

## Matthew 12A

- Tonight we move into Chapter 12 of Matthew, the pivotal chapter in this Gospel
  - And as we do, we also transition out of studying the first reason for Jesus' rejection and into a study of the second reason
    - The first reason was the hard hearts of the people of Israel
    - They preferred their system of rules and rituals over a plain carpenter from Nazareth claiming to offer Israel the Kingdom
  - But there was a second reason for Jesus' rejection, one that worked hand-in-hand with the first
    - The second reason was the religious leaders of Jesus' day
    - They set themselves against Jesus because He denied their authority and their system of rules and regulations
    - And in particular, they turned against Jesus when He disregarded their extensive system of Sabbath day rules
  - As I explained at the end of Chapter 11, the Pharisees had created more rules for keeping the Sabbath than for any other area of Jewish life
    - By Jesus' day the Pharisees had established some 1,500 rules for how Jews must observe the Sabbath
    - And they claimed their rules were equal to Scripture
    - In the process, the Pharisees turned the weekly day of rest into a day of burdens
    - Which is why at the end of Chapter 11 Jesus invited Israel to come to Him for rest...rest from the Pharisaic system now and rest for their souls
- But when Jesus positioned Himself as an alternative to the Pharisaic system of Sabbath keeping, He put Himself on a collision course with the religious leaders
  - It was bad enough that Jesus claimed to forgive sins and that He associated with tax collectors and the like
    - But now He was striking at the heart of Pharisaic Judaism

- He was threatening the foundation of their authority and power and wealth
- So if Jesus was looking to pick a fight with the religious leaders, He couldn't have chosen a better way to do it
- So in this chapter Matthew shows us how Jesus' opposition to the Pharisees' Sabbath rules contributed to His rejection and death
  - Matthew opens Chapter 12 with two scenes of Jesus contending with the leaders over proper Sabbath observance
  - The first is found in vs.1-8

**Matt. 12:1** 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.

**Matt. 12:2** But when the Pharisees saw this, they said to Him, "Look, Your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath."

**Matt. 12:3** But He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he became hungry, he and his companions,

**Matt. 12:4** 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?

- Matthew sets the scene here by saying "at that time", referring to the time of the events of Chapter 11 when Jesus was in the cities of the Galilee
  - This is the time when He condemned the cities of Capernaum, Bethsaida and Chorazim for their unbelief
    - This is the time when He confronted the crowds for their hard hearts
    - And at this same time, Matthew says Jesus was contending with the Pharisees over the Sabbath
  - In the first incident, we find Jesus and His disciples walking through a grain field on the Sabbath
    - The Jewish Sabbath is Friday evening until Saturday evening, so this event happened on a Saturday somewhere in the Galilee
    - And the Galilee is a sparsely populated, rural area of Israel – both then as it still is today

- It's a farming region, with gentle rolling hills covered with grain fields and other crops
- So on this day Jesus and His disciples passed through a grain field, perhaps because they were hungry and wanted a snack
  - And the Pharisees were following close behind, looking for an opportunity on the Sabbath to accuse Jesus
  - With 1,500+ rules devoted to Sabbath observance, the Sabbath was the best day of the week to find fault
- And sure enough, they witness Jesus' disciples plucking heads of grain in the field and eating them, so they accuse the men of doing something unlawful
  - Now, the law of Moses specifically permitted this type of behavior

**Deut. 23:24** "When you enter your neighbor's vineyard, then you may eat grapes until you are fully satisfied, but you shall not put any in your basket.

**Deut. 23:25** "When you enter your neighbor's standing grain, then you may pluck the heads with your hand, but you shall not wield a sickle in your neighbor's standing grain.

- The idea in the law was very straightforward...
- A traveler was allowed to help himself to a few heads of grain in a field or a few grapes from a vineyard without paying the owner
- But he couldn't go the next step of taking a sickle or a basket to collect the produce because this would be considered stealing
- But in this case, the Pharisees weren't accusing the disciples of stealing
  - Notice they say Jesus' disciples were breaking the *Sabbath*
  - How? Among those 1,500 or so rules the Pharisees invented for Sabbath observance were rules on plucking heads of grain
- The Pharisees determined that when a man plucked an individual grain from a stalk, he was reaping, and reaping is a form of work
  - Moreover, when the man rubs the husk away from the kernel of a grain, he was winnowing which is also work
  - And if the man placed the kernel of wheat in his pocket to eat later, he was storing grain which was...you guessed it...work

- If that seems ridiculous to you, then welcome to first century Pharisaic Judaism...but it gets even worse
  - The Pharisees refused to even walk in a field of grass on a Sabbath for fear of breaking the Sabbath by working
  - He's an explanation from Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum for why:

If someone asked such a rabbi, "What is wrong with walking on the grass on the Sabbath day," his answer would be, "Nothing. It is permissible to walk on the grass on the Sabbath day." However, there is a problem. What looks only like a grassy field might have one stalk of wheat growing wild in it. A person walking through the field of grass might inadvertently step on that one stalk of wheat, separate the wheat from its stalk, and become guilty of reaping on the Sabbath day. Furthermore, if his foot came down and twisted the wheat just enough to separate the wheat from the chaff, he would be guilty of threshing on the Sabbath day. If he continued to walk, the outer hem of his garment might cause just enough breeze to blow the chaff away, and he would be guilty of winnowing on the Sabbath day. Finally, once the person had gone, a bird or rodent might see the exposed piece of wheat and swallow it, causing him to be guilty of storing the wheat on the Sabbath day

- This is a good example of rabbinical logic at work
  - It starts with a command of God, "Thou shall not work on the Sabbath" and then the rabbis took over
    - Seeking to appear wise in these matters, rabbis identified supposed loopholes that needed closing to protect against violations
    - So they created rules that closed the loopholes, but of course there were always new loopholes to find
    - In time these men stretched God's commandment beyond recognition, to the point of ridiculousness
  - Remember how the Lord described Sabbath rest for Israel?

**Ex. 23:12** "Six days you are to do your work, but on the seventh day you shall cease from labor so that your ox and your donkey may rest, and the son of your female slave, as well as your stranger, may refresh themselves.

- The Lord said His Sabbath rest for Israel was intended to give His people refreshment
- Israel would cease strenuous labor so they could enjoy a day of idleness and relaxation
- Which tells us that God's purpose in the Sabbath was to reduce burden in the lives of His people, not to add burden
  - Which means the Lord wouldn't wish that His command to rest become a cause for worry over trivial matters like plucking grain
  - Yet that's what the Pharisees have done with the Sabbath day
- So Jesus responds to the Pharisees' charge with three arguments
  - In the first argument, Jesus denies the legitimacy of the Pharisees' rules using Scripture to contradict the Pharisees
  - The Scripture Jesus uses comes from the story of David and Saul

**1Sam. 21:1** Then David came to Nob to Ahimelech the priest; and Ahimelech came trembling to meet David and said to him, "Why are you alone and no one with you?"

**1Sam. 21:2** David said to Ahimelech the priest, "The king has commissioned me with a matter and has said to me, 'Let no one know anything about the matter on which I am sending you and with which I have commissioned you; and I have directed the young men to a certain place.'

**1Sam. 21:3** "Now therefore, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever can be found."

**1Sam. 21:4** The priest answered David and said, "There is no ordinary bread on hand, but there is consecrated bread; if only the young men have kept themselves from women."

**1Sam. 21:5** David answered the priest and said to him, "Surely women have been kept from us as previously when I set out and the vessels of the young men were holy, though it was an ordinary journey; how much more then today will their vessels be holy?"

**1Sam. 21:6** So the priest gave him consecrated bread; for there was no bread there but the bread of the Presence which was removed from before the LORD, in order to put hot bread in its place when it was taken away.

- Before David became king, Saul was on the throne

- Saul became jealous of David's growing popularity and threatened David's life causing David to flee with a few loyal men
  - While on the lam, David needed food, so he sought support from someone he trusted: Ahimelech the priest
  - So David traveled to Nob, where the tabernacle was located at that time, and he asks the priest for food
- Ahimelech, the priest, says the only food available was the consecrated bread, referring to the bread used in the tabernacle
  - The law of Moses requires that once a week the priests placed bread in the Holy Place of the tabernacle
  - The shewbread, as it was called, was to remain in the Holy Place one week and then the old bread was taken out and given to the priests
  - Leviticus 24 commands that once the bread was removed from the tabernacle, it must be given to the priests as their portion
- But when David asks for food, the priest offers David the shewbread so long as David's men were ritually clean
  - At first glance it may seem to us that the priest was violating the Law by giving bread to a non priest like David
  - If so, then why would Jesus cite this example? How does it help His argument against the Pharisees?
- To understand Jesus' example properly, we first need to understand how the priest could give David the bread without breaking the law in Leviticus
  - The answer is that Ahimelech wasn't offering David the shewbread that was presently sitting in the tabernacle
    - That bread could not be eaten by David...it couldn't be eaten by anyone...not even by the priests
    - Before the shewbread could be eaten, it had to spend a week in the tabernacle and then be removed
  - So if Ahimelech is offering David consecrated bread, then that means this is bread that had already been removed from the Holy Place after its week of service

- And since that bread had already been given to the priests, it now belonged to Ahimelech
- And he could do whatever he wanted with that bread...it was his property at that point
- There was nothing written in the law of Moses prohibiting the priests from sharing their bread with non priests
- So Ahimelech and David weren't breaking the law of Moses...but they *were* breaking the Pharisee's so-called oral law
  - The Pharisees had rules for the priesthood too
  - And one of their rules said that the priests could never share the shewbread with a non-priest
  - That rule was part of the Pharisees' Mishnah, their rulebook
  - That rulebook is not Scripture, but the Pharisees said it was equal to Scripture
- As you may remember, I taught in past weeks how the Pharisees claimed their rules had been passed down orally from Moses
  - When Moses received the written law from God on the mountain, they said God gave Moses additional commandments
    - Those additional laws were not written down at the time, but instead were passed from generation to generation orally
    - Finally, the Pharisees recorded the oral law in the Mishnah
  - Obviously their claim of God giving the Mishnah to Moses orally was complete fiction, invented to give legitimacy to their rules
    - And Jesus uses the story of David and Ahimelech to expose this myth of an oral law
    - The Pharisees claimed that their rules originally came from God to Moses
  - And if so, then that would mean David and Ahimelech would have known about this oral law also, and they would have followed it
    - But since the Mishnah forbid priests from giving shewbread to non-priests, Ahimelech and David wouldn't have engaged in this transaction

- And yet the transaction took place, and neither was concerned about breaking any law
- So Jesus uses the example of David to prove that the Pharisees' rules did not exist in David's day and therefore they did not come from God
  - The Mishnah was an invention of the rabbis, created long after Moses, and as such it had no authority over the people
  - So any rules against picking grain on the Sabbath were nonsense and could not be used to convict Jesus' disciples
- The myth about the oral law is the oldest trick in the book...a person or a religious institution claiming they've heard from God in some matter
  - They say this so they can give legitimacy to their rules and stop people from challenging their authority
    - But it's a lie...always...and when we're confronted with that nonsense, we just need to do what Jesus did
    - Go to the Bible to find the truth
  - And when that truth contradicts what the person or institution claims to have heard from God, the Bible exposes the person or the institution to be a fraud
    - It's what Jesus did here, and it's what we can do too
    - This is perhaps the single most important reason to be life-long students of the Bible, to really dig in and understand it cover to cover
  - Knowing God's word inside and out is your best and only defense against nonsense...
    - Against false gospels that deny grace and offer no comfort or assurance
    - Against legalistic burdens that rob you of your freedom in Christ
    - Against harmful and manipulative relationships that seek to exploit you for your money or allegiance
- The enemy has an unlimited number of lies at his disposal, but in order for his schemes to work, he depends on his targets remaining biblically ignorant
  - The writer of Hebrews warns believers about biblical illiteracy

[Heb. 5:12](#) For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food.

[Heb. 5:13](#) For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant.

[Heb. 5:14](#) But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.

- The writer describes a believer maturing in his or her faith like a child moving from mother's milk to eating solid food
- Those who subsist only on milk remain weak, while those who mature into the meat of God's word gain strength
- But those who are not accustomed to the word of God, who never graduate to the meat of the word, remain spiritual infants
  - These believers never fully understand God nor the world properly and as a result they are susceptible to false teaching
  - They aren't equipped to discern the difference between good and evil, the writer says
- That was the central issue for Israel in Jesus' day...
  - They didn't understand the word of God so they fell prey to the evil teaching of Pharisees
  - Likewise, today we have millions of biblically-illiterate Christians falling prey to many schemes of the enemy
  - It's tragic...and it's preventable if we would just follow Jesus' example: learn our Bibles and use what we learn
- So Jesus' first response to their accusation was denying the authority and legitimacy of the Pharisee's rules...the Mishnah is not equal to Scripture
  - And then we find Jesus' second point in v.5

[Matt. 12:5](#) "Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and are innocent?"

[Matt. 12:6](#) "But I say to you that something greater than the temple is here.

[Matt. 12:7](#) "But if you had known what this means, 'I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT A SACRIFICE,' you would not have condemned the innocent.

- The temple was a seven-day-a-week operation, so even on the Sabbath the priests were required to work making sacrifices for the people
  - In fact, Sabbaths were extra busy days for the priests because of additional sacrifices and special Sabbath rituals
    - There were other exceptions to the Sabbath law as well
    - Circumcisions were always performed on a boy's 8th day of life even if that day happened to fall on a Sabbath
    - And even the Pharisees allowed exceptions to the Sabbath in situations like midwives attending to births
  - Jesus cites the example of priests serving on Sabbath to demonstrate how the Sabbath law served a higher purpose
    - The purpose of the Sabbath law wasn't simply prohibiting work merely for the sake of obeying a rule
    - The purpose of the Sabbath was to relieve Israel of burdens
    - So when keeping the Sabbath law added unnecessary burden, the Lord set the law aside to ensure that burdens were reduced
  - For example, a mother in labor on the Sabbath would be burdened by being denied the care of a midwife, so an exception to the Sabbath was necessary
    - Likewise, the people of Israel would have been burdened if they lacked priests to officiate in the temple on the Sabbath, so an exception was made
    - Jesus' point is that the ultimate goal of the Sabbath was to promote rest not burden, and that took precedence over rules
- But that was a foreign concept to the Pharisees...keeping rules was the point for those men, regardless of how burdensome it became
  - In fact, rules didn't exist to serve men...men existed to serve the rules
    - And the more burdensome the rule was, the more the Pharisees felt they were pleasing God by keeping it
    - That's false religion in a nutshell...

- When following God feels like a burden rather than a joy, you are doing it wrong
  - If attending church or saying prayers or giving money or doing anything is something you dread or resent, then you are trapped in a false system
  - You're obeying rules or rituals rather than obeying God, because Christ's burden is light and joyful, He says
- Many people associate God and religion with the feeling of shouldering burdens
  - Because they only know rule keeping, they think that the more burdens they bear, the more rules they keep, the happier God is with them
  - If that's how you feel, you'd make a pretty good Pharisee
- Notice Jesus says in v.7 that if the Pharisees had truly understood God's word, they would have known He desired compassion not sacrifice
  - That's a reference to Hosea 6

**Hos. 6:6 For I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice,  
And in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.**

- My Bible version says "loyalty" but the Hebrew word is *chesed*
- That word could be translated as lovingkindness or faithfulness
- The Lord says He desires we have hearts of faithfulness and obedience; He doesn't delight in our sacrifices
  - A sacrifice is a work made necessary by sin, and it cannot restore us to God
  - Faith recognizes that Christ made the only sacrifice God requires, and so now we don't need to make our own
  - Jesus was saying that these men were not in a relationship with God by faith, which is why they couldn't understand the Sabbath
- That's why we say true Christianity is not a pursuit of religion or ritual...it's a pursuit of a relationship with God through Christ by His word
  - Christians don't get fixated on the minutiae of rules and regulations

- We're strive to know and obey God's heart
- And the word of God reveals those things to us
- Now of course, the word also gives us rules to obey
  - But we know our relationship with God was established by our faith, not by our rule-keeping
  - And for the same reason, we know that nothing we do for God could ever make us more approved
  - Likewise, nothing we fail to do could ever diminish the Lord's love for us
- The Father approves of you because His Son did all the work to make you acceptable to God
  - The Father's love for you is based in what Christ did, not what you did, which is why you can't lose what you gain by faith
  - You could choose to never pray, never give a dime to God, and skip church for months, and God would still love you just as much because of what Christ did on the cross
  - Now, the same can't be said for how I would feel about you... [joke]
- These men had no faith; all they had were ritual and rule, and for that reason they missed the Sabbath's true purpose
  - Notice in v.6 Jesus says that something greater than the temple has come
    - Obviously, Jesus means He is greater than a stone building
    - And if God's word prioritized the temple above the Sabbath, then certainly the Messiah takes priority over any Sabbath rules
  - To a Jew, nothing on earth was more holy than the temple, because the temple held the glory of God Himself
    - Even today, we find devout Jews praying at the Western Wall because of its proximity to a temple that's been gone 2,000 years
    - But Jesus says He was greater than the temple, meaning He was the Messiah

- And faith in the Messiah is the true fulfillment of the Sabbath, which leads us to Jesus' final point

**Matt. 12:8 "For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."**

- Jesus says He is the Lord of the Sabbath
  - More specifically Jesus says the Messiah (the Son of Man) is the Lord of the Sabbath
    - In a simple sense Jesus was saying that as God, He alone determines what is and isn't a violation of the Sabbath
    - The Pharisees' rules concerning the Sabbath were not binding on God Himself
  - Beyond that, Jesus was also speaking of the ultimate purpose of the Sabbath law: it's a picture of Christ's redeeming work on our behalf
    - As I mentioned in Chapter 11, the Sabbath day was an object lesson on what it means to have faith in Jesus
    - The Jews worked six days each week and rested for one, but that day of rest was very temporary
    - Before long that day was over and work began again
  - In that sense, the Sabbath day reminded Israel that their work was never finished
    - You probably know that feeling, don't you?
    - If you work or go to school Monday through Friday, then you're familiar with that feeling that comes every Sunday evening
    - You know your weekend is almost over, and you feel the pressure of another work week building even before Monday arrives
    - That's why we look forward to retirement so much...it's the permanent weekend that never ends...permanent rest
- The Lord established the Sabbath day for Israel to illustrate for them what it's like working your way into Heaven
  - It's like working at a job where there's no retirement

- You pray, attend church, give your money, volunteer, and many other things hoping to please God enough to earn Heaven
- It's work, it's burden, it's worry...and it never ends
- There's never a day you wake up and say confidently I've done enough to go to Heaven...I can rest from my works
- For the person trying to work their way into Heaven, every day of life feels like a Monday and that weekend rest is always in the distance
  - And even if you have a particularly good day and feel caught up with God, like a weekend, that rest comes to an end eventually
  - And then the work begins again...that's a miserable and hopeless way to approach God
- The Bible says that no one can enter Heaven by doing works or being "good" or trying hard...you can't be good enough to enter Heaven
  - There is only one way to enter God's rest...by faith in Christ's work
  - Only Jesus was good enough to enter Heaven, so we have to receive His goodness by faith rather than relying on our own
- So in that sense, the Bible calls Jesus our Sabbath; He is our rest
  - Hebrews 4:3 says we who have believed in Jesus enter God's rest, God's Sabbath
  - And Hebrews 4:10 says

**Heb. 4:10** For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His.

- The one who places faith in Jesus rests from his or her works of trying to reach Heaven
  - Just faith alone in Jesus is required to enter Heaven
  - And God intended that the temporary, weekly Sabbath day would create a longing in Israel for a permanent rest
  - And that longing would lead God's people to place their faith in Messiah's work on their behalf

- The Pharisees condemned Jesus' disciples for failing to accept the Mishnah's burdens even as they failed to recognize God's true Sabbath
  - Don't make the same mistake...don't mistake ritual for relationship
  - Enter God's rest by faith in Jesus, so you may live a life free from the burdens of working for Heaven