Justice and Sabbath Laws

Matthew 12:1-14
SS Lesson for 06/03/2018

Devotional Scripture: Micah 6:2-9

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Introduction

Overview and Key Verse of the Lesson

The lesson reviews for understanding Jesus’ teachings regarding Justice and Sabbath Laws. The study's aim is to understand that obedience to God never hinders compassionate actions. The study's application is to live according to the principles we can draw from the Lord Jesus’ response to Sabbath rules and the people who tried to enforce them.

(Adapted from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary)

Key Verse: Matt 12:7

But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

12:1-8. As Jesus and His disciples were going through the grainfields on the Sabbath, His disciples began to pick the wheat and eat the grain. The Pharisees immediately jumped on this “violation” of the Law (Ex. 20:8-11) and accused the disciples of working on the Sabbath. According to the Pharisees, plucking wheat from its stem is reaping, rubbing the wheat heads between one’s palms is threshing, and blowing away the chaff is winnowing! Jesus, however, disputed the Pharisees’ claim, using three illustrations. First, he cited an event in the life of David (Matt. 12:3-4). As he fled from Saul, David was given the consecrated bread which had been removed from the tabernacle (1 Sam. 21:1-6), and was normally reserved for the priests alone (Lev. 24:9). David believed that preserving his life was more important than observing a technicality. Second, the priests in the temple were involved in work on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:5; cf. Num. 28:9-10, 18-19), yet they were considered blameless. Third, Jesus argued that He Himself was greater than the temple (Matt. 12:6; cf. “One greater” in vv. 41-42), for He is Lord of the Sabbath, that is, He controls what can be done on it, and He did not condemn the disciples (the innocent) for their action. The Pharisees were splitting hairs with their technicalities about reaping, threshing, and winnowing. They failed to understand compassion for people's basic needs (in this case, the disciples’ hunger; cf. Deut. 23:24-25), but were intense in their concern for the sacrifices. Jesus reminded them of the words in Hosea 6:6, I desire mercy, not sacrifice, that is, inner spiritual vitality, not mere external formality.

12:9-14. The first controversy (vv. 1-8) was barely over when Jesus arrived in the synagogue. Since it was the Sabbath Day, one would expect Jesus to be in the synagogue. A man with a shriveled hand was there. Since the Pharisees were continually looking for some way to accuse Jesus, they undoubtedly planted this man in the synagogue to create an incident. The Pharisees raised the question, Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath? Jesus answered their question, as He often did, with another question. If one’s sheep would fall into a pit on the Sabbath, would he not... lift the sheep out of the pit, even though this might be construed as work? An act of mercy toward an animal was perfectly in order. Since people are much more valuable than animals, mercy should be extended toward them even on Sabbath Days. Jesus thus removed any possible objection to what He was going to do, for Scripture did not forbid it and His logic was flawless. His healing the man, however, did not prompt faith in the Pharisees for they went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.

12:15-21. Jesus knew what the Pharisees were trying to do through these Sabbath controversies. As many people continued to follow Him... He healed all their sick but warned them not to tell who He is (cf. 9:30). To publicize that He is the Messiah would only invite more opposition. This was to fulfill the prophecy in Isaiah (42:1-4), obviously a messianic passage. “It suits Matthew’s argument well. First, it
shows how the withdrawal of the King fits the work of the Messiah. He shall not wrangle or cry out in the streets. It is also a fitting picture of His compassion, for He will not break a battered reed or put out a smoldering wick.... A second argument presented by the prophecy is the divine approval of the Messiah. Though He does not cry out or engage in open conflicts, He is still God’s Servant who shall carry out God’s program” (Toussaint, Behold the King, p. 161). The Trinity appears in Matthew 12:18 (quoting from Isa. 42:1). God the Father spoke of Christ as My Servant, and His Spirit was on the Messiah, who proclaimed justice. In Christ the nations... hope (Matt. 12:21).

Commentary from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary

The Lord spoke the words from out text while dealing with some of the Pharisees. Their strict religious practices could not abide how the Lord and His disciples had "violated" the Sabbath by picking heads of grain and eating them on that day. Actually, it was no violation at all, as the Lord clearly informed them. In their protest they had "condemned the guiltless." Nothing had been done to violate God's principles of the Sabbath. The Lord quoted Hosea 6:6 when He said that God wanted "mercy, . . . not sacrifice." What did He mean? The reference to sacrifice points to external religious deeds and duties, like the Sabbath laws of the Old Testament. There is nothing wrong with religious observances, but they must always be combined with mercy, which refers to a genuine and graciously transformed heart. An external religious act devoid of sincere affection toward God is not pleasing to Him. In order to please our just and merciful God, we must be in touch with the higher principles that flow from His holy and loving character. We cannot please Him through mere external duties. The Sabbath laws were good. They were given by God to ancient Israel. It was right and just to observe them. However, the Pharisees had their focus on the forms and outward acts associated with observing the Sabbath and not the higher principles of mercy, righteousness (justice), and love. The Lord reminded them that God desires mercy. Mercy that does not spring from a good and kind heart is cold and empty. The Prophet Hosea ministered at a time in the northern kingdom of Israel when the people were practicing religion with hearts that were far from God. The nation was judged by God shortly after Hosea's warnings to them. We must learn to have hearts in touch with the higher principles of God's character, such as justice, righteousness, and mercy. The Lord had plenty of insights to share with the Pharisees concerning this point. He showed how David was allowed to eat the shewbread from the tabernacle (Matt. 12:4). Normally, this bread was reserved for the priests, but since David was serving God and in need, it was right for him to eat it. Similarly, priests did work on the Sabbath days; but, again, this was permissible since it was service rendered to God (vs. 5). Jesus noted that it is proper for a man to extract a sheep from a pit on the Sabbath, since this is a merciful and righteous thing to do (Matt. 12:11 - 12), despite the fact that the effort is put forth on the Sabbath. For this reason the Lord also healed on the Sabbath (vs. 10-13). We are serving a just and merciful God. If we want to serve Him well, we must seek to live according to His holy character. Being more godly should increasingly become our prime motive in life. Godliness flows from faith in God, not from mere conformity to religious duty. All our actions in life should be influenced by the character of God.

Lesson Introduction and Background
From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Someone has said it to you, probably more than once. You have heard it from friends and family when you have worked hard for a long time, when you have been under great stress, or when you have been ill: “You need to get some rest.” Humans are divinely designed to need rest. Our bodies and minds are attuned to the rhythms of days and seasons, thriving on a blend of productive work and peaceful rest. But as with so many other matters, we resist what we need. There always seems to be more work than there is time to do it. Something clamors for our attention at every moment. We lie awake thinking about what needs to be done. We worry that we have forgotten something important. Our text today deals with the true rest that God gives his people through Jesus.

Our text comes from the Gospel of Matthew, near the middle of its narration of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Having presented himself in teaching and action as having authority belonging only to God (Matthew 5-9), Jesus encountered both opposition and belief. The religious leaders, for their part, opposed him at nearly every turn. Even so, many chose to follow Jesus, believing God was about to fulfill his ancient promises to restore Israel. Of special focus in the latter group are the 12 disciples, called by Jesus and sent out to represent him in teaching and action (10:1-8). In the discourse that comes just before our text, Jesus invited those who were tired and needy to find rest in him (Matthew 11:28-30). For Israel, the concept of rest was closely associated with two of God’s provisions: the Sabbath Day and the promised land (Exodus 20:8-11;
Deuteronomy 12:10; 25:19; Joshua 1:13-15). In effect, Jesus declared that he fulfilled the promises that God had made through these divine institutions. But that claim was challenged. We see that especially in today’s text, where Jesus dealt with a controversy concerning what he and his disciples were doing on the Sabbath. The Law of Moses described the Sabbath as a day of rest from work. It celebrated God’s resting from his acts of creation and his liberating Israel from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:15). But the law never clearly defined what constituted “work.” For the Pharisees, that was a question to be settled with great care. From sources outside the New Testament, we learn that the Pharisees began as a movement opposed to what they saw as corrupt leadership in the temple. They hoped that God would restore his blessing to Israel if Israel began to observe God’s neglected law. To that end, they sought to “build a fence” around the law. That is, they imagined every circumstance in which the law might come into play and devised strict responses to those situations. The person who followed their teachings would, as a result, not even come close to violating the law. Among these teachings were strict regulations about the Sabbath. Not even small, effortless deeds of “work” were to be done. How would Pharisees, so strict in their interpretation of the Sabbath and so powerful in their influence over others, respond to Jesus’ claims to bring the Sabbath’s promised rest of Matthew 11:28-30?

**Major Theme Analysis**

*Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV*

**Lord of the Sabbath (Matt 12:1-8)**

1 At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat.
2 And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, "Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!"
3 But He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him:
4 how he entered the house of God and ate the showbread which 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 that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless?
6 Yet I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple.
7 But 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 even of the Sabbath."

**Misconception of the Sabbath (1-2)**

*Misunderstandings about hidden things (Luke 9:42-45)*

42 Even while the boy was coming, the demon threw him to the ground in a convulsion. But Jesus rebuked the evil spirit, healed the boy and gave him back to his father. 43 And they were all amazed at the greatness of God. While everyone was marveling at all that Jesus did, he said to his disciples, 44 "Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men." 45 But they did not understand what this meant. It was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask him about it.

*Misunderstandings about the reasons for actions (John 13:6-9)*

6 He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" 7 Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." 8 "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." 9 "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"

*Misunderstandings because God's works are too numerous to understand (Ps 40:5)*

5 Many, O Lord my God, are the wonders you have done. The things you planned for us no one can recount to you; were I to speak and tell of them, they would be too many to declare.
Misunderstandings because of ignorance (Eph 4:18)
18 They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.

Misunderstandings because of not having the indwelling Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:14)
14 The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

Misunderstandings because of not having or relying on the Holy Spirit (Eph 1:17)
17 I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.

Lawfulness of the Sabbath (3-6)

Lawful because obedience is greater than sacrifices and offerings (1 Sam 15:22)
22 But Samuel replied: "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.

Lawful through mercy and acknowledgment of God (Hosea 6:6)
6 For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.

Lawful because love is the greatest commandment (Mark 12:33)
33 To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

Lawful because no one should judge us about Sabbaths (Col 2:16-17)
16 Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. 17 These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.

Lawful because one should be convinced in their own mind about sacred things (Rom 14:5)
5 One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.

Lawful because God’s kingdom is not about special observances but of righteousness (Rom 14:16-17)
16 Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil. 17 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,

Lawful because one should stand firm in the freedom through Jesus (Gal 5:1)
5 It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

Jesus the Lord of the Sabbath (7-8)

Lord of the Sabbath because Jesus is Lord of all things (Mark 2:27-28)
27 Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. 28 So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."

Lord of the Sabbath because Jesus is the Son of God (John 5:17-19)
17 Jesus said to them, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working." 18 For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God. 19 Jesus gave them this answer: "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does."
Lord of the Sabbath because Jesus knows what true keeping of the Sabbath means (Luke 6:9)
9 Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?"

Lord of the Sabbath because man cannot judge Jesus correctly (John 7:23-24)
23 Now if a child can be circumcised on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry with me for healing the whole man on the Sabbath? 24 Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment."

Lord of the Sabbath because Jesus is of God (1 Cor 3:23)
23 and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.

Mercy on the Sabbath (Matt 12:9-14)
9 Now when He had departed from there, He went into their synagogue.
10 And behold, there was a man who had a withered hand. And they asked Him, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"--that they might accuse Him.
11 Then He said to them, "What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out?
12 Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.
13 Then He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he stretched it out, and it was restored as whole as the other.
14 Then the Pharisees went out and plotted against Him, how they might destroy Him.

Mercy for healing (9-10)
Mercy for healing because man needs healing (Matt 14:14)
14 When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.

Mercy for healing because man is weak and hungry (Matt 15:32)
32 Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way."

Mercy for healing because God is always willing to help (Mark 1:41)
41 Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!"

Mercy for healing because men are helpless (Matt 9:36)
16 "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse.

Merciful healing spiritually (Isa 53:5)
5 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

Merciful healing that proved Jesus’ Divinity (Matt 11:2-5)
2 When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples 3 to ask him, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" 4 Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: 5 The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor."
Merciful healing through God’s abiding (John 15:1-4)
1 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. 2 In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. 4 You know the way to the place where I am going."

Mercy for possessions (11-12)

Merciful physical and spiritual resources (Ps 104:14-15)
14 He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate — bringing forth food from the earth: 15 wine that gladdens the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread that sustains his heart.

Merciful resources in creative ways (1 Kings 18:36-38)
36 At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: "O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. 37 Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again." 38 Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.

Merciful resources that overcome inadequacies (Exodus 3:10)
10 So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."

Mercy manifested (13-14)

Mercy manifested because God loves us (Rom 5:8)
8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Mercy manifested because Jesus took the initiative and bore all of our transgressions (Isa 53:5-6)
5 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. 6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Mercy manifested because God is faithful and righteous (Rom 3:3-5)
3 What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness? 4 Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written: "So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge." 5 But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.)

Mercy manifested because of grace (Eph 2:8-9)
8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—9 not by works, so that no one can boast.

Mercy manifested because it is mercy that prompted God's salvation (Rom 9:16)
16 It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy.
Mercy manifested because God started it before the beginning of time (2 Tim 1:9)

who has saved us and called us to a holy life — not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time.

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Concluding Thoughts from Allen Ross

Analysis of the Text

I. In response to legalistic criticism, Jesus declares that He is LORD of the Sabbath (1-8). This is the essence of the first incident in the chapter, and the main point of the whole section.

First, there is the incident (1,2). The act that triggered the whole discussion was a simple one—they were walking through the field and the disciples snacked on some of the heads of grain because they were hungry. On the surface it would appear no more a work than sitting at a table and eating.

But the legalistic Pharisees were bent on discrediting Jesus, and so they accused them of violating the Sabbath day. How was this a violation of the Sabbath Law? If you look at the Ten Commandments, this hardly seems like the labor they were to cease to set the day apart for God. Well, the only way it could be considered a violation is that the Jewish teachers had made lists of things that would be helpful in determining what the works were that should stop. Whenever the text of Scripture seems unclear, it may be for a purpose, that God expects people to act by faith and determine the application. But there are always religious teachers who cannot abide by that, and they make the detailed applications. That would be fine, expect those applications often get elevated to the status of authoritative Scripture. For the Sabbath the religious teachers had come up with a list of things that should not be done on the holy days; they were later recorded in the Mishnah (tractate “Shabbath”) as thirty-eight forbidden works. One of them was reaping the harvest. So apparently taking the heads of the grain off the stocks was considered a work, and so a violation of the Law.

But it was only a violation of the law as they interpreted it—not as God had written it. Jesus’ answer will get to the spirit of the Law, which they had completely missed in their effort to make legal clarifications. To be fair, not all religious leaders in Jesus’ day would have agreed with the interpretation of these Pharisees, but they held the leadership and so spoke for the group. Later, this particular activity was allowed on the Sabbath, but that was much later, and perhaps influenced by Christianity.

So second, we have Jesus’ response (3-8). In this response there are several different arguments being used. The immediate one is the case of David’s eating the bread in the sanctuary. You will have to go back and read the story in all its details. The story is in 1 Samuel 21:1-6; and the references for the bread in the tabernacle are in Exodus 25:30 and Leviticus 24:5-9. The twelve loaves of bread were placed on the table inside the tent of the tabernacle, in the holy place, and were only to be eaten by the sanctified priests. But David and his men, running from Saul, stopped at the sanctuary when it was in Nob and ate the bread, perhaps reasoning that they were on a holy mission, or that it was a matter of life and death.

In referring to this incident Jesus is not trying to argue the case for or against David by saying there were rules but David was permitted to break the rules. His point is that Scripture nowhere condemns David for doing this. If David could break the laws of holiness and eat from the holy food in the sanctuary and Scripture not condemn him, then why should His disciples not be allowed to eat from the grain on a Saturday?

Jesus is not justifying the disciples’ act, for it is not obvious that they broke any law in the Law. Rather, Jesus is dealing with the Pharisees interpretation of the Law in general, showing that He is the more knowledgeable teacher and that people should come to Him.

In the story in Samuel, the regulations of the Law were set aside for David and his companions. Jesus is building the case that He is greater than David, and so regulations (legitimate or not) can be set aside for Him and His companions too.

Jesus’ second argument is from the Law in general (Num. 28:9-10); technically, the priests violated the Law every Sabbath by the work that they did. Of course the priests were not guilty, because the same Law that ruled on the Sabbath made them priests. Since the Law established their duties, the Law established the right of the priests to break the Law and to do some pretty hard work at the altar.
Jesus uses this to argue from the lesser to the greater by analogy: if that was permitted for the priests, how much more for someone greater than the priests, or the temple itself. His analogy works only because He actually is greater than the temple and the priests. And the argument of the gospel is that Jesus and His kingdom are greater than the temple and all the priests and prophets and kings of the past. The point that Jesus makes then, is that in the Old Testament the laws of Sabbath were superceded by the duties of the priests, and so in His day the laws of the Sabbath were superceded by His duties as the Messiah and Redeemer. It shows there is a greater authority present than the ordinary leaders. Because the Son of Man was present, the Law would be superceded. He temple represented the presence of God with His people; but the presence of Jesus meant that God was with them in mortal flesh.

And so Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for missing the point of the Law, which is mercy (see Hos. 6:6). The spirit of the Law was life and peace with God, and at the heart of that was mercy. But they were so worked up over the cultic ritual laws that they missed the spirit of the Law. They really did not understand the Law because they were so busy looking at details, mostly prohibitions in this case. But now as accusers they stood accused. And the accused, the disciples, were declared innocent because the one greater than the Temple was there.

To refer to Himself as the LORD of the Sabbath means that He can handle the Sabbath laws any way that He wants, or can supercede them in the same way that the temple service of priests superceded Sabbath observance. As LORD of the Sabbath Jesus is the Son of Man, the divine Creator, the covenant God. And as LORD of the Sabbath Jesus the Messiah has authority over the temple too.

II. In response to the challenge from the Pharisees, Jesus healed on the Sabbath and demonstrated the importance of mercy (9-13). The second part could be taken as a separate Bible study, but since it overlaps so much the two can be taken together. Luke 6:6-11 indicates it was on another Sabbath; but Matthew has combined the two to make his point.

First, the incident (9, 10). Jesus went into the synagogue and there was a man there with a shriveled hand. Matthew says that the leaders were looking for a way to accuse Jesus, and so they asked Him if it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath. The focus now will be on Him and not the disciples; on something He would actually do, and in some detail on the enemies’ opposition.

Second, we have Jesus’ answer (11-13) The early Jews discussed at great length the question that they asked Jesus now. In general, it was fine to cure on the Sabbath Day if it was not an emergency. Their question was whether it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath; and Jesus argued that it was lawful, not that it was required. According to Jewish teaching while healing was permitted in some cases on the Sabbath, the patient had to be dying, or the situation life threatening. And that does not seem to be the case here, unless one were to argue that it was a matter of life and death, and that by healing him Jesus was rescuing his soul as well. But Jesus makes the analogy that if they had a sheep that fell into a pit they would lift it out on a Sabbath day—how much more a human in trouble. Neither the man with the withered hand, nor the sheep in the pit, were in danger of losing their life. So it was a matter of doing a good deed on the holy day. He knew that in principle they practiced that, but now were simply trying to accuse Him of violating their law.

Then Jesus healed the man. The healing comes after Jesus’ bold words about Himself and about His authority over the Sabbath day. But the miracle authenticates His powerful words, and in Matthew’s presentation of the order it also authenticates His prior claim of being LORD of the Sabbath.

III. The Pharisees plot to kill Jesus (14). Finally, the outcome of the exchange is that the Pharisees wanted to put Jesus to death (14). A lot of scholars do not think the Pharisees would have done this over a different interpretation of legal teaching, and that instead of “kill” it meant banish from the synagogue. But the point, of course, is that it is not merely a dispute over interpretation, but over the identity and authority of who Jesus is. The text is clear that Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, and claimed to have authority, and demonstrated it by His powerful works. And in the process He showed that He cared not for the numerous, detailed rulings that the Jewish teachings put in place— they were an added burden to what the Law had originally had in place. The disagreement over the Sabbath did not cause them to plot His death; it was the occasion for it based on His claims to be the Lord of the Sabbath. They were opposed to Him personally.

(Adapted from URL:https://bible.org/seriespage/17-lord-sabbath-matthew-121-14)
Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

People today often complain that they are tired. Ironically, we enjoy more laborsaving devices than people in the past could even imagine! Yet we seem to find ourselves worn out all the time. Perhaps we are tired because we look for rest in the wrong places. Leisure and recreation have their place. But true rest can be found only from the Christ who made us and redeemed us. He makes us whole. He gives us life. He grants us rest even in the midst of trouble.

Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary

1. Judgmental people are very quick to point out flaws in others (Matt. 12:1-2; cf. 7:3-5)
2. We can rest assured that God knows our hearts (12:3-5)
3. God has the final say regarding who is judged guilty or blameless (vss. 6-8)
4. Some people who do not know God set traps for those who do (vss. 9-10)
5. Keeping the Lord's Day is not an excuse for withholding goodwill or good deeds toward others (vss. 11-12)
6. We should do what we know is right, even when others intend to use our kindness against us (vss. 13-14)