

## **The Son of Man is Lord Even of the Sabbath**

Call to Worship: Psalm 108

1st Scripture: 1 Samuel 21:1-6

2nd Scripture: Matthew 12:1-8

### **Introduction**

In Luke 4:16, we are told, “So [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read.” And then again, in verse 31, Luke tells us, “Then He went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee, and was teaching them on the Sabbaths.”

Once Jesus had begun His earthly ministry, following His baptism and anointing by the Holy Spirit, it was His customary practice to teach about the Kingdom of God (that was now at hand), in the synagogues on the Sabbath Day. This was an important time to get His message out, because, even as we gather together every Sunday (on the Lord’s Day) to worship, the Jews would have gathered together on the Sabbath Day, in their synagogues (which were dispersed all over Israel, and all throughout the Gentile world, for that matter) to be taught God’s Word. The Sabbath Day was no small matter to the Jew. It was to be set apart, in accordance with God’s Moral Law, to be a day of worship and rest. No work was to be done on the Sabbath Day.

That said, the religious leaders, in seeking to promote piety, had added literally hundreds of traditional restrictions to the Law of Moses, as a means of seeking to preserve the sanctity of the Day, which sadly, actually only served to make the Day anything but a Day of rest. All in all, it actually became more of a burden for the people of God. Well, what happens when Jesus refuses to honor all of the added traditions of the religious leaders, throughout the course of His ministry? Naturally, they accuse Him of being a Sabbath breaker. And no doubt, this was a label which had spread throughout all Israel (and beyond), in an attempt to discredit the Messianic authority and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. The people had assumed that the religious leaders’ view of the Sabbath, with all of their added restrictions, was actually in keeping with the Law of Moses (after all, that is what they had been taught), and so, if Jesus was going to be received as their Messiah, the questions that would have to be answered were, “Did Jesus really

break the Sabbath Day? If so, how can we receive Him, a transgressor of the Mosaic Law, as our Messiah? If not, why do the Pharisees and Scribes accuse Him, so strongly, of doing so?”

This was an extremely important issue that needed to be dealt with (in fact, it is our Lord’s alleged Sabbath violations which led the religious leaders to begin to talk about putting Him to death— we will see this next time, Lord willing), and so, we ought not to be surprised that Matthew addresses this important matter in his Gospel, beginning with our main text for this morning.

### **I. The Accusation**

“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. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, “Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!” (Vs. 1-2).

Here, we begin by considering the accusation. As our Lord was traveling about with His disciples, continuing to minister with them everywhere they went, en route, they had travelled through some grainfields, and it was on the Sabbath Day. Now, for the moment, we recall again that it was customary for our Lord to minister in synagogues on the Sabbath Day, and it certainly would have been a very busy day of ministry for Him. For, that is when the general population laid aside their own professions, so that, they could rest and worship God together. And so, that which was generally a Day of rest for most, was probably one of His busiest days. We can say it this way. What better opportunity would there be, to get the Word out, about the arrival of the New Covenant Kingdom of God, than the Sabbath Day?

That said, as was often the case, as well, ministry often kept the Lord and His disciples from ensuring that they were able to secure their daily sustenance for the day. And so, en route, while passing through these grainfields, the Lord’s disciples, being hungry, began to pluck some of the heads of grain from the edges of the grainfields (remember, the Israelites were commanded to leave some of their produce unpicked at the edges of their fields, for the poor, for distant travelers and for those who were weary). And then, they sifted the grain by rubbing it between their fingers, so they could eat the edible portion of the grain.

Well, when the Pharisees saw this, they equated it with reaping and threshing, and charged the disciples with violating the sanctity of the Sabbath. And so they confront Jesus, angrily declaring, “Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!” “The Scriptures command us to refrain from any work on the Sabbath. And by plucking those heads and sifting out the wheat through their fingers, they are working. Your disciples are law breakers! What are you going to do about it?”

Jesus then responds by defending the actions of His disciples with the use of two Biblical examples, followed by an overarching principle and two profound personal statements, which seal up the whole matter.

## **II. The Response**

“But He said to them, ‘Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: 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? Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless?’” (Vs. 3-5).

And so, here we find two key biblical examples that Jesus uses to defend the actions of His disciples. First, he reminds them of the time when David was on the run, being unjustly pursued by King Saul. Being forced to flee from his home with no time to pack anything, and having a group of men following along with him, David sought necessary resources from Ahimelech, the high priest. However, all Ahimelech had on hand was the holy bread, which only the priests were allowed to eat, after it served its ceremonial usage. In violation of the ceremonial law, Ahimelech gave the bread to David and his men.

Now, why does Jesus point this example out to the Pharisees? Is he condoning law breaking or casting aside the ceremonial law that God had set in place through Moses? Of course not. His point is that David was in a desperate situation and it was warranted to break the ceremonial law on that occasion, in order to sustain the lives of David and his men. It wasn't like David was careless or just decided he wanted to taste the holy bread. That would have been a serious offense then. But, he and his men were in need, and they were unjustly being pursued

by Saul and his army. The point being that David's life, and the life of his men, were more important than keeping the ceremonial law on that occasion. There is a higher moral law which calls us to love others and to preserve life, which supersedes the intention and purpose of the ceremonial law. And so, neither Ahimelech nor David were wrong for what they had done.

And so, by this first example the Lord was showing that the purpose of the ceremonial law was not to trump all other law, especially the Sixth Commandment which calls for the preservation of life. That's why our Lord quotes again, in verse 7, that critical Old Covenant principle found in Hosea 6:6, which we considered back in Matthew 9:13, where God declares, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice."

You see, the Lord and His disciples were not careless with their Sabbath observance. They were spending the day traveling about, ministering to others, and in the process of their tirelessly serving others, they grew hungry. There was no negligence or laziness on their part. They didn't neglect to prepare for Saturday, on Friday, so that, they could enjoy watching games or lounge about. And so, utilizing this opportunity, en route, to provide themselves with some minimal nourishment in order to continue ministering unto the Lord, was no violation of the law whatsoever, which brings us to our Lord's second Old Testament example.

"Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless?" (Vs. 5) If everyone followed the traditional Pharisaical restrictions added to the true Sabbath restrictions; if everyone was forced to observe the Sabbath in accordance with the weighty commands of the Pharisees, then the priests themselves would have been extremely guilty of violating the Sabbath Day every week, because they constantly performed their ministerial duties on the Sabbath. In fact, their labors increased on the Sabbath Day, because they had to offer additional sacrifices that were added to the regular daily quota, on behalf of the people.

Now, what is the Lord's point in bringing this out? He is saying that there is warrant for some labor to be done on the Sabbath Day, particularly when that labor involves acts of ministry. We are called to do good to others on the Sabbath Day. God never intended to restrain love or to limit acts of kindness, mercy and necessity on the Sabbath Day. Yes, He forbade general labor, so as to give man the blessing of being able to rest and to enjoy God, and to fellowship with His

people, in a way that is not possible on the other six days. But, it is more than appropriate to minister to others and to conduct acts of love and mercy on the Sabbath Day. The priests, who continued to fulfill their ministerial responsibilities (and additional ones), which involved intense labor, were doing what they were called to do, on behalf of the people of God. And so, if Sabbath observance is measured merely by a blind gauge of considering how much energy is exerted (which is what the Pharisees were doing), then the priests themselves were grossly violating the Sabbath command.

Bringing this over to the accusation which the Pharisees were making against the disciples of the Lord, again, we find that the disciples were engaged in laborious acts of service (even greater than the temple service in the ultimate sense), going from town to town proclaiming the arrival of the Kingdom of God. They were not serving their own interests or seeking to make an extra buck. They were freely carrying and proclaiming the life giving Gospel to all people. The Christ had arrived, and they were striving to introduce the Savior to sinners, who had desperate need of Him. And so, they were not in violation of the true intent of the Sabbath. They merely exposed the Pharisaical abuses of the Sabbath command, which God had never intended to bind to the hearts of His people. They exposed what happens when you take any portion of the Law of God and make it a matter of “observing the letter” rather than the heart of the Law. And when you make the Law a means of justifying yourself in the sight of God; when, as a sinner, you make Law-keeping the standard by which you seek to obtain the righteousness of God, you inevitably fall into the trap of observing the letter of the Law rather than the heart of the Law. And in doing so, you actually distort and contradict the very substance of the Law itself, which hinges upon loving God with all your being and your neighbor as yourself. This is what the Jews were doing. And they needed to see that the problem was not about Jesus (and His disciples) violating the Sabbath, but rather, that the religious leaders had completely abused, distorted and changed the true intent of God’s Law.

### **III. The Overarching Principle**

What then is the overarching principle given here about Sabbath Day observance, and Law observance in general? It is found in verse 7 (Note: we will come back to verse 6 in a moment). “But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless.” It’s what we have been saying all along, as we have been working through the Gospel of Matthew, especially presented as the great, definitional summary statement of the entire Sermon on the Mount.

God’s greatest concern is about the heart, and the motive for all that we do ought to spring out of a heart that loves God and others. When you remove the underlying principles of love from any form of law keeping, you have completely abandoned the true intent of the Law, altogether. That’s why the Scriptures also teach that, “Love is the fulfillment of all Law.” This is in no way to subvert the Law, but rather, it is to expose the true heart of the Law, and the very spring, out of which, the Law itself finds its origin. Again, that’s why the Apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 13 speaks of love being the guiding principle, out of which, all acts of obedience to God must spring. And brethren, this is a trans-covenantal principle. In other words, this principle is not only a New Covenant principle. It is the basic principle of life, when seeking to serve our God and Creator. To this end, we ourselves ought to be careful to avoid the same trap which the Pharisees had fallen into. The Law is important. Indeed, the moral Law is still binding on us today. But, it is never to be seen as the standard for securing or maintaining fellowship with God, and it is never to be seen as an end in itself. Motives count. The heart is everything. And love must be the driving force and motive behind all obedience to God’s Law, and acts of service toward God. Indeed, we keep the Law, because we love God and others. Rote obedience to commands, which seeks to lay aside love and mercy, is in fact, lawlessness at its core, and unacceptable to God.

And brethren, that is the glory of the Gospel, isn’t it? God not only saves us from our sins, but He also re-institutes this love principle in us. Christ Himself, as our beloved Redeemer, has become the object of our love, so that, we obey God not to align ourselves into some system of obtaining His favor by way of merit, but rather, out of heartfelt love because of what He has done for us in Christ. We love and obey God because He has first loved us. We are love-driven

and love-compelled, because Christ has saved us from the curse of the Law which falls upon unworthy sinners. And our love is now properly expressed through the vehicle of law keeping, which is governed by the heart of the Law and not the letter. And so, our Lord is not getting rid of the Law. He doesn't say that his disciples had a right to break the law, and that's that. He doesn't excuse guilt. In fact, He states that the Pharisees, who had misused and abused the true intent of the Law, would not have *condemned the guiltless* (our Lord's disciples never broke the Sabbath command here), if they understood the overarching principle for all Law, namely, that God desires mercy and not sacrifice. Again, this is a principle that transcends all covenants.

#### **IV. Two Profound Statements**

Before concluding our time for this morning, brethren, we have to consider two additional profound statements that our Lord makes here, which totally seal the matter. While He does make His case in what we have considered so far, He also states two things about Himself, which directly relate to the Law that the Pharisees were erroneously attempting to wield against Him. And brethren, it is too easy to gloss over these statements and to miss the magnitude of what our Lord is saying here.

1) "Yet I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple." Now, our Lord is obviously speaking about Himself here, but what does He mean by this statement. First, we note that it follows what He had just stated in verse 5, about the priests laboring on the Sabbaths. To this end then, we see that the Lord is building a "lesser to greater" argument. In other words, if the priests are blameless when they profane the Sabbath, by performing their labors; if that highest office in all of Israel is granted the ability (and even commanded) to do what the general population could not do, how much more could the Christ, who is even greater than the entire temple, conduct His ministry labors on the Sabbath.

Now, how could the Lord make such a profoundly stark declaration? How could He claim to be greater than the very temple itself, which represented the very presence of God among His people? How could He claim to be greater *not* only than the priests, but than the very temple itself, which the priests served? When one reads through the Book of Hebrews, you get a thorough exposition of what exactly our Lord meant by this statement. And the short form is

this: What the temple represented in all of its glory; what the temple foreshadowed in the totality of its furnishings and all that ceremonially took place there, all pointed to the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the very substance, toward which, every limited and flawed shadow that the temple provided, pointed to. The temple was an Old Covenant means of preparing the people of God for the coming glory of the Christ! And so, the Lord was greater than the temple in the same way that a real tangible building is to a blueprint. And everything that the temple lacked because it could never ultimately bring man to God, Christ fulfilled by the offering up of Himself once for all time, to bring sinners to God, and that, into the very presence of God in the Most Holy Place of His heavenly tabernacle, and as often as we like. And so, the Lord says, as it were, if the priests were granted this privilege, how much more, the One who is greater than the entire ball of wax; the temple and all that it contains?! Christ's ministry was universal in its scope, and it was far greater than anything the priests had ever done, collectively, since the time of Aaron, and the whole ceremonial system and temple, for that matter!

2) Our Lord also profoundly states, "For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." Now brethren, once again, consider the magnitude of what our Lord has stated here. Can you imagine Abraham or Moses saying, "For Abraham/Moses is Lord even of the Sabbath?" Once again, this declaration is a profound testimony to the deity of Christ. Now, why do I say this?

Well, consider what the Lord Jesus Christ is saying here. He is saying that not only is the Sabbath Day not master over Him, but furthermore, He Himself, the Son of Man (the Messiah), is Master over the Sabbath. Now, what does He mean by this? Is He saying that He can simply disregard the Sabbath commands as He pleases? No, upon becoming man, the Lord subjected Himself to the whole of God's Law, and He kept all of the Mosaic Laws perfectly. However, that said, from the beginning, He is the One who both ordained the Sabbath and determined the scope of its restriction. He is the very maker of the Sabbath, who Himself had set apart the Day, and utilized it as a means of reflecting His own rest on the Seventh Day of creation. It belongs to Him. It is His servant, and has served His purposes from the beginning. It exists for the very purpose of accomplishing what He has intended with it, for mankind from the beginning. The Sabbath Day belongs to Him. Sadly, the religious leaders had added all kinds of restrictions to it, which He, the Lord of the Sabbath, had never commanded, and therefore, they brought the



people under their own yoke, rather than the yoke of God. They stole God's design and transformed it into their own design. But here, the Lord boldly declares, "The Sabbath, as to its true intent; the Sabbath, as God had intended it, belongs to Me, and serves My glorious purposes for mankind."

And so, the disciples of the Lord had not violated the Sabbath at all. They had every right to pluck those heads of grain, and to eat them, as they conducted their ongoing ministry to the Lord. And had they done wrong, the very architect and ruler over the Sabbath would have corrected them for doing so.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Lord willing, brethren, we will continue with this theme next time, as Matthew tells us of another event surrounding the Sabbath Day, where the religious leaders sought to contend with the Lord. But for now, let me just end with these concluding words.

1) Let us be careful never to think (what I have heard people assume) that our Lord, in any way, had broken or allowed His disciples to break the Sabbath. He says right here in the text, that His disciples were guiltless. Jesus, in no way, contradicted the Sabbath command, any more than the priests had done from the time the Lord had initiated the entire Mosaic Law. Rather, as we have seen, the Lord had honored the true intent of the Sabbath, which has been in place since the Lord sanctified the Day from the time of creation. The Lord did not obligate Himself or His Disciples to keep the traditions of the Pharisees, which were not in keeping with the Law of God. And so, the Lord kept the Sabbath Day perfectly from the beginning, and in fact, He brought the people back to its true intent, even as He had done with the Moral Law in general, in the Sermon on the Mount. The Lord wasn't changing or creating a new moral law, rather, He was stripping the false interpretations of the Law, away from the true intention and heart of the Law. It is important to recognize this, lest we accuse the Lord of being a Law breaker, in thinking that He had broken the true intent of the Fourth Commandment. Such a belief is dangerous, as it inevitably brings into question the validity of the Lord's sacrifice, since He would then not have fulfilled the Law perfectly on our behalf.

2) Let us always remember and rejoice in the fact that our Lord and Savior is also the Lord of the Sabbath! To this end, we know that at His resurrection, He had changed the Day to the first Day of the week, stripping away the ceremonial/Jewish aspects of the sabbath (which He had fulfilled by His death), while leaving the substantial principle of setting the Day apart unto God, in tact. Indeed, is it no wonder that John speaks of the first day of the week, in the Revelation, as the “Lord’s Day.” By way of creation and redemption, Jesus is, indeed, the Lord’s Day! And everything the Jews would have reflected upon, concerning their redemption out of the bondage of Egypt, which lined up with their Sabbath, for us, transfers to the substance to which that redemption pointed. We reflect upon our redemption out of the bondage of our sin, which was purchased by the death of our Savior. And so, we all look back to creation in the Sabbath, but our redemptive focus changes in the New covenant. Indeed, to this end, Jesus is our Sabbath, and we look forward to our eternal Sabbath with Him in glory!

Amen!!!

**Benediction:** Jude 1:24-25

Change to the Lord’s Day