October 18, 2026
Pursuing the Kingdom: Mercy over Religion
Matthew 12:1-14
Vernon Advent Christian Church

Have you ever known someone who was so focused on following a rules that they completely missed the reason the rule existed in the first place? Or, perhaps you have watched someone insist on doing things a certain way simply because, "That's how we've always done it."

Did you know, it's possible to become so concerned with doing the right thing outwardly that we lose sight of the heart of God? We can become so focused on just going through the motions that we forget what God cares about most…genuine devotion, compassion and mercy.

And that's the tension we encounter as we begin Matthew ch. 12. At the end of Matthew 11, Jesus invited the weary and burdened to come to Him for rest. To yoke ourselves to Jesus because "His yoke is easy and His burden is light." But in ch. 12, we encounter some religious leaders who had turned God's law into an oppressive yoke that was too heavy to bear, namely, the law concerning Sabbath rest.

You see, the Sabbath was a gift from God, designed to provide rest and remind His people of their dependence upon Him. Yet the Pharisees had surrounded the Sabbath command with detailed regulations that often clouded its original, designed purpose.

Of course, the main issue is not whether God's commands matter. They certainly do. The issue is whether we understand those commands in light of God's original purpose and will we, ultimately, submit to His authority.

As we look into this passage today, we will see that Jesus challenges empty religious legalism, He prioritizes mercy and He exposes the danger of a hardened heart. And to see how He does this, let's jump into Matthew 12. If you are able, please stand as I read the Word of God found in Matthew 12:1-14. [Read Passage]

Matthew begins by telling us that Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath. Now, notice the disciples are back with Jesus after being sent out in ch. 10. This is an important reminder to us that Matthew didn't record every detail of the ministry of Jesus, only what he deemed important to tell his story as guided along by the Holy Spirit. So the disciples are back with Jesus and they are making their way from town to town.

And the text says that they were hungry, so they began to pluck heads of grain from the fields along the way for a quick snack. And, it just so happens, that some Pharisees saw what they were doing and immediately challenged Jesus, accusing His disciples of doing what was unlawful on the Sabbath.

Now, to understand what's going on here, we need to remember the importance of the Sabbath in the life of Israel. Remember, God had commanded His people, as part of the Ten Commandments, to "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy," or set apart. In Exodus 20, the Sabbath, which was the last day of their week (what we know as Saturday) was established as a day of rest from ordinary work, rooted in God's own pattern of creation, for He had created everything in six days and then rested on the seventh. And so

the Sabbath was instituted to remind God's people that they belonged to Him and were not to give themselves over totally to their work, leaving them no time to enjoy God and the gifts He has given to us. You see, the Sabbath was a gift that provided rest, a devoted time to worship and a regular reminder of God's provision and covenant faithfulness. It was intended to bless God's people, not crush them beneath an impossible burden.

Now, the problem was not that the Pharisees cared about obedience. God's commands matter and we are called to obey them. Before we come down too hard on the Pharisees, let's consider how far we have fallen on the side of pendulum swing. For we, as a culture, have lost all sense of Sabbath rest. After the resurrection of Jesus on the "first day of the week" the early church began gathering for worship on Sundays and that became the Sabbath day for the Christian. But Sunday is no longer a day set aside for worship and rest from our labor. Now it's just another day for sports, work or anything else we didn't get finished during the week. And unfortunately this has infiltrated the Church, and we have forsaken the gift of rest that God has given to us for our own good. Maybe if we obeyed God in the area of Sabbath, we wouldn't be so weary and tired…But that's a whole other sermon.

No, the problem wasn't that the Pharisees cared about obedience, the problem was that they had developed their own, man-made, oral traditions of observing the Sabbath that went beyond the command itself.

For, there was nothing wrong with what the disciples did, per se, because what they were doing is described for us in Deuteronomy 23:25 which permitted a hungry person to pluck grain by hand from a neighbor's field, provided the person did not harvest with a sickle. The issue being that the poor were allowed to gather whatever they could with their hands to provide for themselves. They weren't allowed to use any tools because then that would be considered stealing another persons crop.

No, the issue wasn't what they did, only the day on which they did it. For you see the rabbis made an elaborate list of "do's" and "don'ts" concerning the Sabbath and this violated several items on this list. For example, plucking grain was considered harvesting in their minds. Separating the kernel of wheat from the husk was threshing and preparing to eat the grain meant that you had prepared your meal. And so, according to them, this constituted work and the disciples had violated the Sabbath.

And look carefully and notice where their attention was directed. They did not ask whether the disciples were hungry. They did not consider the mercy of God in providing for those in need. They simply saw the "rules" being broken.

And this is one of the dangers of "religion" without a heart shaped by mercy. We can become experts at identifying what other people are doing wrong without considering the circumstances of the people standing in front of us. We can defend our own actions while neglecting the very people we should help.

Now, the solution is not to abandon every rule or tradition. We need wisdom, order and our convictions based on solid biblical teaching. But the solution is to ensure that our convictions remain aligned with God's purposes rather than replacing them. The question for us is not simply, "Are we following the rules?" But, "Do we understand why God gave His commands, and are we reflecting His character as we obey them?"

Well, the text then tells us that Jesus answers the Pharisees by pointing them back to the Scriptures, scriptures that they had memorized and claimed to know. And He shows them that missed the point and that God's purposes cannot be reduced to the rigid application of man-made traditions.

And so, Jesus responds by asking the Pharisees whether they have read what David did when he and his men were hungry. And what Jesus is referring to is the incident recorded for us in 1 Samuel 21, when King David received the bread of the Presence from Ahimelech the priest.

The bread of the Presence, or the showbread, was associated with Israel's worship in the tabernacle. It was to be set out before the Lord every Sabbath, and when it was removed, it was ordinarily reserved for the priests. Yet when David and his men were desperate and in need, as they were fleeing from King Saul, the priest gave David the bread to eat even though it was Sabbath and the bread was meant for the priest. And Jesus draws attention to an important biblical principle. God's commands must be understood in light of God's purposes, including His concern for people's needs. And He rebukes the religious leaders for knowing the text of Scripture while missing its spirit.

Now, again, Jesus is not saying that we can ignore God's Word whenever they feel hungry or uncomfortable. He is showing that the Pharisees have interpreted the situation without taking the whole testimony of Scripture into account. Their accusation overlooks the fact that Scripture itself contains an example in where provision is given to meet a genuine need.

And if one example wasn't enough, Jesus then refers to the priests who served in the temple on the Sabbath in vs. 5. Their work included duties that would be considered as labor according to the Pharisees, yet their service was not treated as a violation of the Sabbath. Why? Because the "work" was part of the worship God had commanded.

And then Jesus grounds His argument in an astounding claim in vs. 6, when He says that "…something greater than the temple is here," in their midst. Now, this is a remarkable statement. The temple was the center of Israel's worship, the place associated with God's presence among His people. Yet Jesus says that something greater than the temple is standing before them.

And He's pointing to Himself. And His point is that God's presence and purposes are being revealed in Him. He is the visible representation of the glory of God. The same manifested glory from the OT visible in the cloud that filled the tabernacle, the temple, left in Ezekiel's vision and returned, not in the second temple, but in the person of Jesus. For John says in ch.1 of his gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God…and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory…" (John 1:1;14) The Pharisees are so concerned about protecting their interpretation of the law that they fail to recognize the One who has authority to explain its meaning.

Then Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6, a verse from the Scripture reading that was read earlier, "God desires mercy rather than sacrifice." Now, this does not mean that God rejected the sacrificial system He had established. Rather, the prophets of the Old Testament, including Hosea, repeatedly condemned God's people for just going through the motions of worship while they neglected faithfulness, justice and compassion toward

others. The sacrifices were not a substitute for a heart that loved God and treated others according to His character. Likewise, the Pharisees knew the words of Scripture, but they had failed to grasp this essential truth.

Well, then Jesus makes another bold claim that "…the Son of Man (again speaking of Himself) is 'Lord of the Sabbath,'" in vs. 8. And this is the climax of this encounter. Jesus is not simply offering another interpretation of what the Sabbath means. He is making a claim about His own authority. The Sabbath belongs to God's design and Jesus declares Himself Lord over it. He has the authority to reveal its true purpose and correct the interpretations that obscure God's original design.

And this statement should shape the way we understand Jesus. He is not simply a religious teacher who helps us become better at managing our own lives. He is the Lord who calls us to submit to His authority. We do not stand above Him, deciding which parts of His teaching we will accept and which ones we will ignore. In fact, I recently came across this quote from pastor and podcaster, Josh Howerton, where he says, "If you read the Bible and disagree [with anything it says]…you're wrong." We don't come to Jesus and get to pick and choose what we will agree with and what we will not. We come to Him as disciples who need Him to correct our understanding and reshape our hearts to look more like His.

There is also an important lesson here for the church. Faithfulness requires more than knowing Bible verses or defending our traditions. We must read Scripture carefully, in context and in light of God's full revelation. A verse can be quoted accurately and still be applied wrongly if we ignore its context or use it to justify an attitude that contradicts the character of God.

Brothers and sisters, it is possible to defend sound doctrine in an unsound spirit. We can be correct in our statements and yet unkind in our conduct. Truth and mercy are not enemies. In Jesus, we see the perfect union of both. He is greater than the temple and He is Lord of the Sabbath. Therefore, our worship and personal convictions must all be brought under His authority. We must ask whether our convictions help us honor Him and love our neighbor or whether they have become substitutes for genuine devotion.

Now, so far, Jesus has exposed the Pharisees' misunderstanding of Scripture and declared His authority over the Sabbath. But now He brings the issue into an even sharper focus. The text says that when they arrive in the next town, Jesus enters the synagogue and demonstrates what the spirit of the Sabbath looks like when the mercy of God is put into practice.

We're told that when He enters the synagogue, He encounters a man with a withered hand. The text does not tell us how the man ended up with this condition or how long he had suffered. But we know that his hand was "withered" and that he was in need. And we're told the Pharisees, who evidently were still following Jesus, also saw the man, but their attention was not directed toward his suffering. Instead, they saw it as another opportunity to accuse Jesus and asked Him whether it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath, something that would, again, break their man-made laws.

Now, consider the difference here. Jesus sees a man who needs help. The Pharisees see a possible way they can trap Jesus. For, their question was not an honest request for guidance, but, indeed, a trap. For if He healed the man, they could accuse Him of breaking their understanding of Sabbath law.

But, Jesus answers their question by giving an illustration involving a sheep that falls into a pit on the Sabbath. And He asks what kind of a person would not rescue the sheep and His argument is straightforward. If everyone recognizes the value of rescuing an animal in distress, how much more should they recognize the value of helping another person made in God's image?

And, so, Jesus then states His point plainly at the end of vs. 12, “So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.” The Sabbath was never intended to prevent compassion. God's command to rest was not a command to turn a blind eye to suffering.

And, then, we should notice that Jesus does not simply explain what He means but He acts on it. In vs. 13, He tells the man to stretch out his hand, and the man does so. The mans hand is completely restored. You see, Jesus does not simply talk about mercy, He embodies it. And this is a powerful picture of the kingdom of God. He confronts the Pharisees distortion of religion and demonstrates that God's purposes are not served by withholding compassion from those who need help.

And this should challenge us to consider what our faith looks like in practice. Because its possible to talk about mercy without showing mercy. We can sing about the love of God and then treat people in ways that do not communicate that love. We can have excellent programs and ministries in our church and still fail to reflect the heart of Jesus if it has no room for people who are hurting or struggling.

Every follower of Jesus lives by grace. We come to Christ not because we have earned His favor but because we need the forgiveness and restoration that only God can provide. And those who have received God’s grace and mercy should, more than anyone else, be the ones who extend that same grace and mercy to others.

As followers of Jesus, we must be willing to ask difficult questions of ourselves. Do we notice the people who are hurting? Do we make room for those who need patience? When we encounter someone in need, do we see an inconvenience or an opportunity to serve? For the kingdom of God calls us to a faith that becomes visible through love. We cannot claim to follow Jesus while disregarding the people He came to redeem and restore.

Now, surely, seeing a man healed would cause the Pharisees to reconsider their error, right? But our text ends this morning with a disturbing response.

After Jesus heals the man, vs. 14 tells us “…the Pharisees go out and conspire against Him, [discussing] how they might destroy Him.” Think about what has just happened. A man has been healed. A visible need has been met. Jesus has demonstrated His authority and acted with compassion. Yet the Pharisees respond by plotting against Him.

And their reaction reveals that the central problem is deeper than a disagreement over the Sabbath. The issue is the condition of their hearts. They are unwilling to accept Jesus' authority because He challenges their assumptions and their understanding of what following God looks like. This is called pride.

You see, when pride becomes entrenched, even clear evidence of God's goodness is rejected. The Pharisees had witnessed a true act of God’s mercy, but rather than allowing that to correct them, they become more determined to oppose Jesus.

This is one of the most serious warnings in the passage. For it is possible for a person to be familiar with Scripture, active in the church and respected within a community

while still resisting the authority of Jesus. Coming to church does not guarantee transformation. Following all the rules cannot replace genuine repentance and faith.

But the Pharisees' example in this passage should lead us to examine ourselves rather than simply condemn them. It is easy to read this account and think, “How could they be so blind?” But we must also ask whether there are times when we resist Jesus because His Word challenges something we want to protect.

Perhaps we are unwilling to forgive someone because we believe our anger is justified. Perhaps we resist an opportunity to serve because it interrupts our plans. Perhaps we cling to a tradition or an assumption because changing it would require us to admit that we have misunderstood.

So, this passage confronts us with a choice. We can approach God through a spirit of self-righteousness, using our rules and traditions to measure others while protecting our own pride. Or we can come to Jesus as people who need His mercy, submit to His authority and learn to reflect His compassion.

Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath. He has authority over our worship, our priorities and our lives. He does not call us to empty religious performance. But He calls us to faithful obedience that flows from hearts transformed by His grace.

And the greatest demonstration of that mercy and grace is found at the cross. We have all sinned against God. And we cannot erase our guilt by following all the rules. But Jesus, the Lord who came to redeem the guilty, went to the cross to bear the judgment we deserved because of our sin. And He died and rose again so that everyone who repents and trusts in Him can be forgiven and reconciled to God.

And the Lord of the Sabbath is still calling people to Himself. So, let us not miss His heart while defending our own traditions. Let us pursue His kingdom with humble obedience, genuine mercy and a renewed love for the Savior who has shown us grace. Let’s pray.

Closing Prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank You for revealing Your heart to us through Your Son, Jesus. Forgive us for the times when we have elevated our traditions and preferences above Your purposes. Give us hearts that submit to your authority and reflect Your mercy toward others.

Teach us to recognize those who are hurting and to respond with compassion, wisdom and love. Guard us from spiritual pride and keep us humble before Your grace. May our lives reflect the character of the King we serve. Help us pursue Your kingdom faithfully and for Your glory. In the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

Benediction:

May the Lord of the Sabbath give you humble hearts, faithful obedience and eyes that see the needs of others. May His mercy shape your words, your worship and your service. Go in His grace and pursue His kingdom with faithfulness and love. Amen.