

“I Desire Mercy, Not Sacrifice!”

Thomas Robinson, *Following or Rejecting Jesus*, 4, October 20, 2013

Matthew 12:1-14 [Cf Mark 2:23– 3:8]

¹ At that time **Jesus** went through the **grainfields** on the **Sabbath**. His disciples were hungry, and they began to **pluck heads of grain and to eat**.

² But when the **Pharisees** saw it, they said to him, “Look, your disciples are doing what is **not lawful to do on the Sabbath**.”

³ He said to them, “**Have you not read** what **David** did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: ⁴ how he entered **the house of God** and **ate the bread of the Presence**, which it was **not lawful for him to eat** nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? (1 Sam 21:1-6) ⁵ Or **have you not read in the Law** how on the **Sabbath** the **priests in the temple** profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? (Num 29:9-10) ⁶ I tell you, **something greater than the temple is here**.

⁷ And **if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’** [Hosea 6:6] you would not have condemned the guiltless. ⁸ For **the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath**.”

⁹ He went on from there and **entered** their **synagogue**. ¹⁰ And **a man** was there with a **withered hand**. And they asked him, “**Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?**” – so that they might accuse him.

¹¹ He said to them, “Which one of you who has one **sheep**, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? ¹² Of how much more value is a human than a sheep! **So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath**.”

¹³ Then he said to the man, “**Stretch out your hand**.” And the man stretched it out, and it was restored, healthy like the other.

¹⁴ But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, **how to destroy him**.

Matthew 9:10-13

¹⁰ And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. ¹¹ And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

¹² But when he heard it, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³ Go and learn what this means, *‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice’* [Hosea 6:6]. For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Hosea 6:4-6

⁴ What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?
What shall I do with you, O Judah?
Your love (*hesed*) is like a morning cloud,
like the dew that goes early away.

⁵ Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets;
I have slain them by the words of my mouth,
and my judgment goes forth as the light.

⁶ For I **desire steadfast love (*hesed*) and not sacrifice**,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

Exodus 20:8-11

⁸ “Remember the **Sabbath day**, to **keep it holy**. ⁹ Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it **you shall not do any work**, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days **the LORD** made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and **rested on the seventh day**. Therefore the **LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy**.”

[*Mishnah, Aboth 1.1* Moses received the Law from Sinai and committed it to Joshua ...to the elders ... to the Prophets ... to the men of the Great Synagogue. They said three things: Be deliberate in judgment, raise up many disciples, and **make a fence around the Law**.]

An 'Obscure' Controversy about a 'Holy' Day

We're looking at a section of Matthew focused around following or rejecting Jesus. He was highly controversial. Many rejected him for substantial reasons. This section ends with Pharisees seeking to destroy him. It's easy for us to class Pharisees as villains, but they weren't – think of Paul. Still Jesus had serious disagreements with them. Here, however, the arguments about the Sabbath may seem trivial and hard for us to grasp what's at stake.

Often religious controversies, looked at from the outside, seem over trivial issues. An iota. Sunday school, kitchen in church, mission societies, etc. But inside, they are important because they encapsulate an issue of God's will – What does God desire? Who is God? The Sabbath is holy, grounded in creation. Many have died rather than break it! Jesus seems to allow his disciples to desecrate it trivially. He cannot truly be teaching God's will.

Protecting the Will of God to Keep it Holy

The Pharisees' view was founded solidly in two basic ideas. (1) The Law and traditions were handed down to the scribes/rabbis to interpret authoritatively and teach to the people.

(2) Israel honors God's holy Law by keeping it as carefully and as universally as possible. We do that by setting a standard more detailed and explicit than the scriptural law itself so we are sure not to break the law. We "make a fence around the law." (Specified 39 forms of work, including reaping, threshing.) Holiness is expressed in the care and rigor of obedience, the sacrifice I make. Through commands touching every moment of life, God permeates life.

Recognizing a New Center of God's Work in the World

Jesus challenged the Pharisees on both of these basic ideas. First, Jesus challenged the basic idea of the authority of scribal tradition to interpret God's law: "traditions of men." But the way he did it had far larger implications than just rules of interpretation. Remember that the deep question is "Are you the one to come?" – the Messiah, anointed king.

He tells an example from David when he had been anointed king by Samuel but had not yet come into his kingdom. The anointed one makes judgments about the holy, about God's purpose. Then he talks about the 'work' done in the Temple itself on the Sabbath. These actions may break the scribal rulings about work, but they are God's work and thus holy. Then comes the assertion: Something greater than the Temple – God's kingdom breaking in through God's anointed king, Messiah – is here! Priests, prophets, scribes lead up to it, but now is a new day.

What God really 'Desires' determines what is Holy.

Second, Jesus challenges the idea that holiness is found in the rigor of obedience, in making a fence around the Law. There's no virtue in being holier than God. It undermines holiness.

Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6, as he does also in Mt 9:13. I desire mercy / hesed – genuine love.

Sacrifice should express that love, but is often done for other motives. Transformation of the heart and real action/service flowing from that transformation is what God desires.

A rigorist reading of purity and Sabbath laws led to exclusivism contrary to mercy / God.

To the Pharisees, this sounded like looking for easy loopholes in God's law. Jesus said no. It goes to the center of the law. It is the true rule of God – the Sermon on the Mount.

Our danger is often that we want to follow the Jesus the Pharisees saw. We still think like Pharisees, but use Jesus to take the edge off God's law. We become sloppy Pharisees, without real transformation, looking for loopholes. *Hesed* is the heart of God. It transforms everything, but not by exclusive boundaries; rather by serving needs, by including outsiders.