



# *The King's Ransom*

Matthew 20:28

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Text

Matthew 12:1-14

Topic

The Pharisees twice try to trip up Jesus  
by accusing Him of breaking Sabbath laws

Title

*"Back in the Sabbath Again"*

Introduction

How do unchurched Americans view contemporary Christianity?

The latest research I could find was a 2008 Pew Research Poll. The summary said, "A full 72% of the people interviewed said they think the church [quote] 'is full of hypocrites.' "

Our usual response to the accusation that the church "is full of hypocrites" is to say something sarcastic, like, "Don't let that stop you from coming; *there's always room for one more.*"

Before we too quickly dismiss every accusation of hypocrisy, it's instructive to realize that Jesus used the "H" word. In fact, if my search engine in e-Sword is accurate, Jesus is the *only* person in the New Testament to call certain people hypocrites, and He does so seventeen times in the Gospels.

Here's the kicker: He didn't accuse just anyone of hypocrisy. He accused the men who thought themselves, and who were thought of by others, to be the most spiritual.

Men like the some 6,000 Pharisees who were straining to keep the very extreme letter of God's Law.

They were definitely trying hard to keep God's Law, and they started well, but they ended up going about it all wrong.

**I, for one, don't want to think I am trying hard to "keep" God's Word, having started well, only to end up going about it all wrong.**

We encounter some of those Pharisees in our text today and, as we do, we get a glimpse at their going about it all wrong with regard to the keeping of the Sabbath.

Jesus gives us two markers - two characteristics - by which to gauge whether or not our version of obedience to God is right or wrong. They are *mercy* and *kindness*.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Keeping God's Word Will Increase, Not Decrease, Your Showing Mercy, and #2 Keeping God's Word Will Encourage, Not Discourage, Your Showing Kindness.

## #1 Keeping God's Word Will Increase, Not Decrease, Your Showing Mercy (v1-8)

The apostle Paul asked the Christians in Galatia, "having begun in the Spirit, are you now made perfect in the flesh?" The Pharisees had done just that and it should serve to warn anyone who wants to keep God's Word to be careful to not do the same.

The origin of the Pharisees is uncertain. Some scholars suggest they go back as far as the Book of Malachi when you read of those obedient Jews whom God eavesdrops upon because He is pleased with their spiritual conversations about Him.

Other scholars say they began in the time of the Maccabean Revolt against the Greek ruler Antiochus IV, also known as Antiochus Epiphanes, around 165BC, in an effort to protect Judaism from contamination by Greek influences.

The name Pharisee in its Hebrew form means *separatists*, or *the separated ones*. They were also known as *chasidim*, which means *loyal to God*, or *loved of God*.

They meant to radically obey God and remain separate from the world but became so extreme, so narrow, in their focus on the letter of the Law that they lost the spirit of the Law.

When their Savior and Messiah, Jesus Christ, was among them, they not only didn't acknowledge Him, they accused Him of being a Law breaker.

Let's watch it play-out in our text.

Mat 12:1 At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat.

Mat 12:2 And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, "Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!"

God nowhere in His Word ever stated that it was wrong to pluck heads of grain to eat on the Sabbath. In their attempt to define what constituted work, the Pharisees had determined that plucking grain was a form of harvesting and, therefore, violated the command to do no work on the Sabbath.

In passing I should mention that there were groups even more extreme than the Pharisees, e.g., the Essenes of Qumran whom we have to thank for the Dead Sea Scrolls.

It's no different today among the various groups who say you must "keep" the Sabbath. There is no agreement on what constitutes "work." Just a lot of speculation and accusations.

Notice that they blamed Jesus for what His disciples were doing. Like it or not, the impression folks have of who Jesus is and of what He is like comes from how we act and react, from what we say and do.

I can't fault a nonbeliever for thinking that knowing The Lord should affect radical, positive changes in our lives. Jesus doesn't only save us; He goes on saving us - changing us from glory-to-glory into His own image.

Or at least that's His plan.

Jesus' answer to the Pharisees will mention a king, the priests, and a prophet.

Mat 12:3 But He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him:  
Mat 12:4 how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which was not lawful for him to eat, nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests?"

David, on the run from King Saul, definitely violated the letter of the Law when he and his men ate the holy bread. God did not rebuke him, and even the Pharisees would not be so bold as to condemn David for his violation of the Law. Yet here they were, rebuking Jesus for something that was their own interpretation of what constituted work.

When Jesus said, "Have you not read?", it was quite a slap in the face, so to speak. It indicated that they were not familiar enough with God's Word. They certainly knew the passage; they did not apply it properly.

In other words, they were reading and studying God's Word the wrong way - trying to nail down the letter but missing the spirit.

Look for Jesus in every text and you will avoid missing the spirit of the words.

Jesus had appealed to David. He was the rightful king of Israel but was not recognized and was exiled. Similarly, Jesus was the rightful King of Israel, but was not recognized and would be rejected.

Mat 12:5 Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless?

While others rested on the Sabbath, the on-duty priests in the Temple worked twice as hard. There were double sacrifices to offer; there was fresh shewbread to make and old shewbread to change out; and if a male child's eighth day of life fell on a Sabbath, the priest must nevertheless perform his circumcision.

The priests, then, show that work done for God on the Sabbath is not "work" in God's eye.

Mat 12:6 Yet I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple.

The argument Jesus was putting forward was that in God's economy the ministry of the Temple took priority over the Sabbath rules. It thus followed that if Someone greater than the Temple was there, He, too, would take priority over any man-made Sabbath rules.

The tragedy in all this is that the Pharisees, in their zeal to be spiritual, did not recognize that One greater than the Temple was in their midst.

The Lord next appealed to a prophet - Hosea.

Mat 12:7 But if you had known what this means, 'I DESIRE MERCY AND NOT SACRIFICE,' you would not have condemned the guiltless.

The quote is from the sixth chapter of Hosea. The entire verse reads like this:

Hos 6:6 For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, And the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.

Again The Lord reprimands them for misapplying God's Word. Moral duties *always* outweigh ceremonial regulations. God doesn't set rules and rituals ahead of showing mercy, which reveals a true "knowledge of God" because mercy is one of His attributes.

Mat 12:8 For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

Jesus didn't abolish the Sabbath for the Jews. Clearly He observed it; He was, after all, on His way to synagogue when this episode took place.

But He claimed the right to properly interpret the Sabbath over the traditions of the Pharisees. He claimed the greater authority.

In fact, He was claiming to be the One Who instigated the Sabbath in the first place, and Who was its fulfillment.

If Jesus didn't abolish the Sabbath, why don't we 'keep' it as Christians? William MacDonald, in his very excellent *Believers Bible Commentary*, has a great perspective on the Sabbath and I'm going to borrow from him.

The Sabbath day was, and always will be, the seventh day of the week (Saturday). God rested on the seventh day, after the six days of creation (Genesis 2:2).

He did not command man to keep the Sabbath day at that time, although He may have intended the principle - one day of rest in every seven - to be followed.

The nation of Israel **was** commanded to keep the Sabbath when the Ten Commandments were given (Exodus 20:8-11). In fact, in several places Israel is told it is a special covenant between them and God - not between Gentiles and God.

The law of the Sabbath was different from the other nine commandments; it was a ceremonial law while the others were moral. The only reason it was wrong to work on the Sabbath was because God said so. The other commandments had to do with things that were intrinsically wrong.

Nine of the Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament, not as law but as instructions for Christians living under grace. The only commandment Christians are **never** told to keep is that of the Sabbath. Rather, the apostle Paul teaches that the Christian cannot be judged or condemned for failing to keep it (Colossians 2:16).

The distinctive day of Christianity is Sunday, the first day of the week. The Lord Jesus rose from the dead on that day (John 20:1), a proof that the work of redemption had been completed and divinely approved. On the next two Lord's Days, He met with His disciples (John 20:19, John 20:26).

The Holy Spirit was given on the first day of the week (Act 2:1). The early disciples met on that day to break bread, showing forth the Lord's death (Act 20:7). It is the day appointed by God on which Christians should set aside funds for the work of the Lord (1Corinthians 16:1-2).

It is not right to say that the Sabbath was changed to the Lord's Day. The Sabbath is Saturday and the Lord's Day is Sunday.



The Sabbath was a shadow; the substance is Christ (Colossians 2:16-17). The resurrection of Christ marked a new beginning, and the Lord's day signifies that beginning.

Jesus is our Sabbath - and by that I mean that it is in a relationship with Him that we find rest. He said so Himself at the end of chapter eleven. The Sabbath is therefore no longer a ritual; it is a relationship.

Listen. When we tell people they must 'keep' the Sabbath on any level, we are telling them that salvation is by grace through faith PLUS works. We are adding to the Gospel.

Back to the text... Jesus, by His appeal to Scripture, shows that His disciples were guiltless. Nevertheless the Pharisees condemned them based on their own interpretation of God's Law.

Don't overlook the statement in verse one, "the disciples were hungry." I'm not saying they were starving, but their picking grain to eat was more than just a snack along the way.

**If they had truly been reading God's Word for the spirit of it, the Pharisees would have shown the disciples mercy by offering them food.**

They would have looked upon them to see how they might minister to them - show them mercy - in order that they come to know God as merciful.

What about us? I don't want to mention anything specific; these issues can be complex. But, in general, are we more prone to declare a *boycott*? Or to offer a *barbecue*?

In whatever we choose, we must be showing mercy, because nonbelievers need to know God desires mercy over sacrifice.

## #2 Keeping God's Word Will

### Encourage, Not Discourage, Your Showing Kindness

(v9-14)

The word "kindness" isn't used in this next episode, but it is implied by Jesus' use of a trapped animal. In Proverbs 12:10 you read, "A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal, but the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel" (NIV).

The Pharisees version of the Law led them to show more kindness to animals than to people - and that's a poor representation of God's character.

Mat 12:9 Now when He had departed from there, He went into their synagogue.

Mat 12:10 And behold, there was a man who had a withered hand. And they asked Him, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" - that they might accuse Him.

The Pharisees challenged Jesus right in the midst of their synagogue service.

It's sad when believers bring petty accusations against one another in the church. We should be serious Christians, but also those who err on the side of showing kindness and mercy and grace.

The Pharisees had determined that you could act to save a life on the Sabbath, but that you could do nothing proactive to effect healing.

If a person was cut, and bleeding, you could act to stop the bleeding, but that is all you could do until the sun went down on Saturday evening.

Mat 12:11 Then He said to them, "What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out?"

Mat 12:12 Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."

The Israelites dug pits as traps against wild animals that attacked their flocks. Occasionally a sheep would wander off and fall into a pit. Regardless it was the Sabbath or not, an Israelite was expected to save his sheep, and no Pharisee would think of accusing him of breaking any law - God's or mans.

I hate to harp on it, but straining to figure out how to properly 'keep' the letter of the Sabbath leads to bizarre conclusions that make Christians seem like hypocrites. Or actual hypocrites.

Whatever a person does think about the Sabbath must be qualified by the principle, "it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." If you conclude that something "good" is work that should be avoided - you're just wrong according to The Lord of the Sabbath.

Mat 12:13 Then He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he stretched it out, and it was restored as whole as the other.

Technically, neither Jesus nor the man did any work. No physical therapy was performed; no manipulation. Jesus simply spoke the word. The man simply stretched out his hand, acting by faith - which is not a work.

So even though Jesus did not really violate the Pharisee's very limited interpretation of 'work,' we read in verse fourteen,

Mat 12:14 Then the Pharisees went out and plotted against Him, how they might destroy Him.

Jesus used the example of a trapped animal to establish that the Pharisees were way off base in their understanding of God's heart.

I wonder if they got the subtle suggestion that here they were seeking to trap Jesus; that they were actively setting traps for Him.

In their zeal to obey the letter of God's Law, they ended up treating their fellow Jews worse than they treated their animals, and anyone who opposed them was treated as a wild animal that needed to be destroyed.

You would therefore never know from looking at these so-called spiritual men that God was kind. In fact, He seemed cruel.

I submit to you that any interpretation of God that makes Him seem cruel is wrong, because He is not cruel. We can't, therefore, look at things like suffering and eternal torment in Hell and say, "O well, He's God and can do whatever He wants." We can't say that something cruel isn't simply because God does it.

No, we must frame our answers from the perspective of the immutable character and attributes of God - especially that He is love. Any talk of suffering or Hell or other things like that must be understood within the context of God as love.

God's kindness towards His own people is sometimes called lovingkindness. It can be defined as *faithful love that takes action*. It is God's persistent and unconditional tenderness, kindness, and mercy, a relationship in which He seeks after man with love and mercy.

An early example of lovingkindness, and a very powerful one, is God's actions in the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve sinned. He acted immediately, seeking them out to cover their shame and promising to redeem them by coming into the world to die as their substitute.

God's lovingkindness seeks after you to save and sanctify you; it doesn't set out to trap you to destroy you.

The Pharisees started out right but ended up all wrong. The apostle Paul warned the Galatians they could do the same - having begun in the Spirit, they could try to be made perfect in the flesh. The majority of nonbelievers in our country think that the majority of Christians are the modern-day Pharisees who are trying to be made perfect by the flesh.

Rather than immediately dismiss their accusation, let's examine ourselves. As serious students of the Bible, we want to know what the Word says, and understand why it says what it says.

We want to be; no, we **must** be separate from the world.

We need, however, to do all that, to be all that, while maintaining the spirit of the Word.

And one way to gauge how we're doing is to check our lives for showing mercy and kindness so that folks know our God, and their Savior, is seeking them out to save them.

The Pew Research poll I cited went on to say,

At the same time, 71% of the respondents said they believe Jesus 'makes a positive difference in a person's life' and 78% said they would 'be willing to listen' to someone who wanted to share what they believed about Christianity.

They sound open to the Gospel. Let's go on showing them Jesus and not some mean-spirited, bigoted caricature.