

## Week 13: Matthew 12:1–21

### Hook



**Main Point:** Jesus didn't fit the religious leaders' expectations for the Messiah, so they plotted to kill Him.

Read off a list of sayings that people contribute to Scripture and ask if each one is found in Scripture or not (none are):

*"Love the sinner but hate the sin."*

*"Cleanliness is next to godliness."*

*"God works in mysterious ways."*

*"God helps those who help themselves."*

*"This, too, shall pass."*

*"Money is the root of all evil."*

*"God will not give you more than you can handle."*

*"Be in the world but not of the world."*

**Q:** Were any of these quotes tricky? Often the ones that added or took words away from actual verses were trickier, why is that?

**Q:** Why is it important for believers to know what Scripture explicitly says?

**Q:** How easy is it for believers to add or take away things from Scripture?

**Q:** When something completely opposite of what you expected happens, how do you respond? Do you readjust your perception and expectations? Do you respond in anger or sadness?

## **Week 13: Matthew 12:1–21**

### **Book**

**Main Point:** Jesus didn't fit the religious leaders' expectations for the Messiah, so they plotted to kill Him.

#### **Matthew 12:1–8 [Read]**

**Talking Point 1:** The Pharisees didn't understand who Jesus really was or what God's Word really says, what His law really requires.

**Q: Why was David able to break the rules of the tabernacle and it not be considered sin?**

**Q: What were the Pharisees missing about the purpose of the Sabbath?**

The Pharisees started openly criticizing Jesus three chapters earlier in Matthew 9, chastising Him for eating with sinners and tax collectors (9:11), then claiming He cast out demons not with the power of God, but the power of the devil (9:34). In this chapter, we see the Pharisees really start to go after Him. The Pharisees would have certainly been either at synagogue or at home on the Sabbath. The fact that they were even *in* a grain field in Galilee on the Sabbath to see Jesus' disciples picking grain means they were following Him, trying to figure out a way to trap or test Him.<sup>i</sup>

The law allowed for people to pluck grapes or ears of grain from a neighbor's field – just enough to eat in the moment – but not to take a sickle to the grain (harvest it) or put any in their bag to take with them (Deuteronomy 23:24–25). They weren't breaking the general law by eating out of someone else's field, but the Pharisees thought they were breaking the law of the Sabbath by “working,” meaning picking the grain. And yet, they weren't working. They hadn't, in the words of Deuteronomy, “taken a sickle to” the grain, so they weren't “harvesting” it, just picking enough for them to eat in the moment. But Jesus didn't simply say that. He used a different, more theological argument, to say something even more intense.

He compared His disciples to David's eating the Bread of the Presence in the tabernacle (v. 4) and to priests in general, who work on the Sabbath (v. 5). The story of David's eating the Bread of the Presence is found in 1 Samuel 21:1–10, just after David ran away from Saul's palace because Jonathan warned him that Saul wanted to kill him. The priest at Nob didn't know David was running away. He thought David was leading an expedition. When he asked why David was alone, David told him he was meeting up with his men later (1 Samuel 21:1–6). So David not only ate of the Bread of the Presence, the holy bread of the tabernacle offered before God each day, he lied to the priest in order to do it, saying he was on a mission for the king and would meet up with

his men later. Then he also asked the priest for some kind of weapon. The priest gave him the only weapon he had, the sword David had used to cut off Goliath's head, which had been kept in the tabernacle for years (vv. 7–10). This was how the Lord provided David, His anointed, with food and a weapon when he went on the run from Saul. Ancient readers of Samuel would have understood that, although it was officially “against the rules” for David to eat of this bread (only priests could eat it), because David was God's anointed king and was in trouble, the circumstances trumped the rules.

The Pharisees may have insisted that Jesus show them with an explicit legal text that the disciples' actions were OK; He chose to use a story instead to show how God's law qualified in practice, showing “a precedent for allowing hunger to override the law.”<sup>ii</sup> This shows a contrast in belief between Jesus and the Pharisees about how to interpret Scripture. The Pharisees were “letter of the law” types, passionate about following every law to the absolute best of their ability, to the point of adding hundreds of their own stipulations to God's law in order to clarify exactly what actions broke or did not break God's law. Rules about the Sabbath, for example, defined *exactly* how far a person could walk before it was considered “work” on the Sabbath (2,000 cubits, about one kilometer).<sup>iii</sup>

The Pharisees' goal was to “build a fence around the law”<sup>iv</sup> so there was no way they could violate the actual law. It started from good intentions. By drawing the border around the Law wider than it actually was, they were playing it safe. But the Pharisees began to hold all the people to their wider boundaries, as if these more specific requirements *were* the law themselves. Paul warns us not to impose our own personal convictions on other people (Romans 14:23).

Jesus interpreted the law more freely than the Pharisees in this way, and yet His standards were actually higher than those of the Pharisees because His concern was not just following the rules, but the condition of our hearts. In the Sermon on the Mount, He said the commandment against murder is also about anger, and adultery is also about lust. Jesus didn't say God's law didn't matter; instead, He focused on the principles and the purpose behind the laws. The Pharisees followed the letter of the law and Jesus focused on the spirit of the law, arguing that you could follow the law perfectly, to the tiniest letter, and completely miss the spirit. This was one of Jesus' greatest criticisms of the Pharisees (Matthew 23:23).<sup>v</sup>

What is the purpose of the Sabbath? To take a break from your regular work to focus on God. The disciples were doing that, not just in that moment, but with their whole lives – leaving their nets (their regular work) to follow Jesus (who *was* God). This is how Jesus could compare them to priests, whose work on the Sabbath wasn't considered profaning the Sabbath (v. 5), much like pastors who have to work on the Sabbath today. Because they are facilitating worship for others, their work is part of honoring the day as holy to the Lord. The priests and Levites were set apart from the “regular work” category to do the holy work of the temple. In the same way, Jesus' disciples were set

apart to do His holy work, which Jesus called “something greater than the temple” (v. 6). In this way, along with calling Himself the “Lord of the Sabbath,” it is clear that Jesus again claimed to not just be a prophet or rabbi but God Himself (v. 7).

At the end of this section, Jesus called out the Pharisees for not understanding the meaning of “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice” – a quote from the prophet Hosea (v. 7). Along with asking them, “Have you not read ...” about the story of David and the Bread of Presence, Jesus challenged their honor. These were both strong insults to men who considered themselves experts in Scripture.<sup>vi</sup> Jesus challenged their method of biblical interpretation and, really, their entire understanding of Scripture. He touched on all three sections of the Old Testament Scriptures – the Law, the Prophets and the Writings, showing them their misunderstanding in all three areas. They had memorized the words and followed the rules and still missed the whole point of them. This was their life’s work, but they didn’t really understand it at all.

If the Pharisees had understood what God truly desires, what He truly wants from us, they would not have criticized Jesus’ disciples, who were doing exactly what God wants – mercy, not sacrifice. Relationship, not religion. Truly following Him, not giving Him lip service.

**Q: In what ways have you struggled with understanding the difference between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law in your personal life?**

**Q: How can the freedom to live by the spirit of the law become dangerous, a license for people to do whatever they want and justify sin?**

**Q: How can we be sure we are really living by the spirit of the law?**

**Q: If biblical scholars such as the Pharisees, who studied God’s Word day and night, could get it so wrong, what does that mean for us? How can we know how to study and interpret God’s law rightly? What habits do we need to work on to understand and apply it correctly?**

**Matthew 12:9–14 [Read]**

**Talking Point 2:** It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.

**Q: Why did Jesus heal this man on the Sabbath? Couldn’t He have waited a day?**

**Q: What does it say about the Pharisees that their response was to conspire to kill Him?**

Jesus continued His argument about the Sabbath by healing someone on the Sabbath, right there in their synagogue, in front of God and everyone (vv. 9–10). Jesus could have

waited a day to heal the man. The physical need wasn't urgent. The man likely had lived that way for months or years, maybe even his whole life. But the Pharisees asked Jesus about the Sabbath in order to trap Him (v. 10), so He healed the man to show that God was with Him. God wouldn't heal this man through Jesus if God disapproved of His Sabbath practices!

Yet, even in healing this man, Jesus honored the concept of not working. He didn't lay His hands on the man, which some may have considered work. He didn't even pray. The strictest Pharisees at the time permitted prayer in general on the Sabbath, but not prayer for the sick – that was considered work.<sup>vii</sup> Jesus didn't ask the man to do anything that may have been considered work either. To stretch out your hand was not considered work, even by the strictest Sabbath standards. Only God performed “work” in this moment.<sup>viii</sup>

Jesus uses another rhetorical argument device – “of how much more” (v. 12) – in His answer to the Pharisees. Every one of them agreed that if your sheep fell into a pit on the Sabbath, it was OK to rescue it. Shepherds often dug pits as traps for wolves that might try to attack their flocks. It was relatively common to have to rescue their sheep from such a pit. Though his shriveled hand may not have been as urgent a situation as a sheep in a pit, the Pharisees couldn't argue with Jesus' statement of the man's *value*. A man is obviously worth more than a sheep.

Most people responded to Jesus' miracles with joy, excitement and belief. His miracles made them much more likely to believe what He said because they proved He was from God. But they didn't change the minds of the Pharisees. They were like those with hard hearts, who would never have “ears to hear” Jesus' message. In the next chapter, Jesus will say that the prophecy of Isaiah was fulfilled in them, “You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive” (13:14). His miracles made no difference to their unbelief, just as Pharaoh's heart was hardened against Moses' miracles. Because He challenged *their* understanding of God's Word, they could only conclude that He wasn't really from God.

Jesus' miracles served only to make Him more of a threat, because they caused Him to grow in popularity and power. That's what this was really all about for them. Differences in biblical interpretation didn't usually make religious leaders want to have a rabbi killed. Even if they thought He was a false prophet, they wouldn't have given Him the death penalty. This went much deeper than a difference in theology. Jesus was a threat to their social, political and religious power. The Pharisees were religious leaders, but they didn't have as much political power as the Sadducees, who were aristocrats. They didn't even have the political power to have Jesus put to death; they had to plot how to make it happen.<sup>ix</sup> From this point in Matthew, moving forward, we will see the Pharisees continue to plot against Jesus, trying to trap, trick, and discredit Him until He finally is killed.

**Q: How do you typically celebrate and honor the Sabbath day each week?**

**Q: Are there certain things you intentionally don't do? Why or why not?**

**Q: How can we deepen our Sabbath practices as a spiritual discipline to grow in our faith?**

**Matthew 12:15–21 [Read]**

**Talking Point 3:** Jesus would not fight back, but would bring justice to victory.

**Q: Why did Jesus withdraw and ask people not to talk about Him?**

**Q: How did Jesus fulfill this prophecy of Isaiah?**

Jesus knew the Pharisees were out to get Him, and He knew they eventually would be successful. But He still had more to do. It wasn't His time yet, so He withdrew from that place. And when He healed others, He told them not to tell people about it. He tried to stay discreet, but His fame grew far and wide through word of mouth anyway. Many followed Him, many were healed by Him, many brought friends to Him. Matthew wrote that Jesus' discretion fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy, that Messiah would "not quarrel or cry aloud" (v. 19). Though Jesus did debate with the Pharisees when they publicly challenged Him, He did not come to fight with them or any other religious leaders. The passage says He knew they were plotting to kill Him (v. 15), but He didn't seek to fight back. He simply "withdrew from there." This Jesus – who told His disciples to turn the other cheek – lived out His own words. He didn't fight back in defense of His honor, even His life. We will see this later, too, as He went to the Cross. They led Him "like a lamb to the slaughter." He didn't fight back; He didn't say anything at all.

He also didn't come to fight with Rome. Many people expected the Messiah to overthrow Rome and take back the throne of David. But Jesus didn't come as a political or warrior Messiah. He came to sacrifice Himself. This passage focuses on the Gentiles – proclaiming justice to the Gentiles, giving hope to the Gentiles. Jesus didn't come to fight with Rome; He came to save them, too – right along with Israel.

This prophecy from Isaiah leaves no doubt who Jesus is. He is God's servant, His beloved "with whom my soul is well-pleased" (the same language God used at His baptism). We just saw that God's Spirit was upon Him through the power of His healing, but Matthew now says it explicitly – this is the Messiah, and God's Spirit is upon Him (v. 18). But this wasn't the picture of the warrior king they expected. He wouldn't fight publicly or raise His battle cry. His voice wouldn't be heard in the streets as He marched into battle. The crowd, for a moment, would cry "Hosanna" as He rode into Jerusalem. But only a few days later, they would shout "Crucify Him!" Just as the Pharisees didn't understand God's Word about the Sabbath, the people didn't understand God's Word about the

Messiah and who He would be. He would bring justice to victory, but not in the way they expected. Not through physical battles, but a spiritual one. Not by shouting a battle cry in the streets, but by silently walking those streets to His own death.

**Q: Why did the people have such a wrong picture of who the Messiah would be?**

**Q: Why is our idea of true strength so often not right?**

**Q: How hard would it be to be like Jesus, to not fight back against these Pharisees and just destroy them right then and there? Or not fight back against those who arrested Him? Or Pilate? Or those who beat Him and mocked Him? To not get down off the cross?**

**Q: What does it say about Jesus that He could have fought back, but He didn't?**

**Q: What does it say to us about humility? Sacrifice? Love? Strength? Power?**

## **Week 13: Matthew 12:1–21**

### **Took**

**Main Point: Jesus is the King, but He doesn't fight physical battles: He fights spiritual ones.**

Like the Pharisees we can often have the wrong picture of who Jesus really is. We create a Jesus in our own image each time we add or subtract to what God tells us in His scriptures. We should consciously make sure that we not add or subtract from the Bible. It's easy to add our own traditions onto the teaching of God's Word. While these traditions may not be inherently bad, if we equate them with God's commands in Scripture, they can cause bondage and legalism instead of a pure heart to serve God. Likewise, we should be very cautious not to enforce our traditions and judge others for things which the Bible doesn't explicitly condemn.

**Q: What are some ways that we can ensure that we know the Jesus of Scripture and not the one of our own or someone else's tradition?**

**Q: How should we respond to believers who act out in ways similar to the Pharisees to other believers?**

### **CHALLENGES**

**THINK:** How can we honor the Sabbath without making it legalistic? What (if any) things should we intentionally avoid on the Sabbath? What spiritual practices or activities should we add? What is the purpose of rest on the Sabbath? How do you define *spiritual* rest, not just physical rest? What does it mean to rest *in the Lord*, not just take a nap or take a day off? What is the purpose of the Sabbath, and how we can see past all the "rules" and traditions we have accumulated over time to honor its purpose?

**PRAY:** for God's wisdom and understanding when we read and interpret the Bible. Pray for a renewed passion for studying and learning to interpret Scripture rightly. Pray for people to help you learn and opportunities for you to study Scripture more and learn to do it well.

**ACT:** Practice Sabbath. You can choose to be more intentional about your Sabbath practice this Sunday or even take a few hours today to add in an extra time of Sabbath to your week. Perhaps after work, instead of flipping on the TV, spend time in prayer or Scripture study. Do a devotional with your family, have a theological discussion with your spouse. Spend time reading a Christian book or listening to worship music. Go for a



walk to experience God's creation. Anything to stop your regular routine and rest in the Lord.

*Hook, Took & Editing by Truett Ross*

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<sup>i</sup> Ethelbert Stauffer, *Jesus and His Story* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960).

<sup>ii</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Jewish law from Jesus to the Mishnah: Five Studies* (London, UK: SCM Press, 1990).

<sup>iii</sup> Jerusalem Talmud: Mishneh Torah, Shabbat, 27

<sup>iv</sup> Talmud: Pirque Avot (Ethics of the Father)

<sup>v</sup> Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

<sup>vi</sup> Bruce J. Malina, *Windows on the World of Jesus: Time Travel to Ancient Judea* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).

<sup>vii</sup> E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York, NY: Allen Lane, Penguin Press, 1993).

<sup>viii</sup> Frederick W. Danker, *Jesus and the New Age* (St. Louis, MO: Clayton Publishing House, 1972).

<sup>ix</sup> Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).