

**Key idea:** As Jesus interacts with and displays his understanding of the Sabbath, his is shown to be the Lord of the Sabbath. This is about identity, which is then displayed in his activity in the synagogue.

**FCF:**

**Application:**

## **1. Who is Jesus?**

The identity of Jesus is clear. Matthew has portrayed him as the one promised by God who would roll back sin, and restore God's approval, in this world. Matthew has shown him at work – preaching, teaching, and doing amazing deeds. In this, we have seen his identity as the good Doctor, the one who brings outsiders in and the downtrodden up, the one with authority to set the natural/supernatural/whole person right, the one who is God-in-the-flesh. God willing, you remember all these facets of his identity!

This picture climaxed last week with an intimate revelation of the relationship that Jesus has with his Father – he knows his Father in a way that is unique. He reveals his Father in a way that is unique. Therefore, he offers the only access point to God the Father. He is the only one who can offer 'rest' to humans, in the way that God intended, that we were made for.

This is important to grasp because it leads into the next section, as Matthew reveals another layer in Jesus' identity.

## **2. Rest and 'Sabbath'**

The key connection lies in the idea of 'rest'.

In Genesis 2:1-3, God rested from his creative work on the seventh day. He set it aside as THE day of rest. It has no end in Genesis (no evening and morning), so I think it symbolises the perfection of the created right order and purpose for creation - rest with the Creator, as he designed. Humans are designed to be at rest with God, which is living in line with his desire and creative intention.

God set aside this last day in the creative week as a memorial day, a unique day, to be a day of rest to remember what God did on that day. It is a signpost day which points towards what God designed, and what he intended for humans and creation and himself. It is the Sabbath day.

This 'rest' was lost in the Fall - after all, we rebelled against that design of God, thinking we could be God instead of God ('sin').

God committed to restoring this 'rest' in his statement to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3. He committed to using this family to bring that about.

As such, as Abraham's family receive their job as God's people, in Exodus 19-20, the idea of rest figures prominently. The job of God's people is to represent God to the world. To do this, God gives them the revelation of his character in the Ten Commandments. In obeying these commands, God's people will display the character of God to the world. There, at

commandment four (Exodus 20:8-11), is the remembrance of this rest as part of the revelation. This is a symbol, a road-sign, to who God is, and to what God has designed and committed to restoring.

So, as Jesus issued the invitation to 'rest', all these historical signposts should be popping up in the minds of his listeners and readers. Even more than this, as we move from Jesus' invitation to 'rest' to the Sabbath in Matthew 12:1, we should be expecting some revelation of the identity of Jesus in this interaction.

### **3. A restful scene (vs.1) and an accusation (vs.2)**

The scene that greets us is a rural one – **look at verse 1...**

**READ.**

The disciples – we presume the Twelve – are walking through a grainfield. Hungry, they pick some grain, rub it, and eat the grain. It is the Sabbath.

They are spotted and Jesus – as their teacher – is approached with an accusation – **look at verse 2... READ.**

The accusation is clear: these men are working on the day of rest. They have broken the law.

What they are doing was allowed (Deuteronomy 23:25). What was not was the strict interpretation that had developed around the Sabbath day – that food preparation was not allowed on the Sabbath. In the opinion of the Pharisees – the upholders of God's Law – the disciples were harvesting, threshing, and eating. Amidst

all the extra regulations that God's people had developed around God's law so that no-one could get close to disobeying God's law, the disciples were breaking God's law – or at least the surrounding regulations.

It was a serious accusation to bring against a teacher and his followers. Moreover, in his first great teaching block – the Sermon on the Mount – Jesus had publicly stated that he was for the fulfilment of the Law, that not one part of the Law could be removed (Matt.5:17-20).

#### **4. An answer (vs.3-8)**

Jesus' response is to turn these men back to the very thing they held dear – the Scriptures, the Old Testament. Did you notice his method? In verse 3, 'haven't you read?' In verse 5, 'haven't you read?' In verse 7, 'if you had known...' In each case he quotes from the Scriptures these men are experts in upholding – from the history, from the Law, from the prophets.

In the first example, he gives an example we have just read. The greatest king of God's people, David, on the run, in desperate and hungry need, on the Sabbath, enters the tabernacle precinct and takes to eat the bread that was reserved for the LORD! And there is no condemnation anywhere in Scripture about this!

In the second example – as if human need ('hunger') was not enough, Jesus raises the very fact that the priests work each Sabbath in the Temple – they offer sacrifices, light fires, and serve God's people. And there is no condemnation anywhere in Scripture about this!

In both those situations, the greater need exposes the reality of the Sabbath rest – the rest day is about pointing towards the restoration of rest by God. In the case of David, his restoration was shown as he ate; in the case of the priests, their work enables the people of God to join together in sacrifice and remembering their place as God's people.

It is a classic method of argument which establishes the heart of the Sabbath – it is about rest not the rule-keeping box-ticking behaviour displayed by the Pharisees. Jesus argues from these small examples, so that when the big reality is stated, his listeners will understand. He argues from the smaller to the biggest. If those examples stand, then... **look at verse 6 – READ.**

David was great, but his great-descendant, the Son of David, is greater. The priests were great, but the good Doctor who has come to deal with sin is greater. The temple was a great symbol of the presence of God with his people, but God-in-the-flesh is now standing in their midst.

Do you see the logic?

If David was not condemned, if the priests were not condemned, for the way in which they displayed the heart of the rest day, then why would you condemn Jesus, who is everything they pointed towards?

Jesus exposes their shallowness in verse 7, by quoting the prophet Hosea to them – **look at verse 7 – READ.**

If these men had truly known their Scriptures – and God – then they would have known that God himself is about mercy and, through his mercy, knowing him as he is. This is rest! This is what God desires! This is what was expressed in the situation of David and the behaviour of the priests! This is what was NOT displayed by the Pharisees as they condemned the disciples!

The conclusion, then, is then an issue of identity – **look at verse 8... READ.**

These men are worried about rules and box-ticking and the appearance of what matters. And, in doing so, they failed to recognise the truth of the Sabbath rest day, and the reality of that symbol staring them in the face, talking and walking amongst them. In fact, they revealed their knowledge by displaying their ignorance: they had no understanding of God and his plans.

Jesus is everything that the Sabbath rest day was pointing towards. He is the one God promised, from Abraham's family, who would and could deal with the rest-thief: sin. So, Jesus is the one who restore humans to what they are meant to be: at rest with God. And these men have missed that truth about Jesus, and so missed the whole purpose of Sabbath and rest and God's commitment.

It is a sobering confrontation on one level. I mean, what a warning about knowing your Bible and missing God. Now, I am not saying that blissful ignorance of the word of God is a better way to knowing God! I am saying that these men are an example of

knowing their Bibles back-to-front but missing it as the revelation of God and his plans.

It is a wonderful interaction, an immense comfort. I mean, it reaffirms that Jesus IS the one we must deal with if we want to have what God made us for – true rest, which is restoration.

### **5. A display of this identity... (vs.9-14)**

It is worth pointing out that as Jesus states his identity, he doesn't do it in a bragging manner – he remains humble. Moreover, it does not delete the Sabbath from the record or from observance – Jesus immediately is shown observing the Sabbath in the way it should be observed – **look at verses 9-10... READ.**

A man is obviously damaged. His hand is shrivelled. He is like the outsiders in Matthew 8 – physically displaying the brokenness of this broken world in a particularly sharp way.

The religious leaders – perhaps even the same Pharisees as Jesus has interacted with – bring the man to Jesus. Their reaction to his identity is not about revelation but about revenge – they are picking a fight! They ask a question – and we are meant to see in the repetition of 'lawful' (from verse 2) an explicit opposition to what Jesus has revealed.

The question is revealing in itself. Their concern is correct behaviour on the Sabbath. They are still worried about box-ticking rule-keeping.

Jesus answers them from experience – **look at verses 11-12... READ.**

The scenario Jesus laid before them is clear. A man has a sheep. The sheep falls in a hole on the Sabbath. What would you do? You would get it out!

Here is an image-bearer of God. Here is someone for whom rest is not real because of the effects of sin in this world. Here is someone who is in desperate need of rest – the rest that is restoration from the damage of this broken world. Here is someone who is vastly more valuable than a woolly beast. What would you do?

The comparison, and contrast, is so stark. These men are so stuck on the rule-keeping and box-ticking that they have lost sight of the purpose of Sabbath rest: it is to point towards the rest that is restoration with God, by sin being dealt with. It is a rest-day that reeks of mercy and not rules. It is a rest-day that displays knowledge of God as he is, and not a series of 'no's' about what you can do. It is a rest-day that is found only in Jesus.

So, the Sabbath day is about good – the good of restoration with God. Jesus acts to restore this man – **look at verse 13... READ.**

You cannot miss the obvious contrast with the religious law-keepers in **verse 14... READ.**

They are so keen to keep the law that they miss the sin of plotting to murder the One who is THE endpoint and purpose of the law,

who keeps the law perfectly himself by revealing God as the Father!

The identity of Jesus is revealed in his activity – he is the One to whom the Sabbath rest-day pointed – the One who brings rest, offers rest, by dealing with our sin. And this is what Sabbath rest looks like: the doing good of restoration!

## 6. Who is Jesus?

In many ways, Matthew places these events here in a way that shore up the identity of Jesus already established. These interactions are about Jesus' identity: he IS the Sabbath rest we need, the restoration to God the Father that sin has damaged. And he shows this, consistently and constantly.

The **purpose** of the Sabbath, then, is to point to Jesus as the One who brings the rest symbolised by that one day off per week. It is only in Jesus that the rest we were made for – in right relationship with God, as humans living in this world under the rule of God's word – can be restored to us. It is only in Jesus that sin is dealt with, as we are coming to know!

The **place** of the Sabbath remains – there is still a place for the Sabbath in the lives of God's people. It is not a requirement for getting into God's people, for being set right with God as our Father – but it does display where such restoration is achieved for us: Jesus! Moreover, as we take this one day off each week to rest, with God's people, in enjoyment of life as it is designed to be, we are also pointing forward to the time when this will be enjoyed completely.

The **practice** of the Sabbath, then, is something we need to think about. It is one day each week where we display the identity of Jesus most fully in our practice – we do something in our weekly schedule that displays the identity of Jesus: he is the rest-giver, the restorer, the one who deals with sin so that we can be returned to the presence of God.

This will mean a number of things across people's lives. But it must at least consider the importance of the gathering of God's people, the rest from our weekly occupation as a statement of dependence upon God as our Father, and the enjoyment and pursuit of 'doing good' to show the restoration that comes from Jesus alone.

Now, that would be a great thing to chat about over lunch today, wouldn't it?