

June 3
Lesson 1 (NIV)

JUSTICE AND SABBATH LAWS

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 10

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Matthew 12:1-14

MATTHEW 12:1-14

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. 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.”

⁹ Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, ¹⁰ and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to bring charges against Jesus, they asked him, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”

¹¹ He said to them, “If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? ¹² How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” ¹³ Then he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other. ¹⁴ But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.

KEY VERSE

If you had known what these words mean, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice,” you would not have condemned the innocent.—Matthew 12:7

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the incidents in today’s text and Jesus’ response in each case.
2. Explain why mercy trumps sacrifice.
3. Plan a merciful act toward a specific person in the week ahead.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. The Best Rest
- B. Lesson Background

I. Law and Temple (MATTHEW 12:1-5)

- A. David in the Temple (vv. 1-4)
Have Hat, No Service
- B. Priests in the Temple (v. 5)

II. Sabbath and Messiah (MATTHEW 12:6-8)

- A. Greater Law (vv. 6, 7)
For Lack of Track Shoes
- B. Greater Authority (v. 8)

III. Ritual and Humanity (MATTHEW 12:9-14)

- A. Trick Question (vv. 9, 10)
- B. Bold Response (vv. 11-14)

Conclusion

- A. No Longer Sick and Tired
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. The Best Rest

Someone has said it to you, probably more than once. You have heard it from friends and family when you have worked hard for a long time, when you have been under great stress, or when you have been ill: “You need to get some rest.”

Humans are divinely designed to need rest. Our bodies and minds are attuned to the rhythms of days and seasons, thriving on a blend of productive work and peaceful rest.

But as with so many other matters, we resist what we need. There always seems to be more work than there is time to do it. Something clamors for our attention at every moment. We lie awake thinking about what needs to be done. We worry that we have forgotten something important.

Our text today deals with the true rest that God gives his people through Jesus.

B. Lesson Background

Our text comes from the Gospel of Matthew, near the middle of its narration of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Having presented himself in teaching and action as having authority belonging only to God ([Matthew 5-9](#)), Jesus encountered both opposition and belief. The religious leaders, for their part, opposed him at nearly every turn. Even so, many chose to follow Jesus, believing God was about to fulfill his ancient promises to restore Israel. Of special focus in the latter group are the 12 disciples, called by Jesus and sent out to represent him in teaching and action ([10:1-8](#)).

In the discourse that comes just before our text, Jesus invited those who were tired and needy to find rest in him ([Matthew 11:28-30](#)). For Israel, the concept of rest was closely associated with two of God’s provisions: the Sabbath Day and the promised land ([Exodus 20:8-11](#); [Deuteronomy 12:10](#); [25:19](#); [Joshua 1:13-15](#)). In effect, Jesus declared that he fulfilled the promises that God had made through these divine institutions.

But that claim was challenged. We see that especially in today’s text, where Jesus dealt with a controversy concerning what he and his disciples were doing on the Sabbath. The Law of Moses described the Sabbath as a day of rest from work. It celebrated God’s resting from his acts of creation and his liberating Israel from slavery in Egypt ([Exodus 20:8-11](#); [Deuteronomy 5:15](#)). But the law never clearly defined what constituted “work.”

For the Pharisees, that was a question to be settled with great care. From sources outside the New Testament, we learn that the Pharisees began as a movement opposed to what they saw as corrupt leadership in the temple. They hoped that God would restore his blessing to Israel if Israel began to observe God’s neglected law.

To that end, they sought to “build a fence” around the law. That is, they imagined every circumstance in which the law might come into play and devised strict responses to those situations. The person who followed their teachings would, as a result, not even come close to violating the law. Among these teachings were strict regulations about the Sabbath. Not even small, effortless deeds of “work” were to be done.

How would Pharisees, so strict in their interpretation of the Sabbath and so powerful in their influence over others, respond to Jesus’ claims to bring the Sabbath’s promised rest of [Matthew 11:28-30](#)?

I. Law and Temple

([MATTHEW 12:1-5](#))

A. David in the Temple ([vv. 1-4](#))

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.

The scene is set as *Jesus . . . and his disciples* pass through a field of *grain*. Wheat and barley are the grains most common in this time and place. The Law of Moses allows a hungry traveler to take a modest amount of grain from a farmer’s field to eat immediately ([Deuteronomy 23:24, 25](#)), and that is what the disciples are doing. God gave Israel such laws so that his people would be generous in response to God’s generosity ([15:12-14](#)). So the plucking of grain is not a controversial matter in and of itself. ([Mark 2:23](#) and [Luke 6:1](#) begin parallel accounts.)

² When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, “Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath.”

The problem with the disciples’ action is that it is being done *on the Sabbath*. According to the interpretation of *the Pharisees*, what the *disciples* are doing amounts to three kinds of work: reaping (plucking the grain), threshing (rubbing the grain to separate kernel from husk), and winnowing (blowing the husks away from the grain). It does not matter that their actions are simple and easy, expending little energy. They have transgressed the “fence” around the Sabbath law.

These Pharisees have no official position from which to stop the disciples’ actions. They do not occupy any governmental or religious office, but they do have powerful influence. They do not confront Jesus’ disciples, but Jesus himself. They hold him, as the teacher, responsible for his followers’ actions. They perceive Jesus as a rival, so they seek to discredit him for not correcting his disciples’ mistake.

What Do You Think?

How were you shaped by an experience of being judged through a lens of legalism?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding your own use of such a lens
- Regarding presuppositions
- In terms of response
- Other

HAVE HAT, NO SERVICE

He looked like a typical teenager. It was the first time we had seen him in church, and he appeared to be by himself. He came in and sat down, and it was obvious that he was out of his element.

We'll never know why he came, but we do know why he left. He left because of his baseball cap. During the song service, a deacon sitting behind the boy leaned forward and demanded rather gruffly, "Please remove your hat."

The boy did not comply, so during the preacher's prayer a few minutes later, the deacon leaned forward again and whispered, "I said, remove your hat!" The teen turned around and pleaded, "I really don't want to take off my cap. Maybe I should just leave."



Visual for Lesson 1. *Keep this map posted throughout the quarter to give your learners a geographical perspective.*

"You don't need to leave. Just take off that hat!"

After the boy turned back around, the deacon reached forward and snatched off his hat and dropped it into his lap. "That wasn't so hard, was it?" That was when everyone near the spectacle noticed the ashy paleness of the teen's bald head and the nasty scar that stretched across it. The teen jammed the baseball cap back on

his disfigured head and got up and left. The preacher was just beginning his sermon, which was titled “The Love of Christ.”

We don’t know who that boy was. We will probably never know him. He might have been blessed by hearing a message about the love of Christ. It’s a sermon we all need to hear, but most of all to apply. Don’t let human traditions get in the way of the message of Christ’s love.

—C. T.

3 He answered, “Haven’t you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry?”

Jesus begins his response by summarizing a story from [1 Samuel 20:1-21:6](#). *David* had been a member of King Saul’s court, but Saul had become jealous of David’s popularity and success. Warned to flee for his life, David became a fugitive in desperate need of food.

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.”

The house of God that David entered was the tabernacle—the tent that served as Israel’s center of worship before Solomon built the temple. Asking the high priest for food, David was told that the only food available was the bread ritually placed in the tabernacle as an offering to God. No one was permitted to eat that bread except *the priests* ([Leviticus 24:5-9](#)). Yet the high priest gave the bread to David.

The high priest’s reasons for giving the bread were apparently twofold. David’s life was in danger, so the high priest acted to save his life. And David’s anointing by Samuel to be king was likely known, even though Saul still occupied the office ([1 Samuel 16:1-13](#)). The high priest acted in submission to God’s chosen.

B. Priests in the Temple (v. 5)

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?”

Jesus then appeals to another part of Israel’s Scriptures. The Law of Moses explicitly requires priests to offer sacrifices on the Sabbath, first in the tabernacle and then in the temple that superseded it ([Numbers 28:9, 10](#)). Jesus sarcastically uses the deliberately harsh expression *desecrate* to describe their action. By the Pharisees’ definition, this work would reduce the holy Sabbath to an ordinary day. Yet the Law of Moses commands sacrifice on the Sabbath, and so the priests who perform the sacrifice must be without guilt.

What Do You Think?

Where do you draw the line regarding what you will and won’t do on a day of rest? Why?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In terms of physical activity

In terms of mental activity

Considering [Proverbs 6:10, 11](#); [Matthew 11:28; 26:45](#); [Mark 6:31](#); [John 9:4](#); [Hebrews 4:9, 10](#); [6:11, 12](#); [10:25](#)

II. Sabbath and Messiah

([MATTHEW 12:6-8](#))

A. Greater Law (vv. 6, 7)

6 “I tell you that something greater than the temple is here.”

As Jesus’ authority is greater than that of David, so he is *greater than the temple*. This statement, like many others that Jesus makes, no doubt shocks the religious leaders and others. To be allowed to have a temple is a gift from God. The temple was built according to his design for sacrifices and rituals instituted by God. To claim standing greater than the temple’s standing is to claim the authority of God himself.

7 “If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent.”

The regulations that allow plucking grain in order to satisfy hunger are expressions of God’s *mercy* (see comments on [verse 1](#), above). This practice is an expression of God’s loving generosity. His people live in the land he has given them because of that generosity. So they are obliged to be similarly generous to one another.

Jesus quotes from [Hosea 6:6](#) to make this point. The prophet Hosea had warned God’s people centuries before that their love for God was weak and erratic. They relied on sacrifice in the temple to express their devotion to God, but they practiced violence and theft day by day. True devotion to God must be expressed with his degree of mercy. These Pharisees, however, are using the Sabbath to enforce a devotion to God that has no place for mercy.

The Pharisees may not acknowledge it, but Jesus stands before them as the ultimate expression of God’s mercy. He is God as a human being, living among sinful humans, eventually to die as the innocent one in place of the guilty. When the Pharisees ignore him while enforcing their view of the Law of Moses, they are ignoring the mercy of God in its greatest demonstration.

HOW TO SAY IT

Babylonian Bab-ih-low-nee-un.

Hosea Ho-zay-uh.

Leviticus Leh-vit-ih-kus.

Pharisees Fair-ih-seez.

What Do You Think?

How can you help your church improve its extensions of mercy?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In physical, material terms

In spiritual terms

As the material needs interrelate with the spiritual

FOR LACK OF TRACK SHOES

You couldn't find a more faithful woman than Hazel. Her son Donnie, however, was a different story: he had left the church immediately after graduating from high school. Now he was in his late 50s, and Hazel longed for her boy to come back to Christ. She begged me to visit him; I did.

"Would you mind telling me why you stopped attending church?" I asked Donnie.

"In high school I was a good distance runner. I even broke our league's mile record. But I ran every race in my clodhoppers, the same shoes I wore to school—the only pair of shoes I owned. I asked Mom and Dad for a pair of track shoes, but they said we couldn't afford them. I reminded them of the flour canister in the cupboard. Every payday Dad would put money in there. I asked if we could use that money."

"Oh no!" they said. "That's the Lord's money. We made a pledge to the church. We can't use it for anything else." I went to the state meet, ran in my old shoes, and lost," Donnie continued sadly. "Track shoes would have made a difference."

Not knowing what to say, I responded, "I'm sorry, Donnie." With misty eyes Donnie concluded, "I decided that if the God who owns the entire universe needed money more than I needed track shoes, he isn't much of a God."

I enjoyed my visits with Donnie and prayed for him often, but he never said yes to Jesus as far as I know. I could conclude here with "the moral of the story," but I think you know what it is.

—C. T.

B. Greater Authority (v. 8)

8. "For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

Jesus' divine authority is summed up in this statement. The phrase *Son of Man* echoes [Daniel 7:1-14](#). In the prophet's vision, "beasts" representing kingdoms opposed to God's people are overcome by "one like a son of man." To him God gives authority to rule forever. Jesus claims to be that very figure, having come into the world with authority that belongs only to God. (By contrast, the dozens of references to the prophet Ezekiel as "Son of man" highlight his mortality.)

The Sabbath was a gift of God's mercy for people who needed rest. Jesus declares himself *Lord* of that gift. As God's divine Son, he exercises full authority over God's Sabbath. The rest that he gives accomplishes what Sabbath promises.

III. Ritual and Humanity

([MATTHEW 12:9-14](#))

A. Trick Question (vv. 9, 10)

9. Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue,

Matthew records another incident that occurs on this particular Sabbath Day. The *synagogue* is the traditional gathering place for Jewish believers on the Sabbath. Apparently the concept of the synagogue was established during the Babylonian captivity, when the people no longer had access to the temple. Faithful Jews would gather on the Sabbath to read Scripture and pray together.

Jesus is found often in the synagogues in the Gospels. But they prove to be places of controversy, as Jesus makes claims and performs actions to which the religious leaders object.

10a. and a man with a shriveled hand was there.

In this synagogue meeting Jesus encounters a man with a disability. The term *shriveled* suggests that his hand appears shrunken, like a plant that has dried up. The man has little or no ability to use this hand and probably not his arm.

10b. Looking for a reason to bring charges against Jesus, they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"

Jesus' opponents see this as an opportunity to discredit him. He has healed people before (see [Matthew 4:24](#); [8:16, 17](#); [9:1-7, 18-35](#)), but will he "work" in a way that breaks the Sabbath law by healing the man? They once more illustrate that they don't comprehend the priority of mercy. So before the healing, Jesus tries once more to get through to them (next verse).

B. Bold Response (vv. 11-14)

11. He said to them, "If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out?"

Jesus responds to his opponents with a question of his own. They take for granted that an act of mercy on the Sabbath is a violation of the Law of Moses. But Jesus points out the inconsistency in their own practice. Longstanding Jewish tradition allows a shepherd with a *sheep* in distress on the Sabbath to do what is necessary to rescue the animal. Oddly, many Jewish teachers of the day (like these in the synagogue with Jesus) do not allow acts of mercy toward other people.

What Do You Think?

What safeguards can be implemented to ensure that a Scripture discussion sheds "light" and not "heat"?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In terms of predefined safeguards, which everyone knows in advance

In terms of impromptu safeguards, enacted on the spot

12. “How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.”

Arguing from the lesser to the greater, Jesus implies that humans are more worthy of mercy than livestock. How can a person who knows God apply the law of the Sabbath to treat a fellow human as less than an animal? The practice of Jesus’ opponents refutes their position.

But Jesus’ point is broader than just this comparison. *It is lawful to do good* for others *on the Sabbath* because the Sabbath is a gift from the generous God to his people in need. Israel had labored many years as slaves in Egypt. The Sabbath was God’s blessing of rest to those who had known no rest ([Deuteronomy 5:15](#)). Acts of goodness and mercy are not forbidden on such a day. In fact, they may be even more appropriate because of what the Sabbath celebrates.

What Do You Think?

What accessibility boundaries do you need to establish so you don’t overextend yourself in being available to help others?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In matters of time

In matters of money

13. Then he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other.

Jesus proceeds to demonstrate the point he has just made. As he commands the man to place his afflicted *hand* where all can see, the hand is *completely restored*. This is no temporary or partial healing, for the formerly withered hand is as strong as the man’s *other* hand.

Jesus’ previous assertion about mercy on the Sabbath is more than just sound reasoning. It has now become authoritative. Jesus has the power to restore life to the lifeless, including this man’s withered hand. Such power belongs only to the God who has granted Israel the Sabbath as his gift commemorating his creation of the world and as his gift of freedom to captive Israel. Such power identifies the “Lord of the Sabbath,” the one who has come to give true rest to suffering humanity. He authoritatively interprets the Sabbath. He fulfills the Sabbath’s promise of rest.

14. But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.

Jesus has faced opposition since early in his ministry ([Matthew 9:3, 11; 11:19](#)). He has warned his disciples that they will face the same ([10:16-25, 34-39](#)). Now *the Pharisees*, repeatedly put to shame by Jesus’ responses to their objections, conspire to kill him. In sad irony, those who outwardly profess to honor God’s law the most now secretly plan murder.

What comes of their plot? In every later controversy, Jesus still gets the best of his opponents. Eventually he warns his disciples that when he goes to Jerusalem, he will be arrested by the religious authorities, then handed over to the Romans to be crucified—only to be raised again to life ([Matthew 16:21; 17:12, 22, 23; 20:18, 19; 26:2](#)).

Jesus will surrender himself when approached by soldiers ([Matthew 26:45-56](#)). He will make no defense when on trial ([26:57-68; 27:11-26](#)). Jesus dies not because of his enemies’ power but because of his willing self-surrender. The Lord of the Sabbath is also the Lord of life and death. The Lord who restores life to a lifeless hand will make life possible for everyone by giving away his own life.

Conclusion

A. No Longer Sick and Tired

People today often complain that they are tired. Ironically, we enjoy more laborsaving devices than people in the past could even imagine! Yet we seem to find ourselves worn out all the time.

Perhaps we are tired because we look for rest in the wrong places. Leisure and recreation have their place. But true rest can be found only from the Christ who made us and redeemed us. He makes us whole. He gives us life. He grants us rest even in the midst of trouble.

B. Prayer

Lord, we cast our cares on you. We cast our lives on you. Make us whole. Give us your peace. Grant us rest. And make us the instruments of your peace and rest for others. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Jesus gives us rest in a weary world.

VISUALS FOR THESE LESSONS

The visual pictured in each lesson (example: page 348) is a small reproduction of a large, full-color poster included in the *Adult Resources* packet for the Summer Quarter. That packet also contains the very useful *Presentation Tools* CD for teacher use. Order No. 4629118 from your supplier.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV® Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV® Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Before class, write the following situations on separate index cards. Do not include the italicized answers. (1) A judge gives people who play their car stereos too loudly the sentence of (*listening to blaring music—such as Barry Manilow—for one hour*). (2) In addition to a \$100,000 fine, a judge sentenced a slumlord who owned 40 run-down properties to (*six months of house arrest in one of the units*). (3) The mother who received a ticket because her 6-year-old son kept unbuckling his seat belt asked for the judge's help. He (*sentenced the boy to a seat belt safety class specially designed for the child*).

Divide students into small groups and hand a card to each group. Say, "Read the situation on your card and decide what punishment you would give." Allow time for groups to reveal the sentence they came up with. Review the judges' actual sentences. Then say, "It seems these judges had the accused in mind when handing out just the right sentence. The Pharisees of Jesus' day, on the other hand, didn't seem to have much concern regarding how their interpretation of Sabbath laws would affect people. We'll see what Jesus has to say about this."

Alternative. Distribute copies of the "Strange Sunday Laws" activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. After students finish working on this individually, say, "The Pharisees also had some strange and strict laws related to their Sabbath. We'll find out what Jesus had to say when they tried to shame him and his disciples for not keeping their laws."

Into the Word

Ask two students to read [Matthew 12:1-14](#) aloud. Assign half of your class to represent the Pharisees' beliefs and the other half to represent Jesus' teaching. Have each group select a spokesperson. Distribute copies of the following list, and ask the groups to decide how the Pharisees or Jesus would respond. (1) The disciples walk through a field and eat grain. (2) David asks for bread reserved for priests. (3) The temple is more important than anything except God himself. (4) Mercy is more important than sacrifice. (5) Healing on a Sabbath violates the prohibition of work on that day ([Exodus 20:10](#)).

Alternative. Give each student a copy of the "How Do They Compare?" activity from the reproducible page. Have students work in pairs.

After either of the above activities, lead a class discussion with the following questions. Anticipated responses are italicized.

1. How did the Pharisees' beliefs on Sabbath observance reveal their imperfect understanding of the Sabbath law? *Their added traditions had the effect of minimizing the importance of mercy.*
2. What were Jesus' corrections of the Pharisees regarding what was important when observing the Sabbath? *Mercy predominated when David accepted bread reserved for priests to feed his hungry men. Also, priests who work to perform sacrifices on the Sabbath are guiltless for doing so. Jesus also pointed out the inconsistency of allowing the rescue of lost sheep on the Sabbath while disallowing merciful acts toward people.*
3. How was the fact of Jesus' greater importance than the temple relevant to the Sabbath discussion? *His claim to be greater than the temple is a claim to deity. As such, he was the one who had the authoritative interpretation of how to observe the Sabbath.*

Into Life

Say, "The Pharisees got it wrong by emphasizing their traditions over the needs of the people. If a visitor did either of the following, how should we handle it?" Allow time for comments as you present these scenarios: (1) a guest comes to church dressed inappropriately; (2) parents keep their very young and noisy children with them in the main service rather than taking them to age-appropriate classes.

Encourage students to take special note of visitors and find one person to whom they can show a kind and merciful welcome.