

## **Matthew 12:1-21:**

### **Connecting:**

Let's remember where we've been. Jesus has just assured the group around him that if they want to know God the Father they can. He is the only one who knows God accurately and fully, but he'll reveal God to anyone. All they need to do is come and learn from him. He says:

**28 "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."**

We talked about the fact that every relationship takes work, and that's no less true of our relationship with God the Father. Jesus shares with us--in his way of life, his teaching--what work we have to do to keep that relationship we have with God, one of blessing and power. Today we'll look at the way Jesus' yoke and burden--his way of being faithful to God--contrasts with the "more difficult and heavier" yoke and burden that the Pharisees offer people.

Let's Pray.

### **Prayer:**

#### **On The Sabbath: 12:1-8**

So Jesus calls to anyone who will follow him to take on his yoke and burden. And then we read this:

**12 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.”**

The Pharisees have questioned Jesus about where he goes and how he spends his time, because they don't understand him, they don't think the way he's acting is appropriate at all--especially if he's claiming all the authority of God. But this time they skip the little questions. They go big. They go to the Bible.

### ***That's not biblical!***

Because if you're one of God's People, and you're trying to find out what's appropriate or inappropriate, what fits for the people around you, what's right and what's wrong, it's Scripture you go to. They declare their “gotcha.” **“Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath.”** They're going back to the Ten Commandments, of course, and God's demand that His people “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.” The Sabbath day was Saturday, by the way; the last day of the week. The week starts on Sunday, what the Church has called “The Lord's Day,” because it was the day of the week Jesus rose from the dead. God declares:

**“Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your**

***towns. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”***

Picking little bits of grain was close enough to harvesting. It's in the same domain, you know? And harvesting is work, and you couldn't work. So the Pharisees can't believe what they're seeing. You do wonder, of course, what's more "work," watching closely so you can judge someone, "get 'em" when they break a rule, or snagging grain off a passing stalk of wheat. I mean, honestly, I've been the person who's sort of on-call waiting for another person to screw up, and it takes a lot of focus.

***Yes, it is biblical.***

And Jesus effectively says If you're going to go there, go to Scripture, I'll go there, too: And you forget what I remember, or overlook it. I remember David, the faithful King, the one who the Messiah will take after, and how in the Old Testament book 1 Samuel he did far more than what me and mine are doing on this Sabbath.

***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.***

The Pharisees would never fault David, of course: David's the model King, the great hero, who even though he screwed up, wasn't a screw up, but let God's forgiveness define him.

And of course, David was doing God's work when he ate the bread that had been consecrated, set apart for God and the Priests.

The Pharisees probably felt, in protecting the sanctity of the Sabbath, they were on the side of David who broke it--after all, from the Pharisees point of view, they're doing what God would ask of them just like David was doing what God asked of him when he was on the run from Saul.

And Jesus dropping this story to explain his behavior isn't an accident. It reminds them that the Messiah will in critical ways mimic David, a thing they know, something everyone expected. Jesus forces them to see the parallel between his actions and David's. He's saying, look, I'm like David. But Jesus goes even further.

### ***Doubling Down:***

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

He points out the Priests get a by, because it takes work to keep the Temple running on Saturdays, and they aren't desecrating the Sabbath by doing their jobs; in fact, they're keeping the system running that keeps the Sabbath relevant. They're maintaining infrastructure. And when Jesus says "I tell you that something greater than the temple is here," he's saying that old religious infrastructure, it's on it's way out. Something greater has replaced it.

We're well past the moment this conversation took place. We realize that Jesus' "yoke and burden," his way of life, all the most important stuff that we wrap up in Christianity, that it's a different than the Temple system. That to keep faith with God you don't need the Temple anymore with its sacrifices and feast days and rhythms.

If the Temple was the place where Heaven and Earth met, the sort of earthly footstool to God's heavenly throne, well, the Church is that place, now; we who are Christ's body on earth, filled with the Spirit, together bear witness to God's love for and authority over all creation. And this follows because Jesus himself, as Paul put, was the place where heaven and earth met, and we have been united in him by our lives of trust.

But just objectively, to claim to this group around him that something greater than the Temple has arrived, and he's brought it, and so he gets more of a by than the Priests ever got, well, it's just, it's unfathomable. It's displacing. It's confusing and shocking.

But he continues.

### ***Tripling Down:***

And just in case we Pharisees around him aren't offended enough, aren't shocked at his total blasphemy, Jesus goes ahead and gives us something else to be made about. He says:

***7 If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,'[a] you would not have***

***condemned the innocent.***

Here's the larger passage Jesus is quoting from Hoseah, and Old Testament book. It's one of nothing but judgment against Israel for their faithlessness:

***“What can I do with you, Ephraim?  
 What can I do with you, Judah?  
 Your love is like the morning mist,  
 like the early dew that disappears.  
 5 Therefore I cut you in pieces with my prophets,  
 I killed you with the words of my mouth—  
 then my judgments go forth like the sun.  
 6 For I desire mercy, not sacrifice,  
 and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt  
 offerings.  
 7 As at Adam, they have broken the covenant;  
 they were unfaithful to me there.  
 8 Gilead is a city of evildoers,  
 stained with footprints of blood.  
 9 As marauders lie in ambush for a victim,  
 so do bands of priests;  
 they murder on the road to Shechem,  
 carrying out their wicked schemes.  
 10 I have seen a horrible thing in Israel:  
 There Ephraim is given to prostitution,  
 Israel is defiled.***

God was telling Israel, there, that all their amazing commitments to following the letter of the Law were unfaithfulness, in light of how terrible they were at keeping the Spirit of the Law. They didn't care about living for God;

they cared about living for the rules. In Hoseah's time, things were terrible: the most "religious," the biggest Temple insiders, the faithfulness police, they were the worst actors. Jesus says to the Pharisees that its the same now, and they are the faithless ones. They're the ones who lead Israel to prostitution, not worship, to murder not mercy, to judgment, not blessing.

### ***Quadrupling Down:***

And then Jesus just sort of drops the mic and leaves the room. He says:

### ***For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.***

By now, even the Pharisees get that when Jesus talks about himself as "the Son of Man" he's talking about himself, and he claims to be the "Lord of the Sabbath." You know who the Lord of the Sabbath is? It's God. Not this Galilean dope. This is the kind of blasphemy that will get you killed if you don't let it go and disappear for awhile.

It's a powerful claim, though. Jesus has rights that they don't have. Rights he uses not for himself but to complete the mission of God that he's on, just as David was doing when he ate the priest's bread. What the Pharisees keep failing to see, failing to appreciate, is that this situation is different from every situation that's ever gone before.

Jesus changes everything, and what they have for so long felt was right and appropriate and fit with their sense of what it meant to be godly and faithful--it's changing before their eyes. It's talking to them. And this would be sad if it

weren't for the case that God always, always, even to the Pharisees and even to us gives us grace and power to take on what's appropriate, and give up what's inappropriate as we join in the mission of God.

### ***In Their Own House!***

So the Pharisees, we assume, are equal parts fuming and, just, shocked. Incredulous that Jesus would be doing and saying what he's doing.

And he decides, with all of them around them, to go into their synagogue, which is apparently right nearby. What could go wrong, you know? I keep thinking of the Twelve, and wondering, as the Pharisees stare them down--some of whom they probably knew, and grew up with--if they're like, mumbling together, "Do we have to follow him in there?" But they all go in.

***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?"***

***11 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? 12 How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."***

***13 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. 14 But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.***

“It’s lawful to do good on the Sabbath” Jesus says. And heals the man. This is the total exercise of his right over the Sabbath as its Lord. He’s making new rules about what’s appropriate...but they aren’t new rules at all. They are what ought to have been all along. He’s erasing the Pharisees rules.

And they leave there, plotting how they might kill him.

***Symbols:***

What’s crazy is that it’s not until this moment, when Jesus desecrates their clearest religious boundary, clearest religious law, most public law, that they decide to kill him.

We ought to notice this. Sabbath-keeping wasn’t just a rule; it was a symbol. Does this make sense? A symbol of the Pharisees’ way of life, the best example of the their whole yoke and burden, the whole lot of it.

We’ll come back to this.

***No Dummy:***

Jesus is no dummy. He still has things to do before he’s murdered. “It’s not yet his time,” we’d put it. So he backs off.

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

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

**18 “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.**

**19 He will not quarrel or cry out;  
no one will hear his voice in the streets.**

**20 A bruised reed he will not break,  
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out,  
till he has brought justice through to victory.**

**21 In his name the nations will put their hope.”**

Matthew uses this passage in a couple of ways. First of all, the image of someone who can pass through a field of reeds and not break a single one is an image of sturdy gentleness, of deliberate skill. And this matches Jesus' earlier promise that his way of following God is easy and light, that he himself is “gentle and humble of heart.” Matthew is reminding us with these bookends that Jesus is unlike these Pharisees, who are infuriated and out for his blood.

Which is ironic, really, since it's Jesus death, and his subsequent return to life, that cements his way of following God as the easy one.

Matthew also wants us to see, and we need to realize, that this passage from Isaiah is a prophetic passage that is all about Jesus, just all about him. He's the one upon whom the Spirit of God has come. He's the “servant who suffers,” the one God the Father loves and delights in. And until he brings

"justice through to victory," his way is going to be a quiet way of healing people. When Jesus charges those who he heals not to tell everyone, he's saying that they have a duty to help keep his voice from being heard in the streets. Jesus knows that the Pharisees' desire to murder him will be realized; but knows now is not the time, and those who he gently heals can't speed up the clock.

### ***Conclusion:***

We could talk about all sorts of things from today's passage. We could look at the character of Jesus, which is a gentle one. It's not without power, of course. He has enormous authority that he exercises as he pleases, in line with what God would have him do. And yet, he's not violent, he's not abusive, he's not clumsy. He's deliberate and respectful and appropriate. You could say he's graceful, if you wanted, just as easily as we say he's gracious. Physically, we get graceful. We think of ballet, or gymnastics, maybe, but geez: any great football run, any great skateboard trick, there's a physical skill in which a person seems to have complete control over where they desire to God. Jesus is this, figuratively. He can interact with those who need help in a graceful way, a way that is deliberate and sensitive and incredibly powerful--for their good and in their interest. Not a bad thing worth striving for. We could talk about what it means that the Spirit of God is on Jesus. We could talk about all sorts of things.

But let me return to symbols, instead.

### ***Conclusion: Symbols***

Remember, it's not until Jesus tromps all over their most

powerful religious symbol that the Pharisees decide he has to be killed.

Again, Sabbath-keeping wasn't just a rule; it was a symbol. A symbol of the Pharisees' way of life, the ultimate example of their whole yoke and burden, the whole lot of it. Like any symbol, it was a thing that represented something abstract, in this case, their entire way of life.

And when Jesus destroys their symbol, they do what people have always, to our terrible, sin-driven shame, have done: They're out for blood. Burn a cross, burn the bible, burn a flag, burn the koran, slash an icon, smash a window...I mean, people will take a lot. They'll write you off, ignore you, excuse you, but when you tear up our symbols--when you misuse them, or claim that you have rights over them we don't have.

### ***Conclusion: Notice Your Symbols:***

Each of us has things that have become symbolic for us. Marketing has driven us there, culture did and does, when advertising hasn't appropriated them,--that is--taken them over.

Any noun can become a symbol. Does this make sense? Any thing, any person, any place. Any tradition.

Little things have been packed with meaning for us, and we don't realize it until that little thing is threatened, and we discover that we ourselves, somehow, are threatened, because we've so tightly tied our identity, our way of life in the world, to that thing. Symbols are powerful because they

short-circuit thinking. We know what they mean without needing to articulate it--whether it's a thing, a tradition, a purchase, a person--the meaning that we've packed into that symbol gets us in our gut and brings to mind a whole world, a whole set of values and commitments and relationships that we don't have to list out anymore.

And so, when someone takes out our symbols, they take out us--our commitments, our view of the world, our relationships. Why is an upside down cross a powerful symbol of something or other? It's because a cross right-side up is a powerful symbol of something or other, and it undoes it. Why do people react so strongly when someone kneels or sits during the National Anthem, because standing for the National Anthem is a powerful symbol of something or other. We may not mind it if someone gets a little tattoo--although having a tattoo is a symbolic thing, too--but we may not mind a little heart one--hearts, after all, are barely symbolic anymore--but if the little heart tattoo has a swastika inside it, then something or other--something terrible--is being brought into play, right?

There is almost nothing more powerful than the power of symbols, and our lives are utterly, utterly, full of them. And when Jesus claimed that he was the only one who had rights over the meaning of Sabbath and Sabbath-keeping, he not only stole from the Pharisees their symbol, he stomped on it and said he was allowed to — at least emotionally, that's how they took it.

Of course they decide to kill him.

***Symbols:***

What symbols are in your life?

We can't answer quickly.

Some of us plaster our lives with symbols. Any glance into our lives--the things we put on our walls, the things we put on our bodies, the words that come out of mouths, the places we say them in--any glance into our lives reveals a whole universe of meaning, if only we could take a moment to communicate what it is that we mean with all the symbols and symbolic things we have. Others of us have fewer symbols and symbolic things that we incorporate into our lives, and it could be simply because we, say, so deeply value the abstract idea of simplicity that we don't express anything through words or pictures. Regardless, all of us have some.

Our symbols can be public or private. Privately, this bench, that song, that necklace, this tool, they can all be things that, for us, draw up huge worlds of meaning. We give as a gift to our child our special whatever-it-is, read to them that passage from that book that we've memorized, and we realize, not that much later, that they don't appreciate the thing the way we did, because of course, for them, grandpa's hammer wasn't symbolic of all the good times we ourselves shared with grandpa. It was a hammer. It wasn't a symbol at all.

Publicly, our biggest problem when it comes to communicating these worlds of meaning through symbols is that, simply, communicating authentically and lovingly

through symbols isn't communication at all, but really feels like it is. Because public symbols, while largely agreed upon, allow for a wide variety of disagreement when it comes to what they most truly mean. Jesus, when he says he's Lord of the Sabbath, is claiming the right to invest the Sabbath with the meaning that he knows it ought to have. The Pharisees don't have that right, but they think they do; they've nursed belief in that right for generations, and they'll kill Jesus before they'll have that right taken from them, before they'll allow their powerful symbol desecrated again.

Our job titles can be incredibly symbolic, for ourselves, occasionally, but for others, too. I don't know how many times people have found out I'm a pastor--and, like any job, that title is itself a symbol, a shortcut to meaning, for people, although doubly-so because it's also a religious job title--and they tell me about their faith in Jesus, because I'm a pastor. I mean, We must agree on what "pastor" is, right? And I realize, very quickly, that they are not a Christian the way that I am a Christian. They are not a Father the way I am a Father. They are not an American the way I am an American. Our discovery is one of connection, but also one of disconnection, and it can be so, so disconcerting to realize that the very thing we thought would bring us together--this symbol we both know is meaningful--actually doesn't bring us as together as we hoped.

Let me skip to today's point.

***Challenge:***

I want to challenge us to think about the symbols that are in our lives. These can be traditions, they can be things, they

can be relationships, they can be any noun at all, any person, place, or thing that has become, for us, a shortcut to meaning.

Sure, think of the Christian ones: What does the cross mean to you? What does a Bible mean to you? What does Communion--because traditions are symbolic--mean to you? How about other things? Desk toys. Brands. Bottles of this or that. Colors. Furniture, Car Keys. What decorates your walls or your body or your car? What would you never decorate, never write on or in, and why? What is "special?"

Our lives are filled with things, things that represent some idea we hold dear.

And we are one or two steps away from murderous, Pharisaical, anger when these symbols are desecrated, are treated with disrespect. What thing would we rage and hit over if they break it; or want to? What would we quit church over? What relationships would we leave unreconciled because this or that thing was treated in this or that way?

I don't want us to be like the Pharisees, you know? That's my only point today. I don't want us to be like the Pharisees when it comes to the symbols in our lives. I don't want us to embrace sin, to turn down a path that will ruin us and distance us from God because we've invested in our symbols something that we ought to only invest in the person of God. All of us find life meaningful, in one way or another, and all of us have things that are meaningful to us, that represent to us "life and love and why," what it's all about and what it means to live well in the places well we do our living. What's



amazing is how many symbols and symbolic things we live with, and just how fragile a symbol really is, especially the private ones; anything can break it. But Jesus isn't just lord of the Sabbath; he's lord of everything.

As we go about our business this week, touch the things we touch, do the things we do, buy and sing and decorate and attend and play and whatever--as we go about our business, I want us to see every symbolic thing we touch and notice every symbolic thing we do. Notice what value system, what beliefs we're reminded of as we have touches with all these symbols we've built our life around. Is Jesus Lord here? Is Jesus Lord of our ideas, our abstractions, our view of the world, our code of ethics, our relationships? Is Jesus only at Church, where the crosses and bibles pile up?

I know, even as I ask this, it's too much to ask. Most of us won't think about the symbols we surround ourselves with, the symbolic things we do, the meaning they bring up, and whether our response to their disrespect would be faithful or faithless. It's hard to think about these things, you know?

But Jesus is Lord of every day and every symbol and all that they communicate, not just of the Sabbath. So they're worth thinking about, I think.