

Lesson 12 . . . Lord of the Sabbath

Gospel of Matthew

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Suggested responses to questions about Matthew 12:1-50

Note: Be sure to respond to all the questions yourself before reading the suggested responses in order to make the most of this study.

1. As Jesus and his disciples walk through fields of grain on the sabbath, the disciples are plucking the heads of grain and eating them because they're hungry. In Matthew 12:2, the Pharisees interpret these actions of the disciples as breaking the sabbath law as it's set forth in Exodus 34:21: "Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; in plowing time and in harvest you shall rest." Deuteronomy 23:25 explains that under Mosaic law it was acceptable to pluck grain from a neighbor's field, but not to harvest it with a tool: "When you go into your neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor's standing grain."
2. Jesus refutes the accusation of the Pharisees that his disciples are breaking sabbath law 1) by reminding his listeners of the example of King David eating consecrated bread, 2) by citing the law concerning priests who don't profane the sabbath, 3) by explaining the correct understanding of compassion and mercy, and 4) by testifying that he himself is "lord of the sabbath." 1 Samuel 21:1-6 explains that King David and his men were considered holy and able to receive the bread of the Presence because they had kept themselves sexually pure. Just as King David and his men were hungry and seeking something to eat while on an expedition, so Jesus and his disciples also are on a mission and seeking something to eat. Just as King David and his men kept themselves pure for their mission, Jesus and his disciples are pure. Although King David is described as eating the bread of the Presence, Scripture doesn't say that Jesus himself plucked and ate any of the heads of grain.
3. Leviticus 24:5-9 instructs that each sabbath the priest is to bake 12 cakes of flour (the bread of the Presence), set them up in two rows on the table, and burn pure incense with each row. Afterwards, Aaron and his sons are to eat the bread of the presence in a holy place. Numbers 28:9-10 describes additional sabbath duties of the priests—they're to offer a burnt offering of "two male lambs a year old without blemish, and two tenths of an ephah of fine flour for a cereal offering; mixed with oil, and its drink offering." Paragraph 583 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that Jesus "expressed the deepest respect for the Temple in Jerusalem" and describes how he exhibited that respect throughout his life. When Jesus says in Matthew 12:6: "I tell you something greater than the temple is here," he isn't being disrespectful of the Temple. Paragraph 586 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that Jesus, "far from being hostile to the Temple, where he gave the essential part of his teaching," was willing to pay the temple tax, and presented himself "as God's definitive dwelling-place among men. Therefore his being put to bodily death presaged the destruction of the Temple, which would manifest the dawning of a new age in the history of salvation: 'The hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the

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Father' (Jn 4:21)." Paragraph 590 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that because of Jesus' divinity he was able to claim to be greater than the Temple.

4. Hosea 6:6 contains this message from God given through the prophet: "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings." Paragraph 2100 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: "Outward sacrifice, to be genuine, must be the expression of spiritual sacrifice: 'The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit. . . .' The prophets of the Old Covenant often denounced sacrifices that were not from the heart or not coupled with love of neighbor. . . . The only perfect sacrifice is the one that Christ offered on the cross as a total offering to the Father's love and for our salvation. By uniting ourselves with his sacrifice we can make our lives a sacrifice to God." When Jesus says in Matthew 12:8: "For the Son of man is lord of the sabbath," he's applying the messianic title "Son of man" to himself and also claiming equality with God since in Jewish tradition God alone is "lord of the sabbath." Paragraph 2173 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that Jesus never fails to respect the holiness of the sabbath: "He gives this law its authentic and authoritative interpretation: 'The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath.' With compassion, Christ declares the sabbath for doing good rather than harm, for saving life rather than killing. The sabbath is the day of the Lord of mercies and a day to honor God. 'The Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.'"
5. In Matthew 12:10-13, when Jesus heals the man with the withered hand he reminds the Pharisees that it's indeed "lawful to do good on the sabbath." A person with a withered hand would be unable to lift anything—on the sabbath or any other day. The Pharisees, so far from seeing the sign and understanding Jesus' words, harden their hearts against him even more and plot to destroy him.
6. Isaiah 42:1-4 describes the Messiah as one who will "bring forth justice to the nations" and includes this prophecy: "He will not fail or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law." Jesus brings justice to the descendants of the 12 tribes of Israel who were oppressed by the interpretation of the law imposed on them by the Jewish religious leaders of the day—and to peoples of all nations as well.
7. By his use of the three images of a kingdom, a city, and a house in the twelfth chapter of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus implies that it's the Pharisees who are demon-possessed. The Pharisees came from Jerusalem—the city that was the center of the kingdom of Judah that was ruled by the house of David. Jesus identifies the city of Jerusalem and the Temple there with Satan's stronghold and the center of diabolical resistance to him.
8. Paragraph 1864 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: "There are no limits to the mercy of God, but anyone who deliberately refuses to accept his mercy by repenting, rejects the forgiveness of his sins and the salvation offered by the Holy Spirit. Such hardness of heart can lead to final impenitence and eternal loss." According to Jewish teaching, God's Spirit had two main functions—to bring God's truth to humans, and to

enable men and women to recognize that truth. Jesus is cautioning that a person with a hardened heart can become so jaded that evil seems good, and that God's goodness appears evil. The Pharisees are able to look Jesus—the Incarnate God who is goodness itself—straight in the eye and accuse him of association with evil.

9. In Matthew 12:40, Jesus explains: "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." In the *Rome to Home* excerpt, Pope John Paul II further explained that the sign of the prophet Jonah Jesus refers to in Matthew 12:39 "is the sign of the Resurrection." In 2 Samuel 7:12-16, God promises King David that his ancestors will forever remain on the throne—implying that the Messiah will come from the house of David and will be a descendant of the tribe of Judah. 1 Kings 10:23-25 recounts: "Thus King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. And the whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind. Every one of them brought his present, articles of silver and gold, garments, myrrh, spices, horses, and mules so much year by year." Jesus is similar to and exceeds King Solomon—he's a son of David; he's the promised Messiah; all are amazed at his wisdom, which exceeds that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law; and at his birth the wise men brought him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Paragraph 590 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that Jesus was able to make the claim to be greater than Solomon because of his "divine identity."
10. Jesus statement in Matthew 12:50: "For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother," honors the Blessed Virgin Mary because she's a shining example of one who does the will of God the Father. Paragraph 494 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches this about the Blessed Virgin Mary: "Espousing the divine will for salvation wholeheartedly, without a single sin to restrain her, she gave herself entirely to the person and to the work of her Son; she did so in order to serve the mystery of redemption with him and dependent on him, by God's grace."

Responses to the Questions for Reflection will vary.

Matthew Notes