

Matthew 12:1-8: Situation Ethics?

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“At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck the heads of grain and to eat. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, ‘Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!’” (Matt. 12:1-2).

Some misuse this context. They start with the mistaken assumption that the Pharisees were technically correct. However, Jesus went on to defend His disciples. Therefore, they conclude that in some situations one is justified in setting aside God’s law.

Let us point out that Jesus earlier experienced intense hunger, yet He refused to set aside God’s word in order to satisfy His hunger (cf. Matt. 4:1-4). Who can believe that He approved of His disciples setting aside God’s law in order to satisfy their hunger?

The disciples had not violated the law by plucking grain. (a) This was not a violation of the Sabbath (cf. Exod. 12:16). It is true that most work was to cease on the Sabbath (Exod. 20:8-11 cf. Exod. 34:21; 35:2-3; Num. 13:32-36; Neh. 13:15-22; Jer. 17:21-22). However, they did not violate the Sabbath. (b) Moreover, this was not theft, as some have thought (cf. Deut. 23:24-25; Lev. 19:9-10).

It was a violation of the Pharisees’ rules and perverted interpretation of the law. They developed a long list of things that could not be done on the Sabbath. For example: one was not to look in a mirror on the Sabbath, because this might tempt one to pluck out a gray hair. Notice how Jesus deals with their objection in six points.

Point One

“Have you not read what David did when he was hungry... how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat...” (Matt. 12:3-4).

The Jews highly esteemed David. They did not condemn him for what He did in 1 Samuel 21:1-6 (cf. Exod. 29:33; Lev. 24:5-9). Where was the outrage? Why the inconsistency? Was this really about the law? Or, was this about their hatred of Jesus?

Point Two

“Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless?” (Matt. 12:5).

Not all work stopped on the Sabbath. Burnt offerings were made (Num. 28:9-10). The showbread was prepared (1 Chron. 9:32 cf. Lev. 24:5-9). Circumcisions were performed (John. 7:22-23). These facts establish that God never intended for everything to cease on the Sabbath.

Point Three

“...in this place is one greater than the temple” (Matt. 12:6).

They had no idea who stood before them. “If He could instruct priests to carry on temple service on the Sabbath, He surely knew whether His disciples were authorized to eat on the Sabbath (in harmony with the law)¹” (Miller, *Piloting the Strait* p. 411).

Point Four

“But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless” (Matt. 12:7).

Jesus twice referred the Pharisees to Hosea 6:6 (cf. Matt 9:13; 12:7). God emphasized mercy over sacrifice. Ritualistic sacrifice, without love for one’s fellow-man, did not impress God (cf. Prov. 15:8; 21:3; 21:27; Isa. 59:1-2; Mal. 2:11-14). The Pharisees had a heart problem. They typically had little compassion and love for others.

Consider this: While they allowed one to care for his animal on the Sabbath (cf. Luke. 13:15; 14:5-6), they objected to the disciples plucking grain to eat on the Sabbath. They cared more for their animals than they did for their fellow-man.

Let us make application to the church assembly. Think of the man who missed because he was taking someone to the emergency room. Think of the mother who stayed home to take care of an ill child. Mercy has precedence over sacrifice. This is not setting aside God’s law. This is God’s law.

Point Five

“The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath” (Mark. 2:27).

One of the purposes of the Sabbath was to provide a day of rest (Deut. 5:14). It was not designed to be difficult on man. “Since it was intended for his good, therefore, the law respecting it must not be interpreted so as to oppose his real welfare” (C.E. Dorris, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to Mark*, p. 68).

Point Six

“For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (Matt. 12:8).

Jesus has provided the proper understanding of the intent of the Sabbath law. He was Lord of the Sabbath (cf. Heb. 3:1-3).

May we each remember – that while there may be many different interpretations of a Bible passage or subject – there is only one which should ultimately concern us, His. May we each be about the business of discerning His will.

¹ Dave Miller, *Piloting the Strait* (Pulaski, TN: Sain Publications, 1996), p. 411