

“IT IS LICIT TO DO GOOD”: MATTHEW 12 AND THE MISSION WORK ON THE SABBATH

Vanderlei Dorneles¹

Abstract: In Matthew 12:1-8, the Pharisees attack Jesus and his disciples for picking heads of grain on the Sabbath. Jesus defends the disciples by appealing to the example of David and his men, who ate the sacred bread permitted only to priests, and to the priests who guiltlessly worked on the Sabbaths. Generally, interpreters consider that Jesus is rescuing the Sabbath from the heavy burden of Jewish tradition, giving back its true meaning and purpose. The context would be that of Jewish casuistry, and Jesus would be saying that his yoke is light compared to the Sabbath rules maintained by the Pharisees. In this perspective, some say human needs precede the law. However, instead of that, in Matthew, Jesus says that “Man shall not live by bread alone,” but by “every word” of God (Matt 3:4). For him, human needs do not precede God’s word. The Torah forbade the Israelites even from going to the field to gather food on the Sabbath (Exod 16:27-30). Furthermore, David and his men, as well as Jesus’ disciples, were hungry, but the priests were not. What the three groups have in common is not the hunger, but that they are all engaged in a work commissioned by God which seems to be the only activity that precedes Sabbath law. This article employs an exegetical methodology and compares the three groups on the aspect of their work in relation to divine laws, and not by physical needs. The premise is that Matthew 12 does not deal with the correct way to keep the Sabbath, but rather with what is lawful on the Sabbaths for those commissioned by God.

Keywords: sabbath; commission; workers; gospel.

“É LÍCITO FAZER O BEM”: MATEUS 12 E AS ATIVIDADES DE MISSÃO NO SÁBADO

Resumo: Em Mateus 12:1-8, os fariseus criticam Jesus e seus discípulos por colherem espigas no sábado. Jesus defende os discípulos recorrendo ao exemplo de Davi e seus homens, que comeram os pães sagrados reservados apenas aos sacerdotes, e ao exemplo

¹ The author holds a doctorate in Religious Studies from the Methodist University of São Paulo, with a dissertation on Revelation 13, and in Sciences of Communication (University of São Paulo). He also had a post-doctoral experience at Andrews University where wrote a book on Armageddon. He is professor of theology at Adventist University in São Paulo (UNASP). Email: vanderlei.dorneles@unaspedu.br



dos sacerdotes que, sem culpa, trabalhavam aos sábados. De modo geral, os intérpretes consideram que Jesus resgata o sábado do pesado fardo da tradição judaica, restituindo-lhe seu verdadeiro significado e propósito. O contexto seria o da casuística judaica, e Jesus estaria afirmando que o seu jugo é leve em comparação com as pesadas regras sabáticas mantidas pelos fariseus. Nessa perspectiva, alguns argumentam que as necessidades humanas precedem a lei. No entanto, em Mateus, Jesus afirma que “nem só de pão viverá o homem”, mas de “toda palavra” de Deus (Mt 3:4). Para ele, as necessidades humanas não precedem a palavra de Deus. A Torá proibia os israelitas até mesmo de ir ao campo para colher alimentos no sábado (Êx 16:27-30). Além disso, Davi e seus homens, assim como os discípulos de Jesus, estavam famintos, ao passo que os sacerdotes não estavam. O que os três grupos têm em comum não é a fome, mas o fato de estarem todos engajados em uma obra ordenada por Deus — a qual parece ser a única atividade que precede a lei do sábado. Este artigo utiliza uma metodologia exegética e compara os três grupos sob o aspecto de seu trabalho em relação às leis divinas, e não com base em necessidades físicas. A premissa é que Mateus 12 não trata da maneira correta de guardar o sábado, mas sim do que é lícito fazer aos sábados por aqueles que foram comissionados por Deus.

Palavras-chave: sábado; comissão; obreiros; evangelho.

“ES LÍCITO HACER EL BIEN”: MATEO 12 Y LAS ACTIVIDADES DE MISIÓN EN EL SÁBADO

Resumen: En Mateo 12:1-8, los fariseos atacan a Jesús y a sus discípulos por arrancar espigas en el día de reposo. Jesús defiende a los discípulos apelando al ejemplo de David y sus hombres, quienes comieron el pan sagrado reservado únicamente para los sacerdotes, y al de los sacerdotes que trabajaban en los días de reposo sin incurrir en culpa. Por lo general, los intérpretes consideran que Jesús libera al día de reposo de la pesada carga de la tradición judía, devolviéndole su verdadero significado y propósito. El contexto sería el de la casuística judía, y Jesús estaría afirmando que su yugo es ligero en comparación con las pesadas normas sobre el día de reposo que sostenían los fariseos. Desde esta perspectiva, algunos sostienen que las necesidades humanas prevalecen sobre la ley. Sin embargo, en el Evangelio de Mateo, Jesús afirma que «no solo de pan vivirá el hombre», sino de «toda palabra» de Dios (Mt 3:4). Para él, las necesidades humanas no tienen prioridad sobre la palabra de Dios. La Torá prohibía a los israelitas incluso salir al campo a recoger alimentos en el día de reposo (Êx 16:27-30). Además, mientras que David y sus hombres — así como los discípulos de Jesús — sentían hambre, los sacerdotes no. Lo que estos tres grupos tienen en común no es el hambre, sino el hecho de que todos ellos realizan una labor encomendada por Dios; esta parece ser la única actividad que prevalece sobre la ley del día de reposo. Este artículo emplea una metodología exegética y compara a los tres grupos centrándose en la naturaleza de su trabajo en relación con las leyes divinas, y no en sus necesidades físicas. La premisa es que Mateo 12 no aborda la manera correcta de guardar el día de reposo, sino más bien lo que es lícito hacer en dicho día para aquellos que han sido comisionados por Dios.

Palabras clave: sabbat; comisión; obreros; evangelio.



INTRODUCTION

Matthew 12:1 reports that the disciples were “hungry” on a Sabbath and “began to pluck heads of grain and to eat”. The event probably is the most debated about Sabbath keeping involving Jesus and the Pharisees (see also Mark 2:23-27; Luke 13:14; John 5:18; 9:14; 9:16). Indeed, by plucking the ears and rubbing out the grain the disciples were doing a real work to satisfy their necessity of food. The Pharisees’ accusation is that they were doing “what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath” (v. 2), independently of whose field it was (Specht, 1982, p. 95-97).² However, Jesus considers them “guiltless” (v. 8). He alludes to David and his men who ate the shewbread reserved only for the priests, and to the priests at the temple who worked normally on the Sabbaths, and both were not accused of transgression.

Usually, the understanding of the passage is from the background of the tradition of the rabbis, by considering that the “yoke” of Jesus is “easier” (Matt 11:30) than theirs especially on the Sabbath keeping. David Turner and Darrell L. Bock (2005, p. 169) say that “Jesus promised his disciples rest, an easy yoke, and a light burden (11:29-30),” and his actions on that Sabbath (Matt 12:1-8) is “a clear example of how his promise is fulfilled”. Willy Rordorf (1968, p. 63) goes beyond by stating that “it is a misunderstanding to hold that Jesus did not attack the Sabbath commandment itself, but only the casuistical refinements of the Pharisees”. In his view, “the Sabbath had failed in its divine purposes, and consequently, rebellion against it or abandonment was no longer a sin. The Sabbath commandment enslaved human beings”. In practical terms, most Christians consider Sabbath commandment from this viewpoint.

By taking Jesus’ yoke as easier than the Pharisees’, the hunger is considered as the key-point on discussion. The conclusion would be that human needs precede Sabbath law. In this case, Jesus would indicate that to work to attend human physical needs is licit on the Sabbaths. However, this conclusion does not fit the whole passage. In his argumentation, Jesus mentions the priests who worked on the Sabbaths but not because were hungry. The priests did not have any physical necessity like the disciples nor David and his men. The interpreter must ask here about what is common to the three groups involved in the narrative to fit Jesus’ argumentation.

² The law permitted to pluck heads of grain from someone’s field, see Deuteronomy 23:25.



The meaning of Jesus’ saying about what is licit to do on the Sabbaths depends on the wide context of Jesus’ mission in Matthew. This gospel begins with the word of God placed above the human needs. After 40 days fasting in the wilderness, Jesus was too hungry, but said to Satan, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matt 4:4). Thus, he places the word of God above human needs. In addition, Jesus and the disciples were in mission to preach the gospel and heal the people. When he sent them, he said that they should not take “gold, silver”, neither “bread” (see Matt 10:1, 8-9; Mark 6:8; Luke 9:3), because the worker is worthy of his “food” (Matt 10:10). This immediate context seems to be crucial in understanding the issue in Matthew 12.

This article considers the passage in its wide context to discuss the meaning of Jesus’ saying about the Sabbath and the sanctuary. The methodology is exegetical. First, it reviews the general understanding of the passage to challenge the hypothesis of the rabbinical background behind Matthew 12. Then, from the literary context on Sabbath discussion in Matthew 12, it considers the key-point of the event not as the human needs in terms of food, but a work commissioned by God, which is common to the three groups involved: David and his men, the priests at the sanctuary, and the disciples in mission. The thesis in discussion is that Jesus is not dealing with rabbis’ tradition about Sabbath keeping, neither of plucking to satisfy the hunger on the Sabbath by people in general, but about the needs of those engaged in a work divine-commissioned, in attention to Matthew 10:10 where the disciples are sent without any food to the mission field.

RABBINICAL TRADITION AND PRECEDENCE OF HUNGER OVER THE LAW

Most commentators assume that Matthew 12 is written from the background of rabbinical tradition on the Sabbath keeping. From this view, the “yoke” of Jesus is “easier” than the Pharisees’ because the rabbis placed the precepts on the Sabbath above human needs. From this background, the people in Jesus’ time were under a very heavy burden with “so many rabbinical requirements than an entire lifetime was ordinarily too short to learn them all” (Nichol, 1980, p. 389).

In this line of thought, Ekkehardt Mueller argues that the issue in Matthew 12 is the real meaning of the Sabbath as a divine blessing in contrast to the tradition of the rabbis which had turned it in a heavy yoke. According to him, “Jesus brings true rest to



those being burdened by the legalistic understanding of the Sabbath” (Mueller, 2023a, p. 43). He defends that in this narrative “the charge is based not on the written Law,” but “on scribal hermeneutics about the Sabbath” (Mueller, 2023a, p. 47). The base of Pharisees’ criticism on the disciples’ attitude was their own interpretation on Sabbath observance, “a rabbinical rule,” “a human addition to the Law,” and therefore a “tradition” (Mueller, 2023a, p. 48).

In Mueller’s approach, Jesus mentions David under a negative view in the sense that he really transgressed divine law, by lying and eating the shewbread. Thus, “the connection between the action of the disciples and David’s ploy are hunger (Matt 12:1, 3) and eating (Matt 12:1, 3 [twice])”. However, he argues, despite these similarities, “the situations are quite different”. In David’s case “the problem was the transgression of a divine law,” while in the disciples’ case “the problem was the violation of a rabbinic tradition” (Mueller, 2023a, p. 49).³ Thus, he concludes that “the conflict between the Pharisees and Jesus is not directly about the fourth commandment of the Decalogue but about rabbinic interpretations and traditions”. And in this respect, according to him, “Matthew 12 does not differ much from Matthew 15 where the tradition of washing hands is confronted by Jesus with the fifth commandment” (Mueller, 2023a, p. 85).⁴

Clinton Wahlen (2020) understands no differently. According to him, the issue in Matthew 12:1-14 is around the way the Pharisees observed the Sabbath from the tradition of the rabbis. He says that the Pharisees were “especially concerned with the correct observance of the law,” as one learns from rabbinic traditions. However, Wahlen (2020) argues that, by mentioning the hunger of David and his men, Jesus considers that “eating to sustain life does not infringe on the holiness of the Sabbath, just as the eating of shewbread by David and his men did not compromise the temple’s holiness (see 1 Sam 21:1-6),” differently on Mueller’s view. In his argumentation, Wahlen (2020) defends that, “although harvesting was forbidden on the Sabbath” (see Exod 34:21; 31:15; 35:2), Jesus considers disciples’ action as “not harvesting,” not a “work” as such, and therefore was not a Sabbath violation. Thus, the disciples were “guiltless” (Matt 12:7) and “the Pharisees

³ In David’s event, Michael Green (2001, p. 146) understands that the Scripture is pointing that “human need took precedence over ritual custom”. Leon Morris (1992, p. 302) also punctuates that David’s attitude shows that “the need to satisfy hunger overrode a liturgical provision”. According to him, Jesus’ argument is that “if these men’s hunger set aside a divine regulation without blame, how much more should the hunger of Jesus’ disciples set aside a rabbinical rule!”

⁴ See Mueller (2023b, p. 102).



should have known that”. In addition, Wahlen points out that the “physical sustenance” is necessary and it is not in “conflict with the priestly obligation to preserve the holiness of the temple, as Ahimelech, the high priest, recognized” in David’s case.

Similarly, William Hendriksen (2007, p. 504) explains that in Jewish literature a “yoke” is “the sum-total of obligations which, according to the teaching of the rabbis, a person must take upon himself”. In addition, those obligations were a condition to salvation, a complete “legalism”. Thus, he understands that Pharisees’ accusation is against breaking the rules of the rabbis who “had drawn up a catalogue of thirty-nine principal works, subdivided into many minor categories, so that, for example, plucking heads of grain was considered reaping, and rubbing out the grain *threshing*” (Hendriksen, 2007, p. 511, emphasis added).⁵ In this view, by explaining God’s commandment to answer the Pharisees, Jesus reveals the “true meaning” of the Sabbath (Matt 12:1-8). Thus, Hendriksen proposes that, from Matthew 12, “necessity knows no law (v. 3, 4)” and “every rule has its exception (v. 5, 6)” (Hendriksen, 2007, p. 513).

Donald A. Carson (1984, p. 279-280) sees the event in Matthew 12:1-8 from a similar perspective. He says that the Pharisees’ accusation was that the disciples were breaking the law “reaping” which was “one of the thirty-nine kinds of work forbidden on the Sabbath.” Accordingly, Stuart K. Weber (2000, p. 168) criticizes the “enormous load of religious expectations and legalities” that were placed upon the people by “their false religious leaders”. He adds that the Pharisees see Jesus’ disciples “rubbing the heads of grain between their palms to separate the kernels from the hulls” which was a very work “according to their rules” (Weber, 2000, p. 170). In this context, Weber says that “Jesus regularly highlighted a pharisaical neglect of Scripture as opposed to their conformity to tradition” (Weber, 2000, p. 171). Turner and Bock (2005, p. 168) also understand that the motivation of the Pharisees to object the attitude of the disciples was because it was against “their oral traditions”. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison (1991, p. 310) see no

⁵ The 39 Prohibited Categories of Activities by rabbis were: (a) Agriculture and bread preparation: sowing; plowing; reaping or harvesting; binding sheaves or gathering; threshing; winnowing; selecting; grinding; sifting; kneading; baking or cooking; (b) Textile production: shearing wool; washing or cleansing wool; beating or combing wool; dyeing; spinning; warping or stretching threads; making two loops; weaving two threads; separating threads; tying; untying; sewing two stitches; tearing for sewing; (c) Leather preparation and writing: trapping; slaughtering; flaying or skinning; salting or curing hide; scraping or smoothing hide; cutting to shape; writing two letters; erasing for writing; (d) Construction and fire: building; demolishing; extinguishing a fire; kindling a fire; striking the final hammer blow or finishing; (e) Transportation: carrying from one domain to another (see Bin-Nun, 2013).



differently, “Jesus was simply reminding the Pharisees that a higher good (human need) takes precedence over a lesser good (ceremonial law)”. Still in this line, Yong-Eui Yang (1997, p. 145) punctuates that, in the synoptics Gospels, the Sabbath controversies are preceded by Jesus’ saying about “new wineskins” (see Matt 9:16-17; Mark 2:21-22; Luke 5:36-39). According to him, this saying signifies that by Jesus’ presence “there are now new forms as well as new content” on the Sabbath.

Accordingly, Walter F. Specht (1982, p. 94) recalls that the four Gospels bear witness to the fact that the Sabbath was “one of the main areas of conflict between Jesus and the Jews”. He also considers the event on the Sabbath in Matthew 12 from the viewpoint of the rabbinical tradition, and Jesus would be regulating the proper way to keep the Sabbath. According to him, the Pharisees insist that the Sabbath was to be kept according to the “oral rules that the rabbis had developed down through the years” which consider that “reaping, threshing, winnowing, and grinding” were transgression of the Sabbath (Specht, 1982, p. 95). However, Jesus refused to abide the “man-made rabbinical rules for Sabbath observance,” because they had turned the Sabbath into a “burden instead of a blessing”. In his view, the event in Matthew 12:1-8 is part of Jesus endeavor “to free the Sabbath from burdensome restrictions and make it a day of spiritual freedom and joy” (Specht, 1982, p. 94). Specht finally states, from Matthew 12:9-14, that showing mercy is “far more important than a legalistic obedience to the law” (Specht, 1982, p. 96). Thus, he considers the action of plucking the heads of grain and heal a man as works of the same nature, a manifestation of mercy.

From this predominant viewpoint, the call in Matthew 11:28-30 for all those “weary and burdened” prepares the way to the events in Matthew 12. The scribes and Pharisees had placed upon the people shoulders a “heavy load of rules and regulations”. Thus, in Matthew 11, Jesus calls “anyone who, for whatever reason, tries wholly or partly to achieve salvation by means of own exertion” (Hendriksen, 2007, p. 503). As part of his easy yoke, Jesus considers the disciples guiltless for plucking the heads of grain to satisfy their physical necessity on the Sabbath.

Therefore, the predominant view is that Matt 12:1-8 deals with the debate between Jesus and the Pharisees in relation to rabbinic requirements on Sabbath keeping. In this perspective, the human needs should precede Sabbath law. However, this view makes no sense since Jesus retorts the Pharisees by mentioning the priest’s service at the temple on



the Sabbath. There is no human need or hunger in priests' case neither a connection to rabbinical rules to justify Jesus' argumentation. Why would Jesus mention the priests alongside of David and his men and the disciples? In addition, the provision of the civil law to gather fruit in the neighbor's field, in Deut 23:25, is not concerned to the Sabbath.

Moreover, by reading Matthew 12:1-8 from rabbinic background to conclude that to pluck the heads of grain on the Sabbath to satisfy the hunger is not against divine law does place Jesus in very contradiction to the Torah. In the narrative of Exodus 16, God said to Moses that he would send “bread from heaven” during the whole week, unless on the Sabbath, and would test “whether they will walk in my law [Hebrew torah] or not” (Exod 16:4).⁶ But some of the people did not attend God's word and went out to the field to seek for the manna on the Sabbath (Exod 16:27). They did not find anything on the field, and therefore they did not gather any food on the Sabbath. However, this action was considered by God as a very transgression of the law: “How long do you refuse to keep my commandments [*mitsvotay*] and my laws [*torotay*]” (Exod 16:28).

Although his argumentation about the rabbinical tradition, Mueller (2023a, p. 54) says that “one of the problems with the argument of human need superseding divine law is that it may lead to situationist ethics and can be used under almost all circumstances, not only in life-threatening situations but also in cases of inconvenience”. Also in this context of Matthew 12, Robert K. McIver (1995, p. 237) states that “any human need justifies the breach of divine laws”.⁷ Indeed, if human needs precede the law, there is no sense in that Jesus rejects to transform stones in bread since he was fasting for 40 days by saying that “man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matt 4:1-4).

Thus, a more comprehensive reading on Matthew 12:1-8 seems necessary. This reading needs to take the wide context of Jesus' mission in Matthew and the instructions given by Jesus to his disciples.

⁶ One observes that the phrasing of Exodus 16:26 is very similar to the fourth commandment's: “Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will be none” (see Exod 20:9-10).

⁷ Moreover, Morris (1992, p. 299) also says that the Jews took Sabbath observance very seriously. “When the enemy attacked on the Sabbath in the days of the Maccabees, they let themselves be slaughtered, men, women, and children, rather than break the Sabbath by defending themselves (1 Macc 2:31-38)”. He adds that they were “ready to suffer rather than break the Sabbath”. Mueller (2023a, p. 47-48) adds that, “in the first century AD two major groups had their traditions about Sabbath keeping: the Dead Sea people and the rabbis. The Dead Sea community was much stricter than the rabbis and, thereby, than the Pharisees. For example, the saving of a human life on Sabbath was not allowed by the first group, while the rabbis permitted it.



THE DISCIPLES' ACTIVITY DISCUSSED IN MATTHEW 12

The question whether the disciples were breaking the rabbinic regulations or the very Law of God seems to be central in this discussion. If Jesus is debating with the Pharisees on the tradition of the rabbis, why he does not mention it as he does in Matthew 15? Indeed, if he is debating on the application of the Sabbath law, all the narrative needs more exegetical and theological discussion.

In fact, the text does not say that the Pharisees accuse the disciples of breaking the tradition as they do on the handwashing and ritual purity (see Matt 15:1-20; Mark 7:1-23), but of transgressing the Law of God. They do say that the disciples' activity was “unlawful” (*ouk éxestin*, “not permitted;” see Matt 12:2; Mark 2:24).⁸ By his turn, Jesus does not say that the disciples were not transgressing the law. Moreover, one observes that the Greek verb *tíllō* (Matt 12:1, “to pluck”) indicates in LXX an activity of physical strength (see Ezra 9:3, “to pluck off”; Dan 7:4). They were engaged in a real work.

F. P. Viljoen (2014, p. 227) highlights that, in their accusation, the Pharisees “explicitly refer to the law: ‘your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath’ (Matt 12:2)”. By his turn, Jesus does not dispute what the disciples are doing, but challenges the Pharisees on the evaluation of their inquiry from biblical perspective. Then, he mentions two cases of clear transgression, but without guilt (Matt 12:5).

To justify what is happening, Jesus mentions that the priests indeed “profane” (*bebēlousin*) the Sabbath and are “blameless” (v. 5; see Num 28:9-10; John 7:22, 23).⁹

⁸ Matthews uses this expression four times in chapter 12 (v. 2, 4, 10, 12) and others five in the book (14:4; 19:3; 20:15; 22:17; 27:6), indicating with the negative *ouk* an action that is prevented by a court or by law; without the negative indicating something that is permitted, it is lawful, it may be done. See Friberg; Friberg; Miller (2005), Gingrich (1983).

⁹ Mueller (2023a, p. 61-62) argues that the verb “to profane” (*bebēlō*) used by Jesus is a “strong expression” to describe several types of transgression and profanation. In the Old Testament, it points to “(1) profanation of God’s name/God through child sacrifices, carelessness with temple sacrifices, false swearing, sexual sins, injustice, etc. (Lev 18:21; 19:12; 21:6; 22:2, 32; Isa 48:11; Jer 41:16; Ezek 13:19; 20:9; 20:14, 22, 39, 44; 36:20-23; 39:7; 43:7-8; Amos 2:7; Mal 1:12); (2) profanation of the sanctuary through sins by the priesthood, child sacrifices, various abominations, and desolation, among others (Lev 21:12, 23; Ps 73:7 [LXX]; 88:40 [LXX]; Ezek 23:38-39; 24:21; 25:3; 44:7; Zeph 3:4; Mal 2:11); (3) profanation of sacrifices (Lev 22:15; Num 18:32); (4) profanation of the covenant (Pss 54:21 [LXX]; 88:32 [LXX]; Mal 2:10); (5) profanation of God’s statues/commandments (Ps 88:32 [LXX]); (6) profanation of God’s land (Jer 16:18); (7) profanation of God’s ways (Ps 9:26 [LXX]; see also verses 25, 27-28); (8) profanation of a person (Lev 19:29; 21:7, 9, 14-15; 22:8; Num 25:1 [LXX]); (9) profanation of one’s word (breaking an oath (Num 30:2); and (10) God profanes kingdoms and rulers (Lam 2:2). Besides, other biblical passages address “the profanation or non-profanation of the Sabbath: (1) Profanation happens if the Sabbath is not kept, and work is done (Exod 31:14). (2) Nehemiah mentions agricultural work as well as selling and buying produce on the Sabbath as profanation of the Sabbath (Neh 13:15-18). (3) Ezekiel speaks about Sabbath profanation in



Jesus’ assertion that the priests “profane” the holy day is because they had more work to do on the Sabbath, not less. In fact, they needed to circumcise babies on the eighth day independently on the day of the week it fell (Lev 12:3; see John 7:22). “Thus, the priests treat the Sabbath in the same way as other days for the purpose of circumcision, and it is treated as even more important for the purpose of worship and offering sacrifice” (Wahlen, 2020). Thus, Jesus’ answer does not focus on the tradition, but the Scriptures. By comparing the disciples in plucking the heads of grain with the priests who work on the Sabbath, Jesus assumes that both groups break the law, but are guiltless (Matt 12:5, 7).

About the tradition of the rabbis, in Matthew 23:1-4, Jesus says that whatever the Pharisees and scribes tell to observe, people should “observe and do,” but should not do according to “their works”. Jesus’ point is that “they say, and do not do”. He explains that “they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers”. That seems to be his main problem with them, which has to do with hypocrisy.

Turner and Bock (2005, p. 168) say that “the priests were guiltless in that they were instructed to do [their] work on the Sabbath, evidently because this obligation overrode the normal Sabbath law (Lev 24:8; Num 28:9-10; see John 7:23)”. For them, “the ‘work’ of the Temple took precedence over the ‘rest’ of the Sabbath”. Michael Green (2001, p. 146) also understands that the priests used to break “the Sabbath rules” because “the temple worship of God took precedence over the regulations about the day”.

Thus, the issue in discussion in Matthew 12:1-14 seems not to be the traditions of the rabbis on the Sabbath keeping, but what can justify the “breaking” of the Sabbath by the priests and the disciples and the eating of the shewbread by David and his men. Thus, the crucial question to the text is: What is the point that resemble all the people mentioned in Matthew 12? Jesus places in parallel the attitude David and his men, the priests, and the disciples in relation to God’s laws. One should observe first the literary context of Matthew 12 in seeking author’s main ideas.

the context of rebellion, rejection of God’s law, idolatry, and various vices (Ezek 20:13, 16, 21, 24; 22:8). And (4) profanation of the Sabbath and of the sanctuary together appear in Ezekiel 23:38”. Moreover, although the OT states that “on Sabbath work should not be done (Exod 20:9-10; Deut 5:13-14)”, it also states that the priests have certain responsibilities, for instance, arranging the showbread on the Sabbath (Lev 24:5-9), offering Sabbath sacrifices (Num 28:9-10), occasionally offering other sacrifices (e.g., for Jewish festivals), and performing circumcision (Lev 12:3; see John 7:23)”.



THE LITERARY CONTEXT OF MATTHEW 12: SHEEP WITHOUT SHEPHERD

The way Matthew structures the events of chapter 8 through 12 is very important to understand the meaning he intends to convey. Since chapter 8 he reports the ministry of Jesus and the disciples in favor of the people in distress and sickness. In this Matthew's context, Jesus and the disciples are engaged in very hard work to set the people free from heavy burdens of disease, sin, and demons.

Matthew 12:1 starts the two narratives on the Sabbath (the plucking of the heads by the disciples and the healing of the man with a withered hand by Jesus) with the clause “At that time”. Carson (1984, p. 279) understands that “At that time” would not be the “same day as the events of the chapter 11,” but that the events of Matthew 12 happened “at about that time”. Weber (2000, p. 170) argues that the phrase “At that time” intends to link chapter 12 to what precedes it. In 11:25, Matthew also makes a connection between what is then going on and the preceding context with the expression “At that time”. This requires considering the events on the Sabbath as part of the whole pericope on Jesus' ministry of healing, started since Matthew 8.

Jesus performs many miracles of healing by which he shows the power of the kingdom of heaven, as reported in Matthew 8 and 9. But then he makes a kind of evaluation of the task. Matthew 9:35 says that “Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people”. Then, he sees the multitudes and is “moved with compassion for them,” because “they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd” (Matt 9:36). At this moment, he feels the need for more workers. Then Jesus says to the disciples, “The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few” (Matt 9:37).

Then, chapter 10 starts with Jesus giving “authority” (*exousían*, “power”; see Matt 28:18) to the disciples and sending them to evangelize the people. Weber (2000, p. 139-140) states that “this is the same authority Jesus demonstrated through his teaching in chapters 5-7 and through his miracles in chapters 8-9”. The divine authority skill the disciples to heal “all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease” (Matt 10:1) and to “heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, [and] cast out demons” (10:8). As they go out, Jesus instructs they should not take “neither gold nor silver nor copper,” neither “bread” (Mark 6:8; Luke 9:3), “for a worker is worthy of his food” (Matt 10:9, 10; see 1 Tim 5:18), a key-



point in this whole context of the gospel of Matthew (Nichol, 1980, p. 376). Finally, Jesus says that he who receives them would receive him (Matt 10:40). In doing that, Jesus indicates that the work of the disciples was of the same nature as his. Thus, the disciples should go to ministry for the children of Israel without any thing in their hands. It is thus that they are pictured in Matthew 12:1-8, having no “bread” with them.

As Jesus exercise his ministry in benefit of the multitudes by teaching and healing them, the people soon realize his divine authority, differently on the scribes (Matt 7:28-29). A clash between Jesus and the Pharisees also takes place very early. Jesus states that disciples’ righteousness needs to exceed the Pharisees’, suggesting their hypocrisy (Matt 5:20; see 3:7). By seeing Jesus’ authority and popularity, the Pharisees try to convince the people that he is a sinner because he eats with sinners (Matt 9:11), and that he expels the demons by the power of “Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons” (Matt 9:34; 12:24). As the popularity of Jesus increases, they plan to kill him (Matt 12:14). Therefore, a conflict between Jesus’ ministry and the Pharisees is emphasized by Matthew. The Pharisees and scribes do not recognize Jesus and the disciples’ ministry.

Jesus’ evaluation that the multitudes were like “sheep having no shepherd” (Matt 9:36) is very significant in the context of his healing ministry and his confrontation with the Pharisees, and of his latter comparison with the sanctuary (Matt 12:6). The people were lacking spiritual shepherding and exposed to physical and spiritual distress. The shepherds have the role of feeding, healing, guiding, and protecting the sheep. However, as in the past (see Ezek 34:1-10), the Jewish religious leaders were “harassing and abandoning their sheep, leaving them ‘harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd’” (Weber, 2000, p. 130). In Matthew 9:36, the expression “weary” (from Greek *skýllō*) means “to trouble, distress;” and “scattered” (from Greek *rhíptō*) means “to throw down”. The multitudes “were completely and perpetually discouraged” (Weber, 2000, p. 130).

Thus, the multitudes of Israel were left to suffering, diseases, and the power of darkness. Before his death, Moses asked God to “set a man over the congregation” who “may go out before them and go in before them” that “the congregation of the Lord may not be like sheep which have no shepherd” (Num 27:16, 17). Joshua was a kind of prototype of this “prophet”. But Jesus finally came as this Master to take care of the sheep as the congregation of the Lord. He found the sheep scattered and lost (see also 2 Kgs



22:17; Ezek 34:5; Jer 50:6; Isa 53:6), although they were surrounded by a lot of priests, scribes, and teachers of the law.

From this perspective, the heavy “burden” and “yoke” (see Matt 11:28-30), that prepare the reader to understand the events on the Sabbath, in the context of Matthew 9-12, seems to point out to the evil condition of sickness, disease, and the power of darkness, not exactly the rabbinical requirements of the law. The sheep are “exhausted” and “exposed to ravenous beasts,” when comes the Prophet asked by Moses (Hendriksen, 2007, p. 440). The scribes and Pharisees were not fulfilling their divine-commissioned role. Even so, they do not recognize Jesus and disciples’ effective ministry in benefit of the burdened people. Therefore, they are not willing to permit them to act as the priests do in relation to the law.

THE BETTER YOKE OF JESUS

The event of plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath is preceded by the call of Jesus to all the “weary and burdened” to come to him to find “rest”. The word “rest” (11:28) is used by LXX in reference to the “rest” of the Sabbath (Nichol, 1980, p. 389).¹⁰ That rest is not a yoke, but a blessing as it may be seen in the Old Testament (see Isa 58; Ezek 12). Jesus states that his “yoke” is “easy” and his “burden” is “light” (Matt 11:28-30). The usual understanding of the “yoke” here is also connected to the rabbinical law. In this view, the event on the Sabbath shows an example of Jesus’ yoke which is “easy,” in contrast with the rabbis that is suggested to be “heavy”. Thus, to permit the activity of plucking on the Sabbath to satisfy the hunger would exemplify how the “yoke” of Jesus is “light”.

Weber (2000, p. 169) points out that the verbal participle tense in the phrase “that labor and are heavy laden” (*kopiōntes kai pephortisménoi*; Matt 11:28) conveys the idea of “continual weariness and exhaustion, without a minute of relief”. In addition, the perfect tense in the second verb implies that “the people were completely loaded up at some time in the past, and the load remains perpetually on them”. According to Weber’s

¹⁰ With the word “rest” (Matt 11:28) Jesus quotes Jer 6:16. Mueller (2023a, p. 42) highlights that the verb *anapaúō* (“to rest”, Matt 11:28) and the noun *anápausis* (“rest,” v. 29) most likely refer to the Sabbath. He recalls that it is the Sabbath that was first associated with “rest” in Gen 2:2-3; Exod 20:11; 31:17; 34:21 and later Heb 4:4, 10 which uses the related term *katapaúō*. But Sabbath rest is also described in the Old Testament with the noun *anápausis* (Exod 16:23; 23:12; 31:15; 35:2) and the verb *anaphúxō* (Exod 23:12; Deut 5:14), the terms used in Matthew 11:28-29. He defends that it is also evident that in Exodus and Leviticus, *anápausis* “exclusively means Sabbath rest”.



view, the legalism of the Pharisees “surrounding the Mosaic Law had ground them to spiritual powder”. In this case, to these people so heavily burdened Jesus offers “rest” in contrast with the “burden of the Pharisees’ Sabbath rules (Matt 12:1-14)” (Weber, 2000, p. 170).

However, according to Celia Deutsch (1987, p. 46), there is nothing in Matt 11:2-13:58 to suggest that “Jesus’ yoke will be easy or his burden light”. She questions: How can a burden be eased by “taking up one’s cross” (Matt 10:38) or “being hated by all” (Matt 10:21-22)? Matthew W. Mitchell (2016, p. 325) points out that Jesus does “not provide any alleviation but rather a sharpening of the demand of God”. He considers that Jesus demands “high ethical standards” in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) even “additional demands beyond what the Torah demands”. He questions: “If the yoke is easy and the burden light, why did he [Jesus] call the way narrow? How is the Gospel lighter than the Law, when in the Law murder is condemned, [but] in the Gospel, anger?”

Accordingly, Leon Morris (1992, p. 299-300) understands that in Matthew 12 the controversy arose not because Jesus “was trying to relieve people of the mass of regulations”. In his view, Jesus did not consider that “the Pharisees were too rigorous in their Sabbath observance and was trying to relieve a grievous burden”. Mueller (2023a, p. 38) proposes that in Matthew Jesus shows “an intensification of the commandments”. Accordingly, R. Alan Culpepper (2022, p. 21) defends that “there is no debate in Matthew regarding whether Jesus’ followers ought to keep the law, only how the law is to be interpreted”. In addition, Benjamin J. Ribbens (2018, p. 400) considers that “it is difficult to conclude that Jesus would identify the disciples’ hunger as a valid justification for violating the Sabbath”. In his view, “if the Torah were violated every time someone felt hungry, then Israel would have lived in anarchy” (Ribbens, 2018, p. 400). He goes beyond to state that “even if Jesus views the disciples’ actions as not violating the written Torah but merely the oral Torah, it seems unlikely that Jesus would try to convince the Pharisees of the disciples’ innocence by appealing to their hunger” (Ribbens, 2018, p. 400).

Indeed, Jesus’ interpretation of the Law in general terms is heavier than Jews were taught. He includes feelings, thoughts, and desires as transgressions while the Pharisees used to point out only the actions in themselves (see Matt 5:17-48). About the divorce, his ethics is far heavier (see Matt 19:3-13). In fact, on the practice of the Law, he says: “Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no



means enter the kingdom of heaven”. He is talking about the life of righteousness in the level of feelings and motivations of the heart. Carson (1984, p. 278) says that the contrast between Jesus’ yoke and that of others “is not between antinomianism and legalism, for in a deep sense his demands (5:21-48) are far more radical than theirs”.

In view of that, what does Jesus mean by his “yoke” is “easy”? In what sense does he bring alleviation from the heavy burden people were under? One observes that the Greek word *chrēstós* translated as “easy” also means “useful,” “suitable,” “excellent,” “worthy,” or “good,” with a basic meaning of “being well adapted to fulfill a purpose”.¹¹ And the Greek word *elaphrós* translated as “light” indicates “a burden or trial easy to bear,” “insignificant,” or “trivial” (see Friberg; Friberg; Miller, 2005). Mitchell (2016, p. 339) makes an extended analysis of the possible translations of *chrēstós* in Matthew 11:30, based on the LXX usage, the tradition, and Matthew’s context. The LXX usage of *chrēstós* generally signifies “good,” “upright,” or “kind”. But, according to him, “the philological, lexical, and semantic evidence indicates that the term *chrēstós* does not mean “easy”. He proposes that other choices may better reflect the meaning of Jesus’ yoke, like “beneficial,” “useful,” “good,” or “kind,” but “the choice ultimately depends on the broader question of Matthew’s meaning” (Mitchell, 2016, p. 339).¹² In this view, he defends that “easy” “lies outside of the normal range of meanings for the term *chrēstós*; thus, the usual translation of Matthew 11:30 requires active justification over passive acceptance” (Mitchell, 2016, p. 326).

It seems that Matthew 11:30 uses the nouns “yoke” and “burden” in parallel. In this way, the translation of “my yoke is easy” tends to be confirmed by the interpretation “my burden is light”. The verb *phortízō* (“to burden”) in Luke 11:46 refers to the Jewish

¹¹ See Friberg; Friberg; Miller (2005) and Gingrich (1983). See also the translations of *chrēstós* as “good” or “comfortable,” in Matthew 11:30 (NASB); “better”, in Luk 5:39; 6:35; Rom 2:4; 1 Cor 15:33; Eph 4:32; 1 Pet 2:3. The word “ease” in Matthew 11:30, translates the gr. *chrēstós*, “fit for use,” “good,” “kindly,” or “pleasant”; not “easy” in the sense of being not difficult. No one English word is a good equivalent for *chrēstós*” (see Nichol, 1980, p. 390).

¹² According to Mitchell (2016, p. 322-323), the “yoke” of Jesus has been understood in a variety of ways, including: “(1) Jesus’s teaching (which presents the fullest understanding of the Torah); (2) Jesus himself (as the embodiment of the Torah); (3) The yoke of Christian grace (which liberates one from the burden of the Jewish law); (4) Jesus’s unique interpretation of the Torah (Jesus’s yoke is a contrast not to the Torah itself but to certain religious authorities and their misuse of it); (5) The yoke of divine Wisdom (and Jesus as Wisdom personified); (6) The yoke (normally a symbol of labor or servitude) of ‘rest’ and ease, specifically the ‘rest of messianic redemption’ as promised by the Sabbath”. Davies and Allison Jr. (1991, p. 291-292) list six options for explaining the Jesus’ yoke as “ease”: the love of God and neighbor; the fellowship with Jesus; the avoidance of the Pharisaic oral tradition; the promise of future reward; the eschatological rest; and something that can be experienced but not described”.



interpretation of the law, which had become a heavy burden (see Matt 23:4). In contrast, Jesus' *phortíon* is “light” (Matt 11:30). On the other hand, *zygós* (“burden”) translates Hebrew *‘ole*, which means “office” or “work” under a certain power, like Egypt (Lev 26:13; Jer 2:20), kings (1 Kgs 12:4; 2 Chr 10:4), and rulers (Isa 10:27; 14:25; Jer 30:8; Eze 34:27). A possible meaning would be that, in Matthew 11:30, by “my yoke” Christ means his “way of life”. Thus, “the ‘yoke’ of Christ is none other than the divine will as summed up in the law of God and magnified in the Sermon of the Mount” (Nichol, 1980, p. 389).

However, as seen above, this interpretation in contrast with the tradition is taken from the background of the rabbinic requirements that is not so clear in the context of Matthew 12. Instead of that, as one considers the fruitful ministry of Jesus and his disciples in shepherding and healing the multitudes (Matt 8-12) in contrast with the ministry of the Pharisees and priests, the understanding of *chrēstós* as “useful,” “suitable,” or “good” seems to be most appropriate. In this view, in Matthew 11:28-30, Jesus is stating that his ministry is “fruitful” and “useful” in contrast with the priests’ which had left the multitudes in disease and possessed by demons, as sheep without shepherd. Thus, in this perspective, Jesus is calling the burdened, sick, and demon-possessed people to come to him and find “rest” from the heavy burden that the priests could not alleviate, but Jesus can. From this view, Jesus’ claim to be “greater than the temple” (Matt 12:6) seems reasonable. Therefore, the disciples are permitted by Jesus to pluck the heads of grain on the Sabbath to maintain their physical strength and fulfill their “useful” ministry in benefit of the multitudes.

A GOD-COMMISSIONED WORK

In the context of Matthew 12, Jesus seems not working on the Sabbath commandment in general terms neither on the tradition of the rabbis and Pharisees. He does work on Scriptural cases of exception about the use of sacred things by those commissioned by God. The two cases he mentions are different in terms of the sacred things involved. The context of 1 Sam 21 does not talk about the day when David and his men ate the holy bread, neither Jesus enters in this point, although probably was a Sabbath.¹³ By other side, the mention on the priests has nothing to do with hunger. Thus,

¹³ Carson (1984, p. 280) says that “it is possible that this event took place on a Sabbath, since 1 Samuel 21:5-6 sounds as if the consecrated bread had just been changed”. But Jesus makes “nothing of David’s deceit nor depends on any supposition regarding the day on which it occurred”. By his turn, Specht recalls that the



what is crucial here seems to find out what is common to the three groups involved in Matthew 12:1-8 — David and his men, the priests, and the disciples.

A first point to notice in Matthew 12 is that the disciples were not farmers doing some illicit work on the Sabbath, or common people doing that. Indeed, “they were itinerant preachers casually picking some heads of grain” (Carson, 1984, p. 281). The analogy Jesus does make sense only as one considers that Jesus and the disciples are doing a work of the same nature as David and his men, and the priests at the temple.

David and his men were in campaign to protect the people of God in the past, under the Spirit of God (see 1 Sam 16:13; 18:5). Because of that, David says that in campaign the women were prohibited to them and their body was “holy” (1 Sam 21:5). By their turn, the priests also were anointed and consecrated by the Spirit of God to perform the task at the temple (Exod 29:1; 2 Chron 23:8). In Matthew the Twelve are equally commissioned by Jesus as “workers” under his divine authority (10:1-4) (Carson, 1984, p. 235). Indeed, by the first time, they are called “apostles” (Matt 10:2; Greek, *apóstolos*). In this way, Jesus expected the Twelve were to be “supported by those to whom they were to minister” (see 10:9-13; 1 Cor 9:14). Therefore, to these disciples is applied the principle that “the worker is worth his keep” (Carson, 1984, p. 245).

By asking the Pharisees if they have “not read” the Scripture (Matt 12:3, 5), Jesus intends to make them conscious about the reality of those commissioned by God to a special work, as worthy of their food. The phrase does not indicate that the Pharisees fail because they do not read the Scriptures. The question is rhetorical (see Matt 19:4; 21:16; 21:42; 22:31). They fail in applying to Jesus and the disciples the same principle applied to David and the priests.

David and his men

In the event mentioned by Jesus in Matthew 12:4, David and his men were hungry, and they went to the temple, which was then in Nob, north of Jerusalem (1 Sam 21:1-6). The priest gave them the “holy bread” (1 Sam 21:4, 6; cf. Exod 29:32). David says to the priest that he was on a “campaign” or “journey” (1 Sam 21:5). What Jesus intends by

exchange of the new for the old bread was made on the Sabbath. “In the view of some rabbis, the day on which David received the loaves was the Sabbath”. However, “the Scripture does not state the day of the week” (Specht, 1982, p. 95).



mentioning the event of David and his men eating the shewbread needs to be considered carefully.

According to Mueller (2023a, p. 56), in Matthew 12:4, Jesus indicates that the behavior of David and his people was “not lawful”. In his view, in Matthew 12:5, Jesus emits a kind of verdict against David’s attitude. In this case, he proposes that Matthew 12:1-8 does not envision “a positive David-Jesus typology” which is common in this gospel, but a “temple-Jesus typology” (Mueller, 2023a, p. 57). In this perspective, Jesus could be saying, “You, Pharisees, declare my disciples lawless for transgressing human rules. But the one, who really acted lawlessly was David, whom you consider justified although he broke divine law” (Mueller, 2023a, p. 57).

However, although David lied to Ahimelech at Nob (1 Sam 21:2), this attitude is not placed in perspective by Jesus in Matthew 12 (cf. Mueller, 2023a, p. 53-54). Jesus’ point is that David and his men ate guiltless the shewbread only allowed to the priests. On this discussion, John Nolland (2005, p. 459) claims that “the unstated assumption shared by Jesus and his interlocutors is that David was justified in his behaviour”. And Jesus uses the event in favor of his disciples who were also hungry. In addition, as Jesus starts his argument by using the phrase “Have you not read” (Mat 12:3, 5), it follows that he intends the same condition for both cases, David and the priests as guiltless in their behavior.

Viljoen (2014, p. 227) adds that David was not punished by God. “He seems to approve the deed and strengthens David to continue his task. Likewise, Jesus supports his disciples. Jesus argues that Sabbath praxis should be shaped by mercy”. What 1 Sam 21-22 seems to highlight is that Doeg the Edomite is the guilt of the priests’ death. Soon after, in 1 Sam 23:1-14, David consulted the Lord who responded positively to him and strengthened him.

Indeed, in the context of 1 Sam 21, David had already been anointed by Samuel to be king and was under the Spirit of God (1 Sam 16:13). Thus, the battles of David were battles of the Lord (1 Sam 17:47; see Josh 1:9). The text of 1 Sam 16:13 says that “the Spirit of the Lord came upon David” (Greek *pneuma kuríou epi david*). This expression shows a kind of parallel between David and Jesus, upon whom was the Spirit of the Lord” as well (Luke 4:18 says in Greek, *pneuma kuríou epi eme* [Christ]). “The point here seems to be that David was the anointed of the Lord, with all that this implied” (Specht, 1982, p. 95).



As Jesus sends the disciples to preach the gospel and heal the people, he says they should not take bread with them, because “a worker is worthy of his food” (Matt 10:10). David and his men were also engaged in a work to protect God’s people from their enemies around. In some circumstances they were also maintained by the people. In 1 Sam 25, David asked Nabal to give him food, for he and his men were protecting Nabal’s goods (see v. 7, 16). Nabal explains his refuse for not knowing who David and his men were (v. 10). Nabal ignores David’s work, as the Pharisees ignores the ministry of Jesus and his disciples (Matt 12:2). However, Abigail, wiser than her husband, attends David with food. Her attitude was justified with the saying that David “fights the battles of the Lord” (1 Sam 25:28). Abigail recognizes the work of David as the Lord’s and considers him as worthy of the food (see also 2 Sam 17:27-29).

In this perspective, Jesus’ argumentation does not mean that “the example of David makes it legitimate for any hungry Israelite to eat the shewbread”. Nor the mention to the priest who worked on the Sabbath and were guiltless means that any people may harvest grain “on the Sabbath” (Beare, 1960, p. 134). Thus, what Jesus’ argumentation does means is that he and the disciples are performing a work of the same nature as David and the priests, a work under God’s direct commission. Jesus is claiming before the Pharisees that he is the Messiah and the disciples his ministries (Beare, 1960, p. 134).

The priests

The priests at the temple were busy on all the days of the week. On the Sabbaths, they had more work to do, like to change the breads of the presence (Lev 24:8) and offer the incense and the daily burnt offering (Num 28:9-10).¹⁴ Formally speaking, Jesus mentions the Levitical priests as those who “break” the Sabbath every week (Matt 12:5), “since the right worship of God in the temple required them to do some work” (Carson, 1984, p. 281). Specht (1982, p. 96) recalls that “there were animals to be slain, wood to be prepared and placed on the altar”. He says that “the priests actually worked harder on the Sabbath than on any other day of the week”. But their work was not sinful, because it was in the service of God. “Their priestly service was justifiable work, because it was sacred, nor secular” (Specht, 1982, p. 96). Accordingly, Carson (1984, p. 281) argues that the

¹⁴ On the work of the priests on the Sabbaths, see Leviticus 24:8, 9; Numbers 28:9, 10; 1 Chronicles 9:32; 23:31; 2 Chronicles 8:12-14; 23:4; 31:2, 3 (see Hendriksen, 2007, p. 513).



priests were guiltless because the same law that “established the Sabbath” also established “the right of the priests” to do their work on it.

This point fits the example Jesus gives in Matthew 12. In this view, the same reason that justifies the work of the priests also justified the work of the disciples. Both groups were engaged in a work commissioned by God. But the Pharisees refuse to recognize that Jesus and his disciples have such a work for God. In fact, throughout the Old Testament law, “the Lord prescribed work for the priests on the Sabbath to facilitate the worship of others”, and yet “the priests were never declared guilty for such practices” (Weber, 2000, p. 171).

In this perspective, Specht (1982, p. 96) states assertively that Jesus “came to earth as the Redeemer of the world,” and his disciples were “associated with him in the great work of redeeming mankind, a work that was sacred, not secular”. Therefore, “it was right for them to satisfy their physical hunger to receive strength to carry on their work further”. In this way, “in exceptional cases the Sabbath may be infringed to save human life” (Specht, 1982, p. 96). That is what Matthew 12 is about, exception for those commissioned by God to do a work in benefit of his people.

Greater than the Temple

Matthew describes Jesus teaching the people the principles of the kingdom of heaven, healing their diseases, and setting them free from demons. Indeed, the great Galilean ministry continues from chapter 5 until 15 to which “the crowds respond with enthusiasm but the scribes and Pharisees with growing antagonism” (Hendriksen, 2007, p. 439). The perception of the people that Jesus teaches them “as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Matt 7:29) makes a contrast between Jesus’ ministry and the scribes and Pharisees’.

According to Matthew 12:18, the superiority of Jesus’ ministry is because the Master bears the Spirit of God, as prophesied by Isa 42:1-2. The Pharisees and the priests are unfruitful in taking care of people because they not only “lacks the Spirit” but fail in recognizing “Jesus as the bearer of the Spirit” (Yang, 1997, p. 147). Because of that, they hate Jesus and conspire to kill him (Matt 12:14). The conflict becomes explicit in Matthew 12:22-32, where the Pharisees “attribute Jesus’ work by the Holy Spirit to Beelzebul” (Yang, 1997, p. 147-148). Although God loves and is well pleased with his chosen servant



Jesus (Matt 12:18), “the Pharisees are not pleased with Jesus and his disciples (v. 2, 10), instead they condemn them (v. 7) and finally take counsel against him to kill him (v. 14)” (Yang, 1997, p. 148).

This picture of conflict and rejection of Jesus as the Messiah explains the attitude of the Pharisees in condemning the disciples as doing something unlawful on the Sabbath (Matt 12:2). The Pharisees do not accept the disciples as doing a ministry like that of the priests who work on the Sabbaths and are guiltless (Matt 12:5). It also explains Jesus’ statement that “something greater than the temple is here” (Matt 12:6). By using the Greek neuter article *tou* (“the”), Jesus suggests that he and the disciples are exercising a priesthood in benefit of the people which is greater than the priesthood of the priests at the temple. Carson (1984, p. 281) says that “this refers to the service or worship of God in which Jesus is engaged. This is greater than the service of the temple performed by the priests”.

The Jews considered the temple as “more sacred than any other object on earth”. In a very astonishing statement Jesus affirms that his ministry is even greater than the temple, “a bold claim” of his messianic identity (Nichol, 1980, p. 392). By proclaiming his authority above the temple, Jesus equals his ministry and the disciples’ as of the same nature of the priests. Because of that, their work is not a transgression of the law even when exercised on the Sabbath. In this same context, Jesus states that he desires “mercy and not burnt offerings” (Matt 12:7; Hos 6:6). Therefore, if the Sabbath could be “violated” by the priests to do sacrifices (Matt 12:5; Num 28:9; John 7:22, 23), much more by the disciples to show mercy in healing the people and expelling demons (Matt 10:1, 8-10).

Viljoen (2014, p. 228) highlights that the point in Matthew 12 is that “temple service took precedence over the Sabbath, and Jesus’ ministry and messianic office supersedes the temple service”. Gregory K. Beale (2004, p. 177) suggests that, when Jesus claims to have the authority to forgive sins in Matthew 9:2-6, he is already beginning to replace the temple as “the divinely instituted place where sacrifices were offered for the forgiveness of sins”. Accordingly, Morris (1992, p. 303) agrees that the issue in Matthew 12 is not related to the people in general, but those engaged in a special work to God. “We should understand this [Matt 12:6] to refer to the nature of the service and the person of Jesus as one sent to bring the kingdom, to the launching of the saving events”.



By healing the man with a shriveled hand on that Sabbath (Matt 12:9-10), Jesus shows what he intends by stating that he desires “mercy not sacrifice”. Therefore, the proper and lawful work on the Sabbath is to do good for the people (Matt 12:12), not to work to satisfy the hunger. Jesus’ conclusive phrase on this event, “it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath” (Matt 12:12), should be considered on the viewpoint of the ministry of Jesus and the disciples to heal people from their diseases and weakness, even when this requires them to work to feed themselves in order to maintain their mission. Indeed, Jesus healed many people on the Sabbaths (Matt 12:9-14; Luke 13:10-17; 14:1-6; John 5:9; 7:23; 9:14) (see Weber, 2000, p. 171).

CONCLUSION

The event reported in Matthew 12:1-8 does not match the tradition of the rabbis, nor does it mean that Jesus alleviates the requirements of the law to the common people. What is common to the three groups of people involved in this gospel account is not that all of them are in need, but that all of them are engaged in a work commissioned by God. This work divinely ordained justifies that they “transgress” divine necessary rules to fulfill their ministry.

Thus, what justifies the disciples of “picking ears of grain” on the Sabbath is the same principle that justified David “to eat” the holy bread and the same that justified the priests “to transgress” the Sabbath and stay guiltless. All of them are fulfilling a mission divinely ordained.

The context of Matthew 12:1-18 is one of preaching the gospel and healing the people who are like sheep without shepherd. In this case, those authorized by Jesus to “pick ears of grain” on the Sabbath are the disciples and servants of the gospel when hungry in mission. If sacrifices could be made on the Sabbath, much more so the acts of mercy in healing and saving people. Therefore, what is “lawful” or “licit” to do on the Sabbath is preaching the gospel, healing people, cleansing lepers, casting out demons, all of that means “doing good” (Matt 12:10, 12; see 10:7-8).

The Pharisees demonstrated that they did not consider the work of Jesus and the disciples as a new priesthood to replace the temple. Therefore, they were not willing to permit them to pick the ears of grain on the Sabbath. However, Jesus affirms that there is “one greater than the temple” (Matt 12:6). Jesus is replacing, along with the disciples, the



office of the priests. In this view, the work of preaching the gospel and making people enter the kingdom of God must be carried forward “every day, and especially on Sabbath” (Wahlen, 2020).

Thus, by defending the disciples in picking the heads of grain on the Sabbath to satisfy their hunger, Jesus appeals to the permission given to David and his men to eat the holy bread permitted only to the priests, and to the priests allowed to perform their work on the Sabbath without incurring in guilt. Jesus’ appeal is relevant only on the premise that the disciples are exercising functions that place them on the same level of the priests and king David (Beare, 1960, p. 135).

In this view, in Matthew, the ministry of Jesus and the disciples to preach the gospel and heal the people is superior to the ministry of the whole temple. The yoke of Jesus is useful in taking care of people who, although very close to the temple and the priests, were like sheep without shepherd. Finally, it is necessary to be careful in reading Matthew 12 to conclude that Jesus is authorizing the disciples and others in mission to break any law with the supposition that the service of God precedes the law. One must consider that the point in discussion in this context is only the satisfaction the disciples’ hunger on the Sabbath to keep the mission of the gospel.

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