

Jesus, God's Chosen Servant

Matthew 12:1-21

Key Verse: 12:18

“Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations.”

The Sabbath, the temple, and the Torah were the three pillars of Jewish society. These three things made up the “DNA” of the nation. Even though Israel was invaded by pagan nations such as Babylon, Persia, Greece, and even Rome, the Jews could maintain their national identity as God’s chosen people. The Torah includes the written Torah - the five books of Moses, or the Pentateuch - and the oral Torah, which are the Mishnah, Talmud and Midrash. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus acknowledged the written Torah, but interpreted it differently than the Jews in many ways. Jesus revolutionized the understanding of the Torah. The temple was God’s dwelling place and the center of Jewish life and culture. Jesus once said, **“Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days”** (Jn 2:19). Jesus was speaking of his body, which would be sacrificed and raised from the dead. The religious leaders were greatly offended and charged him with blasphemy at his trial; it became a basis for his death sentence. Nevertheless, Jesus revolutionized the concept of the temple. Keeping the Sabbath was another way the Jews maintained their identity as God’s chosen people. They were very serious about keeping the Sabbath. One historian said it was because the Jews would not fight on the Sabbath that the Romans were able to invade the temple. But as we will see, Jesus also revolutionized the concept of the Sabbath.

In today’s passage, conflict arises between Jesus and the Jewish leaders in regards to the Sabbath law. The Jewish leaders felt that Jesus was completely discarding their identity. That is why they felt so greatly threatened. The issue was “What is lawful on the Sabbath?” The Jews tried to keep the law meticulously as the means to keep their identity without knowing God’s heart. But Jesus wanted them to know the heart of God and his purpose in giving the Sabbath law. Moreover, Jesus wanted them to know that he is the Lord of the Sabbath and God’s chosen servant, the Messiah, whom they had long awaited. Jesus wanted them to find their identity in him. America has been known as a Christian nation with many good traditions and legacies. The problem is that when we keep them meticulously, we can fail to see God who lives and works among us. We should find our true identity in God, not traditions or legacies. Through this passage let’s see who Jesus is and find our identity in him.

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I. Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath (1-8)

Matthew, Mark and Luke all record the events in this passage. Mark and Luke present them as a background for Jesus calling the Twelve, while Matthew sees through them who Jesus really is, in fulfillment of the prophecies of Isaiah.

Look at verse 1. Jesus along with his disciples went through the grain fields on the Sabbath. The disciples had been receiving internship training from Jesus. They were working hard, with no time to eat, and were always hungry. When they saw heads of grain, it looked like delicious baked bread; automatically the disciples reached out, took the grain and began to eat it very deliciously. They knew that their actions could be misinterpreted in that strict religious society. But they did not care, because they experienced true freedom in Jesus. Suddenly, some Pharisees appeared and said, "Aha! We caught you!" Then they accused Jesus, **"Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath."** It was not unlawful to pick and eat heads of grain while passing through a field (Dt 23:25). In the law there is mercy. But to the Pharisees, there was no mercy. They accused the disciples of violating the Sabbath law. According to their interpretation, by picking heads of grain, the disciples were guilty of harvesting, by rubbing them in their hands, they were guilty of threshing, and by blowing away the husks, they were guilty of winnowing. In other words, the disciples were working on the Sabbath day. The Pharisees condemned the disciples in order to discredit Jesus. Jesus was in trouble because of his disciples. He could have rebuked them, "This is a hot mess! It is all your fault!" However, Jesus did not blame them. Jesus understood their hungry feeling. It was a valid reason to pick and eat grain on the Sabbath. So Jesus defended them with Biblical examples: David and temple priests.

Look at verses 3-4. We find the basis for this story in 1 Samuel 21:1-6. David went to Nob to find God's direction in a time of great difficulty because of King Saul. David and his companions were hungry. Even the great David, who defeated Goliath in battle, could not bear the pangs of hunger. So he asked the priest for something to eat. There was nothing except the consecrated bread, which was lawful only for priests to eat. David knew that those who are not priests should not eat the consecrated bread. Also, the priest Ahimelech knew this well. Then why did David ask? And why did Ahimelech give him the bread? It was because both of them knew God's heart. They knew that God valued life more than ceremony. They knew that God who gave the law was not legalistic. They knew that God is merciful to those in need, including the hungry. David knew God's mercy and love. And David loved God with all his heart. So David, a great ancestor in Israel's history, was free from a legalistic way of thinking.

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Another example Jesus gave was that of priests in the temple. Look at verse 5. The priests in the temple worked hard on the Sabbath to sacrifice lambs, bulls, goats and birds, to manage the fire, and to clean the temple. It was the busiest day of the week for them. But they were not condemned for breaking the Sabbath law. They were exempted on the basis that worshiping God in the temple supersedes the Sabbath law. Jesus is greater than the temple (6). Jesus is God in the flesh. So his disciples, who were with him, were exempt from the Sabbath law. In verse 7, Jesus tried to teach the Pharisees that mercy was more important than ceremonial sacrifice (9:13). Sacrifice without mercy builds up one's self-righteousness. What God really wants is to show mercy so that his people may learn mercy and reflect his mercy. This is more important than sacrifice. To us, sacrifice may mean to attend meetings, carry out Bible studies, engage in prayer or write testimonies. However, we should remember that these are means of receiving God's mercy, not acts of self-righteousness. What matters most is to meet God personally and receive his mercy, instead of stressing how much we sacrifice. In conclusion, Jesus declared in verse 8, "For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." This declaration means that Jesus is God who created the Sabbath. This is why we should keep the Sabbath in Jesus. The point of the Sabbath is to come to Jesus - who is God - to love Jesus, have fellowship with Jesus, and to worship Jesus. When we come to Jesus we can find true rest.

II. Jesus teaches to do good on the Sabbath (9-13)

There was another event related to the Sabbath. Look at verses 9-10. When Jesus went into the synagogues, many people came to listen to his words. Among them was a man with a shriveled hand. Luke, the medical doctor, tells us in detail that it was the right hand which had shriveled (Lk 6:6). When God made human beings, he gave us two hands for more effective work. This man could not work well with only one hand. Even if he had excellent music talent, he played the piano like a child at best. His typing speed was very slow and he could not text message properly. Worst of all, people identified him on the basis of his deformity, and he must have also. When we look around us, we find many people who are handicapped inwardly, due to factors like a broken family, a character flaw, failures, and lack of love and discipline. Each one of us has our own problem. It seems most serious to us. We all need shepherds. But the man with the shriveled hand was largely ignored by the religious leaders and they even made use of him to try to trap Jesus. So, with gross insensitivity, they asked Jesus, **"Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"**

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Jesus was deeply distressed and angered by their evil intention (Mk 3:5). However, Jesus had a shepherd's heart even for them. So Jesus calmly explained: **"If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out?"** (11) In Jesus' illustration, a sheep is not just one animal among many. It is more like a treasured pet to its owner. We might even compare it to a car in our time. If we are driving on a Sunday and our car stalls, most people do not just abandon it. Rather, they call the tow truck right away to deal with it. Jesus went on in verse 12a: **"How much more valuable is a person than a sheep!"** People thought that the man with the shriveled hand was useless and worthless. But according to Jesus, he was very valuable and important, because he was made in the image of God. Jesus concluded, **"Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath"** (12b). Here we learn a further purpose of the Sabbath. The Sabbath is not only a day to worship God, it is also a day to do good for needy people. When we look around us, there are so many shriveled people. Jesus cares about each of them. Jesus wants us to serve them with his mind on the Sabbath day.

Look at verse 13. Then Jesus said to the man, **"Stretch out your hand."** What a challenge these words were to the man. It was not easy for him to expose his deformity publicly. Then why did Jesus ask him to do this? Jesus wanted him to experience God's power through obedience. Experiencing God's power and love personally would heal not only his hand, but his soul and mind and heart. Jesus really wanted to have a personal relationship with him. How did the man respond? The man stretched out his hand. His outstretched hand expressed his trust in Jesus; it expressed his obedience to Jesus; it was his hand of prayer stretched out to Jesus. What happened? Immediately, his hand was healed, completely restored - just as sound as the other. His shriveled inner man was also restored. Jesus, with a great shepherd's heart, restores those who reach out to him in faith. Thank you, Jesus!

III. Jesus is God's chosen servant, the Messiah (14-21)

Through the two events mentioned thus far, the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders reached its crescendo. The Pharisees ignored the obvious truth that God was working through Jesus. They had no awareness of God's presence, and they did not care about people who were being healed. They were only concerned about maintaining the status quo for their security. To them, Jesus looked like a dangerous man who could overturn their society and culture. So they went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus (14). Aware of this, Jesus withdrew from that place. A large crowd followed him (15). At this time of crisis, which was a matter of life and death, Jesus could have encouraged the crowd to rise up against

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the religious leaders. But Jesus was only concerned about one thing: to please God by helping the needy. Jesus healed many sick people, all who were ill. Then he warned them not to tell others about him (16). Jesus sought neither security nor popularity, he only wanted to obey God's will. When Matthew observed this, he was deeply moved. He realized that Jesus was fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah 42:1-4, so he quoted these words. Through them, we can find the character of the Messiah and his ministry that pleased God.

First, Jesus pleased God, not himself (18a). Look at verse 18a. **“Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight.”** As the Son of God, Jesus could have worked in his own way. But from the beginning to the end, Jesus obeyed God's will without deviation. God's love language is obedience. If one wants to express love to God, it can be done through obedience. Jesus obeyed God always. Jesus said to his Father God in John 17:4, **“I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do.”** Jesus' teaching the words of God, healing the sick, raising disciples, suffering, death, resurrection - all these things - were done in obedience to God to bring glory to God. Jesus wanted to please God throughout his lifetime. Psalm 40:6-8 foretold this: **“Sacrifice and offering you did not desire - but my ears you have opened - burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. Then I said, ‘Here I am, I have come - it is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do your will, my God; your law is within in my heart.’”** Jesus carried out his messianic work, not out of duty, but out of love for God. Jesus did not work according to his own ideas and plans. Jesus listened to God and obeyed God willingly. God was pleased by Jesus and testified by saying, **“Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased”** (ESV).

Second, Jesus worked by the Holy Spirit to proclaim justice to the nations (18b). Look at verse 18b. **“I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations.”** We find that this happened when Jesus was baptized, and as he started his ministry. At the outset, Jesus opened the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and read: **“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor”** (Lk 4:18-19). Jesus, the Messiah gives freedom to those who are shackled by sin and Satan; Jesus gives life to the dead, light to those living in darkness, and he restores us in the favor of God in a right relationship with him. This is the good news, the gospel. Jesus carried out this ministry by the work of the Holy Spirit. Later, Peter testified to this by saying, **“...how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and**

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how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him" (Ac 10:38).

Third, Jesus was a gentle and humble shepherd (19-21). These days many people think that one must raise their voice and complain when there is a problem. Those who don't speak up are regarded as weak and ineffective. So there is a saying, **"The squeaky wheel gets the grease."** But Jesus did not quarrel or cry out. No one heard his voice in the streets (19). Most people want to show off when they do something well. Many want to exaggerate their successes to the maximum degree. But Jesus was different. He did not seek any human recognition or the understanding and support of people. Jesus sought only to please God quietly. This reveals Jesus' gentle and humble character, which he invited us to learn in 11:29. If we really want to please God, we should serve him in the same way that Jesus did.

Jesus' gentleness and humbleness enabled him to serve all kinds of broken people as their good shepherd. Look at verse 20. **"A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he has brought justice through to victory."** Reeds symbolize weakness. They are easily swayed by the wind. A "bruised" reed is not only weak, but wounded. It seems beyond healing and useless. If it is treated with the slightest roughness, it will break rather than be healed. It can be healed only through the most gentle and humble care. A smoldering wick no longer flames; it produces a lot of smoke but no fire. So it should be extinguished quickly to disperse the irritating smoke. There are so many people like a bruised reed or a smoldering wick. Their wounds are so deep and painful that they seem broken beyond repair. Outwardly they may seem like a tiger or a lion. But inwardly we are like bruised reeds and smoldering wicks; it is mainly because of our sins. So we are easily tempted, quick to express negative emotions, and crushed just like that. Even slightly harsh words, intended only for humor, can render us helpless. How can we be healed? It seems that there is no one who truly understands, no one who can really help us. But Jesus can help us. Through his blood on the cross, Jesus heals our wounds; through his mighty resurrection, he makes us strong. This is how Jesus brings justice through to victory (20b). Jesus came to this world in order to heal wounded people. Jesus saved a Samaritan woman who was like a bruised reed. Jesus healed Matthew, who was like a smoldering wick. Matthew was selfish and lonely, like many of us in America. Such people are burdensome; no one wants to be with them, even for lunch. But Jesus loves us and has hope for us to be Christ-like in character and to be the light of the world. Jesus heals our wounded, crooked hearts, and pours the oil of hope and love on us, so that we may become a flaming fire, and a light to the world.

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This Jesus is the hope of the nations (21). Here “the nations” means the Gentiles, who were regarded as bruised reeds or smoldering wicks by the Jews. But Jesus wants them to be saved by hearing the gospel. Jesus is truly the hope of all people of all nations.

In this passage we have learned that Jesus is God's chosen servant who obeyed God's will as a humble and gentle Savior. Broken people cannot be healed by following rules and regulations or by going through systems. Only Jesus can heal broken people and make them wonderful servants of God. We can find true security and our real identity in Jesus. Praise Jesus!