

Don't Miss The Point!

Matthew 12:1-21

Mark Vroegop

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? 5 Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? 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,' 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 a 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 man 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.

15 Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there. And many followed him, and he healed them all 16 and ordered them not to make him known. 17 This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah:

18 "Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. 19 He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets; 20 a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory; 21 and in his name the Gentiles will hope." (Matt 12:1-21)

"He can't see the forest for the trees." "That's like the pot calling the kettle black." "You're like a frog in hot water." These idioms and statements attempt to drive home a very important point: **sometimes we are oblivious to the obvious.** There are many times in our lives where the truth or the reality of something was right in front of us, but we fail to see it. Sometimes this happens by mistake but other times it happens by neglect.

Being oblivious to the obvious because of a mistake can be laughable (e.g., pepper in your teeth). Who hasn't had that happen? But being oblivious to the obvious by neglect is dangerous. Often we describe situations that fit that category with language like "mission creep" or "myopic leadership."

When it comes to religion, being oblivious to the obvious is more than dangerous; it is tragic. Self-deception, spiritual hypocrisy, and legalism all have, at their root, an obliviousness to what should be obvious. Somehow, over time, it is way too easy for certain people to lose the core of what religion was supposed to be. That reality has led me to define spiritual maturity as "not what you know but knowing what is important."

Matthew 11-12 gives us a series of portraits of Jesus, different vantage points in which Jesus presents himself to the people. His teaching and his miracles have attracted crowds, but these chapters highlight a growing opposition and resistance to the picture that he paints. These two chapters are characterized generally by unbelief, and we've seen that already. In 11:1-19 we saw that way in which Jesus did not meet the expectations of the people, and in 11:20-29 we saw Jesus afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted based upon their response to who he claimed to be.

Matthew gives us 12:1-20 as a clear statement as to how off the religious crowd really was, and he gives it as a warning: **Don't be oblivious to the spiritually obvious**

There are three lessons in the text regarding things that we should be careful not to miss.

Don't miss the greater for the lesser (v 1-8)

Matthew's account begins by informing us that Jesus and his disciples were walking through a grainfield on the Sabbath, and because they were hungry, they plucked some heads of grain and ate them. Let me give you a bit of background on this situation.

The Sabbath was the 7th day of the week, and it was considered a holy day for all Jewish people. Observing the Sabbath was part of the 10 commandments (Exodus 20:8-11), and it was a very important part of what it meant to be a committed, religious person in Jesus' day. Sabbath observance marked you as radically different than the culture. It was viewed as one of THE defining marks of true religion. In fact during the Maccabean rebellion (167-160 B.C.), the Jewish people were slaughtered because their enemies attacked them on the Sabbath, and they refused to defend themselves.¹ Sabbath observance was a big deal.

Additionally, it is important for you to know something about the grain that the disciples picked. Farmers were commanded to leave the outer edges of their fields unharvested (Lev 19:9-10)

¹ See 1 Maccabees 2:31-38

for the benevolent needs of people. So the disciples are not doing anything illegal (like eating a candy bar at Walmart and not paying for it). Picking grain from a field when you are hungry was an acceptable part of their culture (like taking your kids to Sam's Club for a taste-testing lunch). The problem here is not what they did but when they did it.

The Pharisees (v 2) rebuked Jesus for the conduct of his disciples saying, "Look, your disciples are not doing what is lawful on the Sabbath." Now the disciples were not breaking specific commands from the Bible; they were breaking religious rules that the rulers had set up to prevent the breaking of the Sabbath. The Pharisees had many, many laws regarding the Sabbath. They even attempted to define "work" so you could know what you could or couldn't do on the Sabbath. Here are a few examples of the work you weren't allowed to do from Mishna Shabbat 7.2:

- sowing, plowing and reaping;
- polishing and grinding (grain);
- making two loops. weaving two threads, undoing two threads;
- tying (a knot) or loosening (it);
- sewing two stitches or tearing in order to sew two stitches;
- hunting a deer; slaughtering, flaying or salting it;
- writing two letters, erasing in order write two letters;
- building up or tearing down;
- kindling or extinguishing;
- hitting with a hammer; and
- carrying from place to place (except you could take things out as long as you used the back of your hand, your foot, your ear and in your shoe – Shabbat 10.3)

As you can see, these rules and regulations were often really difficult. And do you know that the problem was? Most people loved it that way! That is the way it had been for years. However there was a huge problem: the rules that were meant to protect the Sabbath were actually missing the point of Sabbath. The Sabbath was supposed to be about a restful and worshipful reminder about who God is. It became more about the rules than the rest, more about conformity than the creator, more about the definition of work than the display of worship.

To combat this, Jesus cites two examples to show the Pharisees how oblivious they were to the obvious. The first is David who "entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence" (v 4) even though it was technically reserved for the priests. Jesus shows them that David, even though he ate bread reserved for public worship, wasn't condemned by God for his actions. The second example he gives is from the Law. Jesus reminds them that the priests "work" on the Sabbath and they are not considered guilty (v 5).

What is Jesus saying here? Is he endorsing some kind of situational ethics? No he is not. The problem here is that the religious leaders have so missed the point of real righteousness that they are creating situations that creating ethical tensions that aren't real. Their lack of balance has created an unnecessary and perceived ethical problem. What does Jesus say to this?

He points them back to the center with three important statements:

- "Something greater than the temple is here"
- "If you had known what it means 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice' you would not have condemned the guiltless"
- "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath"

They are treating minor rules like they are major rules. They are out of balance. They are neglecting the very heart of the Bible, the very point that the Law was trying to make with its regulations. Mercy was the goal, and their use the Law was violating the very heart of the Law. But there's something even worse. The greatest tragedy is the fact that they are missing the most important point of all: the Lord of the Sabbath is in their midst!

Jesus is greater than David, temple worship, and the Sabbath. In fact all of those things were meant to point people to Jesus. He fulfilled all of them. He is the promised Son of David; he is the full manifestation of the presence of God, and he alone gives true rest. But all the Pharisees can see is "Yeah, but what about the grain that your guys picked?"

This is what happens when religion gets off center. You miss the greater for the lesser. You miss Jesus in the midst of everything that is about Jesus. It is so easy:

- You sing about him but never worship him
- You listen to his words but never hear him
- You are busy serving him but not doing it as unto him
- You develop rules out of allegiance to him only to find decreasing love for him
- You defend him but do it in a manner totally unlike him
- You talk about him but not to him
- You love to be around people follow him but you don't know him

How tragic it is to miss the greater for the lesser. And how often it happens to those who consider themselves to be religious.

Don't miss the special for the normal (v 9-14)

The second story carries a similar point, but it argues more from common sense. It appeals, not to the Law, but to what is really valuable. And in this story the contrast is between compassion to a disabled man or strict adherence to Sabbath rules.

Verse 9 tells us that Jesus went into a synagogue and when he came in contact with a man with a withered hand the Pharisees attempt to trap him by asking if it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath. Verse 10 identifies their clear motive: to accuse him.

Jesus responds by asking them a question about how they would treat one of their own sheep. He asks if they would not rescue a sheep that has fallen into a pit on the Sabbath. The question is rhetorical and appeals to common sense. Of course you are not going to let it remain in the pit. Jesus is setting up a ridiculous scenario of a man whose sheep is in danger of dying but he cannot rescue it from certain death until the Sabbath day is over. Imagine a bleating sheep in the bottom of a pit crying out for mercy, and the owner saying, "Yeah, I'll have to wait 6 hours and come back." Luke's account in Luke 14:5 makes it even worse. He puts a son down in the well. "Sorry son! You fell into the well on the wrong day. You see it is a day of worship so we cannot get you out for another 8 hours." It is ridiculous, and that is what the Pharisees were doing.

Jesus' gives two conclusions. First, how much more valuable a man is than a sheep. In other words, the Pharisees rules are pushing the boundaries of common sense. Secondly, Jesus gets to the heart of the Sabbath when he says that "it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath" (v 12). In other words, the Pharisees have made so many rules about Sabbath observance that they can't even recognize what is really valuable or what real righteousness is all about. The Pharisees probably even thought that they agreed with Jesus – "Sure, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath but they probably thought that it was only lawful to do it in the cases of life and death." This man could wait a day. They have some many rules about righteousness that they don't even know what real righteousness is.

I love what Jesus does next. Even though he knows that they are trying to trap him, he still heals the man. Jesus is unrelenting in his passion for real righteousness even if it makes other people uncomfortable.

Finally, notice what the Pharisees take away from this experience. They aren't humbled. They aren't thoughtful. They aren't convicted. They get together and try to figure out how to kill him! Notice the abject self-deception. He heals on the Sabbath, and they are so enraged about his lack of compliance that they are plotting to break the 6th commandment.

Do you see how scary this is? They are self-deceived, judgmental people who, in the name of protecting what is right, are preparing to commit the greatest crime ever committed. They are plotting eventually leads to the betrayal and execution of the Son of God.

How does this happen? Let me give you a few things that I've seen, experienced and fought in my own life. Watch out for the following:

- When your Bible reading begins to be an information gathering session
- When your prayer time is more about the spiritual needs of others than your own
- When you measure people up based upon your standards
- When all your friends start to look like you, act like you, talk like you
- When your tones are immediately caustic with people who are different
- When you've not sacrificed for anything in a long time
- When your words are more critical and negative than they are positive

Oh let us beware of the subtle ways that we can turn religion upside down.

Don't miss the gospel for religion (v 15-21)

So what is our only hope to be sure that we don't drift off into some kind of weird religious legalism? We have to know and understand the gospel. We have to be reminded as to what is the center.

I find it so remarkable what Matthew does here. He pauses in the midst of his narrative, takes us back to Isaiah, and reminds us what Jesus is all about. One commentator describes what happens here as if the dark clouds of unbelief part for a moment, and we get a crystal-clear vision of Jesus' mission.

He begins by describing what Jesus does. He withdrew from the crowd, healed people, and asked them not to make him known. This is strange conduct for one who is the Messiah; strange, that is, unless you are the sovereign Son of God and in complete control.

Matthew then quotes Isaiah 42:1-4 which is one of the classic Old Testament texts on the Messiah. Notice what we find in this Old Testament passage:

- **Jesus is the chosen servant of God.** Clearly God's hand is upon him. He is on earth for a very particular mission – one that we will learn about in a few verses.
- **Jesus has God's full approval.** God is happy with his Son. He loves him, and there is a close relationship with the Father. Jesus knows the heart of God like no one else. He knows what real righteousness is.
- **He is empowered by the Spirit.** Jesus is not acting on his own. Everything he is doing is due to the delight of the Father and the empowerment by the Spirit.
- **His ministry is to proclaim justice or freedom.** This fits with Matthew's theme so well. Jesus is starting with the nation of Israel, but his big-picture target is to proclaim freedom to all people.
- **His style is meek.** Jesus would not do well on cable TV. His demeanor with those who are hurting is gentleness and meekness – power under control.
- **He is full of compassion.** A bruised reed (bent reed) and a light that is about to be extinguished is how Jesus describes the people he has come to help. He has come to

bring compassion to those who feel like they are about to break. The rigid rules of religion are only going to snuff these people out. Jesus brings love and grace.

- **His name brings freedom and hope to the world.** The gospel is centered on Jesus, and its fruit is hope. Jesus offers hope like no one else because there is no one else like him. No one can bring this kind of freedom and mercy.

This is the gospel, the good news that Jesus came to bring mercy and freedom to sinful, hurting, and hopeless people. The gospel means mercy, grace, kindness, and hope is offered to people through the person and work of Jesus. The gospel means a love for God, his Word, his church and obedience that could never have been produced in you apart from God's invasion of your soul.

And living out the gospel means that you see everything through this lens – the lens of your gracious redemption.

We have to keep coming back to the gospel; we need to preach it to ourselves every day. We need this, not because we forget. We need this because we become spiritually myopic. We need this because grace, forgiveness, and mercy can become normal. We need this because the gospel can become less than amazing and we can become less than Christ-like while claiming to be a Christian.

Beware of the possibility of being spiritually oblivious to the obvious. Pray that you will know what is great in God's eyes and costly in his kingdom. Pray that you will know what the gospel is all about so that you don't miss the point.

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