

Lord of the Sabbath

Devotional Reading: [Luke 13:10–17](#)

Background Scripture: [Matthew 12:1–14](#)

(See also [Mark 2:23–28](#); [Luke 6:1–11](#).)

Matthew 12:1–8

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.”



Key Text

I tell you that something greater than the temple is here. —**Matthew 12:6**

Sacred Altars and Holy Offerings

Unit 2: Jesus and the Temple

Lessons 6–9

Lesson Aims

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

1. Identify the source of Jesus' statement regarding mercy and sacrifice.
2. Compare and contrast the Pharisees' basis of concern with Jesus' own.
3. Make a plan to follow Jesus' example and show abundant mercy in a place or time it would not be expected.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. What Are We Talking About?
- B. Lesson Context
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 - A. Hungry Disciples (v. 1)

B. Offended Teachers (v. 2)

II. What Is Greater? (Matthew 12:3–8)

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Sleeping In

B. Than the Temple (vv. 5–6)

C. Than Sacrifice (v. 7)

D. Summary (v. 8)

Authority Undercover

Conclusion

A. Lordship Is the Issue

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Ahimelek *A-him-uh-leck.*

Davidic *Duh-vid-ick.*

Levitical *Leh-vit-ih-kul.*

Sabbath *Sab-uhth.*

synagogue *sin-uh-gog.*

Introduction

A. What Are We Talking About?

In the middle of a conversation, have you ever stopped to ask yourself, “Wait, what are we really talking about?” Imagine you’re discussing loading the dishwasher. “Everyone knows the bowls go in the top rack!”

you say, but as you feel the tension grow, you realize you are arguing over something else. *Whose job is it to fix this? Am I the only one who cares if the dishes come out clean? Am I seen?* Many of our “disagreements” turn out to be about values, whether or not we acknowledge that reason.

Jesus knew how to take a conversation and use it to reveal a person’s heart. His discussion about Sabbath is like this. You might anticipate a legal discussion of Sabbath rules—what is or is not permitted. But Jesus turned the discussion around to reveal the motives of the Pharisees. He was more interested in talking about showing mercy. At the same time, his sweeping claims left everyone wondering, “Who is this person who calls himself Son of Man and Lord of the Sabbath? Who gave him the right?”

B. Lesson Context

Observing a seven-day week that included one day of rest (Sabbath) was a distinctive practice of ancient Israel. An ancient king might declare a rest day to celebrate a great victory, but regular, periodic rest was a revolutionary idea. For the most part, ancient peoples were expected to work every day.

Sabbath was a gift that God gave through the Law of Moses ([Exodus 20:8–11](#); [Deuteronomy 5:12–15](#)). It commemorated two of God’s mighty acts. First, God completed the work of creation and rested on the seventh day ([Genesis 2:1–3](#); compare [Exodus 20:11](#)). Second, God liberated his people from oppression in the land of Egypt, a place where they were not allowed rest. Rest was a gift from God—even the animals got a day off ([Deuteronomy 5:12–15](#)).

Thus, Sabbath was not only a blessing but also an expression of faith. The challenge was to trust God that six days of labor would be enough to

sustain life as God provided for his people. That required a lot of faith in a pre-industrial agrarian era!

The Law of Moses extended observance of Sabbath to include one *year* out of seven; on every seventh year, the fields were to remain uncultivated, debts would be forgiven, and enslaved people emancipated ([Leviticus 25:1–8](#); [Deuteronomy 15:1–18](#)). In the Year of Jubilee—which came after seven Sabbath years (49 years total)—any land that had been sold would return to its original owners ([Leviticus 25:8–22](#)). Through these commands, God promised blessing and fruitfulness in the land he had given Israel as an inheritance.

But keeping Sabbath had been a controversial topic for centuries by Jesus’ day. Israel’s prophets had spoken out against hypocritical Sabbath observance (examples: [Isaiah 1:13](#); [Amos 8:3–6](#)). Jeremiah had warned Jerusalem that failure to keep Sabbath would lead to destruction ([Jeremiah 17:27](#)). The prophets also looked forward to a day when Sabbath would be kept properly, when God’s blessing would be restored to the nation of Israel, and even other nations would join in worshiping God for his mighty acts ([Isaiah 66:22–23](#); [Jeremiah 17:24–26](#)).

The Pharisees of Jesus’ day responded by emphasizing meticulous observance of Sabbath. Their “oral Torah” (traditions passed down by word of mouth) had amplified regulations that prevented a person from even coming close to breaking the commandments. Such traditions defined what constituted “work” that could and could not be performed on the Sabbath.

I. Question of Lawfulness ([Matthew 12:1–2](#))

A. Hungry Disciples (v. 1)

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.

In the discourse immediately before this, Jesus told all who were tired to find “rest” in him ([Matthew 11:28–30](#)). It meant that what Sabbath promised, Jesus offered in abundance. So, it is no surprise that immediately after this promise of abundance, Matthew recorded a controversy about Sabbath.

Travel on the day of rest was itself controversial, since an extended journey is incompatible with a day of rest. [Acts 1:12](#) mentions “a Sabbath day’s walk,” which means the distance the rabbis considered permissible to travel on a Sabbath. It was an imprecise measurement, approximately the distance a person would walk to synagogue, about a kilometer.

The word *grain* is a general word, perhaps meaning barley or wheat. These crops were staple foods for anyone who consumed a Mediterranean diet of the era.

According to the Law of Moses, one could satisfy hunger while traveling by plucking fruit or grain from nearby fields ([Deuteronomy 23:24–25](#)). It was not stealing, for this was part of the Law’s expectation to show generosity. Thus, it was perfectly acceptable to eat from the land while traveling. But the fact that this happened *on the Sabbath* sparked a controversy.

B. Offended Teachers (v. 2)

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

The Pharisees viewed plucking grain as work since it involved forms of harvesting, threshing, and winnowing. Even miniature forms of these were “work.” So, in the view of Pharisees who observed this behavior, Christ’s disciples were violating the Law in multiple ways. The Pharisees were making what seemed like a valid point: did Jesus really intend to ignore the command of God to “remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy” ([Exodus 20:8](#))? Instead of eating, why didn’t Jesus’ disciples fast?

The Pharisees did not denounce the disciples directly. They took up their complaint with Jesus, which displays their real concern. Beginning in [Matthew 9:1–7](#), Jesus had done controversial things in the sight of religious teachers: forgiving sins and calling himself “the Son of Man.” These teachers were less interested in religious principles than in undermining Jesus and his popularity with crowds because Jesus represented a threat to their religious authority ([John 11:48](#)).



Visual for [Lesson 7](#). *Display this visual and allow one minute of private reflection for learners to consider the question.*

As these Pharisees framed the issue, there could be no debate whether the small actions of the disciples counted as work. They did not

ask questions; they started with an accusation. The Pharisees assumed the rightness of their own interpretations and ignored the issue of the disciples' hunger. They also assumed Jesus was responsible for whatever his followers were doing. If these disciples worked on the Sabbath, the observers believed that Jesus gave permission. Therefore, they point out an apparent affront against Israel's God and his commandments. Just who does this Jesus think that he is?

II. What Is Greater?

([Matthew 12:3–8](#))

A. Than David (vv. 3–4)

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

Jesus did not debate the nature of work or the intention of Sabbath rest. Jesus responded as a Jewish rabbi might be expected to respond by drawing a comparison from Scripture. Jesus' audience would not have missed that he was comparing his and his disciples' actions to *what David did when he and his companions were hungry*.

By drawing a comparison with David, Jesus not-so-subtly hinted that he possessed a kingly prerogative. This continues a central theme Matthew did not want his audience to miss: Jesus is the rightful Davidic king. The very first verse of Matthew's Gospel calls Jesus “the Messiah the son of David” ([Matthew 1:1](#)); Matthew's genealogy takes special interest in connecting Jesus to David ([1:17, 20](#)); other people called Jesus the “Son of David” ([9:27](#)); and here in [Matthew 12](#), Jesus compared himself to King David to explain his actions.

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.

In the narrative of [1 Samuel 21:1–6](#), David and his men sought food from the priest Ahimelek. At the time, the only bread in the tabernacle was the bread in the Holy Place (*consecrated bread*), which the Law allowed priests to eat but no one else (see [Leviticus 24:8–9](#)). Still, Ahimelek recognized David as God’s anointed king, and he nonetheless gave David and his men the bread. It is a story about a king and his men in desperate need.

Jesus did not say that extreme hunger is an exception that allows breaking ceremonial rules. In fact, Jesus taught that violating a single command of God made a person “least in the kingdom of heaven” ([Matthew 5:19](#)). And unlike David’s men, Jesus’ disciples were not on the run from enemies.

However, the statement in this verse implies a comparison from David (a lesser example) to Jesus (a greater example). Ahimelek acted in mercy, but more importantly, he recognized the authority of a king, one whom God’s prophet had anointed. Jesus was also a king, a greater one. If it were right for King David to eat *consecrated bread*, it would be even more acceptable for Jesus’ followers to eat “bread” that God had provided them, for they were crucial people of the Messiah’s mission. They should be granted at least as much leeway as David’s men were!

What Do You Think?

How can the practice of asking questions be an effective tool for strengthening the spiritual walk of another person?

Digging Deeper

What resources and training will you seek to help you ask effective questions?

Sleeping In

My children worked hard in high school and always wanted to do their best in classes and activities. All three were in marching band, so their schedules were busy during that season. They had two hours of practice every morning and at least two evening practices each week. Many Fridays, they stayed out late performing at football games. On Saturdays, they attended band competitions, which lasted late into the night. They did all this in addition to schoolwork. Needless to say, they often felt tired.

Some mornings, they struggled to get up for practice and felt exhausted as the day progressed. As a mom, my heart went out to them. I encouraged them to stay home to take a day off to rest. Even though their commitments were important, physical and mental health was not something I would disregard. And as their parent, it was my call to make.

Jesus was the one with authority in the situation in [Matthew 12](#), although that's precisely what bothered his opponents. Jesus could call the shots and prioritize the physical needs of his disciples. Have you had an occasion when God has asked you to prioritize your mental and physical health? Do you listen to the voice of your King when he tells you to show yourself mercy?

—L. M. W.

B. Than the Temple (vv. 5–6)

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 provided a second scriptural argument. Once again, he did not say there are exceptions to the rules about rest on the Sabbath, nor did

he minimize his disciples' actions. Instead, he made a claim about his own authority and identity.

For ordinary Jews, work stopped on the Sabbath. But what about priests? By necessity, their duties continued. The temple had tasks that needed tending every day, like daily offerings and changing the bread of the presence ([Numbers 28:1–8](#)). Thus, priests carried out their duties in the sacred space on every Sabbath day. That is what Jesus meant when he said they *desecrate the Sabbath*. Neither the Law of Moses nor the Pharisees' regulations forbade this. That is why these priests were *innocent*. However, skeptics might wonder why any of this is relevant to what Jesus and his followers were allowed to do. Jesus did not claim to be a Levitical priest, and the disciples were not performing sacrifices. So Jesus continued.

What Do You Think?

How will you support ministry leaders whose work consists of serving others on days of worship?

Digging Deeper

How will you ensure that you are continually praying for these individuals?

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

Jesus had compared himself to David indirectly. Here, he compared himself to *the temple* directly, showing precisely the point he was making. If Jesus claimed to be greater than the temple, that meant he was greater than the location where God's people honored his holy presence.

For one thing, a temple that lasted forever was supposed to be built by a promised Son of David ([2 Samuel 7:13](#)). Jesus accepted his title as David's greater Son (see comments on [Matthew 12:3](#), above). Further-

more, Jesus claimed to fulfill the function of the temple. The temple mediated the presence of God, and the priestly sacrifices for sin were meant to cover God's people: "The priest will make atonement for them for the sin they have committed, and they will be forgiven" ([Leviticus 4:35](#)). But Jesus offered forgiveness of sins without needing a temple of stone and wood. He could only do this with the authority of God ([Matthew 9:1–8](#)). Later, when Jesus observed Passover with his disciples, he used bread and wine as images of a new covenant with God's people ([26:26–29](#); compare [Jeremiah 31:31–34](#)). Thus what the temple was intended to do, Jesus fulfilled in and through himself.

These words did nothing to quell the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees. The Pharisees objected to Jesus' Sabbath practice, but their real objection was to him. But his responses made even greater claims of authority! He portrayed himself as a king on a mission, and he portrayed his disciples as priests who serve in the presence of a greater temple.

C. Than Sacrifice (v. 7)

7. "If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent.

Jesus turned his attention to a related issue arising from the Pharisees' criticism. [Hosea 6:6](#) says, "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings." Offerings, the sacrifices that God himself instituted in the Law of Moses, could be rejected when they were given hypocritically—meaning when a person was otherwise being unmerciful toward others. God redeemed his people through an act of mercy, and this fact could not be ignored in a setting of worship.

The prophet Hosea understood mercy, for God had called him to

marry a sexually immoral woman ([Hosea 1:2](#)). Hosea's wife abandoned him, but God called him to find her again, to pay the price of her freedom, and to take her back as his wife ([3:1–2](#)). Hosea's marriage became a dramatic sign of the kind of merciful, gracious love God shows for wayward people. It anticipated the way that God would give Jesus to save people from the enslaving powers of sin ([Romans 6:18](#)).

Therefore, to live without mercy is the greatest affront to God (see also the parable in [Matthew 18:21–35](#)). Even worse, Jesus said the Pharisees had *condemned the innocent*. The disciples had not done anything wrong in the first place, and yet still they were accused.

Jesus' opponents had lost sight of God's mercy, trusting in their own rigor to keep the Law and to receive God's blessing. Even when Jesus, the very image of God's mercy, stood before them, they could not see past their own judgments. They were blind to the glory of the King.

What Do You Think?

What would it look like for you to show “mercy, not sacrifice” in the upcoming week?

Digging Deeper

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

D. Summary (v. 8)

8. “For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”

The story ends with a memorable saying, which is both a summary and a climax. Instead of saying “I,” Jesus calls himself *the Son of Man*. This title had a complex history. A figure called “one like a son of man” is mentioned in the vision of [Daniel 7:13](#). The figure from Daniel is myste-

rious: someone to whom God gives “authority, glory and sovereign power” ([Daniel 7:14](#)). Scholars disagree about how much this phrase was used as a title in Jesus’ day. It could be that some people associated the title Son of Man with political and military power. Alternatively, Jesus might have adopted the term to “fly under the radar” and present himself as a different kind of ruler.

Elsewhere, Jesus claims that the Son of Man possesses authority. Jesus had shown that the Son of Man had the authority to forgive sins, something God alone can do ([Matthew 9:1–8](#)). Jesus had also used the title to speak of himself as a lowly figure: “The Son of Man has no place to lay his head” ([8:20](#)). Here, Jesus claimed that he, as the Son of Man, could be the one to establish the meaning of faithful observance of Sabbath. Since the Jewish people understood Sabbath as God’s gift to them, claiming authority over Sabbath was bold. It would mean that Jesus was responsible for creation, which was the reason why God had the right to give Sabbath in the first place.

Additionally, the term *Lord* could be applied to any figure of authority, but it was frequently used to translate the divine name of God from Hebrew into Greek. To claim to be *Lord of the Sabbath* left little room for doubt: Jesus possessed authority belonging to God. Jesus will say more about this after Peter calls Jesus “the Messiah” ([Matthew 16:16](#)). He will speak of the Son of Man as one who shall be arrested, put to death, and rise from the grave ([17:22–23](#)). And one day, the Son of Man will return “in his Father’s glory with his angels” to bring just reward to God’s people ([16:27–28](#)).

What Do You Think?

What is the spiritual significance of the title “Son of Man”?

Digging Deeper

How would you explain this significance to someone new to faith in Jesus?

Authority Undercover

If you have not seen an episode of *Undercover Boss*, you are missing out! A typical episode follows a company's owner or CEO as he or she dons a disguise and enters the workforce as a low-level employee of the company. Sometimes, the boss is the one humbled and transformed by the experience. But in nearly every episode, workers are rewarded or punished according to their behavior (which the boss witnessed firsthand). Who doesn't love to see people get what they deserve, good or bad?

Imagine that an undercover owner arrived at work and parked in the "Manager Only" section. If the shift manager spotted this, would he or she try to set the employee straight? It would appear that the "new employee" was not obeying the rules. But if the company's owner revealed her identity, she might say, "It doesn't matter whether you think I broke the rules. I own the place."

That's not so different from what Jesus claimed by calling himself "Lord ... of the sabbath day." Whatever the rules might be, Jesus was the one with authority over them. Perhaps, like me, you've had times when you've gotten so concerned with rules that you've forgotten to ask what Jesus would say about it. How would Jesus respond if he went undercover in your life and examined your actions toward others?

—J. H.

Conclusion

A. Lordship Is the Issue

This story looks at first like it will show how to observe Sabbath: as a gift and not a burden. Instead, the story is about the one who fulfills what Sabbath promises. It is about his authority and the blessing he brings. Jesus is a King, greater than his ancestor David. Jesus' disciples were like priests because they served a person greater than the temple. And Jesus is the Son of Man, for he is the Creator and Redeemer. He is God, who gave Sabbath in the first place.

Regardless of our understanding of Sabbath observance, all Christians can affirm that Jesus is Lord—even Lord of the Sabbath. Today's text challenges readers to acknowledge Jesus' authority. As King, he is able to provide good things: forgiveness, rest, and an eternal kingdom. The Lord of the Sabbath has given himself freely for our sakes, and we are responsible for showing mercy. If you want to honor the one with authority over Sabbath, start there.

What Do You Think?

What steps must you take to acknowledge and accept Jesus' authority as Lord and King?

Digging Deeper

How can you share this message with an unbelieving friend or neighbor in a culturally sensitive way?

B. Prayer

Lord Jesus, in you we see the power of God. Help us to find our rest in

you. As you have shown us forgiveness and mercy, help us to offer mercy to others. Remind us that we are your disciples on a holy mission with you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Jesus gives his people true rest.

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

Begin class by asking volunteers to share humorous examples of a time when their words or actions were misunderstood by others. Then, ask volunteers to share about a time when they felt misunderstood and criticized, even when they believed they were doing the right thing. Ask, “Why do you think it’s easier to criticize others rather than show mercy?”

Lead into Bible study by saying, “Just like some of us may have faced criticism, Jesus and his disciples faced criticism for their actions. In today’s lesson, we will delve into one such situation and see how Jesus responded.”

Into the Word

Say, “As we look at today’s Scripture passage, we will approach it like journalists, seeking answers to the essential five ‘W’ questions: ‘Who,’ ‘What,’ ‘When,’ ‘Where,’ and ‘Why.’” Divide the learners into three groups: **Character & Context (C&C) Group**, **Timeline Trailblazers (T&T) Group**, and **Purpose Pursuers (P&P) Group**.

Distribute a pen and a printed copy of [Matthew 12:1–8](#) to each learner. Encourage learners to take notes directly on the printed copy of Scripture as needed. Instruct the **C&C Group** to underline any words and phrases in the text that could address the “Who?” and “What?” questions of the passage. Ask the **T&T Group** to underline words and phrases that could address “When?” and “Where?” questions. Finally, direct the **P&P Group** to underline words and phrases that could address the “Why?” question.

After five minutes of in-group work, reconvene the class. Ask the groups the assigned questions below. Answers are based on the results of the previous activity.

C&C Group: 1—Who was going through the fields on the Sabbath? 2—Who voiced an objection? 3—What was their objection? 4—In the story Jesus recounted, who entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread? 5—What did David and his companions do that was unlawful?

T&T Group: 1—On what day of the week did the events of this Scripture text take place? 2—Where were Jesus’ disciples when they picked and ate the heads of grain? 3—When did David and his companions eat the grain? 4—Where did David and his companions eat the consecrated bread?

P&P Group: 1—Why did the disciples pick the heads of grain? 2—Why did the Pharisees criticize Jesus’ disciples? 3—Why did Jesus

mention the story of David? 4—Why did Jesus say that one “greater than the temple” was present? 5—Why does Jesus quote [Hosea 6:6](#)?

Alternative. Distribute the “Missing Word” activity from the activity page, which you can download. Have learners work in pairs to complete as indicated.

As a whole class, talk about the challenge of the Pharisee’s basis of concern versus what Jesus told them about His authority over the Sabbath.

Into Life

Ask learners to consider times when they could have demonstrated abundant mercy to another person but did not. Direct learners to work with a partner to answer the question: “How can believers approach situations with compassion and mercy?”

Distribute index cards to each learner. Challenge them to make a plan to follow Jesus’ example and show abundant mercy in a place or time it would not be expected. After one minute, direct learners to share their plan with a partner. Encourage learners to place the index card in a location where they will see it throughout the week.

Option. Distribute copies of the “Lord of the Sabbath” exercise from the activity page. Have learners complete it as a take-home activity.

End class with a prayer, asking the Lord for guidance and wisdom to show abundant mercy in the week ahead.

To print the reproducible activity page, simply click the highlighted text below to create a pdf file on your hard drive. Then open the pdf file in

Acrobat Reader and print.
Activity Page (July 13—Lord of the Sabbath)
