

The Gentle King who Brings True Rest

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[0 : 00] This is God's word. Please do keep that passage open in front of you. If you can, let us come before God in prayer together. Father, we thank you and praise you for your word.

We pray now that you would speak to each and every one of us through it by your Spirit. That we might know you and love you more. And submit to our great King Jesus.

Who loves us so tenderly and gently. In his great name we pray. Amen. Our holidays are almost always something we look forward to, aren't they?

But I wonder if you've ever found yourself coming back from holiday and thinking, I need a holiday. That sound familiar?

I regularly find myself in such a place before I was shown a better way. I viewed holidays as a time to pack in every activity under the sun that you didn't have time for in a normal week.

[1 : 10] Our first holiday as a married couple, Mary and I, was in Argyle. It's a lovely part of the country that neither of us had the privilege of visiting before.

And that for me meant it was time to explore. So I had our week planned out with countless expeditions. There was hikes morning and evenings. There was trips to every castle in a 50-mile radius.

Samplings of all the coffee shops going. And in our spare time we would just follow any brown tourist sign we happened to pass on the road to see what random place it would take us to.

Mary was just off the back of a stretch of night shifts in an understaffed surgical ward. There's no prizes for guessing what she thought of my plans.

I learned that week what it means to put the word compromise into practice. Sometimes we get rest wrong, don't we? Sometimes we get rest wrong.

[2 : 16] That can happen in fairly non-catastrophic ways, like getting the balance of a bit of time off, a balance a bit off during a week of holiday. But we can get rest wrong in a much more serious way too.

Let me introduce you to the Pharisees. The Pharisees were the religious leaders of Israel in the time of Jesus. And they were well respected by most Israelites, although perhaps not loved.

But they got rest wrong. And they got rest wrong in more ways than one. The surface level problem was their application of Sabbath regulations.

The Sabbath was supposed to be Israel's day of rest. The last day of the week set apart for God's to enjoy him and his people.

But the Pharisees' idea of Sabbath rest in Jesus' time was arguably worse than my idea of rest in Argyle. Not because they demanded too much, but because they demanded you do nothing.

[3 : 37] Their idea of rest was restriction. You want to go for a walk? Better not be more than 2,000 steps. You want to eat a nice meal?

Well, unless you've cooked it the day before, tough luck. No food for you. You want to take notes during the synagogue service?

Well, you can write a letter, but no more than that. Those rules might seem a little silly almost, but the Sabbath restriction's got a bit more serious.

You pass someone who's had a bad fall and broken a bone. Well, you're going to have to wait until the next day before you can set it back in place.

The Sabbath was supposed to be a joyful day of rest from normal work, but it instead becomes something burdensome. Restricting, not restful.

[4 : 40] Exhausting, not joyful. And so when the Pharisees spot Jesus' disciples up to something they shouldn't think be allowed, it's no surprise that they kind of pop up like meerkats and start pointing accusatory fingers.

But what we'll see as we go through these verses is that the Pharisees were so wrong about the day of rest because they were so wrong about the one who brought true rest. Much more serious than their misapplication of a few Sabbath laws was their misunderstanding of who Jesus was.

This conflict with the Pharisees is what dominates this whole chapter of Matthew, Matthew chapter 12. And the conflict over the Sabbath is what holds together the section that we're coming to this evening.

So it is important we understand a bit of the background, but I, or most importantly, Matthew doesn't want us to get too lost in the details. The Sabbath is sort of the battlefield we need to understand.

[6 : 04] But what is really being fought over here is the identity of Jesus. That's the big revelation through this chapter.

And so while we might learn something about Sabbath observance as we go, the big point this evening is to learn about who Jesus is. We're going to do that by breaking up this passage into three sections.

They fall out quite naturally from the text. And in each section, we'll see something about who Jesus is, starting with our first point this evening in verses one to eight, where Jesus reveals himself as Lord of the Sabbath.

Just picture the scene. It's a glorious Saturday morning. Jesus and his disciples are walking through the golden grain fields on their way to the synagogue.

They often travel from place to place, so they don't have much in the way of supplies. Perhaps the disciples haven't had any breakfast. Whatever the case, they are hungry. The good news is that the Old Testament law provides for exactly this scenario.

[7 : 19] If you were wandering through a stranger's fields, understandably, you couldn't harvest it. Okay, there's no coming and taking it all away and heading off to the marketplace. But you could pluck heads of grain and eat if you were in need.

So that is exactly what the disciples did. They reached out, plucked a few heads of grain and satisfied their grumbling stomachs.

All well and good. Well, all well and good according to the law, not all well and good according to the Pharisees.

Because they pop up in verse two. Don't know where they've come from. They're spying on Jesus. They pop up and are immediately on Jesus' case. Why?

Because the disciples are doing this on the Sabbath. And in their eyes, that counts as harvesting, it counts as winnowing, it counts as threshing, and it probably counts as cooking too.

[8 : 29] And in their eyes, none of that was okay. None of that was okay on the day of rest. Look, they say, your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath.

They're in no doubt in their minds. They have caught Jesus and his disciples red-handed. Now, what's interesting here is that there seems a really obvious response to their accusation.

It was true that harvesting was not permitted on the Sabbath, but it was a long, long stretch to suggest what the disciples were doing counted as taking in the harvest. What the Pharisees were insinuating, it'd be a bit like suggesting that a barista was working at home because they made themselves a cup of coffee in the morning.

Or a chef was working at home because they had a bowl of cereal. The Pharisees are clearly taking the law to unhelpful extremes that the law itself does not do.

But significantly, Jesus doesn't go down that route because Jesus doesn't just want them to know what is lawful on the Sabbath.

[9 : 46] More than that, he wants to teach them something about who he is. And so he turns to two examples from the Old Testament, both of which are meant to make us think, in part, yes, what is lawful on the Sabbath, but more than that, who is Jesus?

So his first point in verse 3 and 4, Jesus leaves behind the Sabbath altogether and brings in David, the great king of the Old Testament.

If you just look there, you'll see that he recalls a time in David's life when he and his followers were hungry, just like Jesus and his disciples.

But when David and his followers were hungry, they didn't break a man-made rule. He and his companions ate the bread in the temple specifically set apart for the priests. That was plainly forbidden in God's law.

And at no point was David held accountable. No one condemned him as guilty. I wonder if you see what Jesus is doing here.

[10:57] Why does Jesus choose this specific example? I wonder what you would think if I walked in here this evening with a crown on my head and you asked me what I was up to and I said, oh, actually, it's okay.

I saw a picture of King Charles wearing a crown, so I figured it'd be okay for me to do that too. What would you think? Or if at the start of the service I announced a press conference to tell you all about my upcoming budget for the year and you came up to me and said, what are you doing, Donald? And I said, oh, it's okay. I saw Keir Starmer do it on the news, so I figured that'd be okay for me as well. What would you think? You think, I imagine, he lost his mind.

Maybe you think that already, in which case, don't tell me. The point is, though, in order for those comparisons to be valid, you have to be kind of equal to or greater than the person you're comparing yourself to, don't you?

Not anyone can do what King Charles does because not just anyone is the king. Likewise with the prime minister. You see what Jesus is doing in verse 3?

[12:24] Jesus isn't making a Sabbath comparison. He's making a David comparison. See what he's saying to the Pharisees here?

He's not just saying, you've got the technicalities of the Sabbath wrong, although that is true. What he's really saying is, you've got me all wrong. Jesus is openly comparing himself and his disciples to the great King David and his followers.

Not just anyone can justify their deeds by comparing themselves to the greatest king in Israel's history. You'll make this explicit later on in the chapter, but he is already suggesting that he is the greater son of David, the king who would reign on the throne forever.

It's a big claim, but it's about to get bigger. He steps on the accelerator in verse 5. Or have you not read in the law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? If Jesus stopped there, all well and good. He's made his point. There are regulations even within the law which clearly necessitate the Sabbath being broken. Temple work is more important than Sabbath rest.

[13:56] And if Jesus had stopped talking there, that is the big point we'd go away with. But that's not the main takeaway Jesus wants to leave us with, is it? Because look at what he says in verse 6.

I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.

Just imagine the Pharisee's reaction. What did he just say? Temple work is more necessary than Sabbath rest.

Okay, maybe you've got a point there, Jesus. Jesus. But then he goes on to say something greater than the temple is standing right in front of you.

There's no doubt in Jesus' mind, is there? Sabbath, temple, Jesus. The temple was not just any old building.

[15:04] It was God's dwelling place. It was where his glory descended. It was the presence of God on earth. And now Jesus is standing before these Pharisees and saying something greater than that is standing right before you.

Who is Jesus? Jesus is the greatest king and God incarnate.

That is who Jesus thinks he is. Both king and God and so, verse 8, of course, Lord over the Sabbath.

Sabbath, temple, Jesus. If Jesus is God as he claims to be, then of course he stands over the Sabbath because he stands over everything.

The Pharisees, Jesus was saying, you've missed the point. Right? You've missed the point of the Sabbath entirely. This good thing that gave you a foretaste of rest was supposed to point you to the true rest you would find in me.

[16:26] Instead, you've become fixated on the signpost and missed the real thing it has been pointing to all along. They get rest so wrong because they get Jesus so wrong.

Jesus is Lord. Lord of the Sabbath. What do we take away from that? Well, let me start by saying the point of these verses is not to give thanks that we're not like the strict Sabbatarian Pharisees. Jesus is absolutely not saying the Sabbath does not matter. He kept the Sabbath and he cared about the Sabbath. The Pharisees had a lot of rules and regulations about what you could and couldn't do.

If Jesus was wandering around breaking the Sabbath right, left, and center, you can be sure the Pharisees would have picked up on something much more serious than his disciples barely transgressing a minor point of their law.

Jesus took the Sabbath seriously. The point is not to get rid of the Sabbath and replace it with Jesus. The point is to come to Jesus as Lord, our King and our God, and through Him relates rightly to the Sabbath and to everything else.

[17 : 50] Because only with Jesus as Lord of everything in our lives will we find true rest in Him. the Pharisees had taken a good thing the Sabbath but made it their Lord and so expected Jesus to bow to their Sabbath because they thought their rules were the way to true rest.

Whatever we think will bring us true rest, that is what we will make Lord of our life. because every one of us, aren't we, we are all longing for rest for our souls as we were thinking about last week. For the Pharisees, it was their man-made religion which they expected Jesus to fit into. For us, it could be any number of things.

Just ask yourself, what are you living for that you expect to bring you lasting peace and contentment? Who are you living for that you expect to bring you lasting peace and contentment? I hope and pray the answer for every single one of us is Jesus. If it is anything else, we will, like the Pharisees, try and fit Jesus below number one in the priority list, but he will not go there.

[19 : 31] He alone is Lord and he must be over and above everything else in our life if we want to find rest for our souls in him.

He is the greater temple. He is the Lord of the Sabbath. He is over and above everything and everyone. He is the Lord of rest and everything else in this creation that points to rest.

He is Lord of it all. So, come to Jesus. Come to Jesus and submit it all to him.

live with him as Lord over everything in your life and then you too will find rest for your soul.

Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath. He is the Lord of everything. And then secondly, we see in verses 9 to 14 that Jesus is the king of compassion.

[20 : 45] And his compassion is highlighted by the contrast we see with the callousness of the Pharisees and their determination to keep their rules that the Pharisees had sort of concocted a religion that ignored the genuine needs of people.

We kind of saw that didn't we in their attitude towards the hunger of the disciples. We see it even more clearly in their attitude towards the man with a withered hand in these verses. We're presumably on the same Sabbath day here because Jesus goes into their synagogue the same synagogue of the very Pharisees who have just opposed him out in the green fields.

And in the synagogue we find a man with a withered hand. What should we think when we see a man with a withered hand?

The Pharisees spot an opportunity. Not an opportunity to help the stricken man, but an opportunity to trip up Jesus.

Because they know exactly what Jesus does with people like this. there's a man with a withered hand, there is Jesus, everyone in the room, Pharisees included, know exactly what is likely to happen next.

[22 : 14] They don't doubt his miraculous power, they just don't like it. So they ask, is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath? Why do they ask it? So that they might accuse him.

Again, Jesus responds with a question. And in his response reveals the hard heart of the Pharisees and the compassionate heart of the great king.

He said to them, which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep?

So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. It is a pointed, painful, almost humiliating question for the Pharisees to be asked in public.

Because it shows to everyone, doesn't it, where their hearts lie. They're happy to look after their own animals on the Sabbath. They're not willing to look after their own people.

[23 : 27] In an emergency, they would drop everything if it was going to cost them personally. They would drop nothing in order to help someone else. The Pharisees were focused solely on their performance.

And religion that focuses on our personal performance, which is virtually every religion except Christianity, will inevitably lead us to be self-absorbed, concerned with our deeds, not others' needs.

If we think we are working our way to God, our works will become our main focus. Jesus, on the other hand, shows compassion.

God's mercy, God's sacrifice, God's desire to see in his people. And Jesus, praise God, is merciful and compassionate.

His focus is solely on others. And so he tells the man to stretch out his hands. and sure enough, it is restored, just like the other.

[24 : 49] He speaks a word. And this man is healed. When Jesus sees people in need, he helps people in need, no matter the cost to himself.

And let's be clear, this was a costly healing to Jesus. Jesus did not need to heal this man. He didn't need to do it on the Sabbath.

There's no indication the man even asked or expected to be healed. And had he not healed him, the Pharisees would not have been so enraged by him. Because he had compassion on this man, the Pharisees went out to plot Jesus' destruction.

But Jesus was more interested in showing compassion to the needy than he was in living a comfortable life for himself. And this is just the beginning, isn't it?

Just the embers of the compassionate king putting the needs of others above his own comfort and security and safety and welfare.

[26 : 09] prayer. It is a road he will walk along all the way to the cross outside Jerusalem, putting the needs of others before himself, having compassion on those who cannot help themselves in spite of what it will cost him personally.

That is the difference between the self-centered religion of the Pharisees and the compassionate, merciful nature of Jesus. The Pharisees showed an interest in themselves, in performing the right rituals for what they thought would be their own benefits.

Jesus looks not to his own interests but to those of others. He is a king of compassion. That is the king we bow to.

That is the king we serve. One who sees people in need and helps people in need even when it will cost him everything.

that is what Jesus did for each and every one of us on the cross. Out of his compassion for his people, he turned away from what would have been easiest for him and instead put our needs before his own, saving us.

[27 : 48] Saving us from a sickness we would otherwise never have had any hope of being healed from. praise God for the compassion of Christ.

Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath. He is the king of compassion. And then thirdly and finally and briefly, we see that Jesus is the servant of justice.

Just look there at verse 15 with me. Knowing what the Pharisees are up to, Jesus withdraws from there. He's not quarrelsome or aggressive with those who unjustly conspire against him and wrongfully oppose them.

Neither does he make a big show of himself, drawing attention in crowds. He's not putting adverts in the news or asking for time on the radio. He doesn't do any of it for personal fame or popularity.

But neither does he stop healing people. Even the life-threatening opposition of the Pharisees does not stop Jesus showing the same compassion to many more, just as he showed it to the man with the withered hands.

[29 : 01] And this, Matthew says, fulfills what the prophet Isaiah said, verse 18. Behold my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased.

I will put my spirit upon him and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets.

A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory, and in his name the Gentiles will hope.

He is the Lord of the Sabbath, he is a king of compassion, and he is the gentle servant of God, who brings justice. He comes quietly, he comes gently, and he comes justly.

A servant of God is just and gentle with everyone who comes to him. He knows each and every one of us are broken and in need of tender care.

[30 : 17] Even a smoldering wick he will not put out, and a bruised reed he will not break. Right, both of those things, a smoldering wick and a bruised reed, they are pictures of things that are no longer useful in the eyes of the world, because they are so broken.

A smoldering wick is a candle that has run out of wax, it has nothing left to give, and is just faintly glowing in its dying light.

No longer useful for its purpose. A reed was a versatile instrument, you could use it for any number of things, but if it was worthless, it was worthless if it was not rigid.

And yet, with both these things, Jesus is incomparably gentle and just. Isn't he just like he was with all those he healed?

Broken in the eyes of the world, valuable and precious in the eyes of God.

[31 : 31] That is part of his glorious justice. God's love. He's not just declaring what is right, but making right. Caring for those who are most often oppressed and ignored in this world.

Jesus does not come to establish a kingdom for the fit, strong, and healthy, but for the needy and weak. And that, brothers and sisters, is each and every one of us, is it not?

needy and weak, broken like a bruised reed. Maybe this evening we feel like we are at the end of ourselves, with little more to give like a candle about to breathe its last breath.

We might go about our days and weeks trying to put a brave face on it, but we know we need the compassionate care of a gentle king. Praise God, that is what Christ holds out to us.

It is no wonder, is it, that as we heard last week, Jesus invites the weary and burdened to him.

because he is inviting us to come to the Lord, who is a gentle and compassionate king, who will give us true rest.

[32 : 58] When we are most broken, Jesus is most tender. He is the powerful, compassionate, just king.

He says, I don't care how wretched or unremarkable you are or may seem. I've come to you to bring even you life and rest and hope, so come to me.

Trust me with your life. I'm a servant and yet a king. I am Lord and yet full of mercy and justice.

So line up broken reeds and smoldering wicks. Come unto me and you will find rest. Let us pray before we sing our final song together.

Father, we thank you and praise you for who Jesus is. Our great king, God incarnate, Lord of the Sabbath, Lord of all the earth, powerful beyond measure, and yet compassionate, gentle, tender, just, and kind with all of us who are so weak, so needy, and so broken.

[34 : 44] We praise you that this is who our Savior is and that he says to us all, come to me, you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

Father, we thank you and praise you for your son. May we submit to him as Lord of all our life and run to him in all times and all circumstances, for he is gentle and humble in heart.

In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.