



International Bible Lessons Commentary

Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series

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Matthew 12:1-14 **New Revised Standard Version** **June 3, 2018**

The [International Bible Lesson](#) (*Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series*) for **Sunday, June 3, 2018**, is from **Matthew 12:1-14**. **Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further** follow the verse-by-verse *International Bible Lesson Commentary*. **Study Hints for Discussion and Thinking Further** will help with class preparation and in conducting class discussion: these hints are available on the [International Bible Lessons Commentary](#) website along with the *International Bible Lesson* that you may want to read to your class as part of your Bible study. You can discuss each week's commentary and lesson at the [International Bible Lesson Forum](#).

(Matthew 12:1) 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.

Some scholars distinguish between ceremonial laws and moral laws in the Old Testament.

Examples of ceremonial laws include laws regulating what should and should not be done by priests and non-priests on the Sabbath (ceremonially defined as Saturday). Ceremonial laws can be cancelled, changed, fulfilled, or made obsolete. The Pharisees added their traditions to the Old Testament ceremonial laws that they expected everyone to obey, and they gave their traditions the same authority and status as the laws of God specifically revealed and recorded in the Old Testament. The Pharisees expected Jesus and His disciples to obey all the ceremonial laws, including their traditional interpretations of these laws, which was the foundation for their discussion with Jesus. The additions of their traditions to the Law of God formed the basis for many of the conflicts between Jesus and them, and later between them and the Apostle Paul and the New Testament Church.

Examples of moral laws are the Ten Commandments and the commands of Jesus. These laws of God will never be changed; for example, God will never change the laws requiring love for God and neighbor. For example, God will never change the laws forbidding murder, theft, bearing false witness, or coveting. The moral law regarding the Sabbath observance can be found in Exodus 20:8-11, which describes one of the ways we should love ourselves and others; how we should love our physical minds and bodies by caring for them, and how we should make certain people and animals under our authority are also given the rest they need one day a week. In addition to mental and physical rest, the Sabbath observation also

gives people the time to worship God, enjoy Christian fellowship, and study the Bible. In Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, He showed how we should not even violate these moral laws in our hearts! Because we have violated some of the moral laws both in heart and action, Jesus died and rose again to save us from our sins.

From Leviticus 23:22, we learn that the Law of God, the Law of Love, required farmers to permit the poor to eat from their fields: "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and for the foreigner residing among you. I am the LORD your God." Jesus and His disciples were materially poor; therefore, the Law of God permitted them to eat grain from the field as they walked.

(Matthew 12:2) When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath."

The poor could not "harvest," and many did not have the means to collect and save enough food during the week to feed themselves on the Sabbath. By adding to the Law of God, the Pharisees violated the Law of Love; they brought hardship on those God intended to care for and protect when He gave the Law to Moses. Likewise, the disciples who travelled from place to place with Jesus were sometimes hungry, and in this situation on the Sabbath they took a few grains of barley or wheat, rubbed the grain

between their hands, let the chaff blow away, and then ate the grains. Using their unlawful traditions, the Pharisees accused Jesus' disciples of harvesting and threshing, thus working on the Sabbath in violation of the Law of God. Adding to or subtracting from the Law of Love, the moral law, can lead to hardship, suffering, and painful, hypocritical, unjust, judgmental accusations against others.

(Matthew 12:3) He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry?”

In answering their accusation, Jesus referred them back to the Bible as the authority, back to the Old Testament as their authority, back to 1 Samuel 21:1-6, back to David as an example when he was poor and fleeing King Saul. Twelve loaves of bread, representing the twelve tribes of Israel, were put fresh in the tabernacle every seven days (see Leviticus 24:5-9). The priest, Ahimelech, gave David and his men five loaves of bread that had been previously removed and replaced by fresh bread in the tabernacle.

(Matthew 12:4) He entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests.

In accordance with the ceremonial law, the bread was consecrated or made ceremonially holy, having been previously presented to the LORD by the priests at least

seven days earlier as part of worshiping the LORD. The ceremonial law forbids anyone but the priests to eat this holy bread. Ahimelech, the priest, broke the ceremonial law when he gave the ceremonial bread to David and his companions, and David and his companions broke the ceremonial law when they ate it, but no one broke the moral law when they were given and ate the holy bread. Jesus declared that Ahimelech and David were justified in breaking the ceremonial law because of a real, human need: hunger. They did not break the moral law; rather, they complied with the Law of Love when they were given and ate of the bread. Neither the Bible nor Jesus condemned their actions. The priest, Ahimelech, obeyed the moral law, the Law of Love, when he loved his poor, hungry neighbors and gave them something to eat. In Mark 2:27, Jesus said, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” God never intended for the ceremonial laws in the Old Testament to make life more difficult for people, but to bless them in many ways physically, spiritually, and socially. Many of the ceremonial laws pointed to Jesus as the promised Messiah; they showed some of what Jesus the Messiah would do. In this confrontation with the Pharisees, Jesus’ example and words show that the ceremonial laws should never be applied or interpreted in ways that would violate the moral law, the Law of Love.

(Matthew 12:5) Or have you not read in the law that on the sabbath the priests in the temple break the sabbath and yet are guiltless?

The Word of God is the authority for our actions, not human religious traditions; therefore, Jesus went on to give another example from the Scriptures. The priests have “Sabbath duty,” the priests “work” on the Sabbath (Saturday: the Jewish Sabbath); therefore, they “desecrate” or “break” the ceremonial Sabbath law every Saturday, but not the Sabbath moral law — they would keep the Sabbath by resting a different day of the week. Their actions and work on the Sabbath (Saturday) fulfilled the moral law, the Law of Love, because their neighbors benefitted from their temple service and leadership in worship. Jesus and His disciples were also doing the Lord’s work on the Sabbath or were on their way to do “Sabbath duty,” even though what they were doing in the service of God and others was not specified in the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament. As the Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus had the authority to lead His followers in the service of God and others without breaking any of God’s ceremonial laws. Indeed, Jesus always led them to do the will of God. Furthermore, Jesus never broke a moral law, the Law of Love, nor encouraged anyone to do so.

(Matthew 12:6) I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.

Jesus, their long awaited and expected Messiah, the King of kings, the only begotten Son of God, their faithful High Priest and Prophet of God, was there with them preaching the good news and healing the sick. Right before their

eyes, the One who was speaking to them at that very moment, all that Jesus was, is, will be, and do, was the “something greater” than the temple. The temple represented the presence of the LORD with His people. Jesus came into the world as Emmanuel, as God with us (see Matthew 1:23). God was with them at that moment in Jesus, and wherever Jesus was, God was there. The temple could not move from place to place to bring the LORD to the people, but Jesus could and did bring the LORD to the people wherever He went, and wherever He went He brought and explained the Law of Love.

(Matthew 12:7) But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless.

Having referred to an historical event in the life of their greatest king as an example, having referred to the law that regulated the service of their Levitical priests at the temple as an example; Jesus then directly quoted from their prophets in the Bible as authoritative commands or words of God. These are some examples of what God spoke through their prophets: Hosea 6:6 – “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings;” Isaiah 1:17 – “Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow,” and Micah 6:8 – “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” The traditions of the

Pharisees regarding the ceremonial and sacrificial laws in the Old Testament demanded unlawful behavior, violating the moral law, and disregarding the Law of Love (as fulfilled by Ahimelech, David, and by the priests in their service at the temple, and the specific commands of the LORD through their prophets).

(Matthew 12:8) For the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath.”

On various occasions, Jesus told people that He was the Son of Man (an Old Testament prophetic title for the promised Messiah) when He used that title for himself. As the Son of Man, Jesus claimed to be the Lord of the Sabbath. He had given the Sabbath laws; therefore, He could and did apply and interpret the ceremonial and moral laws according to the express intention and will of the LORD God. He proved He was Lord of the Sabbath by always doing acts of love on the Sabbath, even miraculous acts that only God could do on the Sabbath

(Matthew 12:9) He left that place and entered their synagogue;

The Pharisees often followed Jesus in order to find some reason to accuse Him of breaking the Law of God or their Jewish laws and traditions or even Roman laws, in order to slander Him, or discredit Him in the eyes of the people, or punish Him, or eventually put Him to death. They would do whatever was necessary to silence Him or destroy His influence over others. Therefore, they followed

Him from the grainfields as He and His disciples walked on paths through the fields to worship in the synagogue, where Jesus would do more “Sabbath duty” or “work.”

(Matthew 12:10) a man was there with a withered hand, and they asked him, “Is it lawful to cure on the sabbath?” so that they might accuse him.

These Pharisees broke the Law of Love, the moral law, when they did not love their neighbor as themselves and help the man with special needs. Instead of comforting him or trying to make his life better any day of the week, as they would have wanted others to do for them, they broke the moral law and tried to use the man as an object lesson in the hope of entrapping Jesus and bringing charges against Jesus; thus, once again breaking the moral law by not loving Jesus as He deserved, but instead seeking to trick Him in order to destroy Him. While breaking the moral law, their evil, unloving hearts prompted their question about obedience to the ceremonial law. Would Jesus break the ceremonial law according to their interpretation and traditions? If He did, they knew they could bring charges against Jesus.

(Matthew 12:11) He said to them, “Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out?”

The Law of Love given by God in the Old Testament commanded people to help others and even animals in trouble. In Deuteronomy 22:4, we read, “If you see your

fellow Israelite's donkey or ox fallen on the road, do not ignore it. Help the owner get it to its feet.” This is a moral law, a law of love, a law that commands a person to always do the loving and wisest thing they know to do. Jesus’ question assumes even a person who is selfish and self-centered, like these Pharisees, would save a sheep or ox or donkey that belonged to him rather than suffer the loss if it fell into a pit or on the road, even on the Sabbath. They would break the ceremonial laws regarding the Sabbath to save a valuable sheep for themselves. These Pharisees probably would not break a ceremonial Sabbath law to help a neighbor’s sheep, only their own sheep.

(Matthew 12:12) How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath.”

Jesus then told them (and He tells us) that a person is more valuable than an animal, even a domestic animal. If a person can do good and help a sheep or any other animal on the Sabbath; then, certainly, it is lawful to help a person and do good on the Sabbath. Jesus had already told them that He was the Lord of the Sabbath, so He could declare what was lawful to do on the Sabbath; therefore, it was lawful to do good on the Sabbath. In compliance with the moral law, it was lawful to do the loving thing, the good thing, and heal the man on the Sabbath.

(Matthew 12:13) Then he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and it was restored, as sound as the other.

Jesus then proved He was Lord of the Sabbath by doing good on the Sabbath and working a miracle which was in His power to do. It was in the power of a Pharisee to save his sheep if it fell into a ditch. It was in the power of Jesus to heal person if he was sick or handicapped. Jesus always did the good, wise, and loving thing, even on the Sabbath. So, in obedience to the moral law, we too should and can always do the good, wise, and loving thing within our prayerful power seven days a week.

(Matthew 12:14) But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.

These Pharisees did not do the good, wise, and loving thing. Instead, they did the evil, hateful thing in violation of the Law of Love and plotted the death of Jesus. They refused to accept the words of Jesus even when He demonstrated by His actions that He always did what was within His power in wise, good, and loving ways. Indeed, by His words and actions, Jesus demonstrated that He was everything He claimed about himself.

Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further

1. Why did the Pharisees accuse Jesus' disciples of doing something unlawful on the Sabbath?

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2. In His response to them, what did Jesus say David had done (and he was not condemned for having done what he did)?
 3. Why were the priests allowed to desecrate the Sabbath and were considered innocent?
 4. What words from the prophets did Jesus say these Pharisees did not know?
 5. After Jesus healed the man with the shriveled hand, what did the Pharisees decide to do?

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