

My goal in my bible reading this year is to read through the major prophets of the Old Testament. They're books I've struggled to really enjoy and grasp, and so I want to understand them better. I started with Isaiah and last week brought me to chapter 40, where I read this:

See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power,  
and he rules with a mighty arm.  
See, his reward is with him,  
and his recompense accompanies him.  
He tends his flock like a shepherd:  
He gathers the lambs in his arms  
and carries them close to his heart;  
he gently leads those that have young.  
(Isaiah 40:10-11)

The thing that struck me about Isaiah's words is how the Lord, "*comes with power and rules with a mighty arm,*" but he also "*tends his flock like a shepherd*" and "*gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart.*" How can he rule with such power and might and yet at the same time be so tender and gentle? Isaiah goes on and asks,

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand,  
or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens?  
Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket,  
or weighed the mountains on the scales  
and the hills in a balance?  
Who can fathom the Spirit of the Lord,  
or instruct the Lord as his counselor?  
(Isaiah 40:12-13)

God is so big and powerful. Two-thirds of our planet is water, but that's like a teaspoon of liquid in the hollow of his hand. How could such a big, powerful God bend to care about such small and measly creatures as us?

In a Peanuts cartoon, Charlie Brown and a friend are standing outside at night staring at a field of stars. Charlie Brown turns to his friend and says, "Let's go inside and watch TV. I'm beginning to feel insignificant."

Sometimes we wonder, if God is really so big and powerful, how could he really care about my struggles and disappointments? Sometimes in the midst of our battles; maybe it's a difficult marriage, a sick child, a personal battle with depression, or a pile of bad debt; we wonder why this powerful God would stoop to serve us.

Today we're looking at Matthew 12:1-21. One of the things we're going to see is how great and powerful Jesus is. He makes

claims about himself that are astounding, and the things he does to back up his claims are even more astounding. But again, the question is, what does he **do** with that power. He may be powerful, but is he good? Does he care? In this passage, we'll see he **is** good and he **does** care.

### **A Sabbath Controversy**

**At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them.  
(Matthew 12:1)**

Verse 1 sets the scene. Jesus is still in Galilee. It's a happy Saturday morning in early spring. He and his disciples get up early and head for the synagogue in a nearby town. It was his lifelong habit to go to church on the Jewish Sabbath. As they walk through a field of grain, his disciples decide to partake of the original breakfast of champions, so they grab a few grains and begin to eat.

In their minds, what they're doing is completely legit. The Old Testament law even said a farmer was to leave the edges of his field unharvested so some of the crops could be picked by the poor or by travelers (Leviticus 19:9, Deuteronomy 23:25). So stealing isn't the issue here.

But there **was** another issue, and that comes out in the next verse.

**When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath." (verse 2)**

The Pharisees were religious leaders who knew the Old Testament law inside and out. Their issue wasn't so much **what** the disciples were doing, but **when** they were doing it. They're plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath! To us, this seems kind of ridiculous, but the Sabbath was a big deal to the Jews, and rightly so. The fourth commandment to keep the Sabbath holy and not do any work was a big deal to God. It is the longest of the Ten Commandments. The Lord even said through the prophet Jeremiah, "*But if you do not obey me to keep the Sabbath day holy by not carrying any load as you come through the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then I will kindle an unquenchable fire in the gates of Jerusalem that will consume her fortresses*" (Jeremiah 17:27).

That's how important this was to God and to the Jewish people. In fact, about 200 years earlier, in the days of the Maccabees; when the enemy attacked the Jewish people on the Sabbath; they let themselves be slaughtered, men, women, and children,

rather than break the Sabbath by defending themselves. They were ready to suffer rather than violate the Sabbath.

The problem was the Pharisees had taken this law and reduced it to the worst form of legalism. The Sabbath law didn't really spell out in detail what constituted work, so they came up with all kinds fine print around this law. There were 39 categories of work that profaned the Sabbath. For example, Jeremiah mentions carrying a load. Well, what constitutes a load? Was a piece of clothing a load? The Pharisees said if it was worn as clothing it wasn't a load, but if it was carried it was. So the way to get a jacket from one room to another was obviously to put it on, walk to the next room, and then take it off.

And here what the disciples are doing is basically reaping, which is work. And if they rubbed the grain in their hand they were also guilty of threshing and by blowing the chaff they were winnowing. All of that together constituted making a meal, which was also forbidden!

All of this, of course, became quite burdensome. This law, which was intended by God to be a blessing for his people, to provide rest and refreshment, had become a burden. So how will Jesus respond to this accusation? Remember, he's the One who just finished saying at the end of chapter 11, "*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*" Jesus responds by asking a few questions of his own.

The first comes in verses 3–4.

**He answered, "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. (verses 3–4)**

I love how Jesus jabs them a little by asking, "Haven't you read?" It's like, "I thought you guys were the experts in the Old Testament!" Jesus goes back to 1 Samuel 21 where the soon-to-be King David was being chased by King Saul in the wilderness. David and his men were on the brink of starvation and asked a priest in the house of God for food. The priest took some of the consecrated bread and gave it to David and his men to eat. That bread was restricted for priests only, but the future king David and his men ate it, and they weren't condemned for doing so. So, here's another King, Jesus, doing something quite similar. I guess satisfying one's legitimate hunger is reason enough to set aside a liturgical rule, especially if you're a king!

The second question comes in verses 5–6.

**Or haven't you read in the Law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent? I tell you that something greater than the temple is here. (verses 5–6)**

Temple worship always required that someone work so others could worship. Just like I work on Sunday, the priests had to work on the Jewish Sabbath, and that was allowed. So worship

offered to God takes precedence over Sabbath regulations. And with that Jesus says something radical. He says, "Something greater than the Temple is here." That's quite a claim! I mean the Temple is God's holy place! What God was doing through Jesus, bringing in the Kingdom, launching worldwide salvation, far surpassed what was going in Temple worship!

Finally, Jesus quotes the Prophet Hosea to make his final point. Look at verse 7–8.

**If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." (verses 7–8)**

What Jesus calls "sacrifice" refers to religious rules. God cares more about mercy, love, and compassion than religious rules. Again, the Sabbath was created to be life-giving, not to load people down. "And by the way," Jesus says, "The Son of Man (that's me) is Lord of the Sabbath." So basically, I can say whatever I want about the Sabbath. I can even rewrite the rules if I want to."

That's another amazing claim! The Sabbath was God's creation. The Jews believed it even existed before creation. To claim Lordship over the Sabbath is to claim Lordship over creation! This is like saying, "I'm God!" That's how big Jesus is. But look what he does with his power and authority. He doesn't crush people like the Pharisees did, with rules and regulations. He frees them up and meets their real needs with mercy and grace. Jesus doesn't abolish the Sabbath, he restores it to its original purpose—to meet human need.

It's like this group we interviewed today, *A Bunch of Guys*. What are they trying to do? Ultimately, they are trying to protect vulnerable women. But they're also trying to change the hearts of men who prey on them. What if we said something like, "You can't do that ministry here because it's false solicitation." I mean someone could make that case. Or even worse, "Those women don't deserve your help." But what does Jesus say? He says, "I'll take compassion and mercy over your rules and religion any day."

## **A Healing on the Sabbath**

Jesus is a powerful King, but he's not like other powerful kings. He's a merciful King. Look what happens that same morning as Jesus and his disciples arrive at the synagogue for worship.

**Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, (verse 9)**

Jesus enters the synagogue and encounters a man with atrophied muscles in one of his hands. Besides the discomfort and disfigurement, this made it almost impossible to earn a living. Most men back then worked with their hands. Jesus was a carpenter. Peter was a fisherman. Paul was a tentmaker. All these things required strong, skillful hands, but this man had a shriveled hand. In another Gospel we're told it was his right hand.

The Pharisees see him as a perfect test case.

**and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to bring charges against Jesus, they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" (verse 10)**

This is an intriguing question because the rabbis allowed healing on the Sabbath if a person's life was in danger but if there was no mortal danger, they should wait until the next day. Clearly, this man's life was **not** in danger; this could wait. Matthew is quick to point out their question isn't an honest search for the truth, but a trap. Notice how they pay Jesus a tremendous compliment here. They know he has the power to heal the guy, but they don't care. They don't care what that says about Jesus or what that means for the man. They just care about the rules.

This time Jesus responds differently from the first incident where he went back to scripture. Here, he relies on common sense.

**He said to them, "If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." (verses 11–12)**

The answer to Jesus' question is obvious. The Jews showed great care for their animals, and according to one of the Pharisees' laws, it was permissible to rescue an animal on the Sabbath. Now for all you animal lovers out there, this might push your buttons. But let's face it, if forced to make a choice, you'd save a drowning child before a drowning sheep. People are more important than animals. Then comes the punch line. Jesus says, **"...it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."** Jesus isn't just saying showing mercy and love trumps Sabbath law, he's saying showing mercy and love **is** Sabbath law.

But what authority does Jesus have to say such a thing? Look what happens next.

**Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other. (verse 13)**

Notice with this miracle Jesus didn't move a muscle. He didn't reach out and touch the guy as he did in other healings. He just spoke four words: **"Stretch out your hand."**

I grew up with a boy who had a deformed hand. I didn't know him well. He didn't talk much. He kept to himself, and he almost always kept that hand in his pocket. Hide the shame, right? Jesus calls this man to stretch out his hand. Jesus requires he demonstrate his faith by exposing his greatest area of shame. And how **do** you stretch out a withered hand? As he obeys, Jesus instantly heals his hand and it inflates to normalcy like air filling a balloon. That's power! That's authority! I'd say whoever could pull that off has every right to say what's lawful on the Sabbath! But this is a very different kind of power and authority, isn't it? This is a King who uses his power and authority to do good and show mercy.

I can just imagine this man's friends and family gathered around him celebrating. How do you think the Pharisees responded?

**But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus. (verse 14)**

So it started right here. In the backroom of a synagogue on the Sabbath, they begin to plot how to kill him. Just like this man stretched out his hand, Jesus will soon stretch out his hands on a Roman cross. This is incredible. Think about it. These men are so careful to observe the letter of God's law. They are as religious as religious people get. But when Jesus doesn't conform to their religious rules, they plot to murder him. You can have a religion of rules and ceremonies but be blind to the truth that's right in front of you, with a heart very far from God. The question is how will Jesus respond to that kind of animosity?

### **Justice Through to Victory for All Nations**

**Aware of this, Jesus withdrew from that place. A large crowd followed him, and he healed all who were ill. He warned them not to tell others about him. (verses 15–16)**

Jesus was quite aware of their intent to kill him. We don't know how he knew, but he knew. He could have exposed them right then and there. He could have challenged them. He could have fought back. Instead, he quietly withdraws. And then after a large crowd follows him, and he heals everyone who was sick, he tells them not to tell anyone about him. Isn't this rather strange behavior? I mean he could have fought back. He had unlimited power, right? He could have started a riot. At least, with so many people on his side he could have organized a march on Jerusalem, or maybe call for a public debate. But that wasn't his way. He preferred to do his work quietly, and without a fuss.

And Matthew gets how this might be hard for us to understand, so he reaches back once again and quotes the prophet Isaiah.

**This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah:**

**"Here is my servant whom I have chosen,  
the one I love, in whom I delight;  
I will put my Spirit on him,  
and he will proclaim justice to the nations.  
He will not quarrel or cry out;  
no one will hear his voice in the streets.  
A bruised reed he will not break,  
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out,  
till he has brought justice through to victory.  
In his name the nations will put their hope."  
(verses 17–21)**

This is the longest quotation from the Old Testament in this gospel, and I dare say the most significant. In it, Isaiah is clearly looking forward to the ministry of the Messiah. Don't forget the popular expectation was the Messiah would come and crush Israel's enemies. This shows they had it wrong.

The Messiah would come as a lowly "servant." Yes, he'd be a beloved servant, a Spirit-filled servant and a servant in whom God delighted, but still a lowly servant. But what did this servant

come to do and how would he do it? Here we see both his mission and his method.

What is his mission? It says, ***“He will proclaim justice to the nations.”*** Later it says he'll bring ***“justice through to victory and in his name all the nations will put their hope.”*** Notice it's a worldwide mission for all people, not just Israel. And with that, it's a mission for justice. He'll proclaim justice; he'll bring justice through to victory. What does justice mean? The Greek word used here is *krisis*, which conveys the idea of judgment, the passing of a sentence. But it also includes the idea of weighing the evidence and doing what's right. Jesus came to make what's wrong, right. The world is bent. Creation is broken. My goodness, just read the news. There's so much that is wrong, so much corruption, but he'll overcome all of it. He won't quit until the job is done. ***“He'll bring justice through to victory”*** so in the end evil is eradicated and creation restored.

We don't just see his mission here, we see his method. It's not what we would think. When you think of the great and powerful kings of the earth, what do you think of? How do they get the job done? With force! With power! This week Putin went public with Russia's advancements in nuclear war. He said they were “invincible.” He put everyone, including the US, on notice. But that's not how God's servant will get the job done. Isaiah says, ***“He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets.”*** He won't make a lot of noise. He won't make big deal of himself: “Here I am, King Jesus! Look at Me! Quick, someone call CNN.” His work will be done without noise, publicity, and bluster.

It will be done in gentleness. Isaiah says, ***“a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.”*** A reed could be used as a flute, a measuring rod, a pen, but however one used it the whole reed was needed. A bruised reed was useless — beyond repair. So you just threw it out and got another. One thing about reeds, they were plentiful and cheap. But God's servant, Jesus, doesn't discard what the world deems useless. It's the same with a smoldering wick. It's nothing but a nuisance. It doesn't give out much light; it just smokes up the room. Snuff it out and throw it away. Flax is cheap so make a new one.

Do you see what this is saying? This servant will serve and restore people who the world would give up on and even throw out. Jesus, this powerful and sovereign King, came to bring justice to nobodies who could find it nowhere else. It was a justice he won on the cross, because on the cross Jesus received the **just** judgment for our sin and brokenness. And it's a justice that will ultimately come when Jesus returns to judge the nations.

In his book, *What Good Is God?* Philip Yancey writes about being invited to speak at a conference on ministry to women in

prostitution. He agreed to accept the invitation as long as he could question the women and hear their stories. At the end of the conference, Yancey had the following conversation with the women. He asked, “Did you know that Jesus referred to your profession? Let me read what he said: ‘I tell you the truth, the tax collectors, and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.’ He was speaking to the religious authorities of his day. What do you think Jesus meant? Why did he single out prostitutes?”

After several minutes of silence, a young woman from Eastern Europe spoke up in her broken English. She said, “Everyone, she has someone to look down on. Not us. We are at the low. Our families, they feel shame for us. No mother nowhere looks at her little girl and says, ‘Honey, when you grow up I want you to be good prostitute.’ Most places, we're breaking the law. Believe me, we know how people feel about us. People call us names: whore, slut, hooker, harlot. We feel it too. We're the bottom. And sometimes when you're at the low, you cry for help. So when Jesus comes, we respond. Maybe Jesus meant that.”

Maybe that's what Isaiah and Matthew meant as well. ***“A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.”*** Maybe you're a bruised reed. Maybe you're a soldering wick. Maybe you feel discarded, useless, and good for nothing. Maybe you're at the bottom. If that's you, a cry for help is enough for King Jesus to respond. Jesus is the powerful, merciful King who says, “I don't care how bruised and broken you are. I've come to bring you life, rest and hope.”

Make no mistake: Jesus is powerful. He's greater than King David. He's greater than the Temple. He's Lord of the Sabbath. He can heal a man with a withered hand without lifting a finger. He'll bring justice through to victory and reign as the King of kings and Lord of lords. However he's unlike any other King because he's not just powerful, he's good. He's merciful. He's gentle. He loves taking the bruised reeds and smoldering wicks of this world and making them into trophies of grace.

As his people, as the body of Christ, we're called to be like him in this world. We don't have to worry about power and publicity. We don't have to vote for the right politicians or fight for Jesus to get more face time in our public schools. We don't have to try to get our greatest sports heroes to thank Jesus on TV. We can do it his way: quietly, gently, without fanfare. We can be there when people are at their low and crying for help. We can show them there's a King who is both mighty and merciful.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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