

Mercy Trumps Ritual Every Time * Matthew 12:1-21

Good morning, my name is Jeremy, I'm blessed to be one of your pastors on staff here at Harmony. I hope you had a wonderful Christmas celebration this past week! Christmas Eve here at Harmony was wonderful. I imagine some of you had lots of family in this week... maybe some of you still have the crazy uncle staying at your house yet this morning, and maybe you are pretty excited right now because "the uncle" is planning on leaving right after church. So you are sitting there thinking to yourself, "Come on, Hess, lets get this thing moving brother, because freedom is just around the corner!"

I have a short confession this morning. I know many of you love the holiday decorations, they've been up at your house since Thanksgiving, and maybe you are the kind of person that says we are going to stick to the tradition of leaving up everything until like 2 weeks into January.... or Easter, or whatever. You know what? That's fine for you. I hope you enjoy them, I really do! But just so you know how we roll at the Hess house, I have a picture of Cooper and I with our Christmas tree at straight up noon on Christmas day (*photo of burning Christmas tree.*) All the decorations in the box, everything done, down, and put away. I believe that this year we set a new record. Enough about that. We are back in Matthew's gospel this morning, and we have a ton of work to do. So we better get started, let's pray.

Father, we come grateful to this place this morning. Grateful for what you have done. Mankind was without hope, we were either desperate because we realized we could never measure up, or arrogant and proud because we thought we had mastered the rules. Either way, we were in need of mercy. We come to open your Word now and we ask that by your Spirit you would open our ears to hear, and then give us the strength act on it so that you would be made famous. Because it is clearly you at work in the lives of ordinary people.

Please open your Bibles to Matthew chapter 12. We have a very large passage to look at this morning, we're back in our epic walk through the Gospel of Matthew that we started 1 year ago now – and really – we come to a milestone chapter in this Gospel. As Jesus has taught throughout these chapters the pressure has been building, the religious elite continually find it absurd that Jesus spends time with tax collectors, prostitutes, sinners & lepers. These same religious elite, trying to figure out this Jesus, have questioned Him, and when they didn't get the answers they liked (because of their hard heart) that turned to doubt, and then doubt turned to criticism, and criticism has turned into indifference. All the while Jesus has been destroying their confidence in their religion. And really, today in chapter 12, we come to a turning point. Where those who are fully invested in rules, religion and ritual reject the very Son of God. Today we start to make the turn from Christmas to Calvary.

Because our passage is quite long this morning, rather than read it straight through, let's take it a chunk at a time. It will help us, and if you are a note taker, this message will have

3 sections: 1. The truth being taught 2. The truth being demonstrated. And finally, we'll end with 3. A true picture of Jesus.

Read Scripture: At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. ²But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath." ³He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: ⁴how 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? ⁵Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? ⁶I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. ⁷And if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. ⁸For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath."

Now in these 8 verses we have the truth being taught by Jesus. And here we sit, some 2,000 years after this confrontation went down, and I don't think most of us get it. That this was a hot, blistering, tense confrontation. Do not think that this was some casual lighthearted chat at the edge of a wheat field, some guys in robes having an intellectual and gentlemanly debate like you might hear on NPR. Not at all. What we have is on one side a group of experts who would say, "We are it! We are the experts on the topic of the Sabbath." And in Israel, there were only maybe one or two things that were more important than a proper observance of the Sabbath. These guys were the **most** important and knowledgeable legal interpreters of pretty much the most important way you showed that you were "holy" and righteous and that you loved God, and that's the Sabbath. So on one hand you have the guys that know the most, about the most important ritual, and on the other hand you have Jesus who looks right at these guys and says, "You don't know the first thing about anything."

So before we can feel the weight of **what** Jesus says, we really need to feel the weight of observing the Sabbath in that day. It was a tremendous weight! The word Sabbath is a simple word, "sabbatan" that basically means to "cease" or to stop. Their Sabbath then was a day where they stopped doing what they did on the other days. Do you remember from Genesis when God created the world it says that on the 7th day He "rested" – now God wasn't tired – but later on He ordained that there would be a day of ceasing for Israel. In Exodus chapter 20, God said to them, "Take the 7th day, the Sabbath, the day of ceasing, and keep it holy." Now hang with me a second. The Sabbath commandment is one of the 10 Commandments of Exodus 20. It is the only commandment that is a *non-moral* one. It is the only one that is a ceremonial one. It is **the** one of 10 Commandments that was **uniquely** between God and Israel as a ceremonial rule. All the other 9 are moral absolutes. And we can know this for sure because when we come into the New Testament, every other command is repeated in the New Testament; every one of the 10 Commandments is repeated... *except* the one regarding the Sabbath. It is not repeated in the New Testament because it was that unique ceremonial sign, much like circumcision was between God and Israel. But at the time of Jesus and his disciples, the Sabbath was in fact the ceremonial law of God. It is not a binding law for the Church, but it was for Israel. And so Jesus would

honor the Sabbath – as would his disciples – in so far as God intended it to be honored. But the Pharisees had added so many things, so many ridiculous things, to the Sabbath that Jesus & disciples would not honor. So that in a true honoring of the Sabbath they would actually be in violation of many of the Pharisaic traditions, and *this*, the experts could not tolerate!

The Sabbath was the focus of all of their religious activities. And they had added so much stuff to the Sabbath that instead of it being a day of ceasing, instead of it being a day of rest (as God intended) it was a day of incredible burden. I really believe that back in Matthew chapter 11 when Jesus said, “Come to me all who labor and who are heavy laden and I will give you rest,” one crystal clear illustration of that would have been the Sabbath observance. When they came to the 7th day of the week – or Saturday as we know it – the laws, rules, rituals and routines they had to keep made it more difficult to rest than it was to work the other 6 days of the week. There was more work trying to rest than there was work trying to work. Let me show you what I mean.

On the Sabbath day (and I couldn’t even **begin** to tell you how many laws there are. We could go on and on all through both services and still not scratch the surface) in the Talmud, in just 1 section, and there are at least 2 sections, but in just 1 of them there are 24 chapters listing all the Sabbath laws. Just to be clear, these are **not** in the Bible. There are so many, in fact that one Rabbi spent 2 and half years trying to understand just one of those chapters. If we extrapolate that out, we would have a lifetime of one man spending his entire life, just trying to figure out what could and could not be done on the Sabbath.

For example: you couldn’t travel more than 3,000 feet from your house, unless on Friday you had planted some food 3,000 feet away – and then when you got there and had food there – that would become “quote” a “home,” and because there was food there, you could go another 3,000 feet. You could “extend” your home to the guy across the alley if you placed a board, rope or a wire from your dwelling across the alley to another dwelling, and from there you could go another 3,000 feet. Those are just 2 of the countless ways you could manipulate the 3,000 foot rule and still be honoring the Sabbath.

Things could be lifted up or put down – only from and to certain places. You could lift up something in a public place, and put it down in a private place, or you could lift it up in a private place, and put it down in a public place, or you could pick it up in a “wide” place, and put it down in a legally free place, or you could lift it up in a legally free place and put it down in a wide place. And Rabbis for years tried to figure out what exactly a wide place was and what a legally free place was.

You could never carry a burden that weighed more than a dried fig. Or you could carry something that weighed half a dried fig, twice. And forbidden foods, there was a long list of things you couldn’t eat on the Sabbath. And the things on that list you couldn’t put any more than the size of one olive in your mouth. I mean, they are on the forbidden list, but you can put about *that much* in your mouth.

If you threw an object in the air and caught it with your other hand, that was a violation of the Sabbath; but if you caught it with the same hand, that was ok. If you were a tailor you were forbidden to carry a needle lest you might be tempted to sew something if it ripped on the Sabbath. Wool could not be dyed. Nothing could be sold. Nothing could be bought. Nothing could be washed. A letter couldn't be sent even if you put it in the hand of a heathen for delivery. No fire could be lit, that's why even today they have in major cities like New York the have the Shabbat elevator, which is an elevator that stops on every floor of a sky rise – because pressing the button would cause current to flow and would be a violation. A candle could not be lit. You could not take a bath. And you couldn't wear jewelry, because jewelry weighed more than a dried fig. I suppose you could wear a dried fig, but that wouldn't be too attractive.

Listen, this is just a little bit of it. Over the course of 24 chapters, the law goes on endlessly about wine, about milk, about spitting. No spitting on the Sabbath (unless into a rag, but the rag couldn't weigh more than a dried fig.) Who knows where or why it all came from. You could have a wad in your ear, but not a false tooth. That would be carrying a burden. Here are 22 things that were commonly forbidden: sewing, plowing, reaping, binding, threshing, winnowing, sifting, grinding, kneading, baking, shearing the wool, dyeing the wool, spinning it, weaving it, making 2 threads, weaving two threads, separating 2 threads, making a knot, undoing a knot, extinguishing fire, lighting fire, beating with a hammer... and it goes on and on. Keeping the Sabbath wasn't a day of rest; it had become a pain in the neck! It was impossible to rest! No wonder they were laboring and heavy laden! No wonder the people were sick of the system that had been imposed on them by the legalists. The Sabbath was the focus of everything. And Jesus came along and didn't pay any attention to the extra pharisaical rules. And it **infuriated** them!

Look back at verse 1, "Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath, his Disciples were hungry and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat" so Jesus and his disciples are traveling on the Sabbath. Buzz! Foul #1: not supposed to walk more than 3,000 feet; not supposed to go walking through fields. They didn't care that he was going from place to place doing ministry, healing, casting out demons. See, for them it wasn't about God and people, it wasn't about rest; it was about ritual and keeping these tacked on rules that God never gave anyway! And then we see in the scripture that his disciples picked grain because they were hungry. Buzz! Foul #2: harvesting. They likely rubbed the grain in their hands to remove the husks and maybe even, God forbid, sifting it from hand to hand so the husks would blow away, and then squeezing the grain in both hands to grind it up a little. Buzz, buzz, buzz. That's like foul 3, 4, 5 and 6. And these legalists are like, "What are your boys doing, man?" Clearly they are not loving God! Just look at them! "You know, we didn't like you before, but now you are walking right by us and you are not keeping our rules!" We are the keepers of the rules!

I don't even know what a modern day equivalent is. The one example I could think of is if I popped into a Catholic church – and they were having meeting with a bunch of Catholic priests, and it was a really hot day and I was all hot and thirsty, and I walked right by all these priests in their meeting to the thing of holy water and dipped in my 12:1 Run mug

and drank a big 10 oz. mug of holy water. Then splashed a little on my bald head and neck to cool down. Which I assure you I would never do, but you get the point.

So can you see how tense and hot this situation was? Now let's see what our Savior Jesus does. He goes right at them. This is not the soft, long blond haired Norwegian guy in all the pictures. Jesus goes at them not just once, but 3 times, and in these sentences He tells these "experts," that "You guys know nothing about the Law." Keep in mind that these guys have the Old Testament **memorized**. They had been studying – like every day studying – the Law since they were little kids. Look at verse 3, He said to them, "Have you not read what David did..." Stop, are you kidding me? Did He just tell them, "Have you not read?" That'd be like me walking up to Albert Einstein and saying "Look here ya moron, can't you do simple math?" Except, I am a moron, but Jesus was the Son of God. These guys would have been in utter horrific shock! Not only that – Jesus really throws down the gauntlet because He points out Scripture where **their** hero David (who's #1 in every popularity poll for all time in Israel) walks into the temple and eats the sacred bread that was explicitly written in the Law that it was unlawful for anyone to eat except the priests. And David wasn't a priest! Jesus is letting them have it! And He just keeps going. Look at verse 5, "Or have you not read in the Law?" and then look at verse 7, "And if you had known what this means." You have to know that when He said that, "if you had known what this means," how infuriating this would have been to them. Listen, **they** were the interpreters of the Law. They interpret the Scriptures. They were the ones who got to say what something meant."

See, they knew the Scriptures, but they missed the heart of God. They had knowledge, but they had no love. And there is so much in these verses that we don't have time for this morning, in these few sentences Jesus takes the two things that matter more to the legalists than anything else: namely the Sabbath and the Temple. There is nothing bigger than those two. And Jesus says, "Something greater than those two things is here, and it's **me**." He's either a blasphemer – or He's God. And this must have driven them mad! He says, "Look, those things are just shadows, things to point people to their utter need for rescue. Because if the Kingdom of God is like the Sabbath that you've created, who would want it? If the Kingdom of God is like the never ending slaughter of animals and sacrifices at the temple, forever trying and keep up with our sin, who would want it? And I've jabbered on here a fair amount about stuff that's fine to know, but I don't want us to miss the heart of God in this passage, so look again at verse 7. Jesus refers here to Hosea 6:6 when he says: "And if you had known what this means, "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice." That word sacrifice really is summation of the whole ceremonial system.

Jesus is teaching us truth, friends. God is for people. The heart of God is a merciful one. He desires mercy. If the heart of God was pleased with ritual, there would be no need for Him to kill His son! If God's desire was for ritual, then we'd still be a slave to killing goats in here and lighting fires! Jesus is teaching that **ceremony takes a back seat to the meeting of needs**. And from the very mouth of God, Jesus tells us: you know what I desire? It isn't ritual. It isn't all these rules. And it certainly isn't all these ridiculous things that you added that were never in this book in the first place.

We should be very careful that we don't add things, add burdens, that aren't in the Bible. Things we think other people should do or not do if they want us to call them "believers!" Burdens we place on people, burdens that bog people down, heavy burdens, and those people end up missing the heart of God, and they are nothing but miserable, so we can feel a little better about ourselves. Do you want to know something? I don't listen to much Christian music. I'll pause here a second to see if you all are going to rush the stage. They haven't even cut off my microphone. Look, I'm not against Christian music. I went through a stage where it was all I listened to, but whether I listen to it or not says nothing about my love for and hope in Jesus Christ. Whether someone has a tattoo, or a bunch of tattoos, or likes to pierce their ear, or belly button, or their nose, while it looks pretty painful to me, I don't think I can flip through this book and say, "See here, you're not a Christian!" If someone home schools, they are really loving Jesus; but if they send their kid to the public school, eh, maybe not so much? What political party someone associates with is **not** the criteria our Lord uses for the Book of Life! And will someone please help me find the biblical reference that states the King James Version of the Bible is the only one allowed? Look, I could go on for a while here. If we aren't careful, we'll end up with 24 chapters in volume 1 of what we think others should do and rituals they should keep if they are going to not get the stink eye from us! There is plenty that God makes clear in His Word that we should be obedient to, things He is still delivering me from. He doesn't need us adding to it. How someone dresses, long hair, having a beer or a glass of wine, going dancing... by the way, you can email me this week at chriscarr@harmonybiblechurch.org. Look, maybe you are sitting there thinking, "Oh man, Hess has gone all soft. Gone Liberal" Listen, it's Jesus who is dealing with a group of religious people, legalists, who have added their rules, outside of God's Word for the express purpose of being in a position to judge others; to include the ones who agree with them and exclude those who don't. And Jesus looks right at them and says, "If you only understood. I desire mercy, not ritual."

You know what Jesus says to them about this later in Matthew? Read chapter 23, ¹³"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. ¹⁵Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves. If we tell someone that to be saved from their sin and to be acceptable to God they have to stick to **our** man made set of rules and rituals, not only is their life here on earth a hell – trying to keep up, but because their faith is in our rules instead of Jesus Christ... their *eternity* is in hell as well.

Jesus says, "You want to know what I desire? I desire mercy because I'm merciful. My Father is so merciful that He sent me here to die on a cross so that your sins might be forgiven. Ritual will not satisfy the Father. Either **you** pay for your sins, or you place all your faith in me – and I'll lay down my life for you. I want your heart! I want your heart be full of mercy for others, not religious pride because you've gotten decent at finagling the rules, experts at performing rituals, none of that pleases Him! Mercy trumps ritual every single time. And then Jesus immediately goes from teaching that truth to demonstrating it.

He went on from there and entered their synagogue. Jesus doesn't just let it lie,¹⁰ And a man was there with a withered hand. And they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" which tells me they *actually believed* He had the power to heal – but you'll have to come back for chapter 13 to find out where they thought His power to heal came from. And they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" —so that they might accuse him. Now, real quick, there were provisions in the tacked on law that the Pharisee's had written that basically said you could save someone's life on the Sabbath, but if you were pretty sure they weren't going to die, they just had to suffer through until the Sabbath was over. Pretty merciful huh? This guy with a withered hand isn't going to die.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? ¹²Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! See, the Pharisees' extra biblical rulebook said they could pull their livestock out of a pit, because not to do so would impact them financially. Can't have that! See, in the order they had established, they got so far away from the heart of God that their own well being actually made an animal more valuable than a person in need.

Finally, Jesus, the author of the true Sabbath, the only one we can find true rest in, the only genuine giver and interpreter of the Law, gives them His final answer, 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. A man gets restored, gets shown mercy, and this seals the deal for the Pharisees. It's rejection!

I so love this healing. And there's so much hope and encouragement we can receive knowing our Lord can take what was withered, dried up, useless and He can restore it. He can restore you; and as much as I'd love to camp here with this healing for a while, we need to keep moving because I really want to leave you, or have you start this new year, with some of the most beautiful verses that are found in the rest of our passage. I want us to make a picture of Jesus, a true picture, with these verses.

Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there. And many followed him, and he healed them all ¹⁶and ordered them not to make him known.¹⁷ This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: And here's where we get our picture.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; ²⁰a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory; ²¹and in his name the Gentiles will hope."

Now I don't know how you walked in here this morning. I know that the Christmas season can be a very hard one for a lot of people for a lot different reasons. Not everybody has the happy perfect family. Not everybody has good memories, or the ability to roll out a big Christmas spread and gifts. Quite frankly, Christmas time can be the pits for some. Then what happens is that New Years comes, and you look back at the year that just went past and it can be full of unfulfilled hopes; it can seem like the whole year was a let down.

People let you down, you let people down, you still have the same struggles you started the year with. Your relationship with Jesus is cold; He seems a million miles away, because somewhere along the line you stopped looking at Him. You don't see Him how he truly is.

Before we go rushing out of here into 2014, let's take just a minute to look at this Jesus. Think of it as if we are starting with a still shot picture. Just look at Him. Starting in 18: the One who was the fulfillment of this prophecy written so long ago, this promised Messiah, the One that God in these verses says, "Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved" can I remind you that God's beloved Son Jesus came as a servant. Not a rigid task master that came to bellow out orders, but a servant who He himself said, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." He's come for sinners to turn and to be transformed by His power.

The last bit of verse 18 lets us add a little audio to this picture. It says, "he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles" That word proclaim means "God's announcement," He came with God's message. And God's message is the Gospel, the Good News that those whose faith is in Him, for them there is now no condemnation, and this Gospel is for the Gentiles, which means it's for the whole world, and that includes you, not just one nation, but all nations, tribes and tongues. Even oddballs from Southeast Iowa!

Verse 19 gives more audio to our picture of Jesus, it says He didn't come to quarrel, He didn't come to fight you or wear you down. It says He won't cry aloud, and that word "cry" is used of a barking dog, or a screeching raven or an angry mob. Jesus did not come into the world to hassle and fight and argue and wrangle and harass you or others in the streets. He spoke the truth, spoke it in love, and He spoke it with meekness. What a contrast to the rabble rousing Pharisees who were always over the top, ripping their clothes and starting riots. God's beloved didn't come to shout down His opposition or yell at you until you loved Him.

Verse 20 allows us to add some of His nature or what He's like to our picture, ²⁰a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench. You're like, what's that about? Well, reeds were used for a lot of things, and once it was bruised it wouldn't stay straight it was crumpled up and thrown away. Shepherds and people out in the fields used to like to pick reeds and make them into little flutes and play them. After they played them for a while, their fingers and their saliva would cause them to bruise and get soft in a place, and if they couldn't be played right, they'd just crush them and throw them away. As for the wick, the fire is just about out – actually, there is no fire – it's just a smoldering spark, barely visible, not really good for anything. In their day, if a wick would get to where it wouldn't hold a flame, they'd just pitch it. It's good for nothing. These things represent the hurting, those people that are all bruised up in this life, and as far as you can tell, you'll never make any beautiful music with your life. You're all bruised up and useless. And the smoldering wick, well, that's you in here whose spiritual fire has gone out. You can't even see it anymore. Doesn't give off any light, just smoke, that's all that's left. And this picture of God's servant Jesus – and His promise is – that He's not going to just crumple you up and move on. Just the opposite, His promise is that He's going to care for you. He will pick you up. And with what you thought was a wasted life, He's going to play

the sweetest music through you that you can hardly imagine. And instead snuffing out whatever little spark was left, His promise is to cup his hands around you and gently fuff, and fuff, and fan your spirit back into a flame that will be a light for all around to see. Press into Him in this next year and keep staring at this picture we're given. He can take damaged goods, bruised reeds, and the tiniest little wick that seems to have no light at all and make beautiful music and gorgeous light.

And finally, this Jesus that you are looking at promises to keep doing that again and again. Look at the rest of the verse, again and again, **until he brings justice to victory; ²¹and in his name the Gentiles will hope.**" Surely the most wonderful part of the picture: His promise that someday, someday soon, He's coming again. And when He does, in spite of the difficulty, in spite of all the struggles and the persecution and trouble, victory is absolutely certain! It's certain because He is God! The Bible says His justice will roll down like mighty waters. He will explode onto the scene and we will no longer have to look at a picture, but we will see Him face to face. And with a countless number of saints around us, from all over this earth, the largest choir ever assembled will sing HOLY, HOLY, HOLY is our Lord God Almighty! Instead of closing this message in prayer, would you stand on your feet and let's close it together in worshipping this merciful, beloved Servant.

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