.” And all the congregation brought him outside

² Barclay Moon Newman and Philip C. Stine, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew* (UBS Handbook Series; New York: United Bible Societies, 1992), 349.

the camp and stoned him to death with stones, as the LORD commanded Moses.”
(Numbers 15:32–36, ESV)

In all this three things are clear, 1) they could not work on the Sabbath, 2) they could not make a fire, and 3) they could not pick up sticks (to make a fire). There are no other prohibitions in scripture. The other regulations are scribal add-ons.

The Sunday feast that we are familiar with could not happen in Israel. They had to prepare food on Friday and eat it cold on Saturday. Although it is not said, these prohibitions appear to be for the purpose of giving the women in the family a day off as well. Remember, gathering the fuel, maintaining the fire and preparing the meal were exclusively their responsibility. There is one day for them to rest as well.

His disciples were hungry.... But keep in mind, they weren't starving. It wasn't of absolute necessity that they do this. Considering the attitude of the Pharisees, they could have waited one day to eat. But if Jesus waited, he would have lost a great teaching opportunity. We often wonder why Jesus would go out of his way to antagonize this religious crowd. His goal was not to antagonize, but to teach. However, his teachings often do antagonize.

pluck... “The Jewish teachers of religion had designated thirty-nine “main classes of work” which could not be performed on the Sabbath. The first three are listed as “sewing, plowing, reaping,” and according to the Pharisaic interpretation of the Law, Jesus’ disciples would have been guilty of reaping on the Sabbath.”³ Reaping implies harvesting which takes place at the end of the growing season. This the disciples were not doing. Plucking a few heads of grain out of immediate hunger is not reaping. The Pharisees distorted what the disciples were doing.

Matthew 12:2 But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.”

Pharisees.... It is clear that the Pharisees are going out of their way to observe Jesus in order to find fault with him; they are virtually stalking him. The miracles in Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum failed to open their eyes. They are not rejoicing and amazed at what God is doing in their midst but instead hostile and looking for opportunity to criticize. They had already insisted that Jesus was in league with Satan when he ministered to the people.

“But the Pharisees said, “He casts out demons by the prince of demons.””
(Matthew 9:34, ESV)

This is not new, opposition was ongoing.

³ Barclay Moon Newman and Philip C. Stine, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew* (UBS Handbook Series; New York: United Bible Societies, 1992), 349.

“And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, ‘This man is blaspheming.’” (Matthew 9:3, ESV)

“And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, ‘Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?’” (Matthew 9:11, ESV)

“Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, ‘Why do we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?’” (Matthew 9:14, ESV)

“It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household.” (Matthew 10:25, ESV)

“The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.” (Matthew 11:19, ESV)

not lawful.... The issue was not plucking neighbor’s grain; that was legal.

“If you go into your neighbor’s standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor’s standing grain.”
(Deuteronomy 23:25, ESV)

The issue involved doing this on the Sabbath. And the Law was clear, harvesting could not be done on the Sabbath.

“Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest. In plowing time and in harvest you shall rest.” (Exodus 34:21, ESV)

So, the issue here is equating this action by the disciples with “*harvesting*.” And this is exactly what the Pharisees did. But in fact what the disciples violated was the Rabbinic extension of this law, not the Bible itself.

“And he said to them, ‘You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!’ ‘...thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do.’” (Mark 7:9, 13, ESV)

The Pharisees are concerned about a proper obedience to the Law that addresses the Sabbath. This is in itself not a problem, they should be concerned and we as well. But, it turns out their concern actually violates the heart of Sabbath observance.

Matthew 12:3 He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him:

Matthew 12:4 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?

So what is Jesus saying? “If David can do it, so can I.” Do two wrongs make a right?

As we shall see, this story took place on the Sabbath and that is what makes it a cogent argument in this context.

Have you not read.... This phrase “suggests that what Jesus is about to say should have been obvious to anyone familiar with the OT text....”⁴

David did when he was hungry.... David was being pursued by Saul and was at the point of exhaustion and death (1 Samuel 21:1-6).

he entered the house of God.... The Priest entered, not David. “So the priest gave him the holy bread...” (1 Samuel 21:6, ESV).

“So the priest gave him the holy bread, for there was no bread there but the bread of the Presence, which is removed from before the LORD, to be replaced by hot bread on the day it is taken away.” (1 Samuel 21:6, ESV)

However, the antecedent to “he” is David. So, in some sense David is considered responsible for this whole incident.

The “house of God” in that era was the Tabernacle not the Temple which was not yet built.

the bread of the Presence.... “The presentation loaves were the loaves set out before God week by week in the tabernacle or temple. The fresh bread was set out on the Sabbath, and the old bread was to be consumed by the priests, and by them only.”⁵

This removal and replacement of the bread occurred on the Sabbath as Jesus and the Pharisees very well knew.

“Every Sabbath day Aaron shall arrange it before the LORD regularly; it is from the people of Israel as a covenant forever.” (Leviticus 24:8, ESV)

⁴ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 458). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

⁵ Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (p. 483). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

Although neither the Old Testament text on David nor Jesus says so, this story indicates that all this took place on the Sabbath, when the bread would be replaced, which makes it cogent to this discussion.

which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him....

“And Aaron and his sons shall eat the flesh of the ram and the bread that is in the basket in the entrance of the tent of meeting. They shall eat those things with which atonement was made at their ordination and consecration, but an outsider shall not eat of them, because they are holy.” (Exodus 29:32–33, ESV)

“It was David, as *David*, who was permitted to do what was not lawful; and now Jesus places his own authority alongside that of David....”⁶ He also has the right to do this!

So, what is Jesus’ message here? David broke the law so I can too. No. Jesus tells the story of David and thereby creates an analogy between himself and David. However, “this analogy holds good only if Jesus is at least as special as David....”⁷ Or better yet, greater than David and greater than the Temple that houses the bread.

“I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.” (Matthew 12:6, ESV)

“Jesus’ point is not simply that rules admit of exceptions but that the Scriptures themselves do not condemn David for his action; therefore the rigidity of the Pharisees’ interpretation of the law is not in accord with Scripture itself....”⁸

But why was not David condemned for doing what is clearly forbidden? Verses 3 and 4 anticipate a point Jesus will soon make about the very nature of the Sabbath. In essence, why was it given in the first place? It was an act of mercy by God to his creation. Their frail bodies and souls needed the rest. Mercy is the heart of the Sabbath law. And mercy was at the heart of why David was not condemned for eating the bread. It was God’s mercy in this extreme case that allowed David to do this without condemnation.

Matthew 12:5 Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless?

⁶ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 459). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

⁷ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 281). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

⁸ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, pp. 280–281). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

“The argument in the previous verse was based on biblical history; the argument presented by Jesus in this verse is based upon the teaching of the Jewish Law, which recognized the differences between “light” and “heavy” commands.”⁹

have you not read.... The question assumes a positive answer; they had read about this.

“On the Sabbath day, two male lambs a year old without blemish, and two tenths of an ephah of fine flour for a grain offering, mixed with oil, and its drink offering: this is the burnt offering of every Sabbath, besides the regular burnt offering and its drink offering.” (Numbers 28:9–10, ESV)

“Every Sabbath day Aaron shall arrange it before the LORD regularly; it is from the people of Israel as a covenant forever.” (Leviticus 24:8, ESV)

Law.... The Pharisees address the law in this discussion of Sabbath observance; Jesus picks up their point and returns to the Law. His point is that some do in fact work on the Sabbath, these are called “works of necessity” by many, the priests are an example of such work.

“Again what is established is that the non-work requirement of the Sabbath is not absolute.”¹⁰ The priests did work on the Sabbath and are not at fault for doing so, just as pastors do today.

Matthew 12:6 I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.

“It is hard to overestimate the shock value of this pronouncement.”¹¹ The temple service was of such great importance that the priests could “work” on the Sabbath and not be guilty. That point the Pharisees would have understood. But the next point they missed, **something greater than the temple is here.**

greater¹².... The fact that the word “something greater” is a neuter adjective instead of a masculine adjective has caused many to suggest that Jesus is referring to “the

⁹ Barclay Moon Newman and Philip C. Stine, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew* (UBS Handbook Series; New York: United Bible Societies, 1992), 354.

¹⁰ Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (p. 484). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

¹¹ France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (p. 460). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co.

¹² *greater μέγας* “...the upper range of a scale of extent, with the possible implication of importance in relevant contexts—‘great, greatly, greatness, to a great degree, intense, terrible.’” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*. New York: United Bible Societies.

kingdom.” And that is a distinct possibility. However, “the neuter, however, can refer to persons when some quality is being stressed rather than the individual person....”¹³

As a result, this statement refers to Jesus Christ. If temple service on the Sabbath could be justified because of the great importance of that temple, then Jesus, greater than the temple itself, could justify his work for his was more important than the shadow found in the temple.

the temple.... “The angle that Matthew takes is to justify priestly behaviour on the grounds that the temple is more important than the sabbath: its needs take precedence. The angle is chosen for its christological potential: since Jesus is greater than the temple, then he must also be of more importance than the Sabbath.”¹⁴

“Jesus’ argument, then, provides an instance from the law itself in which the Sabbath restrictions were superseded by the priests because their cultic responsibilities took precedence: the temple, as it were, was greater than the Sabbath. But now, Jesus claims, “something” greater than the temple is here. **So, that too, takes precedence over the Sabbath.**”¹⁵

“The law points to him and finds its fulfillment in him (see on 5:17–48). Not only, then, have the Pharisees mishandled the law by their Halakah¹⁶ (12:3–4), but they have failed to perceive who Jesus is. The authority of the temple laws shielded the priests from guilt; the authority of Jesus shields his disciples from guilt. It is not a matter of comparing Jesus’ action with the action of the priests; nor is it likely that Jesus is suggesting that all his disciples are priests.... “Rather, it is a question of *contrasting* ...His authority with the authority of priests....”¹⁷

As a result, “what is allowable in the case of the servants of the temple, namely, to work on the Sabbath, must be conceded to the servants of Him who is greater than the temple....”¹⁸

¹³ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 281). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

¹⁴ Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (p. 484). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

¹⁵ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 282). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

¹⁶ The body of Jewish law supplementing the scriptural law and forming especially the legal part of the Talmud.

¹⁷ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 282). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

¹⁸ Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of Matthew* (ed. Frederick Crombie; trans. Peter Christie; vol. 1; Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1880), 330.

Matthew 12:7 And if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless.

Jesus then quotes Hosea 6:6.

“For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.” (Hosea 6:6, ESV)

This is the second time Jesus has quoted this verse.

“Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Matthew 9:13, ESV)

In both cases it is *“I desire mercy even more than I desire sacrifice,”* rather than an absolute negation, *“I desire mercy, but I have no desire for sacrifice.”*

In that earlier context they were angry with Jesus for comingling with tax collectors and sinners—contrary to their interpretation of Law.

“Through Hosea, God said that the apostates of Hosea’s day, though continuing the formal ritual of temple worship, had lost its center. As applied to the Pharisees by Jesus, therefore, the Hosea quotation was not simply telling them that they should be more sympathetic to outcasts and less concerned about ceremonial purity, **but that they were aligned with the apostates of ancient Israel in that they too preserved the shell while losing the heart of the matter, as exemplified by their attitude to tax collectors and sinners....**”¹⁹

In our current context here, “The Ho. 6:6 call to mercy points to the need to understand the sabbath command itself in relation to the sabbath intentions of the One who is himself gracious and merciful....”²⁰ God, being a God of mercy and compassion, allows works of mercy on the Sabbath. It was mercy that was of paramount importance in their sacrifices, which illustrated the mercy of God in forgiving sin. **However, they valued the ritual above the substance with the result that they failed to be merciful.**

The Sabbath was given as an act of mercy by God. Mercy stays at the center of its purpose. It would seem that the Pharisees would have suggested that the disciples “tough it out” and go without eating for another day; this behavior would illustrate their understanding of Sabbath law, mindless obedience to the form with no grasp of the

¹⁹ Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 225). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

²⁰ Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: a commentary on the Greek text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary (p. 485). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

essence of that law. Jesus insists that if they had “known” what the Sabbath was all about—mercy, they would not have condemned “acts of mercy.”

Matthew 12:8 For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.

Jesus uses the term “son of man” to describe himself, a term first found in Daniel 7.

“I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.” (Daniel 7:13–14, ESV)

The meaning is found in its context. In heaven one expects to see God-like revelations, angels and amazing living creatures (Rev 4:6-8). And no doubt Daniel did and perhaps billions of them were arrayed in the background of this scene. What was surprising to Daniel was that there was one who looked like a **human being** there as well. That’s what “a son of man” means, a human being. It turns out that this “human being” was actually far more than that. He has direct and unimpeded access to the Ancient of Days, right through the angelic host and past the four living creatures who guard the throne. It is as if he belongs there, as if it is also his throne the Ancient of Days occupies. And then he is given “*dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.*” This description by Daniel becomes the basis for identifying Jesus as the Son of God and the Messiah.

In using this term, to some Jesus is calling himself a “human being” while to others he is calling himself the Son of God, the Messiah. The ambiguity is useful at this stage of his ministry.

lord.... In the Greek construction, **lord** is the first word in the sentence. As a result, we are to address the lordship of Jesus over the Sabbath as the first idea presented to us. It is highly emphasized. He is **LORD** of the Sabbath. “To say the Son of man is *lord of the sabbath* means he “makes the rules over what may be done on the day of rest” or “controls (the laws about) the day of rest.”²¹

²¹ Barclay Moon Newman and Philip C. Stine, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew* (UBS Handbook Series; New York: United Bible Societies, 1992), 356.

And in this role as “Son of Man” with dominion over all peoples and nations, he has the authority to “handle the Sabbath law any way he wills, or to supersede it in the same way that the temple requirements superseded the normal Sabbath restrictions....”²²

Because he is the Son of Man and Lord of the Sabbath, he determines how the principle of Sabbath observance is to be worked out. He makes the point that Sabbath observance was created out of a heart of mercy. They have made it a burden with their add-on laws and second rate interpretations; taking his yoke lightens the burden. **Under their system, you go hungry on the Sabbath, under his, you eat. As David was allowed to eat when hungry, so are Jesus’ disciples.**

“The short meaning of the first story in the Sabbath Controversy is that Jesus is Lord—over everything else, no matter how sacred.”²³

Perhaps we can sum up Jesus’ point this way:

He is greater than King David and the Temple (12:6).

He is a God of mercy which explains the reason the Sabbath was given (12:7).

He is Lord of the Sabbath (12:8).

Because the Sabbath was given because of mercy, eating the bread by David and eating the grain by his Disciples are not violations of the law. These “violations” are acts of mercy by God—the very point of the Sabbath.

He has himself shown mercy to his disciples, and he will show mercy to the man with the shriveled hand.

²² Carson, D. A. (1984). Matthew. In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, p. 283). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

²³ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary: The Christbook, Matthew 1–12* (vol. 1, Revised and Expanded Edition.; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 550.