

## **‘LORD OF THE SABBATH’ MATTHEW 12:1-21**

**[St Mark’s Northbridge, All Services, Sunday 31 July, 2022]**

You sometimes hear in the media someone being talked about like this: ‘conflict seems to follow him wherever he goes’. It’s the kind of description usually reserved for divisive and controversial leaders. It usually reflects the fact that the person in question often says and does things that people don’t like. And when we refer to someone like this, there’s usually a kind of implied criticism in the words.

But it’s interesting to consider that Jesus could’ve been described in that way. You might imagine that someone who lived in perfect love, and gentleness, and self-control would always just be surrounded by calm and peace. But it’s not so. It’s true, is it not, that Jesus was a divisive and controversial leader. He often said and did things that people didn’t like. Conflict seemed to follow him wherever he went. And that’s what we see again this morning/evening in Matthew 12. And I want to explore this section with you under four headings which you can see on your outline: the interactions, the dispute, the commentary, and the implications.

### **1. The Interactions.**

#### **- the interaction that follows the Sabbath eating**

And Matthew 12 begins with a quiet Saturday afternoon walk in the fields. Jesus is with his disciples. The disciples were hungry. So they picked some of the heads of grain from the field and ate. No big deal right?<sup>1</sup> Well maybe not on the other six days of the week. But this was the Sabbath. And the Pharisees were watching. Maybe even spying. And the Pharisees were the self-appointed Sabbath compliance officers. And so they bowl up to Jesus and accuse his disciples of doing something ‘unlawful’. You see that word there in verse 2. And it’s a very key word in this section.

Well, Jesus responds in verses 3-8 by offering the Pharisees several reasons to reconsider their conclusions. And we’re going to come back to this paragraph again in a minute. But the headlines of Jesus’ answer are that he believes his disciples to be entirely innocent. And he believes the Pharisees have failed to understand the Scriptures properly. And they have failed to understand something else too- something unfolding right before their eyes.

#### **- the interaction that precedes the Sabbath healing**

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<sup>1</sup> See Deuteronomy 23:25.

And after Jesus has taken time to respond to the Pharisees' accusation, he moves on. And he heads to the synagogue. It was the Sabbath, after all, and Jesus was a worshipper of God. Fascinatingly, verse 9, Matthew refers to it as 'their synagogue'- the synagogue of the Pharisees- almost as if Jesus is consciously entering "enemy territory". And there happened to be there that day a man who had a deformed hand. Matthew describes it as 'shriveled' and no doubt this was a significant disability for this man. And, of course, the Pharisees were there too. As you would expect, they had come to the synagogue looking to worship God. Um, not so much. Verse 10 tells us that that day they were looking for something else. They were looking for a reason to bring charges against Jesus. So once again they ask him a Sabbath compliance question. And you notice that this time they come to Jesus before he's even done anything.

And, once again, Jesus patiently answers them. And as he does, he challenges them to consider their own hypocrisy. And he responds to their specific question in the clearest way possible. They had asked whether it was lawful- there's that word again- to heal on the Sabbath<sup>2</sup>. And Jesus' answer is "yes"- it most definitely is 'lawful' to do good to others on the Sabbath.

And straight after this conversation, Jesus, undeterred, even brazenly, walks up to the man with the shrivelled hand. Verse 13.

[Read 12:13]

### **- the interaction the Pharisees have with each other**

And you might presume at that point that the Pharisees had even more reason to worship God that Sabbath. But no. They don't even stay for the service. They leave. They head outside and have a quick meeting on the street. And the meeting has just the one agenda item. Verse 14- how can we kill Jesus? And if that seems to you to be bizarre, or at the very least disproportionate, then I'd say you're seeing things pretty clearly.

Jesus, still back inside the synagogue, is aware of what the Pharisees are talking about- verse 15. It's almost as if he can hear their conversation. And he too decides to leave. But a large crowd of people followed. And, more and more people came to him for healing, and, that Sabbath day, he healed every single one.

## **2. The Dispute.**

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<sup>2</sup> Notice that they already know Jesus is a worker of great miracles.

They are the interactions that Matthew 12 describes. But clearly, at the heart of these interactions, is a dispute. So what's the dispute all about? This is my second point today.

### **- the concern for lawfulness**

Well, on the part of the Pharisees, it's all about their concern for lawfulness- although verse 10 and verse 14 suggest they also have an ulterior motive. But, if we give them the benefit of the doubt, we would say that they're largely driven by a desire to see the Old Testament law properly complied with. In verse 2 they say Jesus' disciples have acted unlawfully. And in verse 10 their question to Jesus is also about what's lawful<sup>3</sup>.

### **- the critique of the concern for lawfulness**

But on the part of Jesus, this dispute flows from his loving desire to critique the Pharisees for the way their concern for lawfulness expressed itself. It's not like Jesus is critiquing the law itself. He honoured the Old Testament law. But what he criticises here is the way the Pharisees were pursuing their own version of lawfulness. And Jesus critique of them has four prongs, as far as I can see. Let me talk you through them.

## **# a simplistic/legalistic reading of the Scriptures**

The first prong of Jesus critique is that he thinks the Pharisees are reading the Old Testament Scriptures simplistically or legalistically.

His answer to their first accusation in verse 3 begins with the words 'Haven't you read'. And of course, they had read. But they hadn't understood. So Jesus points them to what happened in 1 Samuel 21 when David and his men were fleeing from King Saul and they came to the temple in Nob where Ahimelek the priest gave them the consecrated bread. And Jesus points out that it was not 'lawful' (using the Pharisees word) for anyone but the priests to eat that bread<sup>4</sup>. And his point is that even though it may not have been 'lawful' it was still, in the circumstances, an acceptable thing to do. Because, according to Jesus, there are some bigger principles at work in the law which the Pharisees are failing to see.

## **# a selective reading of the Scriptures**

The second prong of Jesus' critique is that the Pharisees are reading the Scriptures selectively. Because Jesus also points out, verse 5, that when the priests work in the

<sup>3</sup> The word 'lawful' is used in verse 2, verse 4, verse 10, and verse 12.

<sup>4</sup> See Leviticus 24:5-9.

temple to serve Sabbath worshippers they too are 'desecrating' the Sabbath if it's understood as simplistically as the Pharisees do. But, of course, the law does not see the work of priests in the temple on the Sabbath as sinful in any way<sup>5</sup>. They are innocent- Jesus says in verse 5. And this is why his disciples are also innocent, according to Jesus, verse 7. Have the Pharisees just failed to think about this part of the law?

And have they also failed to think about things like what the prophet Hosea says. Jesus quotes here in verse 7 from Hosea 6:6. It's actually the second time in Matthew's gospel we've heard Jesus refer to that verse<sup>6</sup>. God desires mercy not sacrifice. And this is the problem with the Pharisees' version of what's lawful. It hasn't taken into account everything the law tells them. And it hasn't taken into account the heart of the law which the prophet Hosea summarises. God calls his people to lives of mercy- not just slavish compliance. He calls people to apply the law in love. The law is designed to direct people in the path of doing good. And the Pharisees seem to have missed this! Because they're only paying attention to those parts of the law that serve their purpose.

### **# a hypocritical spirit**

The third prong of Jesus' critique is to point out the Pharisees hypocrisy. This is what he's doing in verses 11-12. He reminds them that even they would 'work' on the Sabbath if they needed to. If their sheep fell into a pit even the Pharisees would pull it out. They wouldn't ignore the sheep's suffering. Even on the Sabbath. By instinct even these Pharisees would do good rather than evil, they'd show mercy rather than insisting on some kind of bizarre sacrificial compliance. And, as Jesus points out, a person is much more valuable than a sheep. So if it's lawful to do good to sheep on the Sabbath, it's definitely lawful for him to heal a disabled man.

### **# a failure to see who they were talking to**

Which brings us to the fourth prong in Jesus' critique of the Pharisees. They'd failed to see who it was they were talking to. Before their very eyes something was taking place of vast significance. Something which would change for ever how people read the Old Testament law. Something which was new and transforming. And more than anything else, this is why their insistence on their version of Sabbath compliance was wrong. Because in their moment of history something more important had presented itself. And someone had come whose authority was greater than even Moses and his law. Listen to verse 6.

[Read 12:6]

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<sup>5</sup> eg. Numbers 28:9-10.

<sup>6</sup> See Matthew 9:13- also in the context of a dispute with the Pharisees.

And verse 8.

[Read 12:8]

### - the concern for love

This is Jesus' critique of the Pharisees. He's opposed to their simplistic, selective, hypocritical, and blind concern for 'lawfulness'. But what is it that Jesus' is actually in favour of? Well, it's not hard to see is it? He's in favour of mercy- of the mercy God desires more than sacrifice. He's in favour of hungry people being fed- even with consecrated bread. He's in favour of worship in the temple- even if the priests need to work on the Sabbath. He's in favour of doing good- to animals, and especially humans. He's in favour of healing people with all kinds of disabilities and diseases. Jesus is in favour of all these things, because he's concerned for love.

### 3. The Commentary.

And I want to tease out the implications of that for us in just a minute. But first, we need to also pay attention to verses 17-21. Because here Matthew offers us some commentary on what we're seeing.

In verses 15-16 Matthew tells us that Jesus withdrew from the synagogue, aware of what the Pharisees were plotting against him. And he asked those he healed not to tell others about him. Did he do this in order to protect himself? Did he do it because he was weary and needed a break? Well, according to Matthew, the answer to those questions is "no". Jesus did it in order to fulfill the ancient prophecies about him- like the one he quotes here from Isaiah 42. And Matthew quotes at length from Isaiah in order to offer us a way of more deeply understanding what's going on here.

### - the chosen servant

He wants us to see that Jesus is God's chosen servant- the one Isaiah prophesied would one day come. He's God's beloved son. The one in whom God delights. The one on whom God's Spirit rests as he proclaims and pursues justice for all people. He is the one about whom Isaiah said- verses 19-20: 'He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.'

Isaiah was saying that God's chosen servant would not come in search of celebrity or acclaim. He would not come just to draw attention to himself. And he would come gently rather than forcefully. Of course, with these words Matthew reminds us again of what Jesus said about himself at the end of chapter 11.

[Read Matthew 11:28-30]

And since then Matthew has been showing us the hard yoke and heavy burden of the Pharisees. He's making the choice clear. The Pharisees were all about compliance to their understanding of the law. And they were on the lookout for a way to snuff out the smoldering wick of Jesus' life. But, by contrast, Jesus was all about obeying God with a life of love. And his way was gentle and humble.

And, as Matthew reminds us in the quote from Isaiah, Jesus not only proclaimed justice, but he would bring justice through to victory- verse 20. And we who know how the story ends understand how he did that, don't we? In the end Jesus justly paid the penalty for all the sins of his people. And he did so in order that God's people might be justified before him. By his death on the cross and by his glorious resurrection, he conquered sin and vanquished death. He brought justice through to victory.

#### **- the hope of nations**

And this is why he was and is the hope of nations. Verse 21: 'In his name the nations will put their hope.' The disciples were seeing that about Jesus. He was the one who held out to them true hope for their futures. The man with the shrivelled hand knew this too. He placed his hope in Jesus and was healed. So too all those Jesus healed that Sabbath day. But not the Pharisees. Their hope was in the law. Their hope was in retaining their own authority even if that meant killing Jesus- the Lord of the Sabbath. They refused to hope in him, as many still do today.

But some of us, even today, see Jesus for who really is. And it's in his name we place out hope. Hope for today, and for every tomorrow.

#### **4. The Implications.**

Well, finally, what are the implications of these verses for us? There are two things I want to say.

#### **- our leaning towards love**

Firstly, these verses encourage us to live our lives leaning towards love. They encourage us to choose the easy yoke of Jesus over the heavy burden of Pharisaic compliance. They encourage us to choose mercy over sacrifice. They encourage us in a concern for love more than lawfulness.

These verses remind us that even when it comes to rest, the followers of Jesus don't rest from love. We don't have a day off from doing good to people. And this is an important challenge for us to hear. Because our world encourages us to think of rest as

“me time”. But that’s not how Jesus understood rest. Of course, when we take a break from work it’s right for us to do so because we want to look after ourselves. It’s good for us to rest by doing things we enjoy and which rejuvenate us. Rest means rest! But when we take a break from work, we don’t take a break from being disciples of Christ. So rest is not time purely for self-indulgence. A day of rest, or an hour of rest, may still present us with opportunities to love. And these are opportunities that the followers of Jesus will lean into.

And this is true not just during times of rest, but all the time. Jesus reminds us in these verses that the commands of God are not just a bunch of disconnected instructions to be complied with. Rather, they are stitched together into a coherent whole by the call to love God with all our heart, and soul, and mind, and strength. And by the call to love the people around us as we love ourselves. This is, in fact, what life is all about. Every day of the week.

As most of you know, the Archbishop spoke at our church weekend away back in May. And when I asked Kanishka afterwards about how he found the weekend the thing he said stood out most for him was how much love there was between people in our church. And in that moment I couldn’t think of a single thing I would’ve preferred him to say. His reflection filled me with thankfulness to God. Because that’s exactly what we ought to be known for. When someone walks into our church this should be the thing they’re most struck by. And when someone meets any one of us in our daily life- this is what they ought to most easily see. Love.

### **- his leaning towards love**

But of course there’s a second implication of these verses that’s even more important. Yes- this passage does urge us to keep leaning towards love. But it only does so because it calls on us to follow Jesus. And that’s the way he leans. And that’s what Matthew 12 is primarily about. It’s about Jesus. It’s about the way he chose mercy over sacrifice, the way he chose doing good over slavish compliance, the way he chose love over simplistic lawfulness.

And not just on the Sabbath day in question here. But on every day of his life. Including the day when he surrendered to death. That was the day when Jesus poured out mercy through sacrifice. That was the day when Jesus complied perfectly with his father’s will and brought justice to victory. That was the day when Jesus fulfilled the law and ushered in a whole new covenant. And he did these things for us. For you. For me.

In this passage we do see a pattern of love to follow. But first and foremost we see a gift of love to receive. The person we should most identify with in this narrative is not Jesus, but the man with the shrivelled hand. There he was- needy, helpless. A bruised reed, a smoldering wick. Like a sheep in a pit needing to be rescued. In search of someone

who could satisfy his hopes. And along came Jesus. And Jesus saw him. And loved him. And his life was never the same again. That's our story is it not? We too come to Jesus- needy and helpless. Bruised reeds. Smoldering wicks. And gentle Jesus does not break us or snuff us out. He loves us. And he heals us. We put our hope in him and he does not disappoint. And then, and only then, he invites us to follow- to walk in the way of love. To love not just 'like he loved'. But to love 'like he loved us'!

Yesterday I was at the SingleMinded conference with a couple of other people from church. And at one point during the day we sung the great hymn 'I Cannot Tell'. And as we sang the second verse I realised it was a beautiful summary of what Matthew wants to show us in these verses. Verse 2 of the hymn goes like this:

'I cannot tell how silently he suffered,  
As with his peace he graced this place of tears,  
Or how his heart upon the cross was broken,  
The crown of pain to three and thirty years.  
But this I know, he heals the broken-hearted,  
And stays our sin, and calms our lurking fear,  
And lifts the burden from the heavy laden,  
For yet the saviour, saviour of the world, is here.'

Just like Isaiah said.

[Read 12:19-21]