

STUDY FOUR | MATTHEW 12:1-14

LORD OF THE SABBATH

OVERVIEW

Matthew 11 concludes with a gentle appeal to come and learn – to accept Jesus’ yoke and find true rest for the soul. Jesus does not invite the wise and learned, but the weary and burdened. These two types of listeners are typified throughout the Gospel, and we meet them once more in chapter 12. Yet Jesus’ appeal regarding lifted burdens is not so much in relation to the contrasts between law and grace, or arrogance and humility (though it incorporates these opposites), but in relation to a right understanding of his word, specifically here the Old Testament. It is this word of hope and comfort, which had been so distorted and corrupted, that was the key to learning of him, and of the rest he offers now and for the future.

As we enter chapter 12 the appeal is made to all those who are willing to learn, to come and receive the grace God reveals to all who follow his Son. The chapter opens with two disputes concerning the Sabbath:

1. **Working on the Sabbath (vv 1-8);**
2. **Healing on the Sabbath (vv 9-14).**

WORKING ON THE SABBATH (VV 1-8)

From the outset it’s important to note the motivation of the religious leaders in v 14. The Sabbath becomes the vehicle for their intentions.

The institution of the Mosaic Sabbath with its division of six days of work and one of rest is analogous to the way in which God’s activity in regard to his creation is pictured. The Mosaic Sabbath had two purposes: (1) to point to God’s creative pattern; and (2) to remind God’s people of the redemptive activity in delivering his people from Egypt. It was of course a key part of God’s covenant relationship with the people he rescued for himself. After so many years under Egypt’s oppressive rule, where there was no rest, Israel would now see God’s intent and purposes for his people, intricately tied up with the theme of the Sabbath rest.

‘COME UNTO ME’

JANUARY 31

MATT 10:1-31 WORKERS FOR THE HARVEST

FEBRUARY 7

MATT 10:32-42 THE UNDIVIDED DISCIPLE

FEBRUARY 14

MATT 11:1-30 KNOWN & UNKNOWN

FEBRUARY 21

MATT 12:1-14 LORD OF THE SABBATH

FEBRUARY 28

MATT 12:15-37 THE TOUGH & TENDER SERVANT

MARCH 7

MATT 12:38-50 WHO ARE MY FAMILY?

MARCH 14

MATT 13:1-23 THE SOWER & THE SEEDS

MARCH 21

MATT 13:24-43 THE WEEDS, THE SEED & THE YEAST

MARCH 28

MATT 13:44-58 THE TREASURE, THE PEARL & THE NET

RESOURCE

A GREAT LIGHT DAWNS

PETER BOLT

(READING THE BIBLE TODAY)

Jesus cut through the complexities of the Pharisaic debates of his time. In the process he reminded people the purpose of the Sabbath was for their benefit, not for their burden. With the Messiah's coming the Sabbath is understood in a new way with new implications for the people of God. Christ is the resurrected Messiah who has brought the true Sabbath rest of the end time into the course of history and calls us to enjoy it with him now (Matt 11:28). A regular Sabbath calls us to remember our dependence on God (we are not slaves to work, but servants of Christ) by looking forward to the return of Jesus and the eternal rest that will be enjoyed in all its fullness at his return.

Neither Jesus nor his disciples have broken the Old Testament law. The reference to David's actions (1 Samuel 21) anchors Jesus' teaching firmly in the Old Testament, rather than a Pharisaical code. King David (himself a Messiah figure who had brought rest for Israel), knew the priority of human life over the priority of law (a principle reinforced again by Jesus when he heals the man's withered hand in vv 9-15). Furthermore, the priests were required to continue their work on the temple on the Sabbath in order to serve others (v 5) yet were free from guilt. Jesus' then highlights his own Messiahship fulfilling David's and the expectations associated with the Temple (v 6). God's presence with his people had arrived in a new and personal way as Jesus inaugurates a new era of Sabbath rest for his people.

The Sabbath priority of doing good for the Lord is expressed as showing mercy in v 7. Again, referencing his Old Testament, Jesus speaks of the prophet Hosea's words (Hos 6:6) expressing the priority of mercy over sacrifice. It is no point adhering to God's law if you have not first understood his mercy. You cannot understand your own relationship with God or his people unless you have first known what it is to receive God's mercy (Eph 2:4-5).

HEALING ON THE SABBATH (VV 9-14)

Undeterred by Jesus' exposure of their faulty motives, the religious leaders pursue him even more aggressively (v 10). Their question about lawful acts on the Sabbath is conveniently anchored in the potential for Jesus to heal a man in the synagogue with a shrivelled hand. Their opposition to him has reached the point where the strategy is to set a trap for him to walk into.

Expounding his priority of mercy, Jesus provides the analogy of v 11 to expose the hypocrisy of the religious leaders. They would readily remove a sheep from a pit on the Sabbath (most likely because of its economic value), how much more the value God places on us (v 12 cf Matt 6:26)! Therefore it is always lawful to do good on the Sabbath. Confirming his identity as Lord of the Sabbath and the deliverer of healing Jesus restores the man's hand. Ironically his act of giving life is met with a fresh determination by the religious leaders to plot how they might kill Jesus. This would be the experience of the Messiah all the way to the cross.

THE SABBATH REST

What do we learn about the Sabbath from these two encounters?

1. Firstly, it can't be ignored if you are a follower of Jesus. He did not come to do away with it, but to restore it to its intended purpose of reminding us of *creation* (we are dependant creatures who will never be at rest without regular refreshment from God himself) and *redemption* (we are set for an eternal rest in Christ). If we slavishly believe we can work

through a week without a dedicated time to stop and be refreshed we place ourselves at both spiritual and physical risk.

2. Secondly, we mustn't be legalistic about the application of the Sabbath. In the end we'll just create rules that will contradict the mercy of God and his desire that we should be doing his good in the service of others as we have opportunity. What is a good pattern for one many not be for another.

Many have challenging circumstances in their households where family life does not allow set and dedicated times that might be called Sabbath rest. They need our support and encouragement in achieving meaningful times of rest.

3. Thirdly, the means to experiencing the rest Jesus offers does not begin with a formula, but an ever deepening faith in him. Daily immersion in his word surrounded by prayer is the act that rescues us from self-reliance and self-sufficiency, and is the entry point to the blessing of rest Jesus promises. The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath (Matt 12:8) so he is the one you want to be refreshed by in your rest.
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GETTING STARTED

1. When might we be tempted to condemn others when it comes to the Sabbath?

INTO THE TEXT

READ VERSES 1-8

2. How did Jesus' respond to the accusations that his disciples were breaking the Sabbath? Did they actually break it?
3. What did Jesus mean when he said 'something greater than the temple is here' in v 6?
4. What do the words of v 7 mean when it comes to our understanding of the Sabbath (see Hosea 6:6)?
5. What encouragement could we offer to others when it comes to the Sabbath rest?

READ VERSES 9-14

6. What was Jesus' priority in healing the man's hand on the Sabbath?
7. What does it mean for Jesus to be Lord of the Sabbath?
8. How does Jesus transform our understanding of the Sabbath?
9. How would you understand the fourth commandment applies today?

TAKEAWAY

10. How might we misunderstand the place of the Sabbath and what are the risks of doing so?
11. What are the rewards of rightly understanding the place of the Sabbath?