

Lord of the Sabbath

The Grainfields and the Synagogue

Matthew 12:1–14; Mark 2:23–3:6; Luke 6:1–11

Introduction

More than any of the previous lessons, the outcome of this lesson will only be as good as the study which each of you, as individual class members, put into it. It will first be necessary for you to make a composite story of what happened at the grainfields *and* at the synagogue, before we can continue with the interpretive Question-Answer section. (A worksheet is included with this lesson to help you do this.) Until we finish with our composite stories, only the first two pages of this lesson will be available. The reason this is so important is that the two stories are related, and so each story helps you understand the other. It is all the more important, therefore that we first understand the basics: *who, what when, where, why and how*.

As you study and combine the three versions of each story, questions will naturally arise in your mind, as may also some ideas of interpretation. When that happens, write down your thoughts or questions as they come up, but keep on going with the *who, what when, where, why and how*. For, especially in this case, the *basics* actually reveal the interpretation.

Finding answers

This is the first study of the clashes Jesus has with the Jewish authorities on the issue of keeping the Sabbath. It won't be the last. Though the two stories recorded in these texts happened on separate occasions (Luke 6:6), they are grouped together in all three Synoptic accounts. This shows the interrelation of each story to the other and demonstrates that the gospel writers considered the *flow of content* to be more important than the *flow of time* (i.e., chronology).

The first encounter—in the grainfields—has been a source for many discussions and debates and has been the most difficult to interpret. Consequently, there is much confusion and misunderstanding. Did Jesus really think He could excuse Himself and His disciples by pointing to the example of David who sinned, but was apparently “excused” for it? Is the violation of one law acceptable to God if there is another, higher principle at stake? When Jesus said that He was “Lord of the Sabbath,” did He mean that because He was Deity, He could break the Sabbath if He wanted? [You can consult Matt. 5:17–19 for an immediate answer to this!]

In a case like this, when a passage of scripture is difficult to understand or interpret, the sooner you can identify and isolate the “trouble spots,” the better chance you have of getting to the truth. Here are a few of the questions and problems that we will address after having solidified in our minds the *basics of the events* of both stories:

- Although the law forbade working on the Sabbath, it did not “spell out” in so many words as to clearly define “work.” This leads to two possibilities regarding the action of Jesus and His disciples: (1) They were indeed in violation of the Sabbath because what they were doing (harvesting?) constituted work, or (2) they were *not* in violation of the Sabbath, even though they may have been in violation of the *established understanding* of what constituted unlawful “work.” How one views this beginning point will affect, in opposite directions, the outcome of the interpretation. That is, if one starts with the premise that Jesus *was*, in some way, violating the Sabbath, then his interpretation of Jesus’ answers will follow a different direction from one who starts with the premise that Jesus did *not* violate the Sabbath in any way; rather, the fault lies with the Pharisees, who, because of their *misunderstanding* of the Sabbath, were accusing Jesus falsely.
- Did David (and so, also, the priest) really sin in eating the showbread? If one interprets that David indeed sinned because of what the Law said, and because Jesus seemed to *confirm* it, then the resulting conclusion will lead in a direction different from one who interprets that Jesus was using sarcasm, and everyone listening understood that the Law did *not* forbid the priests from sharing the showbread with others as long as certain conditions were met. Of course, we will need to study both the Law and the practice of it.

Depending upon the starting point of each of the two questions above, the following questions will have significantly different answers:

- Is the additional argument offered by Matthew (regarding the priest’s work on the Sabbath day), a different argument than the first, or the same argument confirmed by a second, more pointed example?
- What connection is there, if any, between, “...something greater than the temple is here...”, “...I desire mercy, not sacrifice...” and “...the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath”?
- Does God write laws in such a way that under certain circumstances one law may (or even, “must”) be violated in order to keep another?

This last question is most pertinent to us today, for some use this example to justify forsaking the “exactness” of one command of God in order to fulfill another command of “higher principle.” For a not-so-hypothetical example: in the observance of the Lord’s Supper, if you don’t have unleavened bread and grape juice, you can use whatever you do have and that will be acceptable, because it is more important to “proclaim the death of Christ” using something other than the “proscribed items” than to fail to commemorate it at all. The same argument can be made (and is being made) that observance of the Supper on the first day of the week is not as important as the observance itself, therefore any other day could suffice if a situation might “require” it.

When you finish with your composite story (or during the course of it), you should read 1 Sam. 21–22 to get the background for the first answer Jesus gives.

Questions

The Grainfields

1. *Were Jesus' disciples "stealing" or "trespassing on private property" by eating from this crop? (Compare Deut. 23:24–25 with Luke 6:1.)*

2. *Was the disciples' activity unlawful labor on the Sabbath day?*
Here are some passages to help you with this:

Ex. 16:4–30: The first Sabbath observance (Manna)

Ex. 20:10: the 10 Commandments

Ex. 31:13–18: *What was a stated purpose for the Sabbath in the following verses? What conclusions about "work" can be drawn in comparing the other 6 days to the Sabbath day?*

Ex. 35:3

Num. 15:32–36

Deut. 5:14–15

Jer. 17:19–27

First response: David and the Showbread (1 Sam. 21:1–6)

As indicated in the introductory remarks, you should read at least chapters 20–22 in order to see how the events of 21:1–6 came about and what resulted from them. In fact, the information contained in Ch. 22 will help you in your answer to the questions concerning Mark's assertion that this took place in the time of Abiathar, the high priest.

3. *Did David sin by eating the showbread (bread of the Presence)?*

Here's what you'll need to read before you can answer this question:

Compare the restrictions of eating the offering of ordination (Ex. 29:31–34)...

...and the eating of the "holy gifts" dedicated to God (Ex. 22:10–16)...

...with the eating of the showbread (Lev. 24:5–9).

What do you notice that is different about the restrictions?

4. What did Ahimelech ask of David and his men that shows his concern for keeping the law of the showbread in Lev. 24:5–9?
5. Does the text say anything about David going “into the house of God?”

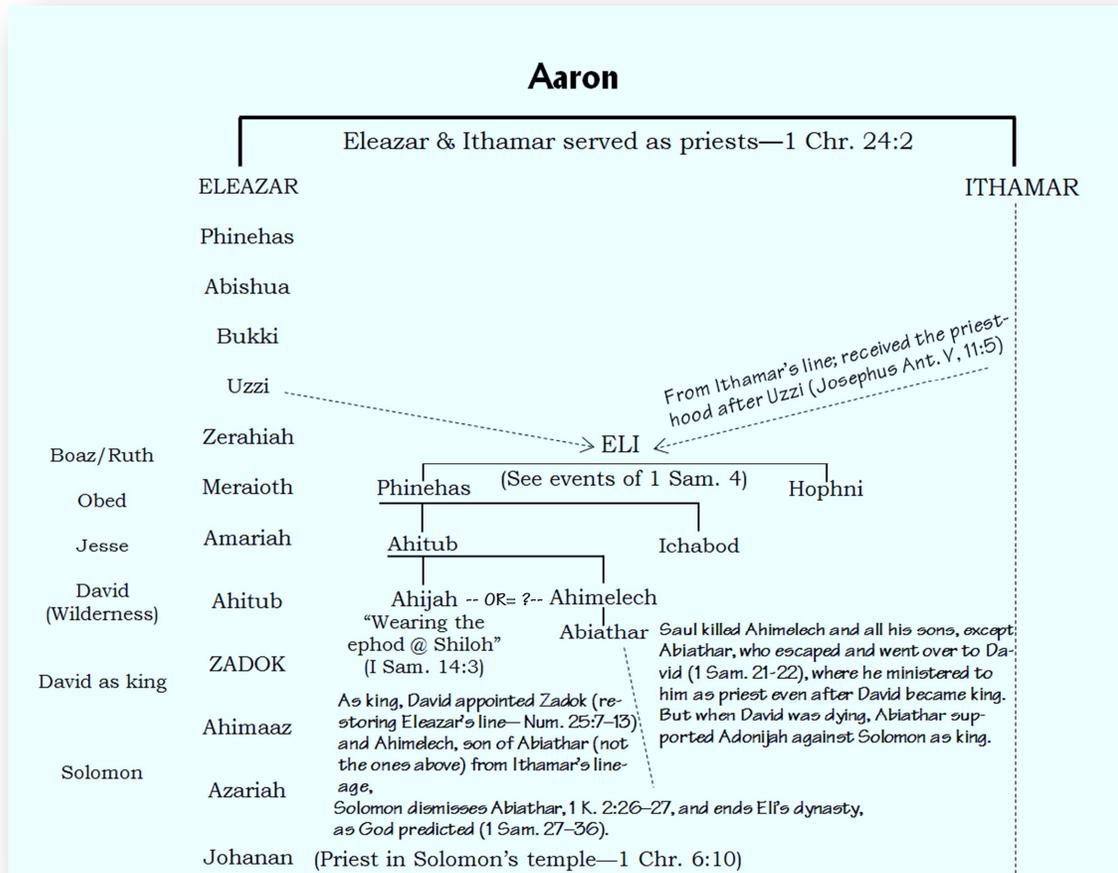
Further notes:

- (1) There is no absolute certainty about the location of the tabernacle OR the ark at this time. The ark had been captured by the Philistines in battle of Ebenezer during the last days of Eli’s life (and the last days of his sons), 1 Sam. 1–4. It had remained with the Philistines for 7 months, then was sent back to Israel (1 Sam. 6–7). It remained at Kir-iath-Jearim at the house of Abinadab “on the hill” for 20 years, but it was there when David, reigning as king, brought it up to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:1–3). It had been returned to Israel by the time of Saul (1 Sam. 14:18), and may indeed have been at Nob with the tabernacle. But it appears, from 1 Sam. 14:3, that the tabernacle might still have been at Shiloh, even though the ark might have been somewhere else.
 - (2) There is no record of rebuke from God, nor a specific consequence, to either Ahimelech or David for what they did at Nob, except perhaps, for David’s misrepresentation of the truth of his mission.
6. Which of these is more plausible:
 - a. The Pharisees knew that David sinned, but because of their veneration of him, they “explained away” his sin by saying (perhaps), that the law of the love of neighbor was a “higher” law, by which they were excused. However, they were unwilling to use that same *interpretive method* with Jesus and His disciples. Therefore, by using this example, Jesus is not refuting their charge, but rather, exposing their hypocrisy.
 - b. The Pharisees understood correctly that David had not sinned, because of the wording of the laws concerning the showbread, and what Ahimelech required of David before giving him some of the bread. But if they had interpreted the “law of the showbread” the way they interpreted the “law of the Sabbath,” then they would have to admit that David sinned. Thus, Jesus is chiding them for their inconsistency.
 - c. ?

In the days of Abiathar “the priest”?

Before we proceed with the story, we must pause to ask: Why does Mark say this took place in the days of Abiathar, the high priest, rather than Ahimelech?

Keil and Delitzch: Mark had, “an error of memory...” {Vol. 2, p. 218, fn}



7. What relationship is Abiathar to Ahimelech? (See chart.)
8. What relationship was Eleazar to Aaron? (See chart.)
9. As Aaron’s ministry was nearing its end, who was (were) said to be “the priest?” (Num. 16:37-39, 18:28, 19:1-4, 20:22-29)
10. As Aaron’s ministry was nearing its end, which would have been an acceptable usage: “in the days of Aaron the priest...”, “Eleazar the priest...”, or either?

11. *Considering Ahimelech's swift death after the event, and Abiathar's long association with David, would it be unreasonable to say these events took place, "in the (days) of Abiathar?"*

Second Response: The priests and the Sabbath (Matt. 12:5–6)

The word used for "temple" in these verses is *hieros* <2413>, which, when translated *temple*, means the physical structure (only). It carries the idea of a "religious or sacred thing" (in 2 Tim. 3:15, it is used as an adjective to describe the scriptures—lit., *sacred writings*). There is another word, *naos* <3485>, sanctuary, which can be used for the physical structure or the sanctuary. You can see the interplay between these two words in John 2 where Jesus drove the merchandisers out of the *hieros*, and then when asked for a sign, said, "Destroy this *naos* and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews thought He was speaking of the physical structure.

In verse 5, the word translated *break, profane, desecrate, etc.* is *bebeloo* <953>, to "cross over the threshold" (Vine's), as where Paul was accused of trying to *bebeloo* the *hieros* by bringing Gentiles into it (Acts 24:6).

12. *What could be implied by the phrase, "...have you not read...?"*
13. *Does the Law does really say the priests desecrate the temple on the Sabbath?*
- a. The real question is, were the priests "working" on the Sabbath, thereby being "excused" because of other laws which required them to "work," OR;
 - b. Does God consider service to Him on the Sabbath as "work," in the way that the Pharisees interpreted the law of the Sabbath?
14. *What evidence is there to show that this event occurred after the meal at Matthew's house? (Hint: Matt. 9:13)*

15. According to Matt. 12:7, Jesus and His disciples were innocent of breaking the Sabbath. How did the failure to understanding Hos. 6 cause the Pharisees to falsely accuse the innocent?

16. *What did Jesus mean, "The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath?" How did He know that?*

17. *What did Jesus mean, "...for the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath?"*

In the synagogue: The man with the withered hand

18. *What question did they ask Jesus? Why did they ask it?*

19. *How did Jesus answer them?*

20. *How does Jesus' answer help in answering question 15?*

21. *How did Jesus demonstrate His understanding of both the Sabbath day and Hosea 6?*

22. *How did the Pharisees react to all this?*

COMPOSITE OF EVENTS IN THE GOSPELS

Lesson 22: Lord of the Sabbath

MATTHEW 12:1-8 // 9-14

Events and notes:

MARK 2:23 - 28 // 3:1-6

Events and notes:

LUKE 6:1-5 // 6-11

Events and notes: