

It was a well-established custom by the time of Jesus that no one worked on the Sabbath. Except for tending animals and caring for the sick, observant Jews refrained from farming, buying, selling, manufacturing, sewing, cooking, cleaning, and traveling on the Sabbath. But the Pharisees added numerous new laws, expanding the definition of “work,” and governing what could not be done on the Sabbath. They forbade even something as humble as picking grain to eat.

The Pharisees were the religious elite, well-schooled in the letter of the law. Unfortunately, these law-abiding scholars kept strict the Sabbath laws, not to honor God, but to appear righteous before others. They prized their virtuous reputations more than they valued the welfare of others. They failed to realize that Jesus always puts concern for people above obeying the rules. The proof of this came when Jesus encounters a man with a withered hand. The Pharisees asked Jesus if it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath “so that they might accuse him” (12:10). Jesus posed a threat to the Pharisees’ system of rules and their power over people, so they tried to catch Jesus out on a point of the law.

But Jesus was not so easy to catch. First, he answered their challenge about picking grain by recalling two stories from the Old Testament. David and his soldiers are hungry, so David asks Abimelech, the priest, for bread. Abimelech gives them the Bread of Presence, special bread prepared as an offering to God, and they eat it (1 Sam. 21:1-6). According to tradition, only the priests could eat this bread; since David was not a priest this constituted an unlawful act, yet no one chastised David or his men for eating it. Likewise, Jesus points out that the priests routinely break the law by working on the Sabbath: leading worship, offering sacrifices, and eating the Bread of the Presence. And yet, says Jesus, they are “guiltless” (12:5). Even the Pharisees admitted the truth of this.

Then, Jesus answers the Pharisees’ question about healing on the Sabbath by posing a question of his own. He asks them: if you have a sheep and it falls into a pit, will you not rescue it? (12:11). It’s a rhetorical question. Of course, they would rescue the sheep! Jesus drives the point home by adding, “How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep!”; and he concludes his argument by affirming, “So, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath” (12:12). Then, to prove his point, Jesus heals the man’s hand.

Jesus did this to show the foolishness of any human law that prevents an act of necessity or kindness on a day set aside for the benefit of humanity. He said, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). He rebuked the Pharisees for

condemning the guiltless and not caring for those in need. Then he added that famous declaration of his own divine authority: “The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (12:8).

The Pharisees turned the Sabbath into an oppressive inconvenience for others and an immense source of pride for themselves. It became a weapon of abuse with which they tormented others. The day of “rest” became one of the most onerous ordeals in a long list of “heavy burdens, hard to bear” that the Pharisees determined to lay on other people’s shoulders (Matt. 23:4).

In this, the Pharisees got it all wrong. Sabbath observance in the Old Testament is not meant to be burdensome; it is meant to be “a delight” (Isa. 58:13) and a respite for weary people. Scripture is very clear: the seventh day is set aside as a gracious reminder that humanity is invited to enter the Lord’s rest (Heb 4:4-11). Sabbath is the crown and culmination of the creation story: “The heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished...Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it [God] rested from all [God’s] work which God had created and made” (Gen. 2:1, 3).

When God completed God’s creative work, God rested, not because God needed relief or recovery, but because God finished God’s work. The Sabbath is intended to be a celebration of God’s finished work, and all humanity is invited to the party. God declared the Sabbath holy as a favor to humanity: so that we would stop our work and delight in God’s good creation. The last day of creation first showed this truth, and now Jesus reveals the full glory of the Sabbath (John 19:30).

When Jesus tells the Pharisees that “something greater than the temple is here” (12:6), he indicates himself. Everything the Sabbath signified – joy and compassion, rest and renewal – is now fulfilled in the work of Jesus. The burdens of this life are replaced by the celebration of God’s new, eternal Kingdom. The rest we desperately seek is given by the one whose “yoke is easy” and whose “burden is light” (Matt. 11:30). The Sabbath is a critically important event in the biblical story of redemption: it is a weekly reminder of the grace of God, which stands in stark contrast to human labor.

The Pharisees missed the whole point of the Sabbath. Even worse, they hardened their hearts to everything Jesus said and taught because it disagreed with their own way of thinking. Matthew tells us that after Jesus rebuked them about the Sabbath laws, the Pharisees “went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him” (12:14).

What more could Jesus do for them or say to them? They refused to listen to his teaching. Although they witnessed his miracles, they refused to recognize Jesus' divinity. Worst of all, they tried to turn others away from Jesus, away from the truth, claiming that Jesus performed his miracles with Satan's help (Matt. 12:24). The Pharisees deliberately closed their eyes and stopped their ears to the truth. The Pharisees' failure to believe in Jesus AND their attempt to turn others from God's truth condemned them. There was no hope for the Pharisees now.

This encounter was a game-changer for Jesus, the turning point when Jesus altered his public teaching. After this, Jesus concealed the truth from the Pharisees by using parables. By deliberately rejecting the truth, the Pharisees lost the privilege of hearing any more, plain truth from Jesus. From that moment on, everything Jesus taught in public would be concealed from everyone except those with willing ears to hear.

This encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees is essential to understanding Jesus and his Gospel: love and care for people always surpasses strict obedience to the law. This story confronts us with God's truth and dares us to believe it. This story challenges us to put aside what we think we know, and to listen with ears willing to hear, to see with eyes willing to see, and to love with hearts open to others. This story defies the human laws of the world with the truth of God's emerging new creation. This is more than a game changer: this is a world changer!

Prayer: Loving God, we thank You for Your written Word which contains all that we need to be forgiven of sins and to live godly lives in Christ Jesus. We know that in Your grace You exclude no one from Your gift of Salvation, but that you also hold us accountable to believe in Jesus and his Gospel. By your Spirit may we grow in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus. Lord, we want to grow in our Christian life. Give us a teachable spirit and a desire to apply all the truths that we are learning, for we desire to do Your will. In Jesus name I pray, Amen.

Source: John MacArthur, *The Parables of Jesus: The Mysteries of God's Kingdom Revealed Through the Stories Jesus Told* (Nelson Books, 2015).

## One Ominous Day in Galilee

Sunday, September 16, 2018

Matthew 12:1-12

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

When is a meeting more than just a chance encounter? When it changes the world!

Let me share a few world-changing encounters:

- 1865: Ulysses S. Grant meets Robert E. Lee at Appomattox Courthouse in Virginia. Lee surrenders the Army of Northern Virginia after Grant offers him generous terms intended to begin the healing of the nation after the Civil War.
- 1891: Henry Ford meets Thomas Edison when Ford begins to work at the Edison Illuminating Company. They two men become fast friends and collaborators on a variety of projects which revolutionize the utility and automotive industries.
- 1904: Charles Rolls meets Frederick Royce and the two men agree to design cars. The Rolls Royce engine went on to power England's fighter and bomber aircraft, helping to win the Battle of Britain and turn the tide of the Second World War.
- 1941: Leo Szilard meets with Albert Einstein and convinces him to sign a letter to President Franklin D. Roosevelt outlining the possibility of a nuclear bomb. This convinces Roosevelt to initiate the Manhattan Project and ushers in the atomic age.
- 1971: Steve Jobs meets Steve Wozniak, and the two design the first Apple computer which becomes the cornerstone of the Apple empire and revolutionizes how we work and communicate.

In our text today, Jesus has an encounter with some hostile Pharisees and the whole character of his teaching changes. No longer will Jesus preach straightforward sermons peppered with prophetic texts from the Old Testament. From this point on, whenever Jesus teaches publicly, he speaks in parables.

Here's the scene: it's the Sabbath day, and Jesus and his disciples are walking through a grain field. The disciples are hungry, so they pick some grain and eat it. This upsets the Pharisees who challenge Jesus: *"Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath"* (12:2). The basis for their accusation is the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment: *"Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work"* (Ex. 20:8-10).