

Prayer

Lord God, we are grateful for the privilege of access to your throne of grace. Help us to see the world around us with the eyes of Your love, to listen to it with the ears of your wisdom, and feel its pain with the compassion of your healing power. Through us who are Your people, Lord God, may Your Kingdom come in this troubled world: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Internet Church

Pray today for Churches and organisations that are attempting to use the internet as a means of evangelism, reaching out to those who would not wish to come to church.

On-going prayers

- *Pray about the economic problems felt by your country*
- *Give thanks for small children and the joy they bring families*
- *Pray for important elections around the world, notably in the USA*

Meditation

What is true discernment?

It is knowing that truth and falsehood, and right and wrong
Exist within the Creator's Universe, and He has made it so.
But knowing too that evil has personified itself in Satan
Who rejoices not so much in being wrong and wicked,
But in blurring the divisions which exist between the two,
So those who do not have an eye to light and darkness,
They never learn the difference!

What is true discernment?

It is following the only lead we have to find the truth;
And in the name of Jesus Christ, stand firm upon the Word
To break the destructive illusions of Satan's ruinous lies
And let the Holy Spirit bear us onwards on our mission
To find the keys of truth and wholeness, life and liberty
And all that's good; and so defeat all evil by the Truth.

We must learn the difference!

Bible Study - Matthew 12:1-8

¹ *Around then, Jesus went through the cornfields on the Sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pick the seed heads and to eat them* ² *But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, 'Look, your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath.'* ³ *He said to them, 'Have you not read what David did, when he and those who were with him were hungry?'* ⁴ *How he went into the house of God and ate the Bread of the Presence, which neither he nor those with him were supposed to eat, but only the priests?'* ⁵ *Or have you not read in the law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple violate Sabbath rules and yet are innocent?'* ⁶ *I tell you, here is something greater than the temple.* ⁷ *If you had known what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice," you would not have condemned the innocent.* ⁸ *For the Son of man is Lord of the Sabbath.'*

Review

This story from Matthew's Gospel is very well known, and each verse of it is full of meaning, with connections to other parts of the Gospel and other parts of scripture. At the beginning of Matthew 12, Jesus was moving on from His ministry in Galilee, and as He was travelling on the Sabbath, the disciples plucked some corn to eat, setting off a dispute between Jesus and the Pharisees. Note that only the disciples plucked the corn, and not Jesus; but as soon as the Pharisees challenged them, Jesus sprung to the disciples defence as if He was personally involved. To start with, most people knew about the strict regulations laid by the Pharisees banning thirty nine forms of work on the Sabbath including reaping! Either the disciples had sought Jesus' opinion as to whether they were 'reaping' or not, or they sat lightly to what the authorities said. However, the Pharisees saw this as a chance to test Jesus' attitude to 'the Law', and the closer you look at this story, the more you realise that neither Jesus nor the Pharisees were really concerned about the Sabbath!

The Sabbath was considered as one of God's greatest gifts (Deut 5:12-15; Ex 20:10; Is 56:4-7). It was the evidence of creation (Gen 2:1-4), and its observance was regarded as the unique sign of the people of God, and it was supposed to be a blessing of deserved rest, and not a burden. However, as Judaism developed, the Pharisees had built up a strict approach to the Sabbath which forbade all reaping on the Sabbath including the plucking of corn, even during harvest time, with one exception. Reaping was allowed on the Sabbath at the beginning of a harvest, when the first swathe of corn was taken on the Sabbath and offered as a holy offering to God.

David and the Sabbath Day (verses 3 and 4) Firstly, Jesus reminded the Pharisees that David and his men had broken religious laws (1 Samuel 21:1-6). Jesus would have known that the Pharisees had an answer to this conundrum. They believed that this must have happened on the Sabbath, because that was the day the bread was changed (as the story suggests). This enabled them to say that David must have eaten bread removed from the table, and he had done this to save the lives of his men, so he was excused. Why then did Jesus quote the story? He may have been objecting to the way this argument bent the text of scripture to fit the law; but another explanation is that Jesus was showing us how to interpret 'the law' by 'the prophets'. He used a story from 1 Samuel (a book of the 'Early Prophets' in the Jewish Bible) to interpret the Law about the Sabbath, thereby refusing to accept the authority of the embellished arguments created by the Pharisees!

The work of Priests on the Sabbath (verse 5) Jesus then questioned the Pharisees about their understanding of work as applied to priests who worked on the Sabbath. Scripture says (Numbers 29:9-10) that offerings were to be presented to the Lord by Priests on the Sabbath day, setting an ancient precedent which allowed holy work in the Temple to be done whether it was the Sabbath or not. In this way, Jesus claimed that He and His disciples were doing the holy work of God and the food they received was holy because of their work. It was a good argument, but the Pharisees would never agree!

Greater than the Temple? (verse 6) Jesus then came out with an extraordinary statement 'I tell you, here is something greater than the temple.' There is some dispute amongst scholars as to whether Jesus meant Himself or the work of the Kingdom. However a similar Greek expression is used in Matt 12:41 and Matt 12:42 where it always means Jesus Himself. We should therefore accept that here, Jesus claimed to be greater than the Temple!

'Mercy, not sacrifice' (verse 7) Jesus repeated this quote to the Pharisees (Hosea 6:6 - see also Matt 9:13) as if to say that He did not believe that the Pharisees understood it. By saying it again in this setting, Jesus drew attention to the word for 'mercy' which in Hebrew was used to describe God's 'faithful everlasting love'. Jesus wanted the Pharisees to know that what God wanted was a relationship with people based on mercy and love rather than strict obedience to ritual law. He could put it no simpler!

The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath (verse 8) This final climactic saying of Jesus is His claim to authority over the Sabbath. In this way, He announced to the Pharisees, 'you

do not have the right to determine laws about the Sabbath, but I do'. This is clearly what Matthew means (despite claims by some theologians that the term 'Son of Man' is merely a way of saying 'man', or 'people'). This is a difficult theological matter, but you may come across this if you read other books about this text. We, too, would be mistaken if we were to read into this incident anything other than Jesus' Messianic claim. It is not firstly about the Sabbath, or legalism, or the disciples, or the Pharisees. It is all about Jesus. It is so easy to read this story and take what we want from it, but in scripture it has the singular purpose of revealing Jesus and His authority. In this story we are invited to see that His authority is not that of religious ritual and legalism, but of the mercy, love and practical good sense of Almighty God.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Which of the arguments used by Jesus do you think addresses the issue of the disciples plucking and eating of grain on the Sabbath most clearly?
2. Look up some of the passages of scripture mentioned in this study to make sure you understand what is being said.
3. Try to imagine how the different people around this incident would have responded; the crowds, the disciples, the Pharisees.

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The sheer power of Jesus response to the Pharisees' challenge is like that of someone who has been offended. Jesus seems to have felt that His own power and authority was being affronted by the arrogance of the Pharisees, but Jesus had no more than the power of words and example with which to face His opponents. Praise God for the power of God's Word!

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *You may feel that some of things done in your own church are somewhat less than godly and a bit legalistic. As an exercise of faith, try finding scriptural texts to confront such 'laws' about how things are done. You may or may not be able to do this, but scripture should still be your guide.*
- *Ask the Lord to give you strength of character and power in your words when defending the faith and seeking to advance the Kingdom of God.*

Final Prayer

Gracious Lord; give us humility which seeks to serve, a servant heart which seeks to learn, knowledge which seeks to inspire, and inspiration which seeks to express itself in the purest worship. Lead us on, Lord Jesus, according to Your will. AMEN