

Faith, Followers, and Failures: Failing by the Book, Part 2
From the Series, “The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe”
By Phil Brainerd

Introduction

We’re continuing in our series, “Faith, Followers, and Failures.” In our last session, we began a two-part message called: “Failing by the Book.” If you haven’t read the first part, I encourage you to do so. For everyone else, let’s do a quick summary so we’re all starting at the same place. We’re in Matthew, Chapter 12, where we see Jesus and his followers walking through a field of grain:

1 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. 2 When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, “Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath.” (Matthew 12:1-2)

So, Jesus was met with a challenge. He and his friends are walking through a grainfield. There was no problem here - This was very normal in his day. His followers were hungry, so they grabbed a handful of grain and began to eat. Again, very normal, and perfectly legal in that day.

However, the Pharisees came along and accused the disciples of a crime. The disciples, supposedly, were doing something unlawful. Why did the Pharisees think that normal and even common behaviors were a crime? Because, they said, this was being done on the Sabbath.

Where did all this come from? Was Jesus a sloppy person who didn’t know the Law of Moses? Was he a rebellious person who would defy that law? Recall, Jesus came to lead a perfect life. If he ever broke the law, **knowingly or otherwise**, that would be sin. And that would disqualify Jesus to die for the sins of the world. He would no longer be the perfect, spotless Lamb of God.

As it turns out, the charge that was made against Jesus and his followers had nothing to do with breaking the laws of God as stated by Moses. However, over centuries, the religious leaders, added multitudes of rules to the clear commands of God. There were so many of these man-made rules that they filled books. Some call this “building fences around the law.” The idea is that it’s not good enough to have the principles of Scripture, so you have to add some buffers. We learned in the last session that when people create rules above and beyond the clear command of God, it creates problems.

- First, these rules don’t help people.
- Next, they obscure the benefits of the laws given by God.
- Finally, these rules are the product of a mistrust of God, not faith.

All of these things combined in such a way that the Pharisees did not recognize the Messiah when he came. Instead, they attempted to undermined him by accusing him of crimes. In this article, we're going to pick up where we left off with part two.

We're going to divide our talk into two parts: First, how did Jesus respond to the charges leveled against him? Second, what does this mean for us today? So, let's dive in. How did Jesus respond? Let's read on in Matthew 12.

3 He answered, "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? 4 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. (Matthew 12:3-4)

How did Jesus respond to people who had made up their own book of rules, and who had the hubris to use their rules to falsely judge him? Here's what he did: ***He answered from the true Word of God.*** Look at what he said: "Haven't you read..."

The way you answer people who are steeped in the laws and traditions of man is to steer them to the true Word of God. And that's just what Jesus did. He's referencing a story that's found in I Samuel 21. We won't go there – let me just summarize. The great King David was at one time a servant of King Saul. Tragically, Saul became jealous of David and tried to have him killed. So, David and a few of his friends found themselves on the run. They had to get out of town fast. On the way out of town, they stopped by the tabernacle. That was where people worshipped before the temple of Jerusalem was built.

Because they were in a rush, David wasn't able to take any food. However, he knew the high priest, so David asked if there was anything available. The only food available was a special bread: It was called, "The Show Bread". Moses commanded that special bread was to be put on display in the temple. After a time, it was taken down. And this is important: After it was taken down, it could only be eaten by the priests serving in the temple. Normal people weren't supposed to eat it.

David and his men were in danger. And they were hungry. So, in this case, an exception was made. The priest on duty gave them some of the bread. So, Jesus says there's an important principle here. This rule was given by Moses. It was an important rule. However:

When human life is in danger, human life often becomes greater than the rules.

In the Gospel of Mark, the writer tells the same story. Over there, Mark records Jesus as adding a statement:

Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. (Mark 2:27)

So, the way that Jesus answered people who made up books full of man-made rules was to take them to the true Word of God. Jesus does this again so we can learn more. Let's read on:

Or haven't you read in the Law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent? (Matthew 12:5)

Notice again: "...haven't you read..." Jesus keeps returning his accusers to the Word of God. He is not a man who is unfamiliar with the writings of the Scripture as the Pharisees suppose. He is a master of the Scripture. Being a master, Jesus now challenges the Pharisees to dig deeper. He says that the priests in the temple desecrate the Sabbath. What does he mean?

We mentioned in our last article that the Pharisees defined work on the Sabbath as lifting a weight equal to a dried fig. The priests in the temple led worship every day - Including the Sabbath. This work involved doing things like offering sacrifices. In order to sacrifice a lamb, you had to lift it on to the altar. Question: Is a lamb heavier than a dried fig?

You get the picture. The priests were involved in all kinds of activities that broke the man-made rules associated with the Sabbath. If the rule book that the Pharisees had created had any validity, then the priests in the temple desecrated the Sabbath. Of course, Jesus is saying that the rules created by the Pharisees had almost no validity. And so, the priests were innocent.

Then Jesus goes on to say some things that would surely make the Pharisees quake.

6 I tell you that something greater than the temple is here. 7 If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent. 8 For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."
(Matthew 12:6-8)

The Hebrew Temple of Jerusalem was considered to be one of the wonders of the ancient world. It was not just a wonder of architecture - It was the earthly symbol of the Hebrew faith. Jesus just pointed out that priests who serve in the temple do things that the Pharisees would define as breaking the Sabbath. Well, guess what? Something greater than that temple was standing right before their eyes. If someone served God in the temple on the Sabbath, it was totally appropriate for them to exert themselves. How much more for people who served something greater than the temple?

Jesus then quotes even more Scripture: "If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent." This is from Hosea 6:6. God ordained sacrifices in his temple. However, he cares more about the condition of the hearts of those presenting the sacrifice than the sacrifice itself. When people make a sacrifice to God, when things are working right, it's a picture - a picture of presenting a piece of yourself to God. When people present themselves to God, he changes their hearts. They start to become like him.

What is God like? He cares about people. He loves people. He is concerned when people hurt. He wants to see his children do the same things. And when people allow God to give them a new heart, they can.

So, Jesus and his followers were charged with a crime: Being hungry and grabbing some food on the Sabbath. Jesus took his accusers and turned them from their man-made rules to the Word of God. By doing so, he showed them that his followers were innocent.

If you learn the true Word of God, God uses it to make profound changes in your life. Your heart is changed. You become like him. On the other hand, if you run your life solely on man-made rules, you miss the wonder of what God offers. In fact, you miss the wonder of God.

The Pharisees missed the fact that something greater than the temple was standing before them. Then, Jesus tells them that they missed something even greater.

“For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” (Matthew 12:8)

God created the earth in six days and rested on the seventh. He called the seventh a Sabbath. The God who did this came to the earth to live in the body of a human. And he was standing right there in the grainfield. The Pharisees missed it, because of their rules.

Jesus continued his response to the Pharisees. Let's read.

9 Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, 10 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?” (Matthew 12:9-10)

Jesus continues his response by walking onto the turf of the enemy. Notice, we're told “he went into *their* synagogue”. Any thinking person knows that a place of worship does not belong to the worshippers. It belongs to the one being worshipped. This was God's house. But the corrupt Pharisees had turned it into a stage for themselves.

On this occasion, there was a man with a shriveled hand. Matthew uses this to help us investigate the minds of the Pharisees. What we see there is scary. Here's a man with a handicap. If you know anything about Jesus, you know that he often healed people like this.

There are different ways to react to his. Someone might say, “Wow! Maybe we'll see Jesus show his power by healing this man.” In the case of the Pharisees, they said: “You know this Jesus guy - He's a do-gooder. He won't be able to resist healing this man. When he does, we'll trap him.”

And so they begin:

Looking for a reason to bring charges against Jesus, they asked him, “Is it lawful to **heal** on the Sabbath?” (Matthew 12:10, emphasis mine)

Jesus just told them that it was acceptable to eat when you’re hungry, even if it’s on the Sabbath. It was acceptable to lift heavy weights in the Temple, even if it’s on the Sabbath. Ah, but healing? That must be **a lot** of work.

We’ve talked about healing in the past. Oddly, the Pharisees were on to something. It must have been a lot of work to look at a deformed hand, and then analyze all the muscles, nerves, and bones. And from there to straighten them all out - in an instant.

Grabbing a handful of grain on the Sabbath? That was OK. Lifting a lamb onto the altar in the temple? That’s heavier, but apparently still OK. But healing – that was REAL work. Surely, this would be off limits. And because Jesus was a do-gooder, he wouldn’t be able to resist.

How does Jesus answer this? Previously, he took these men to the Scriptures. That apparently had no effect. Remember that Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath. He has the authority to do whatever he wants on the Sabbath. On the other hand, Jesus constrained himself to live by the laws that other lived under. That way he could live a sinless life and offer himself for the sins of others. He could not break the rules of the Sabbath. However, he could explain the rules and the principles that the rules represent. He could do so because he made them.

A moment ago, he told these men that that needed to understand mercy. It didn’t sink in, so Jesus appeals to their humanity.

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.” (Matthew 12:11-12)

Israel is a rocky place. If you don’t watch where you’re going, you might fall into a pit. We’ve talked about sheep in the past. They’re not too bright. Imagine that one falls into a pit. It starts to cry - Especially if it got hurt. What kind of a person would stand there and let a poor animal suffer?

In another place, Jesus ran into a similar situation. Here’s what he said there:

Then he asked them, “If one of you has a child or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull it out?” (Luke 14:5)

Many of you either have children or you’ve worked with children, so you know how children are. If you were standing in a field, and you saw a big open hole, you would warn any children that might be around. You would say something like, “Hey, make sure you stay away from

that!" Some children will say, "OK", and they stay away. Other children will run over to the edge and see if they can balance on one foot.

Let's say that you're a parent living in ancient Israel, and you hear the sound that no parent wants to hear from their child: "Help!" You run over to the hole where the sound is coming from. Now imagine the following conversation.

Parent: Son – are you OK?
Child: "I can't get out."
Parent: Well, I'd love to help you, but you know - it's the Sabbath.
You should have come home when we called instead of playing near this hole.
Child: "I'm afraid".
Parent: Well, get used to it for the next 24 hours.
Child: "I'm cold".
Parent: Hey, I'd normally go and get you a blanket.
But you know, I can't carry anything on the Sabbath.
Child: "I think I'm bleeding."
Parent: Well, that's what happens when you don't listen to Mommy and Daddy.

Then, you don't hear any more.

Why would anyone with a heart stand around and do nothing in that situation? Why would you leave a hurting child alone for even a minute longer than needed? So, Jesus says:
"...will you not immediately pull it out."

Back to our story.

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. (Matthew 12:13)

Now, understand this. This man likely had this handicap for his whole life. Could he have waited until the next day? Sure. But to Jesus, there was no reason to allow this man to suffer even one minute longer than he had to. So, as he often did, he helped this poor man.

How did the Pharisees react? Did this change their hearts?

But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus. (Matthew 12:14)

More...

So, the second way that Jesus responded to the Pharisees was to walk directly onto their turf and challenge them. He showed them the condition of their pitiful hearts by shining a stark light on them. He showed mercy and love when they had none.

How did they react to Jesus? They plotted how they might kill him.

II. What does this mean for us today?

What does this all mean for us today? As always, it means lots of things, but let's focus on a few.

We need to understand grace

Above all, we need to understand grace.

16 Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given.

17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. (John 1:16-17)

According to this, grace and truth were a major part of why Jesus came. So we must understand grace.

Moses gave the law. What was the law? The law was God's will for his people. If God were to walk the earth, this is how he would act. Paul talks about this in the letter to the Galatians

24 So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. 25 Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian. (Galatians 3:24-25)

When Jesus came, he fulfilled all the requirements of the law. We read about that back in Matthew 5.

Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. (Matthew 5:17)

Jesus fulfilled the law. Because he fulfilled the law, he was eligible to die for the sins of those who failed the requirements of the law - And that's all of us. He does all this free of charge. He offers all the benefits of his salvation to people based only on faith. That's grace. That's why I often quote the following verse from Ephesians:

8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.
(Ephesians 2:8-9)

So, we need to understand grace. Grace is how we are saved. Grace is how we enjoy all the benefits of salvation. Grace is how God reveals himself to us so that we and enjoy him.

What happens if we don't understand grace? That's why Paul had to add the second part of this quote: "not by works" (v 9) If people don't understand grace, they base their relationship with God on works. And that's not how God does things.

What do the works look like? In some cases, people misinterpret the principles and rules given to us in the Bible. As I said a moment ago, the law was meant to lead people to God. Instead of that, many people view the law as a checklist. For example, the law says, "you shall not murder". So, some people finish their day and say, "I didn't murder anyone - I get a point. God must like me."

But that's not why God gave the commandment. Jesus was God visiting the face of the earth. While he was on the earth, people did all kinds of things to offend him. *He didn't murder any of them*. Instead, he showed them mercy. He forgave them.

So, people who treat the law as a checklist system miss God's purpose for their lives.

Another one is the Sabbath. We ended our first session by mentioning that we would find out why we don't observe the Sabbath today the way people did in ancient Israel. Like the commandment on murder, many misunderstand the command to observe a Sabbath. In the days of Jesus, many took a day off as directed. Then checked off that time on their list. They thought that obeying the Sabbath was one more part of a point system that earned God's favor.

But God directed people to observe a Sabbath for a different reason. When he created the heavens and the earth, he stopped at the end to rest. Here's the point: If we do the same, we have the opportunity to become like him. And more, it's just plain good for us.

Jesus fulfilled the law. So, there is no legal requirement that we take a day off. No lightning will fall if you fail to observe a Sabbath. But, we have a Sabbath principle. Taking a day off is good for us - For all the reasons I've been mentioning. So, I recommend you do it. Use the free time to come to church. And then spend time with your family and friends. And of course, spend time with God.

When Jesus died and ascended into heaven, it started what we call "The Church Age." Previously, God's plan centered on the people of Israel. Now, the gospel would go out into the world. To the other nations – the Gentiles. Many of those people were slaves. If they tried to tell their masters that they couldn't work one day a week, they would be beaten. So, the early

church leaders didn't put this requirement on everyone. And, at some point the church switched the day of observance from Saturday, the last day of the week, to Sunday, the first day. They did this because that's the day Jesus rose from the dead. That's why most Christians don't observe the Sabbath the same way today as people did in the past.

Time is leaving us, so let me just mention a few more things that happen when people understand grace. When people understand grace, there are no big books of rules above and beyond the clear words of Scripture. There are no fences around the Word of God. We study God's Word knowing that every sentence is given to us by a loving Father who wants us to live an abundant life. We love God's word - We're not afraid of it.

Let's pull this all together.

Conclusion

Two thousand years ago, our Lord Jesus and some of his followers were wandering through a field of grain. People who did not know who Jesus was accused him of a crime. They did so because they had created books full of rules that overshadowed the true Scriptures of God. Doing this caused them to miss the Lord of Glory when he was right in front of them.

So, let's learn the true Word of God. But let's make sure we ask God's Holy Spirit to help us apply it to our hearts. Let's invite him to change us, so that we will be like him. So that we can have hearts full of mercy and love. So that we can know and love and enjoy the Lord of the Sabbath.

Thanks for reading! Here are some helpful links:

Trinity Church
TrinityTeaneck.org

Phil's Site
PhilBrainerd.com

To learn how to begin a new life with Jesus Christ, visit Billy Graham's site:
PeaceWithGod.net