

More On Biblical Exceptions

In Matthew 12:1-8, Jesus revealed the correct principles we should use in interpreting God's broad commands and Biblical exceptions to these: ***“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. But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, ‘Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!’ Then He said to them, ‘Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: 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? Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are blameless? But I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple. But if you had known what this means, I desire mercy and not sacrifice, you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”***

In Deuteronomy 23:25, God commanded that Israelites were allowed to pluck grains with their hands from the fields of others. But in Matthew 12:1-8, the Pharisees claimed it was sinful to do this on the Sabbath.

Shabbath 7:2 of the Jewish Mishnah claims picking or reaping grain was one of thirty-nine types of activities which God forbids on the Sabbath. Hagigah 1:8 of the Mishnah says ***“the rules about the Sabbath...are as mountains hanging by a hair, for (the teaching of) Scripture (thereon) is scanty and the rules many.”*** To some extent, the Mishnah is reflective of Pharisaic attitudes in Christ's time.

The Pharisees were interpreting the Sabbath commands found in Exodus 16:23-29, 20:8-11, 31:12-18, 35:2-3, Leviticus 23:3, Numbers 15:32-36 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15 to mean that even just casually plucking a few heads of grain on the Sabbath to satisfy your hunger was breaking these Sabbath commands. But it is possible to argue the Sabbath commands were directed only towards regular work and not just casual activities. This is assuming Numbers 15:32-36 refers to regular work and not just a casual small incident of collecting sticks.

Two God-approved exceptions to this Mosaic Sabbath commands

In Matthew 12:1-8, Jesus revealed that if the Scriptures contain God-approved specific exceptions to God's broad commands, we can obey the exception without being guilty of breaking the broader command. These exceptions can come in the form of *more specific commands* or they can be *historical Biblical examples*.

Matthew 12:5-8 records Christ taught that God's specific command in Numbers 28:9-10 to the Israelite priests about making various offerings on the Sabbath, actually involved breaking the Sabbath command. But Christ stressed that the priests did not incur guilt for doing this because what they were doing was a God-ordained exception to the broader Sabbath commands. In Numbers 28:9-10, God commanded the priests: ***“And on the Sabbath day two lambs in their first year, without blemish, and two-tenths of an ephah of fine flour as a grain offering, mixed with oil, with its drink offering – this is the burnt offering for every Sabbath, besides the regular burnt offering with its drink offering.”***

Similarly, in John 7:21-24, Jesus told the Jews under the Mosaic Covenant of another God-given exception to the Sabbath commands: “*Jesus answered and said to them, ‘I did one work, and you all marvel. Moses therefore gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. If a man receives circumcision on the Sabbath, so that the law of Moses should not be broken, are you angry with Me because I made a man completely well on the Sabbath? Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment.’*”

In the above passage, Christ showed that when the Israelites under the Mosaic Covenant circumcised their sons on Sabbath days, God did not regard this as a sin against the Sabbath command. Jesus also here told the Jews to learn to judge according to right Biblical interpretation principles.

God approved of one of David’s exceptions

In Matthew 12:3-4, Jesus gave an *historical Biblical example* in which an exception to a broad command of God was permitted by God without the persons involved becoming guilty before Him. Christ here was referring to the exception found in 1 Samuel 21:1-6. In this latter passage and throughout the rest of the Bible, it does not say David and his men sinned by eating the consecrated bread which the High Priest gave them. God permitted this exception because of the great hunger of David and his men. They were hiding from Saul’s soldiers who desired to kill them. God wanted David to live and later be king.

But observe, however, that when David tried to make his own exceptions to God’s commands against adultery and murder and against moving the Ark of the Covenant by anyone other than the Levites, God did not approve of these exceptions. The Bible records David sinned greatly in these matters (2 Samuel 6:1-9, 11:1-12:14 and 1 Chronicles 13:1-12).

Nowhere in the Bible does it justify you or I making our own exceptions to God’s commands. To do so is to become like the lawless hypocritical Pharisees did in Matthew 15:3-9 and Mark 7:9-13.

Jesus’ exceptions were God’s exceptions

In Matthew 12:6 and 8, Jesus referred to Himself as “*One greater than the temple*” and “*Lord even of the Sabbath.*” As King of kings and Supreme Lord, He had the God-given right to make His own exceptions to the Mosaic Covenant Sabbath commands. *Jesus’ exceptions* were *God’s exceptions* because Jesus is God. Because the Pharisees refused to accept Jesus as the Davidic King and Messianic Lord predicted in the Law and the Prophets, they would not accept His God-inspired exception to the Mosaic Covenant Sabbath command.

Numbers 28:9-10 reveals that God regards the commands about temple worship as more important than the Sabbath commands. If Jesus is “*greater than the Temple*”, His exception to the Sabbath command carries as least as much authority as the Numbers 28:9-10 God-approved exception.

The Pharisees focused on obeying only some of God’s commands

In Matthew 12:7, Jesus applied the words of Hosea 6:6 *“I desire mercy and not sacrifice”* to the matter of the disciples casually plucking grain on the Sabbath. In its original context, Hosea 6:6 referred to hypocritical Israelites who gave burnt offerings to God according to His commands, but who lived wicked lives involving sexual immorality, stealing, murder and other sins (Hosea 4:2, 4:13-14, 6:8-10 and Amos 4:4-5).

These hypocrites in Hosea’s time observed the Sabbaths and other God-ordained feasts (Hosea 2:11) and gave tithes (Amos 4:4). But like many or all of the Pharisees, they had a low emphasis on mercy and the love of God (Matthew 23:23 and Luke 11:42). So in Matthew 12:7, Christ accused the Pharisees of focusing on superficially obeying only some of God’s commands while hypocritically disobeying His more important commands.

In Matthew 12:7, Jesus was not saying it does not matter whether we disobey God’s least commandments. In Matthew 5:19 when referring to God’s commandments, Christ said: *“Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”*

In Matthew 23:23, when Christ rebuked the Pharisees for obeying God’s least commandments while disobeying His greater commandments, Christ told them they should obey precisely both His least and greater commands.

Human “need” and humanistic “love” do not create exceptions

In Matthew 12:1-8, Jesus was not teaching the modern humanistic situational ethics philosophy that *human need* itself creates exceptions to God’s commands or if something is a supposed act of “love”, this creates its own exceptions to His commands.

Matthew 12:1-8 is not teaching that just because the disciples had a need of food, this created an automatic God-approved exception to the Sabbath commands. For in Numbers 15:32-36, God commanded that a man be put to death for gathering sticks on the Sabbath. This man *was fulfilling a human need also, but he was still sinning*. In Matthew 12:1-8, the disciples were not innocent because of their hunger, but because the Supreme Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus made a God-approved exception for them like God did for David years before.

Tragically at present, many Christians make their own man-made exceptions to numerous commands of God by arguing that various human “needs” necessitate these exceptions. But God does not approve of any of their man-made exceptions which they use under a cloak of humanistic love – a poor imitation of God’s love. Such people have watered down the moral standards of the Bible. Jesus will hold them accountable for what they have done.

Bible Study Questions

1. In Matthew 12:5-8, what did Jesus reveal about exceptions to God’s Biblical commands?
2. What did Jesus teach us in John 7:21-24?
3. 1 Samuel 21:1-6 records a God-approved exception to a Biblical command. Discuss the command and the exception.

4. What was the practical significance of Jesus' descriptions of Himself in Matthew 12:6 and 12:8 when He called Himself "*One greater than the Temple*" and "*Lord even of the Sabbath*"?
5. Why did Jesus quote Hosea 6:6 to the Pharisees in Matthew 12:7?
6. What Old Testament example reveals that supposed human needs do not create automatic exceptions to God's commands?