

The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday, 19 May 2024. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced and see the context for yourself. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.

The Lord of the Sabbath

Matthew 12:1-13

In 1889, a Scottish pastor named **James Paton** published a book called *The Story of John G. Paton*. It was a biography of the life of his brother, **John Paton**—the man who took the Gospel to the New Hebrides Islands of the South Pacific. Paton had a tremendous love for the Lord, and zeal for the Gospel. During his years of missionary service (which spanned nearly five decades) thousands of souls in those islands turned from the darkness of spiritism and cannibalism to the light of Jesus Christ.

Now, anyone who has studied the life of John Paton knows that he had a profound love for the Lord's Day. He was extremely careful not to violate the Lord's Day by doing any unnecessary work. However, for Paton, the Lord's Day (which he called "the Sabbath") was not a straitjacket, or a rigid list of "do's" and "don'ts": to him, the Sabbath was a joy and a blessing. In his book, James Paton gave this little glimpse of how Sundays were spent in his parents' home, after they had returned from church:

"We had, too, special Bible Readings on the Lord's Day evening,—mother and children and visitors reading in turns, with fresh and interesting question, answer, and exposition, all tending to impress us with the infinite grace of a God of love and mercy in the great gift of His dear Son Jesus, our Saviour. .. None of us has ever once even dreamed of wishing that we had been otherwise trained...."

Oh, I can remember those happy Sabbath evenings... a holy, happy, entirely human day, for a Christian father, mother, and children to spend... There were eleven of us brought up in a home like that; and never one of the eleven, boy or girl, man or woman, has been heard, or ever will be heard, saying that Sabbath was dull and wearisome for us, or suggesting that we have heard of... any way more likely... for making the Day of the Lord bright and blessed."¹

I can resonate with what James said about the Lord's Day. To my parents, Sunday wasn't merely *called* "the Lord's Day"; it really *was* the Lord's Day! It was all about Him, because it really is His day. Though we got up early and went to Sunday School, Worship Hour, and Sunday Evening services (with forty minutes of choir practice before the evening service), I never once, from the day of my salvation, thought of it as a "chore." We often went to nursing homes on Sunday afternoons, as well, and preached to the elderly folks, and sang hymns, and shared the Gospel with them. We then went home to eat and take a nap, and returned to church for the evening service. Yet, we never got tired of it. Though there was some service to be done for the Lord on His day, it was a restful kind of service—not just because we

took a nap in the afternoon, but because everything we did that day (whether singing hymns, or listening to preaching, or fellowshiping with believers) was a labour of *love* for the Lord. It was all about *Him*, because He is the Lord of Sabbath. That is what we will be talking about this morning, as we examine yet another proof that Jesus is the King of Israel. The title of this message is ***The Lord of the Sabbath.***

Read Matthew 12:1-8.

I. The Lord of Sabbath (vv. 1-8)

In **chapter 11**, Jesus made a wonderful offer to anyone with ears to hear. He had invited all who were weary and heavy laden to come unto Him and rest. What kind of rest was He speaking of? Was it *physical* rest? In part, yes. Physical rest *is* available for those who are saved. Because of Christ's cleansing blood, a saved man (or woman) is able to have a clean conscience, which is purged from guilt. He also is not overcome with fear about tomorrow, because He knows that God is in control, and is guiding his steps. That is why David wrote, ***"The LORD hath set apart him that is godly for himself: the LORD will hear when I call unto him...I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep: for thou, LORD, only makest me dwell in safety."*** Though there are seasons of deep distress and grief for Christians, on account of living in a fallen world, a child of God does not *have* to stay up all night with panic attacks, because he can rest sweetly in the peace of mind that Jesus gives. You see, *physical* and *mental* rest are simply by-products of a far more important rest: and that is *spiritual* rest. Jesus offers us rest to our *souls*, by freeing us from the bondage of sin, guilt, and shame, and from the impossible task of trying to *earn* our way to Heaven by keeping the Law. Christ provided a perfect salvation for us on the cross, so that we might cease from trying to earn salvation by our good works, and simply *rest* in Him. The Hebrew word for "rest" is *shabbat*—the word from which we get our word "Sabbath." Jesus *is* our "Sabbath Rest."

With this in mind, let's read **Matthew 12:1** again. (**Read Matthew 12:1.**) You'll notice that it was ***"at that time"*** (in other words, around the same time when Jesus offered the people "rest"), that this incident in the wheat field happened. Was it a coincidence that these two events happened back-to-back? No, it wasn't! Here was Jesus, *just after* He had offered the people rest, being accused of violating God's rest day. The irony is obvious! Matthew says that as soon as Jesus and the disciples ***"began"*** to pluck the ears of corn and eat them, the Pharisees pounced on them, and accused them. The Pharisees were always ready and waiting to discover any supposed fault in Jesus and His disciples.

Here, then, is the million-euro question: ***"Did Jesus really violate the Sabbath?"*** As Christians, we need to be able to answer that question, because to this very day, most Jewish rabbis *still* accuse Jesus of breaking the Sabbath by rubbing those wheat kernels. *Did Jesus break the Law, or didn't He?* Well, it depends on which law you're talking about. If you're talking

about the *scribes' and Pharisees'* laws, then, yes, Jesus broke the law. However, if you're talking about *God's Law*, which He gave to Moses, then the answer is "no." There was *nothing* in the Law of Moses that prohibited people from plucking a few raw ears of grain and eating them on the Sabbath day. Doing a regular day's labour, or cooking a meal (which took hours, and was quite labourious), was clearly forbidden; but plucking a few raw ears of grain and eating it directly was not forbidden. The prohibition against plucking ears of wheat was not God's law, but was a tradition of the Pharisees. The rabbis, in their writings, *specifically* forbade the plucking of ears of grain on the Sabbath day! This was just one of countless prohibitions that they had dreamed up. The laws of the Pharisees were so voluminous, and contradictory to each other, that it was almost impossible for the man on the street to know whether he were breaking the Sabbath in some way, or not! That's precisely why Jesus encouraged His disciples to pluck those kernels. Jesus was purposely challenging the Pharisees about their laws, which they had put on the same level as Scripture.

Now, in a few moments, we'll take a close look at how Jesus responded to the Pharisees' accusation. First, though, let's clear up one matter, for those who may be wondering about it: Jesus and the disciples were *not stealing* when they plucked the wheat! In **Leviticus 23:22**, God had commanded landowners not to harvest the edges of their fields, but to leave some of it for the poor to gather. This was God's gracious way of providing for the poor, the widows, and the orphans. What does this tell us about Jesus, then? It shows us that He was poor! The very fact that Jesus and His disciples were eating grain from someone's field, and that no one (not even the Pharisees) accused them of stealing, or of abusing the Law, shows that they were considered to be *poor* men. When Christ came down into our world, He made himself materially poor, so that we might be made spiritually rich through His sacrifice on the cross for us. He was not ashamed to own poor men as His Apostles, either. *That* is how much the King of glory humbled Himself for us! *That* is how much He loves us!

There was no question about whether Jesus had the right to eat the grain that was set aside for the poor. The controversy was over whether He should be doing this on the Sabbath. However, the "controversy" was only in the minds of those who refused to believe what the Scriptures prophesied about Jesus. The Pharisees were armed with their own traditions: but Jesus was armed with God's Word. As we are about to see, Jesus gave three reasons, from Scripture, why He and His disciples had *not* broken the Sabbath.

First, Jesus cited **an event from the life of King David**. Let's read Jesus' answer again; and then, we'll read the Scripture to which Jesus was referring. **(Read Matthew 12:3-4 again.)**

Read 1 Samuel 21:1-6.

The unleavened bread that was baked for the priests was clearly forbidden for anyone outside the priest's families to eat. Yet, in this instance, God allowed David, a non-Levite, to eat this holy bread! (The Pharisees couldn't deny this, either. It was a fact of history!) Yet, why *did* God approve of David's eating the priests' bread? Was it because David was above the Law? No! It was because David was in a state of emergency! David and his men were in dire straits. For no fault of their own, they were literally running from a murderous enemy; and they had to have food. God could have miraculously enabled them to go *without* food for forty days, as He had done for Moses; but He didn't. Instead, He chose to make an *exception* to His Law. What, in other circumstances, would have been forbidden, was allowed in this rare instance, so that the life of God's servant David might be preserved.

Now, the Pharisees could not understand this concept, because their whole understanding of the purpose of the Sabbath was flawed. They failed to see that God gave the Law to *benefit* man, and not to punish him. The Law wasn't meant to be a burden for man to endure; it was meant to be *blessing*. The law concerning the Temple bread was meant for man's *good*. For one thing, it was good because it was a prophetic picture. Prophetically, it pointed to Christ as the Bread of Life, and to believers as priests, serving God day and night. However, this law was also good in a practical way because it provided a means of sustenance for the priests and their families. The priests were doing God's work; and as God's servants, they were worthy of their hire. Yet, in this instance, God allowed someone outside the priesthood to eat the bread, in order to bless His servant, David, who desperately needed fuel for his body. In **Mark chapter 2**, where this same event is recorded, Mark added one more thing that Jesus said about this. Jesus said, "*The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath.*"

Now, let's look at the next Old Testament truth that Jesus cited. Jesus also pointed out that **the priests in the Temple worked on every Sabbath day! (Read Matthew 12:5-6 again.)** Every single day of the year, the priests offered up sacrifices to God; and the Sabbath day was no exception. At the very least, they were to sacrifice a lamb every morning and evening (including on the Sabbath), and burn incense, and keep the Menorah lit, and eat shewbread; and when feast days fell on the Sabbath, they had to offer a strict regimen of animal sacrifices for that day. Also, if a newborn baby boy happened to be eight days old on a Sabbath day, the priests had to circumcise him. Jesus pointed out this very thing on another occasion. He said, "*If a man on the sabbath day receive circumcision, that the law of Moses should not be broken; are ye angry at me, because I have made a man every whit whole on the sabbath day?*" Circumcision is a surgery that requires considerable care and precision. It *is* real work, for which modern physicians are paid hundreds of euros! Yet, God allowed this particular type of work to be performed by the priests on the Sabbath in order to meet His requirements.

By the way, there *is* a direct application of this truth in this New Testament age! As a pastor, I work every Lord's Day. I preach, teach, lead services, collect people for church, give counsel to people, deal with problems, and pour myself into people all day long. This *is* work! Now, I

always make it a point to take a nap on Sunday afternoon, and to do nothing beyond my pastoral duties; yet, in order to keep the charge that God has given me, I must do certain kinds of work on His day. By the way, I'm not the only believer who should be doing certain kinds of work on the Lord's Day. The New Testament clearly teaches that *every* born-again child of God is a priest before God. This means that there is work for Christians to do for God on His Day—such as getting up early, getting their families ready, travelling to church, greeting visitors, setting up equipment, teaching Sunday School classes (for those who happen to be teachers), listening attentively to teaching and preaching, helping to count offerings, distributing food during fellowship time, helping to clean up afterward, preparing for the Lord's Supper, cleaning up after the Lord's Supper, conducting or participating in business meetings, leading congregational singing, leading a choir (or singing in the choir), singing congregationals, singing specials, ushering, playing a musical instrument, conducting baptisms, shoveling snow, or putting rock salt on the footpath, giving people rides, driving a bus or van (for churches that have these vehicles), and spending time in prayer as a congregation. (*Real prayer is labourious, because you are pouring out your soul to God!*)

Make no mistake about it, Christian: *you have labour to do for the Lord*, even on the Lord's Day. Just as it is real work for a student to sit up in class, pay close attention, take notes, and learn from his teacher or professor, so sitting in church, and listening intently to a lesson or sermon, is real work. God wants His children to be *serious* students of His Word! (As Brother Mick always says, "We're serious Baptists around here!") We who are redeemed by the blood of the Lamb are priests before God; and Jesus is the holy Bread of Life of whom we, as priests, partake. Jesus said, "***I am the bread of life***"; and the Apostle Peter says that we who are saved are "***an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.***" Do you see the spiritual parallel to the Old Testament priesthood in those words? In **Leviticus chapters 2 and 24**, we are told that the unleavened cakes were only for the priests and their families to eat; yet, we are also told in the book of **Leviticus** that a *servant* (a non-Levite) who was *bought* by a priest was permitted to eat the Temple bread, just as if he were a member of the priest's family. Well, guess what? We who are saved by faith in Christ have been *bought* by our High Priest, the Lord Jesus Christ; and as members of His priestly family, we are able to partake of the Bread of Life, through faith in Him!

Read Leviticus 22:10-13.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:22-23.

As we've just seen, David, when he ate the priestly bread, was a picture of **believers** who have been bought into the priestly family of Christ. On the other hand, David is also a type of **Christ Himself!** By bringing up this event from the life of David, Jesus was actually *comparing Himself to* King David! Just as David, God's anointed king, was in a state of rejection, and was forced to eat priestly bread, so Jesus, God's Anointed King, was in a state of

rejection, and was forced to pluck ears of corn on the Sabbath. You see, Jesus and His disciples didn't *always* have a place to stay, or food to eat. Jesus said that "***the Son of man hath not where to lay his head.***" Though He did feast at times (when He was *invited* into a home), He often went hungry, as well, and had to pluck a few measly ears of wheat just to get the fuel that He and His disciples needed to travel to the next city and preach. Yet, despite His earthly poverty and humiliation, His ministry was *greater* than the priestly ministry of the Old Testament Temple. The high priests of the Old Testament were mere men, and sinners; but Jesus was the sinless Son of God, and the Messiah. If it wasn't wrong for the *priests* to work in the Temple on the Sabbath day in order to do what God had required of them, how could it be wrong for the *true* High Priest, Jesus Christ, to rub a few kernels of grain together on the Sabbath day, and eat? Jesus' ministry is infinitely greater than the ministry of the Temple!

Now, there is one more Scripture that Jesus cited. Jesus also quoted from **Hosea 6:6**, in order to show that His accusers were *false* accusers. **(Read Matthew 12:6.)**

Read Hosea 6:6.

As you may remember, **Hosea 6:6** was the Scripture that Jesus quoted at Matthew's party. Remember when the Pharisees accused Jesus of eating with publicans and sinners at Matthew's party? On that occasion, Jesus quoted **Hosea 6:6** to show that God gives mercy to sinners who humble themselves, and repent. On *this* occasion, though, Jesus was making another application from **Hosea 6:6**. This time, Jesus was pointing out that God shows mercy to His people *physically*, by meeting their bodily needs. As the true High Priest of Israel, Jesus allowed *His* servants to eat raw kernels of wheat on the Sabbath day, so that they might have the strength to serve Him. The disciples had done no wrong; and if the Pharisees had not been spiritually blind, they would have realised this. Basically, Jesus was saying, "If you Pharisees truly understood your need of God's mercy, you would receive God's revelation concerning *Me*. You would acknowledge *me* as your King and Saviour; and you would ask *me* for mercy and salvation. If you understood God's mercy, you would also own me as the Lord of the Sabbath. Because you would acknowledge me as the *Author* of the Law, you would also acknowledge Me as the One who can *alter* the Law for His purpose: and you would not have falsely accused me and my servants of profaning the Sabbath day."

Now, this brings us to Jesus' statement in **verse 8**. **(Read verse 8.)** Brethren, all the ordinances of the Old Testament Temple were ordained by Christ Himself. *Christ* is the God who gave all the ordinances concerning the Sabbath to Moses on Mount Sinai! That is why Jesus called Himself "***the Lord of Sabbath.***" Folks, do you realise how profound this is? No mere man has the right to call Himself "the Lord of the Sabbath"! By calling Himself "***The Lord of the Sabbath,***" Jesus was claiming to be God.

The Sabbath day was *God's* special day. God sanctified the seventh day as a sign of His covenant with Israel, so that the children of Israel would always remember that He is the Creator who rested on the seventh day. The seventh day will *always* be special to Israel. Yet, as Lord of the Sabbath, Christ was able to make an *alteration* of the Sabbath day—a *big* one! In this church age, Christ has changed the Sabbath day to the *first* day of the week. Why did He do this? Because the first day of the week is the day when Christ arose from the grave! Sunday is holy to us who know the Lord, because on this day we are celebrating the fact that our God and Saviour conquered death for us on this day! During this church age, the seventh day has been set aside, and the *first* day has been established as our *shabbat*.

Read Colossians 2:16-17.

Read Revelation 1:10-11.

In the **Revelation** passage that we just read, Sunday is called by the Greek word *kuriakon*, which means “belonging to the Lord.” This is the very same word that is translated as “***the Lord's supper***” in **1 Corinthians 11:20**. The Lord's *Supper* is precious to the Lord, because it is a memorial of His death for our sins; and likewise, the Lord's *Day* (the first day of the week) is precious to Him, because is a memorial of His *resurrection* from the dead for us. Yes, we do a certain kind of “work” when we meet together on Sunday to worship Christ; but it is a sanctified work—just as the work of the priests on the Sabbath day was sanctified. Ever since that Sunday when Jesus arose from the grave, the first day of the week has *continued* to be the day when Jesus' disciples meet to worship Him. Throughout the book of **Acts**, and in all the epistles, the Apostles consistently spoke of the *first day of the week* as the day when they assembled, worshipped the Lord, and brought their tithes and offerings. In A.D. 115, Ignatius wrote to the Christians in Magnesia and reminded them that as Christians, they had “ceased to keep the [Jewish seventh day] Sabbath, and lived by the Lord's Day.”² In A.D. 110, a Roman official named Pliny remarked about Christians that “They gather on Sunday, the first day of the week, to sing praises to the Lord Jesus.”³ In A.D. 155, Justin Martyr wrote to the pagans of his day, and informed them that “We all hold this common gathering on Sunday, since it is the first day, on which God transforming darkness and matter made the universe, and Jesus Christ our Saviour rose from the dead on the same day.”⁴ The ancient pagans called this day Sunday, because they worshipped the sun; but to us, it is the *Son's* day, because we worship the Son of God (who is also called the Sun of Righteousness). Sunday is *not* a day for regular daily labour, or for personal fun and recreation, or for doing *our* own pleasure. Sunday is *not* “the weekend,” when we can sleep in, or go fishing. It is the Lord's Day. Sunday is the new Sabbath day, because our Lord, who rose on that day, *is* our *Shabbat*. He *is* our Rest!

II. The purpose of the Sabbath (vv. 9-13)

(Read Matthew 12:9-13.) At first glance, it might seem that the two events in **verses 1-13** happened on the same Sabbath day. However, in **Luke 6** (where these same two stories are recorded) Luke informs us that the healing of the man with the withered hand happened on **“*another sabbath*”** day. There is even reason to believe that the healing of the man with the withered hand happened a while *before* the incident in the wheat field. Why, then, did Matthew, Mark, and Luke not record these events in chronological order? Because recording things in strict chronological order was not their purpose. *Presenting truth about Jesus Christ* was their purpose. These two accounts teach the same truth, with a slightly different emphasis. In the incident in the wheat field, Jesus claimed to be the Lord of the Sabbath; but in this incident in the synagogue, Jesus *proved* that He is Lord of Sabbath **by making a man whole!** With this in mind, let’s read **verse 10** again, and then compare it to Mark’s record.

Read Mark 3:4.

In **Matthew**, we are told that the *Pharisees* asked *Jesus* whether it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath day. Yet, **Mark** says that *Jesus* asked *them* the question. Which Gospel was correct, then? Both! The Pharisees, foreseeing that *Jesus* was going to heal this man, tried to discredit Him by asking Him this accusing question. However, *Jesus* beat them at their own game. He turned their own question back on *them*—except that He framed the question slightly differently. Instead of asking “Is it right to *heal*,” *Jesus* asked them whether it was right to *do good*, or to *do evil*—to save life, or destroy. He then followed up this question by asking whether they would rescue a sheep that had fallen into a pit on a Sabbath day. The Pharisees had no answer to this question, because they knew very well that the Scripture says that **“*a righteous man regardeth the life of his beast.*”** Animals *do* need food and water; and if left in a pit, they might fall prey to a predator, or die from wounds, or exposure. The obvious answer to *Jesus*’ question was, “Yes, a righteous man *will* care for his beast, even on the Sabbath day.” How much more, then, should *Jesus* heal a man who was suffering from a withered hand?

By the way, the question about whether it is right to heal on the Sabbath was actually an old one. Long before *Jesus*’ birth, the Jewish rabbis had concluded that healing on the Sabbath day was forbidden, since medications were prepared by grinding spices—something that required actual labour. Just to be sure that no one broke the Sabbath, they forbade *all* healing across the board—even if the medication were already prepared, and no grinding was necessary. In the Pharisees’ minds, saving a person’s life, or freeing him from pain and suffering, was not the question. All that mattered was *keeping their tradition*.

Do you see why the Pharisees viewed *Jesus* as a threat? By healing a man’s withered hand on the Sabbath day, with no struggle or effort at all, *Jesus* was making their law against healing on the Sabbath look ridiculous! It took far more effort for the Pharisees to walk to the

synagogue that day than it took for Jesus to heal this man! Jesus' argument was so convincing, and so powerful, that even people who never believed on Him as Messiah were at least *influenced* by His teaching about the Sabbath. Later in the first century, a famous rabbi named **Eliezer ben Hurcanus** (who is still venerated among the Jews to this day) was accused of being a Christian, and was tried for heresy (but acquitted). Why was he accused of heresy? Because he suggested that since *cutting* a person's body (in circumcision) was allowed on the Sabbath, *healing* a person's body on the Sabbath should be allowed, too. It was strongly suspected that Eliezer had picked up on this teaching from the Christians, since this is exactly what Jesus had said! Sadly, though, Eliezer never trusted in Jesus as Messiah and Saviour. Why? Because, like the Jews of Jesus' own day, he feared man more than he feared God.

Conclusion: As we close this message this morning, I would ask, “Whom do *you* fear more—man, or God?” Have you placed your faith in Jesus, the Lord of Sabbath? Or are you afraid of what people would think of you if you were to become a follower of Jesus? The same Jesus who healed people on the Sabbath has power to heal your soul, and to give you true rest; but in order to have true rest, you must be willing to forsake this sinful world, place your faith in Christ alone, and let Him be the Lord of your life. If you have not been saved, please repent of your sins and believe on Him today! If you are saved already, I would ask, “How important is the Sabbath Day to you?” Jesus has established a new Sabbath (the first day of the week); and it is precious to Him. How precious is it to you? Do you see this day as a day of rest and sanctified service to the one who died and rose again for you? Or do you see it as a day to do your own pleasure? If so, submit yourself wholly to the Lord of Sabbath, and to His Sabbath Day!

¹ “A Peaceful Day” blogspot, <http://ohpeacefulday.blogspot.com/2012/02/john-paton-missionary-to-cannibals.html>, posted 28-2-12, citing from James Paton, *The Story of John G. Patton*, published 1889.

² Robert J. Morgan, *Preacher's Sourcebook of Creative Sermon Illustrations* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2007), p. 719.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 720.

⁴ *Ibid.*