

### *The Interpretation of Sabbath in Matthew 12:1-14*

The Pharisees' encounter with Jesus in Matthew 12:1-14 presents another round in their ongoing hermeneutical wrestling match over the proper interpretation of Torah. This particular rabbinic dispute concerns the proper observance and interpretation of the Sabbath. The passage encompasses two distinct pericopes, and either could be treated independently. However, these two brief stories comprise the entirety of Jesus' teaching on the Sabbath in the entire book (as contrasted with Luke, which contains at least 4 different Sabbath stories in at least 3 different places). Therefore, treating them together offers a comprehensive understanding of Matthew's understanding of the Sabbath. Matthew shows that Jesus' concern with the Sabbath is one of principle, not of particulars; that the purpose of the Sabbath is to promulgate rest, mercy, and compassion, and that this purpose informs proper observation of the Sabbath, not vice-versa.

In both the story of Jesus' disciples eating grain on the Sabbath and the story of the Sabbath healing of the man's withered hand, Jesus' interpretation of the proper observance of the Sabbath is that it principally requires the exercise of compassion. The very eating of the grain by the disciples indicates that they qualify as the poor of the land who need to eat from the edges of random grain fields (Lev. 19:10). Further, Matthew's unique mention of the disciples' hunger (not found in

Mark or Luke) paints them as sympathetic figures who are in significant need of nourishment. The effect on the reader is sympathy for the plight of the hungry disciples, who, in addition to being needy, are seemingly never outside the watchful and accusatory eye of the Pharisees. Into this situation, Jesus is presented as the defender and the one who is able to bring relief, physically and theologically. Interestingly, the accusation is leveled at the disciples, not Jesus himself, since he himself is not eating any grain. But since he therefore speaks not from self-interest but out of compassion, he is presented as the defender of the downtrodden. The impartial Jesus finds guiltless those whom the Pharisees condemn (v. 7). In a similar way, Jesus' contrast of the Pharisees' compassion toward a healthy animal with their indifference toward the man with the withered hand elicits sympathy for the plight of the crippled man. In this case, Jesus again is the defender of the weak, able to provide theological and physical relief.

The rabbinic battle is Aristotle versus Plato. The Pharisees interpret the proper observance of the Sabbath in terms of particulars while Jesus interprets the proper observance as dependent upon the intended principle. The Pharisees' inconsistency in pitting the particulars of Sabbath observance (whether to heal or not, details of eating grain) over against its purpose for existing (mercy) plays out in cold indifference to real people for whom the Sabbath principle could actually bring relief. Jesus brings the Sabbath principle to bear by actually showing mercy on his disciples and the man with the crippled hand. While the Pharisees argue about the particulars of Sabbath observance, Jesus demonstrates the principle of Sabbath in poignantly restorative ways. The interpretive crux for Jesus is given in one of his

three Old Testament citations (Num. 28:9-10; 1 Sam. 21—two more citations than Mark provides) from Hosea 6:6: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” Any specific observance of the Sabbath must conform to this principle. Exceptions are to be permitted if they advance the exercise of mercy. In fact, Matthew portrays Jesus’ opponents as hopelessly ignorant of the very Torah they profess to uphold (“Have you not read in the Law...” (v. 5)). The way one properly observes Sabbath in modern society is not by multiplying details but in propagating compassion.

This interpretation of Sabbath is borne out contextually. Notwithstanding the misleading chapter division, Matthew 12:1-14 comprises the body material of the larger textual unit 11:28-12:21. In this unit the theme is expressed in an inclusion of 11:28-30 and 12:19-20. The theme could alternately be expressed as “Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest;” “I desire mercy not sacrifice;” or “He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick.” If this is the theme, then the passage at hand contains two variations on the theme: the merciful feeding of the hungry (variation 1) and the compassionate healing of the crippled (variation 2). After all, the inauguration of the Sabbath in the Decalogue (to set aside the creation account) is at least partly to mitigate against the constant 7-day-a-week brick-making toil of the Hebrews. Its purpose is to relieve oppression and striving, to bring “rest” (occurring in 11:28 and 11:29), to bring healing (12:15). The co-incidence of bread and Sabbath in 12:1 puts one in mind of God’s provision of manna on the Sabbath. Surely God is providing grain for hungry disciples on the Sabbath, just as he provided special non-rotting,

two-day manna for the hungry Israelites on the Sabbath (Exodus 16:24). The whole point is that the Sabbath is a means to and illustration of the end of rest, mercy, and compassion. That end is negated when the means hijacks the ends, as it has for the Pharisees. Jesus never disavows the Sabbath—his exceptions to Pharisaic observance are not wanton or unreasoned. They are wholly in line with the purpose of Sabbath itself: mercy, compassion, and rest.

Though the issue of Sabbath appears only here in Matthew's gospel, Jesus' interpretation of Sabbath is wholly consistent with Matthew's depiction of Jesus as the gentle savior who is concerned more with the human demonstration of benevolence as true righteousness than that of empty piety. The principle of Hosea 6:6, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice," appears also in 9:13 in reference to Jesus eating with sinners, and a similar rebuke of the Pharisees occurs in 23:23 where Jesus chides the Pharisees for being diligent about particulars while neglecting mercy. Sabbath is an opportunity for gentleness and compassion rather than rigidity and heavy-handedness. Jesus' gentleness and humility (11:29) are on display in the story of the man with the withered hand. In Matthew alone do the Pharisees ask about the lawfulness of Sabbath healing (v. 10—Mark has Jesus asking); Matthew adds to Mark the intention of the Pharisees to find a way to accuse Jesus (v. 10); Matthew leaves out Mark's mention of Jesus' anger (Mk. 3:5). Matthew paints the Pharisees as the aggressors and Jesus as the gentle and humble servant. (Ironically, this gentleness and humility will unfortunately not serve Jesus well when the Pharisees' diabolic plot comes to fruition (12:14; 26:50). He will be the

bruised reed that will be broken and the smoldering wick that will be snuffed out (12:20).) By contrast, and in light of the rabbinic designation of the Torah as a yoke, Jesus' comment on the ease of his yoke is not a *re*-interpretation of the Sabbath but a claim on the *proper* interpretation of the Sabbath and the Torah. It is a light burden and an easy yoke.

But Jesus' actions go beyond mere disposition. In this passage, he is presented as the very personification of the Sabbath. In the first part of the inclusio, Jesus himself is the one who will give rest for those who come to him, in place of the Sabbath (11:28). He is the Lord of the Sabbath (12:8), perhaps meaning that the Sabbath itself is derivative. Jesus himself is rest, mercy, compassion. Thus, Matthew remarkably brings the discussion of the Sabbath from particulars to principle to embodiment.

Matthew shows Jesus' Sabbath project to be decidedly larger and significantly more consistent, both internally and with the Prophets, than that of the Pharisees. He pits the heartless and small-minded Pharisees against the compassionate Jesus, the one who understands the true interpretation of Sabbath as the principle of mercy and compassion and acts accordingly, to the point of being the very incarnation of the ordinance itself.