

God Desires Compassion, Not Sacrifice

I. Honoring God's Law

Are there certain circumstances where the need for authority can be disregarded? Matthew 12 is often cited by some today suggesting that in certain situations, the law of God can be accommodatively set aside for practical purposes, as long it involves compassion or a good work. Let's examine the passage:

Matthew 12: 1-14

¹ *At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath, and His disciples became hungry and began to pick the heads of grain and eat.*

² *But when the Pharisees saw this, they said to Him, "Look, Your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath."*

³ *But He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he became hungry, he and his companions,*

⁴ *how he entered the house of God, and they ate the consecrated bread, which was not lawful for him to eat nor for those with him, but for the priests alone?*

⁵ *"Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and are innocent?"*

⁶ *"But I say to you that something greater than the temple is here.*

⁷ *"But if you had known what this means, 'I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT A SACRIFICE,' you would not have condemned the innocent.*

⁸ *"For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."*

⁹ *Departing from there, He went into their synagogue.*

¹⁰ *And a man was there whose hand was withered. And they questioned Jesus, asking, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" -- so that they might accuse Him.*

¹¹ *And He said to them, "What man is there among you who has a sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not take hold of it and lift it out?"*

¹² *"How much more valuable then is a man than a sheep! So then, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."*

¹³ *Then He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand!" He stretched it out, and it was restored to normal, like the other.*

¹⁴ *But the Pharisees went out and conspired against Him, as to how they might destroy Him.*

A. An apparent contradiction: mercy and sacrifice

Jesus quotes the prophet Hosea in this dialog:

Hosea 6:6 For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings (NKJ).

The meaning of "not sacrifice" here must be "not only sacrifice" or "more than sacrifice." Similar elliptic language is used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:17 where "sent me not to baptize" means "not merely to baptize." God commands baptism and commanded sacrifices as well and was pleased with them (Leviticus 1; Malachi 3:4). He therefore wanted sacrifices to be performed. Recognizing figurative language is critical here.

Comprehending word meanings is also important in this context. The original Hebrew word for "mercy" here carries also the concept of goodness and faithfulness. It is a word used in close connection with righteousness, judgment, truth, and knowledge (Hosea 4:1; 6:4). Mercy and compassion are not in conflict with law-keeping. Hosea's point is that God does not want short-term, half-hearted, or mindless worshipers (Hosea 6:4). Mercy brings about sacrifice, it does not supplant it. Similarly, faith brings about baptism, it does not substitute for it.

B. Case Examination

The Pharisees accuse Jesus' disciples of breaking the Sabbath by plucking heads of grain, but we should first examine for ourselves whether such action actually constitutes a Sabbath violation. If the disciples are acting with God's authority, we should see a validating command, example, or necessary inference.

The first strong evidence is that Jesus clearly says they are innocent (verse 7). Furthermore, when the Sabbath observances of former times are examined, we note that servile work is the kind of work forbidden on the Sabbath (Lev 23:24, 25). The Sabbath was to be a day of rest; the labors of one's occupation and business pursuits were not to be engaged (Ex 20:10; 23:12), as of those who formed the various trades used in building the tabernacle (Ex 35, 36). For example, it would have been wrong for the disciples to harvest the grain in bundles and take it to market for trade (Nehemiah 13:15-22). However, to merely take care of personal needs, such as bathing, drinking, and eating, even for livestock, was not a Sabbath violation (Ex 16:25; Luke 13:15). Likewise, the man whom Jesus healed at the pool of Bethesda did not violate the Sabbath when he carried his bed (John 5:2-15). That was not his occupation nor any kind of business endeavor. Therefore, clearly, the disciples, as well as the lame man at Bethesda, did not violate the Sabbath law but only the Pharisee's interpretation of the law.

Understanding that the Sabbath law does not need to be set aside to justify the disciples' actions will give us direction in any further considerations.

II. Non-conflicting Divine Ordinances

A. Doctrine of higher laws, lower laws

Some commentaries suggest Jesus is teaching that if it was okay in compassion for David to accommodatively disregard the law concerning the consecrated bread, then it is okay for the disciples to disregard the Sabbath in this case. The commentaries further explain that at times, a higher law, such as God's law of mercy, conflicts with a lower law, such as God's law of sacrifice, and when this happens, God's higher law prevails. However, since we have already established that the Sabbath law does not need to be set aside to justify the disciples' actions, then this is a nonsensical line of reasoning.

The higher-law-lower-law doctrine has an additional problem. Ultimately, speculation on our part at some point is required to determine which laws are the higher laws. Moreover, this will be subject to each person's own judgment; some will think one thing is higher and others will think another is higher. There is no way to determine who has the right to decide.

B. Perfect law

This idea is completely unsupported in scripture. It demonstrates a misunderstanding of God's law, which is said to be perfect (Psalm 19:7; James 1:25). No statute is higher than another, and God's perfect law is never in conflict with itself. If we think it is, we have misunderstood it.

The case here is not that the "higher law" of mercy made it okay for the disciples to violate the "lower" Sabbath law. They violated no divine law but only the Pharisees' tradition, and their actions do not need to be excused. The explanation that the disciples broke the law and the Pharisees should have compassion is completely illogical.

This challenges us to understand the point Jesus is trying to make with David and the consecrated bread. If it is not excusing sin, then what is it? There is possibly a more fitting explanation.

III. Exposing Phariseeism

Hypocrisy, inconsistency, and favoritism are characteristics of Phariseeism. Perhaps the issue in Matthew 12 is that the Pharisees are calling the innocent guilty and regarding the guilty as innocent. Let's consider a few things.

A. Examining David's actions

First, Jesus makes no excuses for David. He says the priests are innocent (verse 5) and that the disciples are innocent (verse 7), but He calls what David did unlawful (verse 4, Leviticus 24:9) and reminds the Pharisees that they are overlooking this fact. David's hunger in no way justifies his actions. When the record is examined, we see that David lies to Ahimelech (1 Samuel 21:2). His false words are not to be compared to the faithful diversion tactics of Rahab against the enemies of Israel (Joshua 2:4). David's circumstances are far from desperate; there is no report of famine, and there are plenty of other small towns nearby where David could find relief without raiding the house of God. Moreover, Ahimelech compromises the law (1 Samuel 21:4). This is nothing more than situational ethics. Some may think the

actions meet the need of the moment, but more often than not, we see in scripture an unfortunate result for such an action of impulse: the whole city is killed and also 85 priests are put to death (1 Samuel 22:15-23). However, the Pharisees, holding David in very high esteem, would not likely consider him to have done any wrong, yet they accuse the disciples of doing wrong, though they are not.

Furthermore, based on their own priests, Jesus challenges the Pharisees' definition of what work violates the Sabbath (verse 5). They are claiming that simply taking grain and rubbing it in their hands (Luke 6:1) is laborious enough to violate the Sabbath. If so, their own priests, offering up lawful sacrifices (Numbers 28:9-10) or performing a circumcision (John 7:23) on the Sabbath, would have certainly profaned it, according to their definition. However, the Sabbath law itself makes allowance for these actions, therefore, they are blameless, as are Jesus' disciples.

B. Making traditions law

The Pharisees are known for holding human traditions as divine law. Nevertheless, there are churches today where this very thing occurs. When personal judgment is dictated as divine law in doctrinal matters by ungodly elders, some favored members will have their sin excused in compassion while others will be falsely accused. Such contradiction, abuse, and favoritism are the inevitable results of the higher-law-lower-law doctrine. However, if a man today requests that authority be produced for a doctrine and practice which is based on mere human tradition, he is ironically the one often labeled Pharisaical.

C. Sabbath for man, not man for Sabbath

In Mark's account of this event, he includes some additional words of Jesus:

Mark 2:27 Jesus said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath."

The original intent of the Sabbath was to give man a day of rest from his labors (Ex 20:8-11). It was to benefit a man, not punish him, yet the Pharisees found a way to make it burdensome. According to their traditions, if a man had some urgent need of assistance from his brethren on the Sabbath, he was just out of luck. Doing good for another had to be sacrificed for Sabbath's sake. Men were essentially made slaves of the Sabbath, which was never God's intention. Consider the ridiculous response Jesus receives from a synagogue official in a similar situation:

Luke 13:9-17

¹¹ *And there was a woman who for eighteen years had had a sickness caused by a spirit; and she was bent double, and could not straighten up at all*

¹² *When Jesus saw her, He called her over and said to her, "Woman, you are freed from your sickness."*

¹³ *And He laid His hands on her; and immediately she was made erect again and began glorifying God.*

¹⁴ *But the synagogue official, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, began saying to the crowd in response, "There are six days in which work should be done; so come during them and get healed, and not on the Sabbath day."*

¹⁵ *But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites, does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the stall and lead him away to water him?"*

¹⁶ *"And this woman, a daughter of Abraham as she is, whom Satan has bound for eighteen long years, should she not have been released from this bond on the Sabbath day?"*

¹⁷ *As He said this, all His opponents were being humiliated; and the entire crowd was rejoicing over all the glorious things being done by Him.*

1. Lord of Sabbath

Jesus is God (Matt 12:6) and claims to be greater than the temple, "The builder of the house has more honor than the house" (Hebrews 3:3). Jesus is also Lord of the Sabbath, not that He is above that law, but that He legislated it to man and should therefore certainly know what it means. Obviously, the one who legislates law is greater than that which is legislated. Therefore, Jesus would never break the law He legislated. However, the Pharisees were crushing the whole purpose of the law: mercy and truth.

2. Doing good is always lawful

On grounds of the reasoning presented, Jesus does not break the Sabbath when he heals the man (verses 9-14). Jesus restores something that His enemies lost: doing good. The law never forbade doing good on the Sabbath. "So then," says Jesus, "it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath" (verse 12, Gal 5:22, 23), and we contend that scripture is that which authorizes what is a "good work" (2 Timothy 3:16, 17).

Jesus very pointedly exposes the hypocrisy of his accusers. On that day, the Sabbath, the Pharisees begin devising a plot together to kill Jesus. That would have been work enough to violate their own Sabbath traditions. They use the Sabbath for evil against Jesus; Jesus uses it for good (John 5:16, 17).

Decisively, no one can justifiably do things without authority and use Matthew 12 to support them.

IV. Consequences Of The Doctrine of Higher And Lower Laws

A. Sets a low moral standard

Consider also, if compassion overturns or supersedes law, what a low standard Jesus has set. David and his men were not starving to death; they were simply hungry. No one should think God's law would be set aside over something as small as this. If hunger is a valid reason for breaking the law, Jesus could have turned stones into bread (Matthew 4:2, 4) and the Corinthians could have turned the Lord's Supper into a common meal (1 Corinthians 11:33-34).

If we assume that a divine ordinance can be set aside in cases where we think compassion requires something else, we open the door for all manner of sin. Someone will reason that a compassionate God would never condemn a good man to hell simply for not getting baptized or for worshipping with a mechanical musical instrument or for divorcing a wife for her worthlessness. If this doctrine is adopted, there is no argument against any of these things. Ultimately, all works of the flesh will be tolerated on the basis that a chastisement does not demonstrate compassion. This indicates a gross misunderstanding of authority.

B. Portrays God as a respecter of persons

Adopting the doctrine of higher and lower laws also consequently portrays God as showing partiality. Scripture outright denounces this; God is not one to demonstrate bias or arbitrarily show mercy for one over another (Acts 10:34). If God excuses the disciples for profaning the Sabbath and David for abusing the showbread, there is no justifiable explanation why He should not likewise excuse Uzzah for touching the ark of the covenant (2 Samuel 6:6, 7) or Moses for striking the rock (Numbers 20:8-12). Above all, Uzzah seems to be one most worthy of compassion. He was obviously being helpful and obeying the king's orders. He touched the ark not in defiance but in the need of the moment, yet he was shown no mercy. There's no answer why David would be excused but not Uzzah. The answer is that neither are excused for their unlawful behavior.

V. Applications And Examples

A. The effect of extenuating circumstances

Notwithstanding, there may realistically be sometimes extenuating circumstances to consider. For example, suppose a faithful Christian is on his way to church on a snowy winter morning when he sees a woman stranded alone with her car in a ditch. In compassion, he stops to help as the Bible teaches but misses worship services in doing so. We probably all agree not stopping to help would have been sin. However, we cannot logically reason from this that God's "higher law" conflicted with His "lower law."

Someone may argue that, in this situation, it is okay for the man to "forsake the assembly" (Heb 10:25). Argument follows that if God's law can be set aside for reason of compassion in this case, there are other cases where compassion allows us to set aside God's law. The fact is, this man was not forsaking the assembly, the same as the disciples did not sin when picking grain for themselves on the Sabbath. No law has to be set aside; this is not what Matthew 12 is teaching us.

There is significant difference between this and a man who, having no intention of going to church in the first place, stops to help and likewise misses worship. That man is forsaking the assembly, and helping a

needy woman on that day does not justify him. There is also a difference in someone going out on a wintry morning with the intention of looking for stranded motorists to help and missing worship. This man also is forsaking the assembly, and his good work of compassion does not excuse him.

B. Incidental matters

A study of authority in religion shows that coincidental occurrences do not matter. For example, Jesus washes the disciple's feet the night He institutes the Lord's Supper (John 13). Also, they are meeting in an upper room (Mark 14:15). These are incidentals that have nothing to do with the Lord's Supper. Likewise, Luke records that there are many lights in the facility where they assemble to take the Lord's Supper (Acts 20:8). This is only a matter of coincidence and pertains in no way to the Lord's Supper.

Similarly, when we assemble as a church, we might coincidentally talk about a ball game after services, change a baby's diaper, or fix a loose button on a blouse. None of these things are a work of the church as a body, yet none of them are a violation of a divine ordinance which should be excused because of compassion. These are not the reasons we come together; they are incidentals. Such incidentals do not justify church ball teams, day care centers, or sewing parties. These are purposed activities, not incidentals.

Nevertheless, we do not reach these conclusions on the basis of David's example. The scenarios do not match. His actions were not coincidental. He went to the house of God, not for worship, but for the express purpose of carnally equipping his men, while pretending to be on a royal mission. Conversely, the action of the disciples eating fresh-picked grain on the Sabbath is a matter of coincidence at best.

C. The charge of going too far

Some in the church today suggest we should be careful not to take authority too far, that is, to the point of holding the letter of the law while neglecting the intent of the law: compassion. Notwithstanding, the sound Bible student recognizes that when God's authority is correctly understood, compassion for a man is never compromised.

1. Tithing mint and nit picking

Matthew 23 has also been misapplied by some attempting to defend such a doctrine. Others who would seek to adhere to God's law in every detail are labeled as "nit picky," and their pleas for producing authority for certain actions are completely disregarded. Now examine the text:

Matt 23:23, 24 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!

It might be easy for us to think that requiring men to tithe the produce of even tiny potted plants is nit picking and taking authority too far. Furthermore, some will readily defend a weightier-law-lighter-law principle from this passage, suggesting mercy to be a weighty law and tithing to be a lighter law. However, note that Jesus also includes justice and faithfulness as weighty, which means doing the right thing no matter what, including tithing. Jesus never declares that tithing the spices ought to be excused on a lighter-law basis, rather, "these are things you should have done." Moreover, Jesus never suggests that the weightier law of mercy is contradicting the lighter law of tithing. There's nothing wrong with straining gnats, as long as we are not swallowing camels! Again, Jesus is exposing their hypocrisy, which is fully developed in the greater context of Matthew 23.

2. Korah's example

During the wilderness wanderings, Korah and other men of Israel charge Moses and Aaron of taking authority too far.

Numbers 16:1-3 Now Korah son of Izhar son of Kohath son of Levi, along with Dathan and Abiram sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth-- descendants of Reuben-- took two hundred fifty Israelite men, leaders of the congregation, chosen from the assembly, well-known men, and they confronted Moses. They assembled against Moses and against Aaron, and said to them, "You have gone too far! All the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. So why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?" (NRS)

Apparently, these men consider it to be overly restrictive for only Moses and Aaron to have authority, and they think they should be shown some sympathy for their desires as well. In response, Moses likewise charges them with going too far (verse 7; 2 John 9). Ultimately, Korah and these named men lose their lives when the earth opens beneath their feet, burying them alive because of their rebellion (Numbers 16:31-33). In addition, fire from the Lord destroys the other 250 men who confronted Moses (verse 35). In spite of this display of authority, the congregation further rebels the next day, and another 14700 of them perish by a plague from the Lord (Numbers 16:41-49).

VI. Conclusion

There's something for us to learn from this (1 Corinthians 10:5-12). God has no sympathy for those who rebel against His law. We might disillusion ourselves into thinking that God's mercy and compassion will override our lawlessness, but it didn't work that way for Uzzah, and it will not work that way for us, either. If we think we are standing firm, we better be careful lest we fall.