

It's not fun being accused of doing something you didn't do. But it sometimes happens. A group of friends got together and started sharing stories of when they were accused of something they didn't do. One shared about his grandmother who once accused him of stealing her very old socks and then selling them for profit. Grandma was struggling in memory but somehow her grandson's apparent shame to sell her old socks always came to mind.

Another told of a time he was 12 and at a neighbor's party. The host mom asked "has anyone here seen the movie Aladdin?" He responded, "Oh yah. I liked that movie." The mom replied – "well where is it?" her copy of Aladdin was missing. She was asking if anyone had seen her copy of the movie. So she followed him around at the party accusing him of stealing her VHS tape. He even explained the misunderstanding to her. But she wouldn't listen and even called his parents after the party to tell them he stole her Aladdin's movie.

Another friend shared how a neighbor kid once accused him of feeding their pet bird chewing gum. The bird had eaten the gum, choked on it and died. This friend concluded the kid had given the gum to his pet bird and then panicked when the bird died. So he accused a neighbor kid and of course his Mom believed the story that the neighbor kid did it. It's not fun being accused of something you didn't do.

Some false accusations are much more serious. There are many stories of people wrongfully convicted. Later evidence reveals their innocence yet they have had to endure years in prison or a stain on their reputation that wasn't theirs to carry.

As Christians, we can be the target of false accusations or at least misdirected ones. In his book "Exposing Myths about Christianity," Jeffrey Russell groups the myths or the charges into several categories. Christianity is dying out; Christianity is Destructive; Christianity is Stupid; Jesus and the Bible have been shown to be false; Christian beliefs have been shown to be wrong; Miracles are impossible and What's new is true. You might have been on the receiving end of one these accusations or maybe even wondered about this yourself.

It's hard to be accused because of our relationship with Christ. Yet when that happens, we are not experiencing anything new for Christians. In fact, Jesus endured harsh accusations about Himself, His motives, His ministry, His behavior and His beliefs. He was accused in just about every area one could be accused. Yet he addressed the accusations with His Word and Life.

Today we are going to see Him address the accusation that He and His disciples were Sabbath breakers – not sandwich makers – Sabbath breakers. This was a huge offense in the 1st century honor and shame culture in which they lived. We’re going to see how Jesus responded to these accusations and discover what His responses reveal about Himself. My hope today is that you will first be encouraged at Jesus’ brilliant responses to the accusations. I pray you will also gain courage to respond productively with accusations you might face because of your faith. But we’ll also have opportunity to respond to this Jesus and what He reveals about Himself.

Now to understand this passage in Matthew, we’re going to go on a little journey through Old Testament Scripture before we get to the passage. So you’re going to need your Bibles, devices or you can use the Bible in front of you. The first passage is Exodus 20:8-11 – on page 56 in those Bibles.

Exodus 20:8-11(ESV)

⁸ “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

Next we got to 1 Samuel 21:1-6 – page 219.

1 Samuel 21:1-6 (ESV)

21 Then David came to Nob to Ahimelech the priest. And Ahimelech came to meet David trembling and said to him, “Why are you alone, and no one with you?” ² And David said to Ahimelech the priest, “The king has charged me with a matter and said to me, ‘Let no one know anything of the matter about which I send you, and with which I have charged you.’ I have made an appointment with the young men for such and such a place. ³ Now then, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever is here.” ⁴ And the priest answered David, “I have no common bread on hand, but there is holy bread—if the young men have kept themselves from women.” ⁵ And David answered the priest, “Truly women have been kept from us as always when I go on an expedition. The vessels of the young men are holy even when it is an ordinary journey. How much more today will their vessels be holy?” ⁶ So the priest gave him the holy bread, for there was no bread there but the bread of the Presence, which is removed from before the LORD, to be replaced by hot bread on the day it is taken away.

Next we go to the prophet Hosea 6:1-6 – page 643.

Hosea 6:1-6 (ESV)

6 “Come, let us return to the LORD;
for he has torn us, that he may heal us;
he has struck us down, and he will bind us up.

² After two days he will revive us;
 on the third day he will raise us up,
 that we may live before him.

³ Let us know; let us press on to know the LORD;
 his going out is sure as the dawn;
 he will come to us as the showers,
 as the spring rains that water the earth.”

⁴ What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?
 What shall I do with you, O Judah?
 Your love is like a morning cloud,
 like the dew that goes early away.

⁵ Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets;
 I have slain them by the words of my mouth,
 and my judgment goes forth as the light.

⁶ For I desire mercy and not sacrifice,
 the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

Now we get to our main passage – Matthew 12:1-14 – page 687.

Matthew 12:1-14 (ESV)

12 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. 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.

The Pharisees were one of the Jewish religious groups at the time of Christ. They were divided into 3 schools: the disciples of Shammai, Hillel and Gamaliel. They were especially concerned about the administration of the temple. Shammai was the most conservative wing of the group. They dominated before the destruction of the temple. These Pharisees are likely from the Shammai school. They took their personal relationship with God very seriously because

they believed that the resurrection of the dead was the reward for living a righteous life. So they tried to figure out how God's law, in what we now call the Old Testament, applied to everyday life. Their motives were likely sincere. Yet their written and spoken interpretations of the law became a heavy weight that few people could remember.

This account occurs on the Sabbath. Remembering the Sabbath day was the fourth of the 10 commandments. God commanded His people to observe it for the purposes of rest and reorientation to Him. It was a day to set apart to God to recognize His Lordship over everything and to cease from regular labor.

On this day, Jesus and His disciples walk through the grain fields that were pretty close to harvest. They likely didn't walk in a grain field trampling down plants. They walked on paths between the fields. People would plant their crops right to the edge of the path to get as much grain as possible from the land. But the law instructed the farmer not to harvest the edges of the crop fields. The poor and others in need were allowed to take that grain to feed them. So while they walk on these paths, the hungry disciples take heads of grain and break out the seeds to eat. They weren't stealing. It was common practice.

But it was on the Sabbath. Some Pharisees see this and know that the law forbids working on the Sabbath. They believe breaking off a head of grain amounts to work. So they direct their concerns to Jesus. "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath." Now that's a pretty serious charge against someone who claimed to be the fulfillment of the law. And it doesn't look good for a rabbi or religious teacher like Jesus to allow His disciples to break one of the 10 commandments. At least, that is how the Pharisees framed it.

But Jesus refutes the Pharisee's charge. To refute means to disprove, rebut or counter. With each rebuttal He emphasizes a higher purpose of God's law the first way Jesus rebut the Pharisees. **Rebuttal #1 – Jesus is to remind them how David unlawfully ate the priest's bread AND was not condemned for it.** This incident occurred before David was king. Saul, the current king, pursued David. He comes to the place containing the tent of God. Priests did the work to keep the tent going. One duty involved placing 12 loaves of bread before the Holy Place on the Sabbath Day. They were to remain there as a symbolic offering to the Lord. Then the next Sabbath, only the priests could take that bread to eat.

David arrives and asks for common bread. The priest informs him there is no ordinary bread. But there is the holy bread that sits in the tent of God. Then the priest gives him the bread technically breaking the law. Yet neither the

priest nor David is condemned by the Scriptures. Why? David was in need. He was hungry and the priest judged that it was more important to meet this human need than to meet the technical requirement of the law. This priest and 80 of his colleagues would later die for this decision. So Jesus points out a **greater principle** of the law – **Meeting basic human needs takes precedence over obeying smaller details of the law.** Notice that Jesus spoke to experts in the law by stating “have you not read?” Of course they had read that. But they hadn’t seen the greater principle there.

Jesus goes on in verse 5. “Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath, the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless?” Now Jesus uses two words that normally don’t go together here - profane and guiltless. If someone profanes something, they are normally guilty. But if they don’t profane it, they are guilty. Yet here Jesus says the priests who serve in the temple in Jerusalem profane the Sabbath yet they are guiltless. Priests had to work on the Sabbath just like pastors have to work on Sundays. Technically, you could argue that they broke the Sabbath. But to keep the temple functioning so people could worship, they needed to do their work. **Rebuttal #2 – Priests working on the Sabbath are considered guiltless by God.**

Greater Principle 2 – God makes allowances within the law. So yes, the fourth commandment does say “do no work on the Sabbath.” But there are allowances like priests who have to work; nurses who have to care; doctors who have to heal; ambulance workers who have to respond, cows have to be milked. We can’t go to the other extreme and conclude therefore that it’s okay to do an ordinary days’ work every Sunday because God makes allowances. No it must generally be a time of rest and worship. But on some occasions, work is allowed.

Then Jesus makes a startling statement. Verse 6 – “I tell you, something greater than the temple is here.” The temple was the greatest building and central institution in Judaism. That is where you found God’s presence. Jews all over the world prayed towards Jerusalem because of the temple. But Jesus says something, Himself, is greater than the temple. That must have stunned or shocked the Pharisees. This would be like Jesus going to New York and standing at the bell of the New York Stock Exchange and saying “someone greater than the New York Stock Exchange is here.” Or imagine Jesus went to the Vatican in Rome and stood in that center courtyard where the pope speaks out to the masses. Then he declares “something greater than the Vatican is here.”

The people turned to the temple because God’s presence dwelt there. But now the actual presence of God walked among the people in Jesus. Jesus does not reject the temple. God ordained it and designed it’s layout after all.

But He lays the foundation for the transition from worship directed to God through a place in Jerusalem to worship directed to God through the person of Jesus. “Something greater than the temple” is an earth shattering statement to guardians of the temple like the Pharisees. But Jesus is not finished.

Remember the charge – “Your disciples are doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” **Rebuttal #3 – You’re not doing the will of God with your response.** Verse 7 – And if you had known what this means, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless.” Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6 where the prophet expresses God’s heart. He desires mercy over sacrifice. He prefers his people show mercy towards others rather than offering sacrifices with hard hearts towards others. The Pharisees showed no mercy to Jesus’ disciples. They immediately condemned. They didn’t discern that the disciples needed some food. They just hammered them with a citation or ticket for disobeying their rules.

But Jesus declares them guiltless. So the **greater principle 3** is “**Don’t condemn someone before you understand their need.**” Take a more sensitive approach to others. Don’t be quick to condemn the moment you think you have seen a rules violation. And we can sit in judgment on the Pharisees as “how could they do that.” But then we get our little kingdom or we’re in charge of some policy enforcement or given some authority. We suddenly love to lord it over others. I remember years ago playing a slow pitch softball league with our church in Ottawa. One game, our ump was absolutely fanatical about batters not wearing their watches. We’re playing in an adult slow pith soft ball. No money is involved. No one makes their living off this team. He was right that it’s not wise to bat with your watch on. But we were adults and could make choices about. But he refused to resume the game if a batter had a watch on. And sometimes he would angrily shame the batter who forgot. You’ve got these people on slow pitch teams that you’re just glad to have shown up. They’re a little scared of batting in the first place or having all the attention focused on them. Then the ump yells at them “get your watch off!” I don’t think that guy umped again in our league because he got so stuck on some rule that he missed the bigger purpose of getting people together for some fun and activity. God says “I desire mercy before sacrifice – a tender heart before a hard hearted adherence to ritual.”

Then Jesus drops another bombshell. The last one He disguised a little with the phrase “*something* greater than the temple is here.” But this next statement leaves little doubt about the audacity of the claim. Verse 8 – “For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” Jesus had the boldness to correct the Pharisees. Now he claims Lordship over the

Sabbath itself? That would be like someone today claiming I am Lord over the Internet. I am Lord over all the morality of the nation. I am Lord over the pillars of your society.

But Jesus claims this because He does have authority to interpret the law and intent of the Sabbath. Remember Matthew highlights the authority of Jesus throughout this Gospel. Jesus is the long awaited Messiah in the birth narratives. He was the One who has come to fulfill the law. Now, He has authority to interpret the law correctly. We aren't given any information about how the Pharisee's responded to this. But they can't be happy. Jesus' statements threaten their way of life and interpretation.

The next scene reveals these Pharisee's intentions. Jesus goes from this grain field encounter into their synagogue. There sits or stands a man with a withered hand. Maybe it was paralyzed or damaged in some accident so it could no longer be used. The Pharisees see the man, see Jesus and see an opportunity to accuse. Remember they believed that no work should be done on the Sabbath? This included doctor's work or healing. The Pharisees allowed intervention on the Sabbath when a person's life was threatened. But if there was no imminent danger, healing could wait.

So they now challenge Jesus. "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" Talk about a lack of mercy! What did they do? Did they stand this man in front of Jesus and hold out his hand and ask the question. How would you feel if you had some ailment and someone came along to use you as a specimen for a debate about the law? Talk about heartless! Matthew tells us that they did this to accuse him. Jesus responds with another refutation of the Pharisee's charge.

Rebuttal 4 – Jesus points out their inconsistency in applying Sabbath Law. "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?" Sheep and pits were common in the land. Some people dug camouflaged pits to capture wolves and other predators. But sometimes their animals would fall in. Or they would get trapped in the wells.

So they had to rescue their animals. But were they allowed to rescue them on the Sabbath? This was regular work after all. So this resulted in a great debate. Some prohibited rescuing an animal from a pit on the Sabbath. Some Rabbis allowed articles to be thrown into the pit to allow the animal to climb out. Or you could throw food down to feed them but not rescue them until the weekday. But in practice, most people including the Pharisees rescued their animals on the Sabbath.

So they were willing to waive the rules for a sheep. But they weren't willing to waive the rules for a man? Jesus corrects this imbalance. "Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." **Greater Principle 4 – Doing good is more important than strict adherence to rules.** Kindness toward others' in genuine need takes precedence over maintaining the letter of the law - God highly values kindness. It's more important to encourage a trembling young girl at bat with her watch on by saying "batter up," than it is to get her to remove her watch.

But Jesus does not only refute their accusation. He heals the man. "Stretch out your hand," and the man's hand is restored. Jesus does not touch the man. He does not use medicine. He simply speaks. His action reminds us of another time when God healed a man's hand with a word. In Exodus, God gives Moses signs to assure of His presence when he goes to confront Pharaoh. One sign involves Moses' hand. So Exodus 3:6-7 states ⁶ Again, the LORD said to him, "Put your hand inside your cloak." And he put his hand inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous like snow. ⁷ Then God said, "Put your hand back inside your cloak." So he put his hand back inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, it was restored like the rest of his flesh." If God did not approve of Jesus' interpretation of the law, he likely would not have given the power for him to heal by word at that moment.

So Jesus refuted the Pharisee's statement and accusation. Through this He reveals more of His true identity. He is greater than the temple. He is Lord of the Sabbath. He heals just by speaking a word.

How would the Pharisee's respond? Verse 14 – But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him. This was not simply a character assassination. They wanted him dead. These events have illustrated irreconcilable differences between Jesus' radical approach to God's law and their rule bound religion of the establishment. They discern that his claim to authoritatively interpret Scriptures was in fact a claim to messianic authority. They judge this to be a great false teaching for which He must die. They are so blind and hard hearted that they cannot see that these activities actually validate His claims. We will see their opposition increase in intensity in the next passages

But how will we respond? Have we recognized the supremacy of Jesus over everything in our lives? Jesus declares His supremacy over the Sabbath. Through His death, he proved Himself supreme over death, the devil and sin. So the Sabbath supremacy points to the His supremacy over all. Colossians 1:18 – And he is the head of the body, the

church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent or supreme over all. NT Wright states - *That which he was by right he became in fact. The exaltation of Christ after his work on the cross gives him, publicly, the status which he always in fact enjoyed as of right. Though Lord in right, he becomes Lord in fact by defeating sin and death.*

How do we respond to Jesus, who is supreme over everything? Yet isn't incredible that the supreme Lord of the universe has just invited us in Matthew 11:28-30 to come to Him personally to receive rest? He is gentle and humble in heart. He will fit us with an easy and light yoke to lead us through the challenges of our lives.

So I/we need to respond with obedience to the Lord's will and command over my life. We need to pray Our Father who is in heaven; Hallowed be your name. May your kingdom come; may your will be done not only on earth generally as it is in heaven – but in my life – I open and submit my life to you for your will to be done. So what must change; what am I doing well; what do you call me to? Where do you want me to go? What do you want me to say?

What about your/my interpretations of Scripture? Are we willing to submit them to Jesus' authority and interpretation? Am I more concerned about rules than mercy to others?

If you don't know Christ, please recognize Jesus is not some salesman hoping you will believe his pitch. He is not desperate for sales. He is Lord over all. Will you acknowledge that now in your life? And then invite Him to direct your life accordingly? Or will you resist Him for the rest of your life and only acknowledge it on Judgment Day when it is too late?

I hope you are encouraged today by Jesus' brilliant answers and Jesus' supreme Lordship. So say you face accusations or misrepresentations about our Christianity or the Christ we follow. You can ask Jesus for the words, the heart and the help we need to respond in a helpful God glorifying way. Let's come to Him now.