

# The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

### MATTHEW 12:1-21

THERE are three movements in chapter twelve, all of them dealing with the subject of the conflict between Jesus and the rulers.

- First, the conflict concerning the Sabbath, in verses one to twenty-one.
- Then, the conflict concerning His power, where He obtained it, and what its nature was; in verses twenty-two to thirty-seven.
- Finally, the conflict concerning a sign; they asked for some sign, and He refused it; in verses thirty-eight to fifty.

At the beginning of His ministry the rulers were not only interested in Jesus, they were attracted by Him, and admired Him.

They invited Him to dinner. They propounded their questions to Him. This did not last long; and we saw in chapter nine that they really broke with Him when He claimed authority in the moral realm, and claimed the right to forgive sins.

This was the first outward break; but the first waning of admiration of Jesus on the part of the rulers was born of the fact that He made Himself the friend of sinners, and so violated all their conceptions of righteousness and purity; their conceptions being that righteousness and purity consisted in external separation from sinners, and from their sin.

Now we approach that period in His propaganda when hostility became evident, positive. It never ended until they folded their arms across their breasts satisfied because they had encompassed His death.

In these twenty-one verses the subject is the Sabbath:

- First, the Sabbath in the corn-fields, verses one to eight;
- Secondly, the Sabbath in the synagogue, verses nine to twenty-one.

In the first eight verses dealing with the Sabbath in the corn-fields, we have the King's claim of authority; in the second division, the Sabbath in the synagogue, we have the King's activity upon the basis of that authority.

Before proceeding to the examination of these two passages, it is well to specially notice that the Sabbath question was that which led the rulers to determine on the death of Jesus. They opposed and criticized Him before; they wanted to find some method of dealing with Him; but each of the Evangelists refers to this fact, though in each Gospel it is stated in different setting, under different circumstances, that it was because of our Lord's attitude toward the Sabbath that these men decided to kill Him. If this is established it reveals the importance of the Sabbath question, and forbids any superficial exposition of the verses we are studying.

For instance, it has been very commonly said that the attitude of Jesus to the Sabbath was a protest against the Rabbinical view of the Sabbath. It has been generally said that when He defended His disciples for plucking ears of corn, and when He Himself healed on the Sabbath, He was setting the Sabbath free from false methods of observance. There is an element of truth in all this, but to leave the subject there is to miss the profoundest values of this wonderful section, in which the King, claiming authority for the Sabbath, and prosecuting His activity on the Sabbath, aroused the ire of the rulers so that they begin to plot to take His life. Probably these men would not have plotted to take the life of Jesus simply because He attempted to broaden men's views concerning the Sabbath.

We must read more closely if we would find out what Jesus did both in the cornfields, and in the synagogue. The Sabbath was the most sacred symbol of the real nature of Judaism; indeed the only symbol peculiar to Judaism. We think of other things in the Hebrew economy of the past; for instance their sacrifices, the rite of circumcision, the peculiarity of the Temple in which God was supposed to dwell. But all these things were found amongst heathen people in some form or other. Burnt sacrifices were found among all the Semitic peoples. Circumcision was a common rite among other peoples as well as Jews. Temples in which the gods were supposed to dwell were common things. But the Sabbath was peculiar to the Jew, the setting apart of one day upon which men were to give themselves wholly to, and exclusively to, the cultivation of the spiritual within them, in recognition of their perpetual and underlying relationship to the eternal things.

The Sabbath as a physical blessing provided for men by God is as old as the human race, though not the peculiar quality of the Sabbath as the symbol of separation to God, the seal of God set upon all the phases of life.

The Sabbath according to the Hebrew economy was not one day given to God, while men were permitted to keep six for themselves; it was rather the peculiar sign and symbol of the deepest things in the life of the people.

Now both in the corn-fields, and in the synagogue, and on other occasions, Jesus said things about the Sabbath, and claimed relationship to the Sabbath, which the keen critics of His own day perfectly understood, and upon which they came to the decision that the only thing they could do with Him was to disprove the claim He made by killing Him.

In no relationship or application of His teaching did Jesus make more remarkable claims for Himself than in the words He uttered about the Sabbath, and in our present study there are revealed both His claim, and the reason of their objection to that claim, in two movements.

Let us attempt to look at them with simplicity and naturalness, that we may see what Jesus really said, and understand the claim that He made in the matter of the Sabbath; and discover why it so stirred the hatred of these men.

*First, the Sabbath in the corn-fields, the King's claim of authority.*

He was walking through the corn-fields on the Sabbath day with His disciples, prosecuting His work, journeying from one place to another to preach the Kingdom, to heal, to bless, to call men back again to God; and on the journey the disciples were hungry.

- There is a very wonderful teaching in that very fact; it is a revelation of the poverty of these men.

- There is a very strange teaching in it, too. He, the King, was so poor in earthly things that He was not able to feed the men who followed Him.

At the time they were hungry to use the language of to-day they were doing missionary work, they were going somewhere to proclaim the evangel of the Kingdom. As these hungry men passed through the corn-fields they plucked the ears, and fed themselves with the corn. It was a perfectly simple and natural action of the disciples, and reveals very clearly their estimate of their Lord's heart. They did not for a moment imagine that He would rebuke them.

They knew, as members of the Hebrew nation, that they were doing things that the Pharisees would object to, but they were with Him, and familiarity with Him, and a consciousness of His attitude towards the Sabbath, set them free to pluck the ears, to rub them, to eat, and so to satisfy their hunger. It is a revelation of the relationship existing between Christ and His disciples. There was no hesitation, no appeal, no fear. This action the Pharisees at once criticized. They began to pluck the ears of corn. They began, that is all. Criticism was dogging the footsteps of Jesus and waiting to blaze forth, and immediately the Pharisees raised their objection.

Again notice how the familiarity between Christ and His disciples is brought out in the fact that the Pharisees did not criticize the disciples; they criticized Christ, they put the responsibility for all the disciples were doing upon Him. The appeal which they made was an appeal to Him.

**“But when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto him, Behold, thy disciples do that which is not lawful to do upon the sabbath day.”**

They knew right well that the disciples' action revealed the attitude of their Master, that either by express teaching, or evident example, He had set these men free from certain traditional obligations. Now we come to that which is of supreme importance, our Lord's answer to His critics.

*First, His answer assumed responsibility for their action.*

There is not the faintest suggestion of defense of what they were doing, as though it were something apart from Him. He reminded them of what David did, and so identified Himself with the action of His disciples.

Moreover, He justified their action, and He did so by illustration. Not so much in the actual words He used as in the peculiar illustrations He selected, do we touch the deepest heart of this defense.

He first reminded them of David, that is, He took as an illustration of the rectitude of His conduct the action of the one king of all their history who was after God's own heart notwithstanding all his failure. Solomon was the magnificent, but the name of Solomon never moved the heart of the true Hebrew as did the name of David. He passed back in their history until He came to the one king in whom the kingly ideal had been most perfectly realized, and He said, "**David did, when he was an hungred, and they that were with him . . . did eat the shewbread, which was not lawful for him to eat, neither for them which were with him, but only for the priests?**"

David did the thing unlawful by their standards, unlawful by the technicalities of the law as well as by the tradition of the elders. Jesus would not have said unlawful if referring to tradition merely. Christ was always careful to distinguish between the law of Moses and tradition. And yet He said that David did this, and was guiltless.

Passing from David the king He took the other personality that bulks large in the Hebrew history, and spoke of the priest. He declared that priests profaned the Temple on the Sabbath day in the very act and attitude of their worship. The priest must break the Sabbath to do his manual work of the Temple on the Sabbath. And yet the priest was guiltless. Such is the clear inference.

We miss a great deal of the force of these things unless we keep our minds upon these Pharisees.

They were the rulers, the teachers of the people; and Jesus said to them in effect, You are criticizing My disciples for the breaking of the law; your criticism is not due to enlightenment, it is due to ignorance. Your objection to what you have seen is not due to your perfect understanding of the deep things of God; it is due to your blindness and misunderstanding of them.

**"If ye had known what this meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless."**

Hosea meant, that God looks for mercy and not sacrifice; and that if a man brings a sacrifice, and there is no mercy in his heart, his sacrifice becomes a blasphemy. If you knew, said Jesus to these men, what your own Scriptures meant. If you only understood that the hungry man must be fed Sabbath or no Sabbath! If you had known what all this meant, you would not have blamed the guiltless.

But we have yet to touch the deepest note. All that did not make the Pharisees angry enough to want to kill Him; but this did:

- **"But I say unto you, That in this place is one greater than the temple."**
- **"For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath day."**

The Sabbath is a means of grace, the Sabbath is a Divine provision by which man can have help and strength and blessing, not something by which he is to be bound, and fastened, and burdened. The Sabbath is that through which God in infinite love would cheer the drooping heart of humanity; and it is the Son of Man, the Master of men, Who is the Lord and Master of the Sabbath.

He will take the Sabbath and fulfil it according to the intention of God's heart, even though He violate all the traditions of the elders, even if He seem for the moment to be breaking the external commandment of the law.

The King has claimed to have the perfect right to use the Sabbath as He would.

The King distinctly declared that the priest was guiltless in what would have been his profanity, because he was ministering in the Temple; and then He said, "**But I say unto you, That in this place is one greater than the temple.**"

"And if the priest in the Temple is freed from guilt, when he appears to break the Sabbath, how much more these men journeying with Me if they satisfy this hunger by plucking ears of corn! The vindication of what I do is in Myself. The vindication of what My disciples do is in the underlying purposes of My ministry. If you do not understand what that meaneth, "**I will have mercy, and not sacrifice,**" I understand what it means, and as I prosecute the purposes of the infinite mercy amongst men, I am Lord and Master of the Sabbath."

So, to the listening ear of the rulers, this strange young Galilean peasant claimed a prerogative which is a prerogative of Deity. He spoke with the authority of the one and only God. He said what no other man ever dared to say. He laid that right hand of His upon the most sacred symbol of national life, that Sabbath which they were desecrating in spirit, and said: "I am Master of it, and the vindication of what men do in fellowship with Me on the Sabbath is to be found in the fact of their fellowship with Me."

*But to pass to the next section. Here the teaching is even more remarkably and beautifully brought out.*

We suddenly find ourselves in the synagogue. Again it was the Sabbath day. Jesus had come into the synagogue, and somewhere in the synagogue was a man with a withered hand. These two things are supreme; the presence of Christ, and the presence of the man with the withered hand. Have you ever noticed what unconscious compliments Christ's enemies paid Him?

When Jesus came into the synagogue they immediately connected Him with the man with the withered hand, and asked Him if it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath. There was malice behind the question, for we are told they asked Him "**that they might accuse Him.**"

He had made an astounding claim about the Sabbath, and they were determined to deal with Him. They were trying to see if they could put Him into a difficult position in order to accuse Him. He answered their question by asking another:

**“What man shall there be among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on the sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out?”**

Again here is a small matter needing careful attention. He did not say, If a man see a sheep; but if he have one. He said, If your sheep fall into the pit you rescue it, and you rescue it because it is yours. **“How much then is a man better than a sheep?”** You own sheep and care for them and rescue them.

Now we have come into the new light and glory. Now the Son of Man is claiming not the Sabbath, but the man. Now the Son of Man is not only saying that He is Lord of the Sabbath, but that He is Owner of man. That man belongs to Me. I am here to rescue him, and to set him free from the limitation of the evil that is in the world. You know full well, you men that criticize, that you would violate the Sabbath and be guiltless in saving your sheep, because it is yours. Understand, for evermore, that the supreme work of the Sabbath is that of reaching man and saving him.

All the emphasis of the argument here is upon the thought of ownership. Jesus Christ is not excusing what He is going to do upon the basis of authority. It is the work of necessity. I cannot help it; this is My man. That was the great cry of His heart.

There was another occasion when they criticized Him about the Sabbath, recorded in John’s Gospel, which flashes its light upon this. When He passed through the porches at the Bethesda pool, He healed a man on the Sabbath, and they criticized Him then. He answered, **“My Father worketh hitherto, and I work.”** In other words He said; Man by his sin has broken God’s Sabbath, and God is fulfilling the Sabbath intention of rest by working for the rescue of man. So Jesus said to the critics in the synagogue; That man is not at rest, look at his withered hand, he is restless and suffering and limited; and I Who am Lord of the Sabbath, Who made the golden splendor of the waving corn, have claimed authority over the Sabbath; and I am now exercising that Lordship by saving My man on the Sabbath, and so fulfilling the very deepest intention of the Sabbath. Yes, He said, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.

When Jesus had said these things the Pharisees determined to destroy Him, for He had claimed to be Lord of the Sabbath, and Owner of man; and to have the royal kingly right to do whatever was pleasing to His heart, impelled by the tenderest love.

Then Jesus left the synagogue and multitudes of people flocked around Him. **“Jesus . . . withdrew . . . and great multitudes followed him, and he healed them all.”** Oh what virtue coming out of Him! Oh what a stream of life and health! It was still the Sabbath, **“and He healed them all!”**

He charged the people that they should not tell of this healing at the time, **“that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias the prophet.”**

The prophet of the past saw that this supreme Servant, Whom he described, would overstep all the boundaries of mere prejudice, and nationality, and go out to those that lay farther away the Gentiles.

It is generally said that this passage from Isaiah teaches Christ's meekness, that if a man is bruised He will not break him, and that He will not put out the smoking flax, but that He will help it. But it really teaches Christ's restraint from judgment during His ministry of grace. He withdrew in order that He might not smite them for their hypocrisy; for a bruised reed is weakness weakened, and smoking flax has the element of destruction in itself, and Christ said of these enemies, they are bruised reeds, they are smoking flax, I cannot break or quench until I send forth judgment to victory, and then the bruised reed will be broken, and the smoking flax fanned into a flame for its own quenching.

This is not to deny that He is very gentle with weakness, but to recognize that it is not the teaching here.

It is the great King that we see, claiming the Sabbath, claiming the ownership of man, and restraining judgment which might have proceeded in fire against the blasphemers, in order that He may accomplish His work in His own way, and send forth the message of health to the Gentiles also.

He restrained judgment because the day of His mercy was not perfected, and accomplished.

The outstanding matter of this study is that of the claims of Christ. Greater than the Temple, Lord of the Sabbath, Owner of man, Restrainer of judgment until He please. Let us kiss His sceptre anew, and bow the knee in the presence of His supernal majesty, and say,

“All hail the power of Jesus' name.”

~ end of chapter 28 ~

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