

Jesus Plucks Grain on the Sabbath
Matthew 12:1-8, Mark 2:23-38, Luke 6:1-5

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.” He said to them, “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? Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. And if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.” (English Standard Version – ESV)

Background:

- Matthew’s structure of this narrative follows the standard form for many ancient reports of arguments: he summarizes the situation (12:1-2), presents arguments first by example (12:3-4), followed by analogy (12:5), comparison (12:6), citation (12:7) and ultimate basis (12:8).
- Jewish law, based on Deuteronomy 23:25, made provision for the poor to eat as they passed through a field. Thus, the issue here is not that the disciples took someone’s grain, but that they picked it on the sabbath. Over time, rabbinic law specifically designated this as one of 39 kinds of work forbidden on the sabbath.
- The modern picture of Pharisees as legalists unfairly trivializes the Pharisees’ piety (probably intentionally, so modern legalists will not have to address Jesus’ real bases for criticism). Besides Pharisees, other Jewish people throughout the ancient world honored the sabbath and celebrated it with joy. The Bible itself had forbidden infractions of the sabbath under pain of death, so the Pharisees were naturally disturbed when it appeared that Jesus dishonored the day.
- Although highhanded rejection of the sabbath was regarded as rebellion against God, differing Jewish groups made arguments for differing interpretations of sabbath laws, and were not in a position to legally enforce their views against others. Jesus’ arguments here would not have satisfied the Pharisees, but may have satisfied elders or priests serving as judges on local courts.
- As we know from later sources, most rabbis would have questioned an argument based merely on example such as the one in 12:3-4 and Mark 2:25-26. It is significant that Matthew, writing for Jewish readers, has an argument from the law itself.
- The law of Moses commanded work for priests on the sabbath (Numbers 28:10). This is a Jewish “how much more” argument: if acceptable for the guardians of the temple, how much more for one greater than the temple? The temple had become the central symbol of the Jewish faith, and the suggestion that a human being could be greater than the temple would have struck most ancient Jewish ears as presumptuous and preposterous. Jewish teachers could, however, accept and argue from the principle that some things took precedence over sabbath observance.

Questions:

- + Jewish law forbids work on the Sabbath. Do you agree with such a law? Why or why not?
When Jesus is accused of breaking the law, what point does he make by citing David's actions?
Jesus seems to be saying, "If David broke the law, I can break the law." What do you think?
Describe a time when you broke a law. What reason or excuse did you give for your actions?
How does God expect you to respond his laws? Do you respond that way? Why or why not?

- + How do the questions Jesus asks of the Pharisees in 12:4-5 relate to his response in verse 6?
What does Jesus mean when he says, "I tell you, something greater than the temple is here?"
What does his statement, "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice," mean in the context of 12:1-6?
How does Jesus' statement, "the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath," apply to this passage?
How does Jesus' statement, "the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath," apply to your life?