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February 15, 2026

REJECTING LEGALISM: MATTHEW 12:1-14

Introductory Activity

Ask: Can you think of a time, maybe in your home or workplace, where it might be better practice mercy instead of the letter of the law?

Explain: An honest accident in the home might call for mercy instead of discipline. A single mom caring for a sick child might call for mercy over the demands of the time clock. “We have laws to protect us and to keep our society secure. Parents make rules for the benefit of everyone living in the house. Teachers establish rules in classrooms so students can learn without distractions. But, in every setting, we need to leave room for mercy and grace—not just the letter of the law.” (ETB LG, 120) When we focus too much on rules and regulations and not enough on mercy, we risk slipping into legalism. Legalism is not simply a problem for society, homes, and classrooms. It can also be a spiritual problem. In relation to religion, “legalism involves working in our own power (sometimes according to God’s law and other times according to our own rules) in order to earn God’s favor.” (Exalting, 157)

Summarize and Transition: There are at least two problems with legalism. First, Scripture tells us that there is no way to please God through strict adherence to the “rules” because we cannot keep the rules. Ecclesiastes 7:20 tells us, “There is certainly no one righteous on the earth who does good and never sins.” Likewise, Paul tells us in Romans 3:23, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” In verse 24, he says that a person is justified only by “grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” However, some in Jesus’ day were legalists. They felt that only by keeping the law in the strictest sense could someone be made right with God. In today’s lesson, Jesus is going to address some of these people and help them see the truth of Scripture. Moreover, we are going to see that adding to the laws of God does not help us keep the law. It only burdens us further. In the end, we will learn that “Jesus offers mercy, not religious rules.” (ETB LG, 127)

1. RELIGIOUS RULES (MATT. 12:1-2)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew 12:1-2.

Explain: There is not a lot of action in these two verses, but a lot is going on. The disciples, Jesus, and some Pharisees are probably walking to the synagogue on the Sabbath day. Along the way, the disciples get hungry and pluck some grain to eat. To us, this doesn’t seem like a big deal, but the Pharisees go bug-eyed when they see the disciples doing this. To help us understand why they are upset, we first need to understand that they are not upset because the disciples were eating someone else’s grain. The issue is not theft of grain. Deuteronomy 23:25 says, “When you enter your

Notes:

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *Explore the Bible Commentary* (ETBC)
- *Preaching the Word: Matthew* (Preaching)
- *New American Commentary: Matthew* (NAC)
- *Exalting Christ in Matthew* (Exalting)
- *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Matthew 1-13* (ACCS)
- *The King Has Come* (Spurgeon)

John 1:29

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!

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neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck heads of grain with your hand, but do not put a sickle to your neighbor's grain." So, the problem is not what the disciples were doing. The problem is *when* the disciples were doing it: on the Sabbath. To understand the thinking of the Pharisees, we need to take **a moment** and discuss the Sabbath. The regulation requiring that God's people observe the Sabbath is given most famously in Exodus 20:8-10. "The fourth commandment set apart the seventh day for rest, worship, and remembrance (Ex. 20:8-10; Lev. 23:1-3; Deut. 5:12-14). By not working on the Sabbath, people honored God who rested from His creative work on the seventh day (Gen. 2:1-3). It also recalled how God brought His people out of bondage into a land of rest (Ex. 20:2; Deut. 5:15)." (ETB LG, 130) There is not a lot of information in the first five books of the Bible or the rest of the OT to help us define rest. We do find a few prohibitions:

- kindling fires (Ex. 35:3) and gathering sticks for the fire (Num 15:32-36)
- carrying a burden (Jer. 17:21-25)
- buying or selling (Neh. 10:31; 13:15-17; Amos 8:4-5)
- "not talking idly [or talking business] and seeking your own pleasure [and not] delighting in God (Is. 58:13) (Preaching, 313)

That is all we get in the OT about regulations related to the Sabbath. Now, if we understand the spirit of those regulations, we might say, "Ok, family, let's just sit back and rest for a day while we remember the greatness of God." However, these few regulations were not enough for some. They felt God was being a little vague about the regulations. Does a "fire" include lighting a lamp? What exactly is a "burden?" In order to "help God out," the religious authorities had established "thirty-nine classes of work that profane the Sabbath." (Preaching, 313) These traditional rules were meant to clarify God's Word and provide boundaries for people so that they do not accidentally trespass God's law. However, in expanding God's law and interpreting these additional rules, the legalists had made keeping the Sabbath a burden. It had become *hard work to not work* on the Sabbath. The biblical scholar Robert Mounce contends that in the Pharisees' view of things, the disciples had "violated four different rules: they reaped the grain (pluck the grain from the stalk), winnowed (rubbed it between their hands), threshed (separated the chaff), and prepared a meal (ate the grain)." (quoted in ETBC, 119) That seems a little nitpicky to me. Maybe one *should* refrain from reaping, winnowing, threshing, and preparing a meal on the Sabbath. I mean, some of those do sound like work. But plucking some grain, rubbing it between your hands, and tossing it in your mouth? Come on! But let's stop and think about our lives and our religious traditions.

Discuss: What are some traditions or "religious rules" that we observe today? Let's not get too judgmental. Just consider some rules or customs

Notes:

"The law does not define 'not working' although it certainly implies not doing your six-day-a-week work (i.e. what you do for a living.)" (Preaching, 313)

TEACHER'S NOTE: IF YOU WANT TO READ ABOUT SOME OF THESE REGULATIONS SEE THE ATTACHED PAGE. IT MIGHT BE INTESTING TO DISCUSS SOME OF THESE DURING YOUR GROUP TIME, BUT KEEP AN EYE ON THE TIME AND DO NOT GET TOO SIDE RACKED.

that we might have in church life, and for Christians, that might be ok but are not in Scripture.

Summarize Transition: You might have listed a few customs or traditions. They were probably not bad things to consider, but they were probably customs and traditions and not biblical regulations. Not bad, but not divine regulations. As the *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* says, “We just have to be careful about letting our human traditions take priority over what God has clearly revealed in His Word. And we have to make sure that we don’t use our own standards to judge the righteousness or sinfulness of others.” (ETB LG, 131)

In the next passage, Jesus is going to answer the protestations of the Pharisees. By helping them understand God’s law through a historical and ecclesial standpoint, He reveals that their additions and their basic understanding of the law are flawed.

2. SOMETHING GREATER (MATT. 12:3-8)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew 12:3-8.

Explain: This passage reveals two essential elements to understanding the OT law: The Heart of God and the Authority of Christ. Let’s first remind ourselves what Jesus is talking about and then see what it teaches us about these two essential elements.

David and the Bread of the Presence: After David was anointed King of Israel, but before he ascended to replace Saul, he was hunted by the King. First Samuel 21:1-7 records David’s interaction with a priest while looking for food. The only food present was the Bread of the Presence. This is bread placed before the altar and routinely replaced. When the bread was removed, it was to be eaten only by the priests. The priest quizzes David and then gives him the bread.

Jesus asks the Pharisees, scholars of the OT, if they had read the account. Of course, they had. And of course, they knew David had not sinned by eating the bread that was forbidden. Next, Jesus reminds the Pharisees about the priests who work in the Temple.

The Priest and Their Temple Duties: Jesus reminds the Pharisees that God’s law requires the priests to work on the Sabbath. We find this in Numbers 28:9. The people were to present a sacrifice to the Lord on the Sabbath, and the priests would have to work to prepare and offer the sacrifice.

What is Jesus getting at here? Well, on the most basic level, he is telling the legalistic Pharisees to stop and think about their strict adherence to the Law and the traditions they have put in place around the law. In regards to the account of David eating the Bread, the priest to whom David made the request understood the way God had always interpreted the Law. While there were rules in place regarding the bread, he knows that

Note on David and the Bread of the Presence:

In his commentary on 1, 2 Samuel, Bergen writes concerning regulations related to the Bread of Presence: “Yet specific Torah laws might be set aside if higher-level considerations warranted, especially the preservation of life.” Then he adds the following footnote: “This principle of setting aside Torah laws in certain, limited circumstances for the sake of higher-level considerations was practiced from the time of Moses onward. An example within the Torah is seen in Lev 10:12-20, where a violation of Lev 6:16 was permitted, with the judgment having been rendered by Moses himself. Another example is the work performed by priests on the Sabbath as part of the required sacrificial ritual (cf. Num 28:9). First-century Judaism practiced this principle as well as they practiced Sabbath circumcision (cf. John 7:22) and Sabbath-day rescues of animals and persons whose life and well-being was threatened (cf. Luke 14:5). Jesus, the supreme interpreter of the Torah for Christians, also accepted this time-honored principle. For Jesus, irregularities in the implementation of specific Torah regulations were justifiable as long as they were performed to accomplish a greater good or to save life (cf. Mark 3:4). In keeping with this principle Jesus permitted and even perpetrated certain violations of the Sabbath and dietary laws (cf. Matt 12:9-13; Mark 7:19).” (Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, vol. 7, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 222.)

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Notes:

“specific Torah laws might be set aside if higher-level considerations warranted, especially the preservation of life.”¹ Regarding the priestly work on the Sabbath, it was their duty to work so that others could worship. The law did not apply to them in this case.

So, does this mean I can just pick and choose the laws I want to keep? No this is where we get to the **Heart of God and the Authority of Jesus**.

The Heart of God: The two examples given by Jesus are not strictly parallel to the situation of Jesus’ hungry disciples grabbing a snack on the way to the synagogue. The twelve were not going to literally starve, nor were they performing temple service. But by connecting their inconsequential need to the needs of David, Jesus was showing that the Sabbath law is not as rigid as these legalists make it out to be. To make it clearer, Jesus turns the attention of the Pharisees to the words of the prophet Hosea. In the book of Hosea, the nation is condemned for its sinfulness. In chapter 6, the Lord further condemns them for their “transitory devotion.” In verse 6, God (through the prophet) declares, “For I desire faithful love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.” While the prophet had condemned the great sin of the people, he “is not a religious reactionary who simply desires to stamp out social sins and impose religious duty on people.”² In reality, the prophet realized that for his generation, “the shrines and rituals of Israel had become impediments to true spirituality.”³ That is exactly what Jesus is dealing with. The Pharisees had placed “doing right” over “doing good.” Thereby, their devotion was transitory. They were devoted to God in their severe devotion to the law and tradition, but did not demonstrate devotion when relating to others.

Discuss: In what ways might we place our devotion to tradition and “acting right” above showing mercy?

Explain: The heart of God is a heart for others. Our devotion to looking good and maintaining extrabiblical traditions should never impede our call to love our neighbors as ourselves. If God had explicitly outlawed plucking a few grains and popping them in your mouth, that would have been one thing, but He did not. To condemn these men for having a snack is antithetical to God’s heart for people. But what does this passage tell us about Jesus’ authority?

Jesus Authority: Jesus expresses His authority clearly in this passage. He declares that while the work of the priest in the temple is important, “something greater than the temple is here.” The writer of Hebrews is going to teach us that the religious work in the temple was a shadow of

Jesus has “an authority that gives him the right and power to render all poisonous pharisaic superstitions null and void and to dictate whether or not his disciples’ actions were lawful or unlawful, permissible or impermissible.” (Preaching, 318)

¹ Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, vol. 7, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 222.

² Duane A. Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, vol. 19A, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 161.

³ Ibid, 161.

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things to come (cf. Col. 2:16-17). Jesus will fulfill and make unnecessary the work of the temple. He then goes on to declare that He is Lord of the Sabbath. As such, He determines what is admissible on the Sabbath. However, as Spurgeon says, “[Jesus] interpreted the [Sabbath] law, not with license, but with a sweet reasonableness which the more rigid of religionists did not exhibit...The Sabbath is not profaned by works of necessity, piety, or mercy.” (Spurgeon, 147)

Notes:

Summarize and Transition:

Jesus doesn't deliver a long sermon in this passage, but for these religious scholars who could follow the breadcrumbs of this argument, He was saying a lot. To put it simply, Jesus said: “Y'all are too tightly wound. You have tied yourselves in knots trying to keep all these traditions you put in place. Open your eyes to the heart of God. The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27).

In the next passage, Jesus will demonstrate His heart for people and His authority to determine what is proper for the Sabbath.

3. COMPASSIONATE RESPONSE (MATT. 12:9-14)

Read (or have someone read) Matthew 12:9-14.

Explain: Here again, we see how the law can get in the way of doing good. Upon entering the synagogue for Sabbath services, Jesus is presented with opposition and opportunity. The presence of the handicapped man provides the opportunity for the Pharisees to oppose Jesus. The man's presence and their “entangling question” (Spurgeon, 148) provide an opportunity for Jesus. They ask the question, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” The questioning of Jesus might appear to be a Catch-22. If He declared that it was, He would be called a lawbreaker. If He answered no, in light of His previous comments, He would be condemned as heartless. Instead of answering their question, He presents a question of His own.

Reread verse 11

Explain: According to Blomberg, the oral law permitted the rescue of the animal but forbade the healing of an individual who was in danger of dying. (cf. NAC, 198) The man's disfigurement was probably a long-standing ailment, and he was clearly not in mortal danger. So, based on the oral law, if a bleating sheep garnered the attention of a man who discovered it in a pit, the man was permitted to “do work” and rescue the sheep. However, the Sabbath prayers of a disfigured man who could not provide for his family must be ignored by the healer until a later time. This dichotomy exposes the callous nature of the oral law. It is callous and selfish. A person is allowed to help himself by rescuing his sheep, but he is not allowed to help another human being. Jesus exposes this when he says, “A person is worth far more than a sheep; so it is lawful to do what is good on the Sabbath.”

Matthew 12:11
He replied to them, “Who among you, if he had a sheep that fell into a pit on the Sabbath, wouldn't take hold of it and lift it out?

“He points out the inconsistency in the oral law, which permits the rescue of an animal from a pit (e.g., *b. Sabb.* 128b) but not the healing of an individual whose life is not possibly in danger (e.g., *m. Yoma* 8:6—contra the Qumran sectarians, who rectified this inconsistency by prohibiting both actions—CD 11:13–14).” (NAC, 198)

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Discuss: How can our traditions, church regulations, or expectations for proper Sunday decorum exhibit such callousness and selfishness?

Explain: (Fairview folks see the Notes Box for a disclaimer) While we would probably never be so blatantly hardhearted as the Pharisees appear to be, we can at times exhibit similar behavior. Our traditions related to Sunday (which is not the Sabbath) can cause us to behave similarly. "Sorry, I can't help you fix that burst water pipe this morning. I have to go to church."

"Sorry, I can't help clean up the storm damage on Sunday afternoon because I have to take a nap before going back for Sunday night Bible study." Church regulation (written or otherwise) can get in the way of doing good as well.

"Sorry, we can't allow you to have that event because it might lead to a stain on the carpet or a scratch on the wall" (that is what carpet cleaners and paint brushes are for). "Sorry, your child can't have his birthday party in the gym because someone might get injured" (that is what a million-dollar liability insurance policy and a church host are for). Expected Sunday decorum can get in the way as well. Expected Sunday dress-codes or even statements like, "we can't let the kids sing on Sunday because they are not as talented as the praise team," can demonstrate our hardheartedness.

Summarize and Transition: Jesus says, "A person is worth far more than a sheep." A lost soul is more important than Sunday dress codes. Building a relationship with an unchurched family who wants to use the gym for a birthday party is more important than the possibility of an accident. Performing a wedding for a young couple who want to get things right is more important than the church calendar.

Yes, we need policies and procedures that will protect the organization. Yes, we need expectations that prevent harm or dangerous situations. But we also need to remember that everything the church does or doesn't do is a gospel decision.

CONCLUDE

This passage in Matthew 12 comes on the heels of Jesus' statement in Matthew 11:25-30. There, He calls all those who are "weary and burdened" to come to Him because his "yoke is easy and his burden is light." The traditions and oral law of the Pharisees were a burden on the people. Moreover, they were antithetical to Jesus' heart for people. Jesus' love for others caused the Pharisees to plot against Him. They placed tradition above love and thereby gave in to hate. Let us not go down the same road.

Guide and Challenge:

Guide the group to page 116 of their personal study guide and read the three points at the top of the page: (1) We should avoid judging others based on their adherence to a religious tradition or practice. (2) We should give greater attention to the condition of our heart than to adherence to man-made rules. (3) We must seek to make our priorities and practices consistent with what God values most.

Challenge the group to be aware of the needs of others and place mercy over rules, traditions, or man-made expectations in the coming week.

Notes:

Teacher's Note:

While no church is perfect, I do not often see the examples that follow in our local congregation.

SOME SELECTED QUOTES ABOUT SABBATH LAW

In his commentary, John MacArthur writes: “Tailors did not carry a needle with them on the Sabbath for fear they might be tempted to mend a garment and thereby perform work. Nothing could be bought or sold, and clothing could not be dyed or washed. A letter could not be dispatched, even if by the hand of a Gentile. No fire could be lit or extinguished—including fire for a lamp—although a fire already lit could be used within certain limits. For that reason, some orthodox Jews today use automatic timers to turn on lights in their homes before the Sabbath begins. Otherwise, they might forget to turn them on in time and have to spend the night in the dark. Baths could not be taken for fear some of the water might spill onto the floor and ‘wash’ it. Chairs could not be moved because dragging them might make a furrow in the ground, and a woman was not to look in a mirror lest she see a gray hair and be tempted to pull it out.” (quoted in Exalting, 1580159)

“The Mishna (which is a compilation of these oral traditions) lists 31, ‘including those we might expect, such as plowing, hunting, and butchering, and those we would not such as tying or loosing knots, sewing more than one stitch, or writing more than one letter’ (m. Sabb. 7:2). Some of these novel rulings bordered on the ridiculous. For example, one stated, ‘If a building fell down on the Sabbath, enough rubble could be removed to discover if any victims were dead or alive. If alive, they could be rescued, but if dead, the corpses must be left until sunset [the end of the Sabbath].’” (Preaching, 313)

You could not walk further than 3,000 feet from your house. If you have food stored 3,000 feet from your house, then that food is an extension of your house. This stored food allows you to travel 3,000 more feet. (c.f. Exalting, 158)

Exodus 20:8-11 and Jeremiah 17:21-22 prohibit carrying a load on the Sabbath. What is considered a load? The Pharisees determined that your clothes were not a load, but if you carried your jacket, that was considered a load.” (c.f. Exalting, 158)