

THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Kingdom: A Study of Matthew 8–13

STUDY THIRTEEN

Sabbath Lord vs. Religious Nitpickers

Matthew 12:1–15

The Pharisees never knew what to do with Jesus. They came up with rules, restrictions, and regulations, and He ignored most of them . . . to teach the Pharisees not to put their traditions on a level with God's truth.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

EVERY encounter with Jesus only led to more antagonism from the Pharisees. Ironically, the Pharisees got the most “worked up” when Jesus broke their rules for the Sabbath rest. So what was the big deal about the Sabbath rest anyway?

Sabbath's origins trace back to creation when God Himself rested after six days of fashioning stars and filling the earth with creatures. Consequently, “God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy” (Genesis 2:3).

Later in biblical history, God codified in the Ten Commandments the Sabbath as a “day of rest dedicated to the LORD your God. On that day no one in your household may do any work” (Exodus 20:10). By refraining from work, the Jews expressed trust in their God to supply everything they needed. The Sabbath was a weekly reminder of God's power and provision—a day to take a break from wearisome labors, rest in His sufficiency, and delight in His goodness.

More than a millennium later, the Pharisees inherited God's merciful principle of rest only to twist it into a merciless tangle of rules. By adding hundreds of Sabbath restrictions, the legalists had laid on the people's necks a back-breaking burden of religious obligations. Jesus would have none of it.

In this *Searching the Scriptures* study, we'll explore vital truth about God and His purposes when the Pharisees find their Sabbath's list of rules broken by none other than the Sabbath's Lord!



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Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

Sabbath Lord vs. Religious Nitpickers

Matthew 12:1–15



PREPARE YOUR HEART

No one stood up to legalists like Jesus did, which makes us admire Him even more. As you open the Scriptures, invite the Lord to deepen your appreciation and devotion to Jesus.

Father, take me back in time to the day Jesus put Himself on the line for me, making Himself the target of hateful people who seethed with evil intent to kill Him. Willingly, He walked into the firestorm for the sake of those He loved. Fill my heart with worship as I learn more about Him. In His name, amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

In Matthew 12:1–15, the “law” that the Pharisees accused Jesus of violating refers to the Pharisees’ Sabbath restrictions that “served as a kind of ‘oral law’ or ‘case law’ added to God’s inspired Word.”¹ According to William Barclay, the disciples broke four of these restrictions:


By plucking the [grain] they were guilty of *reaping*; by rubbing it in their hands they were guilty of *threshing*; by separating the grain and the chaff they were guilty of *winnowing*; and by the whole process they were guilty of *preparing a meal* on the Sabbath day.²

Read the *passage*, imagining yourself in the scene. What would it have been like to live under such restrictions, constantly afraid of crossing a moral line without realizing it?



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Matthew 12:1–15

 **Observation: Working and Healing on the Sabbath**

Observation lays the groundwork for understanding the meaning of a passage.³ The timestamp in Matthew 12:1, “At about that time,” connects these events with the growing opposition from the previous chapter. Jesus had been inviting the Jews to follow Him out of their religious bondage, to replace the Pharisees’ heavy yoke of regulations with His light yoke of rest (Matthew 11:28–30). This enraged the Pharisees who, like Pharaoh of old, did not want to let the people go!

In the following chart, compare the features of the back-to-back controversies in Matthew 12:1–15 about working and healing on the Sabbath. Note the characters, the issue that prompted the conflict, the Pharisees’ accusation, and Jesus’ response.

Location	Conflict in the Fields	Conflict in the Synagogue
Passage	<i>Matthew 12:1–8</i>	<i>Matthew 12:9–15</i>
Characters		
Issue		
Accusation		
Response		



Sabbath Lord vs. Religious Nitpickers

Matthew 12:1–15

What is the basis of the Pharisees' authority versus the basis of Jesus' authority?

Contrast the Pharisees' mind-set with Jesus' mind-set toward those in need.

How did the Pharisees' obsession with the letter of the law compare with Jesus' attention to the intent of the law?

When we live by grace we ought to love and understand one another and, as best as we can, get along. But legalists are not built to “get along.” They’re built to take charge and keep others under their thumbs. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Sabbath Lord vs. Religious Nitpickers

Matthew 12:1–15



Interpretation: The Authority and Mission of Jesus

Let's focus the light of interpretation on Jesus' responses to the Pharisees. In the conflict about working on the Sabbath, Jesus answered the accusation, "Look, your disciples are breaking the law by harvesting grain on the Sabbath" (Matthew 12:2), with biblical arguments centered around the temple.

First, Jesus compared Himself and His disciples to David and his companions (12:3–4). Ahimelech the priest gave David and his hungry men the holy bread set out fresh each Sabbath in the temple (1 Samuel 21:1–6). What implication did Jesus make about His connection to David? Also, what theological point did He make about showing mercy?

Second, Jesus argued that priests worked on the Sabbath (12:5). The priests' intercessory ministry at the temple superseded Sabbath restrictions. How did Jesus and His authority "greater than the Temple" relate to all the priests ministering there (12:6)?



Sabbath Lord vs. Religious Nitpickers

Matthew 12:1–15

Jesus draws the conclusion about His divine identity, saying, “For the Son of Man is Lord, even over the Sabbath!” (Matthew 12:8). What was Jesus saying about His identity? For help with the answer, read page 234 in Pastor Chuck Swindoll’s commentary, *Insights on Matthew 1–15*.

According to Mark’s gospel, Jesus added, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27 NASB). God designed the Sabbath to serve His people’s need for rest, but who could rest with all these religious hoops to jump through? The Pharisees had braided God’s law into a whip of a thousand regulations they used to beat the people, and they weren’t about to hand over to Jesus their position of religious authority.

The Pharisees tracked Jesus from the fields to the synagogue and set their trap, “Does the law permit a person to work by healing on the Sabbath?” (They were hoping he would say yes, so they could bring charges against him)” (Matthew 12:10). The Pharisees saw the man and his deformed hand as a potential code violation, but Jesus saw the need and the man’s suffering. What was the meaning of Jesus’ comparison of the man with a stranded sheep (12:11–12)? To what higher principle did Jesus appeal?



Sabbath Lord vs. Religious Nitpickers

Matthew 12:1–15

What irony do you see in the Pharisees' response to call "a meeting to plot how to kill Jesus" (Matthew 12:14)?

This is the turning point in Matthew's gospel. At this point, everything changes. Jesus goes more underground; the Pharisees get more hostile. And it climaxes in chapter 27 when they shout, "Crucify Him!" —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: Convicted by Their Own Words

Later in Matthew 15, Jesus explained how the Pharisees' own regulations convicted them. What command of God did the Pharisees violate by their hypocritical rule about making vows to God, according to *Matthew 15:3–6*?

Their law simply legalized their greed rather than honored God. What was the Pharisees' core problem, according to *15:7–9* which is a quotation from Isaiah 29:13?



Sabbath Lord vs. Religious Nitpickers

Matthew 12:1–15

Like the ancient Israelites, the Pharisees' heartless worship was "a farce." No wonder God wasn't impressed by their showy sacrifices (*Hosea 6:6*). What does God want to see His people doing more than perfunctory religious rituals (*Matthew 12:7*)? How did Jesus model this ideal?



Application: Practical Questions

Jesus asked questions to stop the Pharisees in their tracks and help them see a better way. Here are three questions based on our passage to guide your way.

First, *do you allow legalists to control you?* If so, perhaps Christ's example can encourage you to stop playing their blame-and-shame game. You'll never be able to please people bent on controlling you, and you have no reason to try. They don't speak for God, do they? What can you do to throw off the yoke of legalism imposed from others or even yourself?



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Second, *can you discern between God's instructions and others' expectations?* Under grace, we are free by the power of Christ to follow His way, submit our will to His, and obey His instructions for living. Reflect upon and record below how you have found this truth significant in your own walk with Jesus.

Third, *are you becoming an agent of grace?* We marvel at the picky Pharisees, but we must admit that sometimes we can be as judgmental. Can you look past potential “code of conduct” violations in others to see the needs Jesus sees? To whom can you be an agent of grace? What can you do to show mercy today?

Jesus sought to meet the needs of hurting souls more than meet the expectations of powerful leaders. It's tragic to think how His mercy offended the religious elite and would eventually cost Him His life. The tide has now turned in Matthew. From here on, each incident leads Jesus one step closer to His death on the cross for our sake.

It's there on the cross that God's power, provision, and goodness take on new meaning, and it's there that Jesus secured true, eternal rest for our weary souls.



Sabbath Lord vs. Religious Nitpickers

Matthew 12:1–15



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, my devotion to Your Son grows with each scene I witness. His willingness to defend His hungry disciples increases my hunger to follow Him more closely. His healing of the man's deformed hand with just a command thrills my heart with His determined, even defiant, love. Thank You for His courageous expressions of grace for my sake. In His name, amen.

ENDNOTES

1. Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary: Insights on Matthew 1–15*, vol. 1A (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2020), 232.
2. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 2, rev. ed., The Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 22.
3. To learn about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, go to the Web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)."

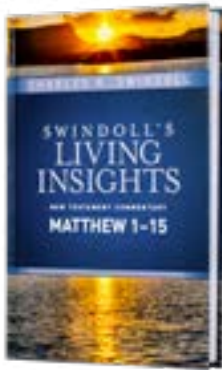


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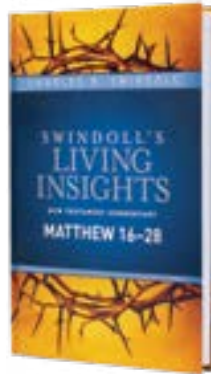
Matthew 12:1–15



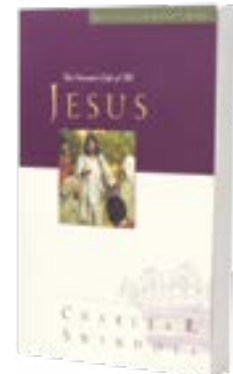
Tools for Digging Deeper



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For the 2021 broadcasts, this *Searching the Scriptures* study was developed by Bryce Klabunde, vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Studies, based upon the original outlines, charts, and transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages.

