

Introduction

Much of the world assumes that religious people are close to God. But this is a gravely mistaken notion. Few people in the world have ever been as religious as the Pharisees of Jesus day. And yet no one has ever been further from God than they. Matthew 12 displays that they loved their religion so much they couldn't stomach the God they claimed to serve.

[Read Text; Pray]

Matthew begins chapter 12 with the words, "at that time." He does not necessarily mean "at that very moment" but "in that general time span." He is referencing a close connection between what Jesus had said at the end of chapter 11 and what unfolds here in chapter 12. In chapter 11 Jesus saw the crowds overloaded with the heavy burden of legalism. He had called them to come to him for relief. He presented himself as the true Sabbath rest for those who would come take refuge in him and learn from him. He said that he is gentle and lowly of heart. He declared that his yoke is easy and his burden is light. He is caring and merciful while the scribes and Pharisees, the ones from whom they had been learning, are callous and cold-hearted. The encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees in chapter 12 vividly illustrates what Jesus said about himself. And it underscores in contrast the self-righteous hostility in the hearts of the Pharisees. We see in a graphic way that you can be devoted to religion but devoid of righteousness. In fact these religious zealots more accurately display the character of the devil than the character of God.

You and I need to pay close attention this morning because in this text we are given an opportunity to marvel at the magnificence and mercy of our Savior. We are also warned against the danger of self-centered, self-dependent, self-absorbed religion.

Let's start this morning by noting . . .

I. The Substitute for Mercy.

The centerpiece of the text is this statement from verse 7: "I desire mercy and not sacrifice." Jesus declares that it is imperative to know what this means. If the Pharisees had known what it means, they would not have wrongly accused the guiltless. And they should have known what it means. This statement is a quote from Hosea 6:6. It was spoken by the Lord to his faithless wife, the people of Israel.

The Lord God expresses his frustration with the people, "What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away." The Lord had spoken sharply to them through the prophets. He had judged them with his words. The people were bringing sacrifices and burnt offerings, but they did not love God and they did not know God. He did not want their displays of worship without mercy in their hearts and a real drive to know and relate to Him. They were more tied to offering their sacrifices than they were to God himself. They did not love him; they did not know him; and they did not reflect him.

The substitute for mercy in their heart was a hollow adherence to the form of religion, the form of ceremony. For this reason the Lord was severe in his rebuke of them. The absence of steadfast love in their heart meant there was an absence of mercy in their lives toward one another. They did not embrace God, and they did not exhibit the mercy of God. That is the way it had been in the days of Hosea. Now in the days of Jesus the condition of the hearts of the scribes and Pharisees was no different. They loved their ceremonies but they did not love God. They were vigilant in their observance of legal regulations but were without mercy in their hearts.

With this statement as the centerpiece of the text, we can look at the whole as it relates to mercy. We will see recipients of mercy, enemies of mercy, and the Lord of mercy.

Let's turn next to . . .

II. The Recipients of Mercy.

A. The first recipients of mercy are the disciples of Jesus. These included former fishermen and a former tax-collector and others, all of whom had left steady jobs to follow Jesus. They went around preaching the nearness

and the nature of the kingdom. Going through the grainfields probably indicates they were en route somewhere. Most roads were wide trails through pastures and fields up to the edge of which the crops would grow.

These disciples grew hungry and were picking heads of ripened grain and eating kernels. This activity was explicitly condoned by the law of Moses. Deuteronomy 23:25 instructs, "If you go into a neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor's standing grain." The disciples were hungry and God provided for their need. There was no biblical reason not to have enjoyed God's gracious and merciful provision.

B. The second recipient of mercy in our text is the man with a withered hand. Here was a man not in a life-or-death situation but in a pitiful condition. Having a withered hand is more serious than being a little hungry. Jesus was delighted to do him good on the Sabbath. And don't you know that man was delighted to receive mercy from the Lord.

C. The Lord delights to provide for the hungry. He delights to help the infirm. David reflects this in the 23rd Psalm. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, he makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters . . . He restores my soul." The Lord feeds the birds of the air. He takes care of his disciples. It is of his merciful kindness that we receive what we need from day to day. It is of his mercy that he provides relief from our distress.

Abraham worshiped the Lord our provider on the mount of sacrifice. There he had taken his son Isaac according to God's word to sacrifice him to the Lord. When he passed the test, however, the Lord halted him from taking the life of his son. Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold behind him was a ram caught in the thicket by his horns. And he went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place, "The Lord will provide."

D. The greatest of God's merciful provisions is his own son. "He . . . spared not his own son but delivered him up for us." By mercifully giving up his Son, he has redeemed those who trust in him. The disciples were

following Jesus. Where he went they followed. They were identified with him and he became their advocate in this situation. When the cries of the accusers went up, the voice of Jesus silenced them. So it is for all who repent of sin and take refuge in him. "If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins." If you have come to faith in Christ, you are a recipient of God's great and wonderful mercy. And there is more yet to come. "He who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"

We move from the Recipients of Mercy to . . .

III. The Enemies of Mercy

A. The enemies of mercy in this text are the Pharisees. There was nothing in the Mosaic law, not even the fact that this was the Sabbath day, to forbid the disciples of Jesus from picking and eating kernels of grain while they walked through the fields. But when it came to the Sabbath day, the rabbis through many years had added to the law of Moses thousands of prohibitions which they considered work. The Talmud is rabbinic Judaism's collection of traditions and ceremonial regulations. It contains 24 chapters of Sabbath laws. Those laws condemned what the disciples were doing as work. It was not allowed on the Sabbath by Jewish tradition. This was a ridiculous interpretation of the Mosaic law. But these people were sticklers for their traditions. It did not matter that the disciples were hungry. It did not matter that they were not reaping. What mattered was their strict allegiance to ceremonial traditions that had turned the Sabbath day from a time of rest to a legal burden God never meant the people to bear.

B. And not only did the Pharisees meticulously work the to keep meticulous and overbearing Sabbath laws, they also had their condemning eyes on others who did not follow the traditions they was they did. So they were out in the fields watching Jesus and his disciples on the Sabbath. And just as they had hoped, they caught these disciples red-handed, breaking a rabbinic tradition of the Sabbath. They were harvesting grain!! According to the law of Moses, breaking the Sabbath calls for death. These Pharisees were driven by a strict legalism and were the enforcement brigade of a system that had severed itself from the heart of God. Their legal code

placed on top of the law of Moses forbade hungry men from eating a few kernels of grain as they walked through the field.

C. But not only that, these guys were serious regarding the guilt of Jesus' disciples. The Pharisees were not following them around simply to be able to say, "Uh-uh. You can't do that!" No they were there to accuse. They were there to pronounce guilt. They were there to condemn. It seems they rejoiced to be able find fault in others and celebrate that fault. No doubt in their minds they were ratified in their own righteousness as they pointed their fingers away from themselves to the sin of others.

D. The Pharisees' enmity toward mercy is further demonstrated with regard to the man with the withered hand. They all went from the fields to the synagogue where there was a man with a withered hand. A man with a withered hand! The Pharisees hearts danced with joy. What an opportunity! Not to see a man made well. No but an opportunity to accuse Jesus! These guys are ruthless. They are not the least bit merciful! They do not sympathize with a man in that condition. They are delighted he is in that condition because here is a public occasion for them to lure Jesus into breaking the law. Then they can pounce!

The Pharisees did not care for this man at all except that he was a means to their end. He is not a valuable soul in need of kindness. No, he is an object for them to take advantage of.

E. Finally, the Pharisees' enmity toward mercy is magnified in their evil intent toward Jesus. When Jesus proved that their traditions flew in the face of the mercy of God, they became enraged. They should have been repenting before him. Instead, their hearts were hardened and they determined to destroy him. They conspired to destroy the Lord of mercy.

If ever the devil was personified, it was in these religious zealots. They hate mercy. They despise grace. They love their many laws because they afford them the opportunity to implicate. They want to lure people into actions for which they can turn around and point the accusing finger. Satan prowls about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. He tempts to sin as he did Adam and Eve in the garden. But he is also the accuser.

Revelation 12:10 calls the devil the accuser of the brothers who accuses them day and night before our God.

Listen, it is helpful, brothers and sisters, if you will remember that Satan is tempter and accuser. He never tempts you to any sin except in order to be able to laugh mockingly before God and say, "Guilty! Guilty!! Guilty!" He is the mortal enemy of your soul. He desires nothing but your eternal condemnation. Why would you listen to his siren call? Remember that like these Pharisees, he is an enemy to mercy.

We move next to

IV. The Lord of Mercy.

What Jesus had said about himself in chapter 11—that he is gentle and lowly in heart, that his yoke is easy and his burden light—is born out here in the encounter with the Pharisees. They are hostile and heartless and desire to incriminate. They set themselves up as the authority of Jewish law and wag their self-importance before others by trampling on them. But Jesus reveals himself to be the real authority, the crown jewel to which the most important features of Jewish history point. He is in fact the Lord, and yet he is a defender of those being accused. He is a reliever of the man in distress.

Jesus' interaction with the Pharisees demonstrates that they are disconnected from the heart of God. Jesus could have argued directly with the Pharisees that they were simply incorrect, that the rabbinic traditions violated the law of Moses by being more restrictive than it was ever meant to be. But oh no, he takes advantage of the opportunity to say that and so much more. He demonstrates great mastery in his response to the Pharisees. With the simplest references he makes the most audacious and compelling declarations about who he is and what the purpose of the Sabbath observance really is.

A. First, he declares that he is the greater King in David's line. The Pharisees say, "Look your disciples are doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath." Jesus' first reply is this (v. 3-4), "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him; how he entered

the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests?" Jesus is referencing what is recorded in 1 Samuel 21. Saul was determined to put David to death. He was pursuing him. David was on his way to be joined by his companions. He went hungry to the house of God and asked for bread. The only bread on hand was the bread of the Presence. This was bread that was baked fresh every week. Twelve loaves were prepared and placed in the tabernacle to signify the fellowship between God and his people. When it was replaced, it was to be eaten only by the priests. But seeing that this was David and he was joined by companions all of whom needed nourishment, the ceremonial rule was waived, and the priest gave David the bread.

In essence Jesus declares to the Pharisees that he is David and these disciples are likened unto David's companions. He was also declaring that it is legitimate to set aside ceremonial concerns because of who he is and because of the need of the moment. This evidences that the ceremonies God instituted were never meant to interfere with human well-being. God is merciful. He cares about humans made in his image and he values meeting human needs more than observing ceremonial stipulations. It would not be the intention of God for these men to go hungry in order to observe the Pharisees' idea of the Sabbath command to refrain from work. And yet Jesus is saying so much more. In a veiled way, he is declaring himself to be David's successor. This is a messianic claim.

Moreover, if you go back to Samuel you see that this even happened in the midst of David's flight from the pursuing Saul who had determined to destroy David. If Jesus fulfills the type of David, then these Pharisees fulfill the type of Saul who is the enemy of the Lord's anointed. Like Saul who wanted to offer God sacrifice but not obey, these have been rejected. And that is exactly what they go on to demonstrate when they conspire to destroy Jesus.

B. So first, Jesus points to himself as the greater David. But next, he points to himself as the fulfillment of the temple. The temple was the absolute center of Jewish worship. Everyday Jewish life revolved around

the temple. Jesus asks again, "Have you not read in the law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless?"

The Sabbath was a day of rest for everyone except the priests in the temple. The Sabbath was in fact the busiest and most demanding day of the week for them. They had to prepare the bread of the Presence (Leviticus 24:8-9), light the altar fires, kill the sacrifices, place them onto the altar. And there was additional sacrificing on the Sabbath to what was required every other day (Numbers 28:9-10). In essence Jesus says to the Pharisees, "Surely, you know that in the temple on the Sabbath day, the priests work harder than ever, but it is not a violation of the Sabbath commandment because of who they are and because of what they are doing. They are obeying the merciful directive of the Lord."

But what Jesus says next is a bombshell to out blast all bombshells for the Pharisees. "And I tell you, something greater than the temple is here." Yes, I am the greater David, and I am the greater temple! What is greater than the temple but God. The temple is where the glory of God tabernacles in the midst of his people. That my Pharisee friends is me. And these my followers are my priests. And they are at work here with me. Their service to me does not violate the Sabbath. The work of the temple is a work of mercy and the work we do is a work of greater mercy. You miss the heart of God because you miss who I am.

C. Jesus declares he is the greater David and the greater temple, and now lest there be any doubt, he says, "The Son of Man is the Lord of the Sabbath." In case you do not see it, the one who is the greater David and the greater temple is in fact the Lord. And that is who I am. I gave the Sabbath. I am Lord over this ceremonial day. I can administer it ever how I want to administer it. And I choose to administer it in mercy. If you knew the heart of God, you would understand and you would not have accused the guiltless."

D. Finally, Jesus demonstrates vividly the power and authority that he possess by miraculously healing the man with the withered hand. He declares he is more valuable than a sheep. And declares that the Sabbath is a day for doing good, for healing, for showing mercy.

All in all Jesus is declaring who he is. And he is explaining that the ceremonies are not the first order of importance with God. Man was not made for the observance of ceremonies. Ceremonies were made for man. The ceremonies of the Old Testament including the commanded observance of the Sabbath, were given to the Israelites to teach them to instruct them. They instructed them with reference to sin, with reference to purity, to a divine demand for cleanness, to the consequences of sin and the need for atonement, and to the provision that would be made by the coming Messiah. The ceremonies were not given to impede human welfare but to promote it at its most fundamental level. It all points to Jesus and his sacrifice and his provision and his mercy and his rest.

These Pharisees would prevent people from entering that rest. Legalistic religion never made anyone right with God. Sabbath keeping never made anyone right with God. The blood of goats and bulls never made anyone right with God. Jesus, the Lamb of God is the one whose blood makes sinners right with God. He is the temple at which we see God and enter into communion with him. Jesus had said, "Come to me and I will give you rest." Here is why you can trust that he will. He is the Lord of mercy.

Conclusion

The people who come for refuge to the Lord of mercy should show themselves merciful as well.

Psalm 86:15 says, "But you, O Lord are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness."

Proverbs 3:3-4 instructs, "Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart. So you will find favor and good success in the sight of God and man."

The people who have received the mercy of God should be the most bright and shining examples of mercy on the face of the earth. Sad to say the Pharisees here represent the kind of heart displayed by many who profess to follow Christ. The thing that really stands out to me about the Pharisees is that they were more concerned to point out what they saw as the sins of others than they were to admit and detest their own sins. They saw

themselves as the champions of righteousness rather than the chiefs of sinners. When a sinner receives mercy and knows he has received mercy, he does tend to go out looking to condemn others but to bless them.

Beware of condemning others because they do not hold to your standard. The gospel is for sinners, the sick, those who need a physician, not for those who are well.

People who haven't received mercy do not know how to show mercy. If we have received mercy we should show mercy. Think of yourself in the normal course of living your life and answer this. Do you look more like the Pharisees or more like Jesus . . . to your co-workers, to your spouse, to your children, to your neighbors, to the world at large?