

## Sermon Script – Matthew 12:1-14

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### 1. Introduction

- a. Last week, Luke unpacked part of Jesus' teaching, helping us see that only Jesus provides true rest.
- b. Jesus proclaimed: *'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'*
- c. So I guess the question is - is this guy for real? He talks the talk - but does he walk the walk? He offers a lasting, satisfying, rest for those who come to him, all who are burdened and wearisome in the face of trials. Rest for those in the ratrace of life, worn out and wondering if this is it? Jesus claims to have the answer. But will he follow through? Is this claim like that counterfeit money that criminals smuggle - offering wealth and luxury but actually being a worthless bit of paper? That money looks like the real deal but when you dig a bit deeper it's phoney. Is Jesus' offer of rest the same - pretty on the outside but actually worthless when push comes to shove?
- d. Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. We're going to read on now and see what counterfeit rest looks like, and how Jesus' offer matches up to this. Luke helped us see last week that Jesus invites us to come to him. He has a posture of open arms, not a pointed finger like that of the pharisees - the religious celebrities of the time.

### 1. Reading: Matthew 12:1-14

- a. Liz is going to read the next section for us

### 2. Who is Lord of What?

- a. The climax of this passage is Jesus claiming something about who he is in verse 8. Verses 1-7 lead up to it and verse 9-14 flow from it. The son of man is Lord of the Sabbath. Who is Lord of What? He uses the words Son of Man which is his way of referring to himself, and relates to an ancient prophesy to the Israelite people by Daniel - which said this promised Son of Man has the authority of the Lord God and rules an everlasting kingdom. Jesus claimed to be that promised king every time he uses that term to describe himself.
- b. The Sabbath was the day of rest commanded by God that Jewish people still follow today.
- c. Now when Jesus says 'The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath' the religious leaders were outraged because they knew who he was claiming to be. And their plans are laid out for us to read in verse 14 - they plotted to kill him.
- d. Seems a bit steep doesn't it? Well to understand we need to back up and explore what this idea of the Sabbath really meant to these people, before we zoom back into today's passage and then draw some applications out for us today.

### 3. What is the Sabbath?

- a. Sabbath is a Hebrew word meaning 'rest'. It was a command of God to his people to rest on the 7th day of the week - Saturday.
- b. The first time God commands the Israelites to observe the Sabbath is in Exodus 16, just after he has rescued them from slavery in Egypt and as he miraculously provides daily water and food in the desert wilderness every morning. He says to them:
  - i. "Tomorrow is to be a day of sabbath rest, a holy sabbath to the Lord"
- c. There are a few reasons why the Lord appeared to do this:
  - i. Therefore I led them out of Egypt and brought them into the wilderness. I gave them my decrees ... 12 Also I gave them my Sabbaths as a sign between us, **so they would know that I the Lord made them holy.** (Ezekiel 20:10-12).
  - ii. Part of the reason for the Sabbath was that the Israelite people would know that the Lord has made them holy - or set them apart - that they would be distinctive from other nations.
- d. Another reason is explained when the Sabbath law is re-stated as part of the 10 commandments which God gave to his people a little later while they wandered in the wilderness:
  - i. "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. 9 Six days you shall labour and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God... For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (Exodus 20:8-11).
  - ii. The Sabbath honoured God's work of creation which he did in 6 days before resting on the seventh.
- e. A third reason is given to the Israelites in a further restating of the 10 commandments later on:
  - i. Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you.... Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day. (Deut 20:12,15)
  - ii. The Sabbath helped God's people remember the redemption from slavery that God achieved for them as he rescued them from slavery in Egypt.
- f. Those are just three reasons God set up this system for the Israelite people. And it was an even bigger system of rest than just weekly. The people wandering in the wilderness were headed towards a promised land that God had prepared for them. Every 7 years the land was to have rest - No crops were to be grown in or reaped from it. And every 7x7 years, so after 49 years, all leased lands were to be returned to their owners, and any slaves were to be set free.
- g. These laws were radical for the time, and certainly would have been a distinctive witness of God's people to the world around of their trust in him as their creator and redeemer.

- h. I say "would have been". Because they don't appear to have kept these laws very well. We've got no record that the freeing of land and slaves ever happened on that special 50 year mark. In fact, their failure to observe the sabbath system is given as one key reason for God sending them out of that promised land into exile. He sent them away for the same number of years that the land was due for all the missed Sabbath years it was meant to have had rest for.
- i. So all this to say - the Sabbath was a big deal! Fast forward to the time of Jesus and the Israelites are back in that promised land again. So the Pharisees - the religious leaders of the time - are eager to protect it. So much so that they even had 39 extra rules to make sure that no one could accidentally break this law. Including, I'm sorry to say, a prohibition on all home baking.
- j. Christians have a complex relationship with this idea of the Sabbath. And true Christians understand this idea differently on how it plays out for us today. In this church family we have a mix of views on it, and that's absolutely fine. We try to practice something we call theological generosity - which is when we aim to have unity with and respect for other followers of Jesus who hold different positions on matters that aren't core to our faith. This issue is one of those secondary issues - in fact we are told this later on in the Bible: Col 2:16-17: ...do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.
- k. So what follows flows from how I understand the Bible to speak about Sabbath, because that's the only way I can speak with conviction on what I'm saying. But I truly welcome people to ask questions about this as we sharpen our understanding together. I'm 100% sure that I'm not 100% right on 100% of my theology. We all bring assumptions to any text we read. And so we all need to keep coming back to God's word to sharpen our understanding of what is God's absolute truth, what is helpful tradition, and what is meaningless trash.
- l. So, looking at old testament laws to the Jewish people requires us to interpret them through the world changing events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. That makes sense - we read about various things in the OT that we recognise as limited to that period of history like temple sacrifices and food laws. It's a bit like the UK and EU's relationship - to massively oversimplify - at one point in history we were bound to obey EU law and that was good and proper to do so at that time. Circumstances have changed and we are no longer bound by these laws, but can definitely recognise wisdom in some of them.
- m. Jesus repeatedly claims to have fulfilled different elements of the law given to the Jewish people. We read in a previous chapter of Matthew that's the reason he came - not to abolish but to fulfil the law. That verse we read earlier continues: Col 2:16-17: Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ

- n. In some sense the Sabbath system was designed to point to Jesus Christ. And that, I think, is Jesus' point in this passage.

#### 4. Lord of the Sabbath

- a. Now what leads Jesus to make this claim that he is the Lord of the Sabbath?
- b. It's sparked off by his followers walking through a grain field.
- c. Imagine the scene... It's a beautiful Saturday morning and Jesus and his followers, including the writer Matthew, find themselves in a grain field. They've not eaten all morning so they are getting a little peckish. And they spot some unharvested crops, grind a little grain in their hands and munch as they go. Basically the 1st century equivalent of a snack.
- d. But the religious leaders of the time, the Pharisees, spot them doing this and say 'Aha! We see what you're doing. You're breaking our laws around the Sabbath. Item number 27 - do not pluck heads of grain. This is against the law! And you, Jesus are responsible as their leader' It's like they had made themselves lords of the Sabbath - deciding what is allowed and what isn't so they could look down their super spiritual noses on everyone else and give themselves a good pat on the back.
- e. Notice Jesus hasn't done anything wrong here. His disciples were plucking grain, he wasn't. It would have been easy for him to throw them under the bus and get away from the controversy. But he uses the Pharisees' complaint to teach them, his disciples, and us today. He makes a progressive argument, bringing together different elements of the OT scriptures - which the Pharisees knew so well.
- f. His argument is basically saying Jesus is greater.
  - i. Jesus is greater than David
    1. Vs 3-4 Jesus answered, "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests."
    2. The account Jesus mentions here is about an ancient Jewish leader, King David - the same David who fought the giant Goliath as a child if you've heard that story before. Now God anointed him as king, and it seems that his position as God's anointed king gave him authority to interpret the law correctly - he saw God's heart in the giving of a law that was designed to point his people to dependence on him. He and his men were on the brink of starvation as fugitives, and God mercifully provided food. David saw this as a provision.
    3. Jesus is saying to the Pharisees - Surely you Bible scholars are well acquainted with the story of 1 Sam 21?! David is a spiritual hero and he allowed his disciples to suspend some of the restrictions of the law in order to show mercy. In making this

argument to defend his disciples, he's highlighting that one greater than David is here, who also has authority to determine how the Sabbath law applies. But he moves on

ii. Jesus is greater than Temple.

1. Vs 5-6: *Or haven't you read in the Law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple **desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent?** 6 I tell you that **something greater than the temple is here.***
2. Again he gently prods - haven't you, experts in the scriptures, read about what those very scriptures require of the priests in the temple? He's speaking about the various roles that the priests had to do on the Sabbath day. They certainly weren't resting, they were working, and yet this was God's command. So if the service of the temple could make such work on the sabbath legitimate, how much more can **something greater than the temple**. Jesus is saying look here - I am greater than the temple and I say this is good.

iii. Jesus is greater than Ceremony

1. Vs 7: *If you had known what these words mean, **'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,'** you would not have condemned the innocent*
2. Jesus now appeals to the prophet Hosea who warned the Israelite people about 500 years beforehand that they hadn't understood his purposes in the law.
3. Hosea continues: For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.
4. Jesus wanted the pharisees not just to perform the religious duties - the sacrifices and offerings - but to actually live in line with His merciful ways - he wanted their hearts to be transformed by knowing God.
5. Mercy not sacrifice. This phrasing is not so much the idea of God wants X and doesn't want Y. It's more that he wants X more than Y. It's about priorities. Like when my toddler Jess says 'read book, no milk' she isn't actually saying she doesn't ever want milk - she just has an order of priority as to what is most important. The sacrificial system served a purpose but it wasn't the main thing. The Sabbath served a purpose but it wasn't the main thing. That main thing - Jesus - is greater than ceremonial observance.

iv. And fourth, he is greater than Sabbath. This is the climax of the argument.

1. Vs 8: **For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.**
2. This angers the pharisees because they have set themselves up as lords of the sabbath - demanding the people carry their heavy burdens. But Jesus, who has just been claiming that anyone can come to him and receive true rest, has just

demonstrated his claim: my yoke is easy, my burden is light - unlike these ritualistic religious leaders who overburden even your day of rest to make it unbearable!

3. And Jesus reveals their hypocrisy in his act of healing that follows. As Lord of the Sabbath he is able to do as he wishes on it. So far he hasn't broken their extra Sabbath laws. But he chooses to do so now.
4. And he chooses to care for the people around him, to have mercy even when it isn't life threatening like this man with a chronically withered hand. He points out their own inconsistency - they won't allow for a human's hand to be healed so it can be used again but they would rescue their own animal from a pit.

## 5. Priorities of the Lord

- a. So what does this mean for us today?
- b. It comes down to priorities - the Pharisees' ceremonial observance wasn't wrong in itself, but their heart behind it was.
- c. Jesus tells these same leaders later: *Matt 23:23 Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.*
- d. They were so eager to dot every i and cross every t that they produced a load of extra rules to make sure they kept the rules they thought it was all about. They wanted a tick box approach to God's approval.
- e. They didn't realise that being friends with the Lord is much simpler than all that. Instead of their wearisome and burdensome demands to keep certain laws, Jesus corrects their understanding:
- f. *'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.'*
- g. You see, Jesus wasn't just greater than those elements of the Old Testament, he was the fulfilment of them. And he fulfils the purpose of the Sabbath too.
  - i. In Jesus we are holy - set apart - from the world.
  - ii. In him we are a new creation.
  - iii. In him we can be redeemed - not from slavery in Egypt but slavery to sin, the word the Bible uses to describe our rebellion against God's ways.
- h. Jesus says: all of you come to me every day, come on Saturday, and Sunday, and Monday, every day of the week, find your rest in me, not in the burdensome obligations of man-made religion, or the secular rat race of your day to day activity, or the oppressive hierarchy of society. That's all counterfeit rest. It doesn't deliver. I will give you true rest, true Sabbath
  - i. Come to me and be made holy.
  - ii. Come to me and become a new creation.
  - iii. Come to me and be redeemed from sin.

- iv. Come to me and experience true Sabbath, true everlasting rest.
- i. And so first he invites anyone who wants to find their rest in him to do so. Our response is key - these pharisees went off to find a way to kill Jesus. They rejected the invitation he makes to them. If you haven't come to him yourself, please don't reject his invitation to you today. That offer is open to you too - just speak to someone near you about how you might do that and what it means.
- j. So how does life look for those who come to Jesus as their Sabbath? It means living according to his way, with his priorities - mercy, not sacrifice. He corrects those who claim to have come to the Lord but have lost sight of what that is really about. I've found this helpful these last few weeks as I reflect on my own faith and how it plays out. Jesus desires mercy, not sacrifice. He's telling us: don't be so interested in religion that you forget about relationship. Don't think the vertical connection with God doesn't impact the horizontal love for others. Jesus' desire is for mercy over ceremonial religion.
- k. As you come to him and receive his mercy like this torch, you receive merciful rest. That mercy should be reflected to others. Like this mirror, shining merciful rays from Jesus to others.
- l. We see the priority he places on certain parts of the law. God's heart is for justice, mercy and faithfulness. The stuff we do as part of our religion - praying, reading the Bible, attending a church gathering, hospitality, giving of our time and resource - all that is good, but it should serve God's bigger purposes. But that's actually much harder to do than keeping a long list of rules. The Pharisees are quick to pick up their rule book and hit people round the head with it, except when their own sheep are stuck in a pit and they might just bend the rules for themselves. I know my attitude to others can sometimes be like that too - looking down on someone for not ticking the boxes that I tick in my religion. And yet I'm very quick to give myself the benefit of the doubt in areas I find harder like prayer.
- m. Where are you prone to judge people, perhaps other Christians? How they dress? How they sing? Whether they read widely? Their politics? Their family circumstances? Their attendance at the weekly prayer meeting? Jesus says: come to me and receive my mercy, share the mercy I've given you with others. Encourage them to come to Lord Jesus themselves rather than beat them over the head with your rule book.
- n. If you identify with the attitude of the Pharisees - and I imagine many of us do - then Jesus' invitation is for us too. Come to me for rest. Rest from judging others and comparing ourselves to them. Rest from the guilt of doing that. Because when we come to him, sorry for our attitude and willing to change, he forgives us and gives us power to do so.

So let's pray to him now, trusting in his character and his authority.

Lord of the Sabbath,

Thank you that you invite us to come to you and experience true rest, not the counterfeit rest offered by man made structures. Help us live in light of that reality and reflect the mercy you offer to us to those around us.

Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath. Come to Him and reflect his mercy to others.