

SERMON NOTES

Sunday, June 1

Synaxis Gospel
Matthew 12:1-8

LORD OF THE SABBATH, GOD OF COMPASSION

INTRODUCTION

The three Gospel writers who record the event¹ in our reading do not specify where Jesus was ministering at the time. It must have occurred on a Sabbath sometime between April and August when the grain ripens. The importance was not the setting, but the startling teaching for those accustomed to accepting the Pharisaic pronouncements on the Law.

SYNAXIS READING

Matthew 12:1-8

At that time Jesus went on the Sabbath through the grain fields, and His disciples became hungry and began to pick the heads of grain and eat.

But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, "Behold, Your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath."

But He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he became hungry, he and his companions; how he entered the house of God, and they ate the consecrated bread, which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those with him, but for the priests alone?"

Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath, and are innocent? But I say to you, that something greater than the temple is here.

But if you had known what this means, 'I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT A SACRIFICE,' you would not have condemned the innocent.

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

¹ Parallel passages to Matthew 12:1-8 are Mark 2:23-28 and Luke 6:1-5.

NOTES

At that time Jesus went on the Sabbath through the grain fields,

The grain was probably wheat, so the event occurred during late spring or summer.

The important notice of all three Gospels is the day of the week:

Mark: “And it came about that . . . on the Sabbath,”

Luke: “Now it came about that on a certain Sabbath . . .”

and His disciples became hungry and began to pick the heads of grain and eat.

Although the grain fields were privately owned, the Law allowed others to eat from the produce as long as they did not reap it with a sickle.² Thus, the poor could always find something to eat during harvest seasons.

Matthew does not tell us that the disciples also were rubbing the heads of grain in their hands. Luke mentions this detail in his account of the story. The Pharisees would call this a kind of reaping which the interpreters of the Law had disallowed as a Sabbath activity. Matthew simply stresses the need of the disciples to eat.

But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, “Behold, Your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath.”

It was not “lawful” according to the Pharisees. This accusation would have been intimidating to the disciples for the Pharisees were the legal experts of the time. They interpreted the Law of God for every possible situation. Many of them were members of the Sanhedrin, the group of rulers who sat as judges for the people. The points of Law were decided by this circle of judges and rabbis.

The disciples needed an attorney! They had the best in Jesus for He is the Word of God, the Giver of the Law. He knew the intent of the Law for He gave it to Moses. Therefore, Jesus was also able to out reason the best of the Rabbis.

He began the defense with a precedent from Scripture which could not be denied.

But He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he became hungry, he and his companions; how he entered the house of God, and they ate the consecrated bread,

Jesus argued that hunger created an exemption from the Law of the Sabbath because it created an exemption from the Law regulating the consumption of the Temple Shewbread.

The precedence He gave for the actions of the disciples was one that the Pharisees knew well. The case that Jesus cited was an incident that involved the great King David before he was crowned. David had been chosen to be the next king by God but the king then on the throne was Saul who was bent on killing David. During his flight from the clutches of Saul, David stopped at the Tabernacle of God that was then located in the village of Nob. Being hungry, David asked the priest for bread for himself and his companions. The only bread that the priest had on hand was the Shewbread, the twelve loaves of Holy Bread that was set before the LORD in the Tabernacle. Since it was to be replaced with freshly baked bread that day, he gave the old loaves to David.³

² Deuteronomy 25:23

³ 1 Samuel 21:1-6

which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those with him, but for the priests alone?

The Law specified that the twelve loaves of bread were “the holy of holies” of the sacrifices offered by fire to the LORD.⁴ They were to be eaten in a holy place by “Aaron and his sons” (the first High Priest and the priests who were descended from him).⁵

After determining that David and his companions were not ritually defiled, this son of the High Priest in authority over the Tabernacle made the decision that in this case of need, the Law would not be broken. The Pharisees of Jesus’ day could not argue with that clear precedent. Jesus’ point was that if the rule given by God, Himself, regarding the “holiest of holy” of the LORD’s sacrifices was not broken in the case of hunger, then the lesser interpretations and definitions of the Sabbath law made by the Pharisees were likewise not broken by the disciples who acted from hunger.

Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath, and are innocent?

It was the job of the priests to continually offer sacrifices in the Temple. There was a lot of strenuous work involved in the killing and preparation of those sacrifices. Yet the Sabbath Law was not broken by them for they were obeying another Law that superseded the Law of the Sabbath.⁶ Their work on the Sabbath was for the Temple service. And therefore, though not stated, it was understood that this work was not meant when all work was forbidden on Sabbaths.

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

Jesus then argues from the lesser example to the greater example. Those who served God in the Temple were exempt from the charge of breaking the Sabbath. Therefore those who served Him should be exempt even more so. Those who served our Lord served One in Whose body lived God in reality, not just symbolically as in the Temple of Jerusalem. This statement must have stunned the Pharisees.

But if you had known what this means, ‘I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT A SACRIFICE,’ you would not have condemned the innocent.

Jesus then turned to make His own charge against the Pharisees, the so-called experts in the Law of God: they have been unjust judges and they had condemned the innocent. Why? Because, they did not really understand God and His desires.

Jesus quoted a passage from the prophet Hosea,⁷ who had charged the priests and rulers of the Israelites with abandoning the LORD and of corrupting justice. As in Jesus’ day, the priests and

⁴ It is interesting to reflect on what this “holiest of holy” of the LORD’s sacrifices, these 12 loaves of bread set before God, *might* have symbolized. Could it have symbolized the people of God called out of the nations to serve Him? David gave them to his companions to eat and David’s great descendant gave bread to His disciples to eat, saying, “Take, eat, this is My Body . . .” Christ’s death the following day was indeed the holiest of holies of the LORD’s sacrifices. Those who serve Him today are identified as the Body of Christ. See 1 Corinthians 12.

⁵ Leviticus 24:5-9.

⁶ See Numbers 28 for all that was involved.

⁷ Hosea 6:6

rulers of Hosea's day had aligned themselves against the prophets of the LORD which He had sent to call them back to Himself.⁸

The rituals of their worship without a proper relationship with the LORD were therefore meaningless to Him. Rituals are only meaningful if they symbolize the actual fulfillment of God's desire: loyalty (to God) in lovingkindness. This is the meaning of the Hebrew term *חַסְדִּים* in the quotation from Hosea translated as 'compassion.'

Jesus' point to the Pharisees is that they, like the people Hosea addressed, do not understand the desire of God. The Laws of God to be truly kept must be understood as laws built on His lovingkindness as an expression of His loyalty to His people. Lovingkindness is implied in every part of the Law. They can never keep the Law if it is divorced from 'compassion.'

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

The Pharisees were focused on keeping the Law of the Sabbath, yet they did not even recognize the One Who gave it for the benefit of mankind. The One in their midst, the Son of Man, the Divine Ruler sent from God, the One Who would judge justly all people, stood before them. He is the master of the Sabbath and its Law.

APPLICATION

Jesus taught us, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.”⁹ His greatest commandments are that we should love God with all our being and that we should love each other even more than we love ourselves; we should love each other as He loved us, sacrificially, always putting the others before ourselves.

It seems that this teaching is clear enough, but it is so very difficult to obey. Therefore, we try to find a substitute that we think will please God. Perhaps we look for moral rules to follow, preferably from the Bible, such as don't lie, don't steal, don't murder etc. Sometimes churches are helpful and provide rules, like the fasting rules and the rules about who can stand at the altar and the rule that women must cover their heads for communion—those kinds of things. Things that are well and good but don't require us to love in the way Jesus meant.

The Pharisees of our reading liked laws; in fact they were experts in the Law of God. They liked laws so much that they created thousands of laws to apply the Law of God to every circumstance that might occur. It was called “putting a fence around the Torah (Law).” They made sure that the Law was protected by all their sometimes nit-picky regulations. The trouble was: these experts didn't really understand the Law's purpose and they created a great burden for the people, especially with their interpretation of the Sabbath Law.

⁸ Hosea goes on to charge, speaking for the LORD: “But they like Adam have transgressed the covenant: there they have dealt treacherously against Me. Gilead is a city of them that work iniquity; it is stained with blood. And as troops of robbers wait for a man, so the company of priests murder in the way to Shechem; yes, they have committed lewdness. In the house of Israel I have seen a horrible thing; there whoredom is found in Ephraim, Israel is defiled. Hosea 6:7-10

⁹ John 14:15

Today, we read that the Pharisees accused Jesus' disciples of breaking the Law. The disciples had picked and eaten a bit of grain as they walked through the fields. There was nothing illegal about that, God's Law provided that anyone could eat grain in the fields. The illegality, according to the Pharisees, was that the disciples did this on the Sabbath day.

Now the Law of God said nothing about picking grain to eat from the fields on the Sabbath. The Law of the Sabbath was that no work should be done on the Sabbath in order that people should have a day of rest. But the Pharisees, to protect that Law, made it illegal to do what the disciples had done. Picking and eating a few bites of grain was interpreted as 'reaping,' "one of the thirty-nine kinds of work forbidden on the Sabbath in the Talmud."¹⁰ The Pharisees had totally missed the point of the Sabbath Law, that is, that people need rest and, on one day in the week, they should have it. The Law was made for the benefit of people not simply to be a burdensome rule.

In His defense of the disciples, Jesus pointed out that the Law of God, even concerning the most holy things, implied exceptions to the rule in the face of human need or in the case of service to God. That is true because God's Laws are for the benefit of the people. They exist because of His love for us. They were never meant to cause human suffering or extend human suffering. Jesus healed people on the Sabbath—granted it was work—because not to do so would have extended suffering for another day. Moreover He healed in the service of God.

The Pharisees did not understand because they did not know and understand God and His ways of compassion. They had substituted their Law in place of knowing Him. They enjoyed being 'holier than thou' and pointing their critical finger at others who could not keep up with all the minutiae of their religious laws. They were quite satisfied with themselves until Jesus came and pricked their bubble.

The Pharisees were no match for Jesus' knowledge and ability to handle the Scriptures. He exposed them for what they were, religious hypocrites, who had no relationship with God, the very God they claimed to serve. They had let 'sacrifice,' a term Jesus used here for their temple rituals, replace a true knowledge of and love for God. How they hated Jesus for that accusation! They did not realize that, even then, He had compassion upon them. While they were planning to kill Him,¹¹ He was planning to die for them, in their place, for their sins, so that they might have a way back to God.

Though they were His deadly enemies, Jesus had compassion on the rule making Pharisees. As Lord of the Sabbath, He did not abolish the Sabbath or the rules they had made to protect it, He simply called them to apply them with what was more important, compassion. Christians need to do the same with our own rules and worship rituals, what

¹⁰ Willoughby C. Allen, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1965) p. 126.

¹¹ In the next event recorded by all three Gospel writers, possibly occurring on that very day, Jesus healed a man; and, for that, they began plotting how they might kill Him.

Jesus would have termed our 'sacrifice.' These should enhance and never bar us from compassion and love for one another.

Sadly, this is not always the case. Once in an Armenian church, a priest fell while performing the Liturgy; he was stricken with a burst aneurism in his brain. A nurse was standing in the congregation near the front and she immediately rushed to the priest's aid. The priest was taken to the hospital, and, thanks to God and her quick action, he lived to sing again. However, the nurse had broken one of the church laws regarding the altar. She was harshly criticized for what she had done. But the nurse understood what the Lord meant when He said "I desire compassion and not a sacrifice." A rule bends for compassion in the face of human need.

Spiritual needs bend the rules as well. In Jesus' day, the Sabbath Law, which commanded that no work was allowed on that day, was superseded by the need for the priests to meet the spiritual needs of the people. The priests served God and worked hard at it especially on the Sabbath. God commanded the priests to do this out of His compassion for the spiritual needs of the people. In our own day, we need to have compassion in the face of spiritual need as well. But in the Christian world, there is a glaring example of our failure in this respect, and that with the holiest of our rituals.

Many (though not all) Christian denominations, both Orthodox and Protestant, have rules regarding Communion; it is closed to outsiders. Although we Armenians are orthodox in our confession, many of the other orthodox churches do not allow us to take communion with them. It is against their rule. Once a young boy, while traveling far from home with his mother on a Sunday, stopped in the first Christian church they could find to pray and worship. During the communion service, the boy looked expectantly at his mother. She whispered, "We are not members of this denomination, we are not allowed to take communion." But he could not accept this and approached the altar with the others. For some reason, the priest looked at the boy and asked, "Are you a member of this church?" The boy replied, "I believe in Jesus Christ, He is my Savior." Immediately, the priest gave the boy communion. For that priest, the boy's confession made him exempt from the law of the denomination. That priest understood, "I desire compassion and not sacrifice."

This lesson is not for the lackadaisical. It is not for those who float through life without a thought for the responsibility we have to God. No, this lesson is for those of us who work hard at keeping the rules. The lesson for us is that obeying the rules is meaningless without love. In fact, without love, anything we try to do for God is meaningless. Love for God, loyal devotion to Him, and compassionate love for others is what He demands from us. He is pleased with nothing less. Let us therefore ask Him to help us do what we cannot do, and surely He will, for He is not only the Lord of the Sabbath, He is also the God of all compassion.