

HAVE YOU NOT READ?

(Matt. 12:3-6)

In Matthew 12:1-2, Christ's disciples were criticized by the Pharisees for plucking heads of grain and eating them on the Sabbath! Here is Christ's response:

Matthew 12:3–4 (NKJV)

3 But He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him:

4 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?

I love this about Jesus. When the devil did his best to tempt Him – Jesus took it right back to Scripture – over and over, saying, “It is WRITTEN” (cf. Mt. 4:1-11). When the Pharisees were critical, He took them right back to Scripture and rightly divided the Word. For Jesus, the answer was always in the Word, and He consistently went right back there. It was all about properly understanding Scripture.

This was actually a very pejorative and insulting response by Jesus, and since it comes from Jesus, we know it is RIGHT and HOLY. To ask these religious leaders, “***Have you not read?***” was insulting. Of course, they had read. They were considered the experts in the BOOK. They would have taken this question as very demeaning, as it challenged both their integrity and their authority. It should have jarred them out of their self-righteous, self-centered wisdom (cf. Mt. 11:25) – especially since they had no answer for it. Jesus always stumped the self-righteous – self-wise legalistic leaders.

I love that about Jesus. The self-wise were always stumped by the all-wise One. Why? Because Jesus in truth is LORD! Pride gets humbled before Jesus. We saw this in 11:25, where Jesus thanked the Father that He has hidden His truth from the self-proclaimed wise and prudent and revealed it unto babes.

The incident about David that Jesus refers to in Matthew 12:3-4 is referenced in 1 Samuel 21:1-6, where David, fleeing from Saul, asked to eat the consecrated bread from the tabernacle, which was only lawful for the priests to eat (cf. Lev. 24:5-9).

David, in this case, believed that preserving his life and the life of his men was more important than a mere technicality of the law, and it seems that Jesus agrees with him on this.

It is good to note that 9 of the 10 commandments were what we might call “moral law”, but the Sabbath law was more ceremonial in nature, which is one reason it is not repeated in the NT and not incorporated into the New Covenant commands given to us. In Matthew 23:23, Jesus spoke of “the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.”

Human life is a very high priority before God – a higher priority than the technicality of ceremonial law. That is the spirit of things here. The Sabbath restrictions were never intended to apply to deeds of necessity. The Sabbath as intended by God was to be for man’s benefit – not his detriment (cf. Mk. 2:27).

By recounting this incident, Jesus showed that human need supersedes the ceremonial law of the Sabbath. That is a very hard concept for the legalist. The legalists want rules for everything and have a hard time with the spirit of MERCY ever superseding the letter of the LAW.

If you go to pass a slower-moving car and suddenly see an oncoming car approaching, what should you do? Not go over the speed limit and die in a head-on collision? At least you kept the letter of the law by not going over the speed limit -right? WRONG! You should value life above the technicality of the law and speed to get around so that all will be safe.

There is a little bit of sanctified common sense here. The value of human life supersedes technical aspects of the law. That is Jesus whole point here, and one that was not well received by the legalistic Pharisees.

Matthew 12:5–6 (NKJV)

5 Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless?

6 Yet I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple.

I doubt very much whether any of the Pharisees had ever thought this deeply before about this issue.

If you are a legalist, you want 100% consistency with your legalism. But Jesus here presents an OT conundrum to these Pharisees. The law that established the Sabbath also established the duty of the priests on the Sabbath, which technically required the breaking of the Sabbath law.

You see (technically speaking) the priests broke the Sabbath every week because the maintenance work at the temple required it. They had to change out the consecrated bread for a new batch (cf. Lev. 24:8); they had to present a double burnt offering (cf. Num. 28:9-10) and so forth.

And yet Jesus says these priests, in profaning the Sabbath, were blameless. There were exceptions to the letter of the law. Sabbath rest was not legalistically absolute. The priestly duties for the sake of worship were not forbidden on the Sabbath – but indeed were required.

In this case, the sacred duties of the temple overrode the sanctity of the Sabbath mandates. In that sense the temple was shown to be greater than the Sabbath.

And then Jesus makes this application, saying, “***Yet I say to you that in this place there is something greater than the temple.***” The Jews had almost an idolatrous/mystical view of the temple.

Jeremiah 7:4 (NKJV)

4 Do not trust in these lying words, saying, ‘The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these.’

For the Jews the incantation “The temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD” was like a magic mantra. In their view the sacredness of the temple trumped everything else so it was understandable that the temple was exempt from Sabbatical regulations.

But now Jesus says that something even greater than the temple is on the scene – which I take to be the ministry of the Messiah. The sense is this: If the ministry of the temple overrode the Sabbath how much more the even GREATER MINISTRY of the Messiah.

Some think the “greater” thing refers to the Messiah Himself, others to the kingdom truth being presented; but I tend to think it most probably refers to the ministry of the Messiah.

There are several reasons to think this: 1) The word “One” is in italics and not a part of a literal translation; 2) The word “greater” is neuter in gender which would indicate “something greater” is in view rather than a person; 3) the parallel thought is a contrasting of the ministry of the priests with that of something greater – which in parallel would be the ministry of Christ.

“If the ministry of the temple superseded the Sabbath rules, how much more does the work of the Messiah overrule the Sabbath.” - ***Stanley Toussaint***

HAVE YOU NOT READ?

Jesus is Lord over all, including the Sabbath!