

COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

AN EXAMINATION OF MATTHEW 12:1-14

BY NATHAN BATTEY

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Contents

Foreward	
Acknowledgements	
Preface	
Introduction	15

PART I.

1-	A Condensed Assessment	25
2-	The Layers	27
	Layer 1: David and the Priests	28
	Layer 2: Hosea 6:6	30
	Layer 3: The Divine Messiah	32
	Layer 4: There's an Ox in the Ditch	33
3-	General Application	37
4-	Our Current Crisis	39
	How should the church respond?	41

PART II.

5-	The Big Picture	45
	Matthew, The Old Testament, and	45
	Matthew 12: Setting the Scene	48
	The Accusation	50
	The Synoptics	52
6-	David and the Showbread	57
	The Positions	57
	Did David Lie?	64
	Requesting the Showbread	67
	A Summary of the Argument	71
	Why does it matter?	72
7-	Tactics	73
	Assessing the Examples	73
	Who is on Trial?	73
8-	Hosea 6	77
	A Bird's-Eye View	78
	Hosea 6	80
	Hosea 6:1-3 + Christ	83
	Hosea 6:4-7	84
	<i>Hesed</i>	88
9-	Matthew's Use of Hosea 6	93
	Hosea 6:6 + Matthew 9:13	93
	Hosea 6:3 + Matthew 11:27-30	95
	Hosea 6:6 + Matthew 12:7	97

10-	Answering Objections	99
	First Objection	99
	Matthew and the LXX	100
	Matthew's use of <i>ἔλεος</i>	102
	Summary	104
	Second Objection	104
	Summation	112
11-	There's an Ox in the Ditch	115
12-	Pandora's Box	121
13-	Our Current Crisis <i>Expanded</i>	125
	How should the church respond?	127
	<i>Expanded</i>	

To my father who taught me
to love truth with conviction.

Foreward

Brother Nathan Battey has provided a very good work for the Lord's Church. He has fulfilled the obligation of I Timothy 4:6 as a "good minister of Jesus Christ" by establishing his views within "the words of faith and of good doctrine." This is a stressful period of time where Hebrews 2 reminds us we labor under the lifetime bondage of fear and death. However, our obligation is to "walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7). Brother Nathan makes the Son shine through the cloudiness of human opinion in this study of Matthew 12:7. Men have muddied the water, and this passage has been abused as a license to sin. Brother Johnny Elmore once told me, "Don't ever forget muddy water looks deep!" Anyone feeling tension between their present stressful circumstances and the law of God must reconcile their choice to the law of God. Foolish statements such as "I just don't think God will hold it against me if..." or "We are doing the best we can" are often dangerous justifications. If we have missed the mark, we need to fix it with God and move on. The message of the Son of God is "He who hath ears to hear let him hear what the Spirit says to the Churches" (Revelation 2:7). Revelation 2:10 outlines faithful obedience even to death. God is our Father and has proven long-suffering, gracious, and merciful. I Corinthians 13 requires all that we do be done in

love. Kindness and love must be joined with steadfastness in our public and private allegiance to God's revealed word. I commend this book and pray that it will bring blessing to the brotherhood.

Cullen Smith

Acknowledgements

Writing this book has been a labor of love and learning aided by the insights and corrections of many faithful brethren. While the failures and shortcomings are my own, I want to thank all who have helped me along the way, and I pray that the labor will stimulate study and growth in the Kingdom.

Special thanks and recognition are due A. K. Richardson, Brandon Stephens, Cullen Smith, and my father for their willingness to critique, support, and endorse my book. My greatest thanks is due Savannah, my virtuous wife, who spent numerous hours editing my mistakes and endured the all-consuming nature of the project. She is more than I deserve and my single greatest blessing in Christ.

May God be glorified and the Kingdom strengthened through His power in the midst of trials!

Preface

When I began writing I did not set out with the intention of writing a book. What began as an article continued to grow until it became what you now hold in your hands.

At the prompting and prodding of several advisors I have decided to present my material in two parts. In hopes of engaging a larger reading audience, it was suggested that I provide a simplified version in conjunction with a more detailed approach. Therefore, the first part of this book assumes some of what will be proven in the second half where the details, evidence, and theories are fleshed out. For readers who do not wish to read the entire second part, I hope that it will at least provide helpful material on particular points of interest.

Above all I ask that you consider what is written in God's word. If what I have written contradicts Scripture, reject it. If, on the other hand, what this book contains is in accordance with Scripture, take it to heart and act upon it. I pray that I have been faithful to the Word and conveyed the love and humility of Christ.

Nathan Battey

Indianapolis
April, 2020

Introduction

In the midst of our current COVID-19 crisis, the church is faced with many difficult decisions including whether or not to continue assembling for worship. The government in most states has issued special regulations which forbid gatherings of more than ten people and have brought added stress to our brotherhood. As a result of the mandate and the nature of the pandemic, congregational leaders are forced to make difficult battlefield decisions. My heart goes out to my brethren, and I pray that God will strengthen us through the power of His word.

Questions facing leaders include: Does our current crisis fall within the grounds of “Obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29) or is it a situation where Christians should submit to their government for their own good (Romans 13:3-4)? What should we do? What must we do? Should we continue to assemble or must we suspend worship until the storm is past (however long that might be)? These and many other questions hang over the heads of congregational leaders as members sit poised awaiting a response.

Making decisions in highly emotional times is always difficult. It may be that in a few months we

16 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

look back at our current crisis with regrets over decisions made, yet in the moment brothers and sisters are trying to do the best they can. It is imperative that we remain as humble and calm as possible while demonstrating compassion towards all.

In the midst of the chaos and confusion a repeated refrain can now be heard as brethren have begun quoting the words of the Lord in Matthew 12:7:

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

The question is not, “What did Jesus say?” but rather, “What did Jesus mean by what He said, and does His statement have any bearing on our current moment of crisis?” Is the meaning of the Lord’s statement self-evident? And what are we to make of the difficult setting in which it was issued? Before discussing the validity, implications, and consequences of applying Matthew 12:7 to our current crisis, we need to carefully investigate what is largely recognized as a difficult passage and prove its interpretation rather than assuming it.

The challenges of leadership are daunting under normal circumstances, and even more so in the midst of a pandemic. I have the utmost sympathy for all of

my brethren who strive to lead and I pray that God will grant us wisdom to lead according to His word.

My comments on Matthew 12:1-14 are written out of sincere love for truth and the brotherhood. I have not written out of hatred or spite, nor am I trying to take a shot at any of my brethren. Please do not mistake my convictions and concern for arrogance, hatred, or a lack of mercy. I am strongly convicted that we must demonstrate mercy to those who doubt (Jude 22-23), while at the same time trying to strengthen the members who hang down (Hebrews 12:12). I have written this book because I am concerned that brethren are misusing Matthew 12:1-14 to advocate positions that cause harm rather than good. Rather than dismissing the position of others, or asserting my own, I hope to engage those with different interpretations and challenge all to grapple with a difficult portion of Scripture. I am not naïve enough to think that I will convince all, but I do hope to identify where difficulties and differences lie.

18 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

THE DIFFICULTIES

The difficulties of interpreting Matthew 12:1-14 are legion. The following inexhaustive list notes some of the major difficulties:

- 1- Why did the Pharisees attack Jesus rather than His disciples?
- 2- Did the disciples actually sin or had they merely violated Pharisaic tradition?
- 3- What is the significance of Jesus' twice repeated question "Have you not read?"
- 4- In using the example of David and his men eating the showbread are we to understand David to have sinned or was he justified in his action?
- 5- Instead of answering the Pharisees directly, why did Jesus choose the example of David eating the showbread if a violation of Pharisaic tradition is under consideration?¹
- 6- Did the priests actually profane the Sabbath when they offered sacrifices on the Sabbath?
- 7- Do the examples of David and the priests express the same truth or a different truth?
- 8- Are we to understand the examples of David and the priests as lawful, unlawful, exceptional, or a mixture of lawful and unlawful?

¹ As He did in Matthew 15:1-9.

- 9- Why did Jesus claim to be greater than the temple?
- 10- When Jesus quoted Hosea 6:6, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice” did He justify the actions of the disciples, rebuke the Pharisees, or both?
- 11- Did Jesus radically change Hosea’s message and fill it with meaning that was completely foreign to the original text?
- 12- Why did Jesus refer to Himself as the Son of Man?
- 13- What did Jesus mean when He claimed to be “Lord of the Sabbath”?
- 14- When Jesus invoked the title “Lord of the Sabbath,” did He claim the authority to violate the Sabbath simply because He is God?
- 15- What constitutes an ox-in-the-ditch type situation?
- 16- Does love trump law or mercy destroy sacrifice?

Though the significance of each of these questions may not be understood, I hope they demonstrate the complexity of the passage and issue a warning of caution to any who would assume its simplicity. Hopefully the discussion which follows will provide answers to these questions and not leave you hanging, though I must forewarn you that not all of the answers will be provided in Part 1.

20 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

Matthew 12 has long been neglected in the teaching of the church due to the difficulties it entails and critical examination is much needed. One of the major challenges of interpreting Matthew 12 (and Matthew's Gospel in general) is understanding both Matthew's and Jesus' usage of the Old Testament. As Matthew addressed a Jewish audience, he appealed to them through their Scriptures. Both the Lord and His apostle required a working knowledge of the Old Testament and presented their instruction as a fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 5:17-19). Matthew 12:1-14 is no exception to this rule and requires that modern readers become Old Testament students. Matthew's message cannot be understood without an examination of Jesus' Bible.

Engaging Matthew from an Old Testament perspective is illuminating, demanding, and rewarding. When Old Testament quotations, allusions, and echoes are encountered the reader must pause and assess the original contextual meaning in order to understand its New Testament usage. As the old saying goes, "A text without a context becomes a pretext." A failure to engage the intertextual relationship of Old Testament passages in the light of progressive revelation will result in skewed and false understandings. "Have you not read" and "Had you known" still serve as warnings that Bible students must heed.

I pray that what I have written brings clarity rather than confusion while avoiding the ditches of legalism

and hypocrisy. Should I fall into such a ditch, I'm sure that one of my good brethren will help pull me out!

Part 1

CHAPTER 1

A Condensed Assessment

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

The words of Hosea rang forth from the lips of the Savior as He concluded His attack on the Pharisees following their false accusation against the disciples. No doubt perturbed, or perhaps even angry, the Lord concluded with a statement of judgment that His adversaries could not help but feel penetrate their souls.

The controversy began in Matthew 12:1 when the Pharisees accused the disciples of Sabbath violation for plucking and eating heads of grain as they passed through a field. Since the disciples acted under the authority of their Master, the Jewish leaders rightfully addressed their complaint to the Lord. Jesus’ response managed to defend the disciples, rebuke the Pharisees, further His mission, and proclaim His

26 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

royal status all at once. The Sabbath was upheld, the Law was clarified, the Pharisees were denounced, and God was glorified.

The Lord's quarrel with the Pharisees over the Sabbath was quickly followed by a second. While the first debate dealt with technicalities, the second controversy dealt with matters of good and evil. Alternatively, the first controversy dealt with Sabbath provisions while the second controversy dealt with Sabbath mandates. The Pharisees held that healing a man on the Sabbath was evil, whereas Jesus declared it good. With defiance Jesus healed the man with a withered hand and chastised the Pharisees for valuing animal life more than human life (Mathew 6:26).

The Sabbath Law had provisions of food, sacrifice, and goodness baked into its essence. To do good, receive the necessities of life, and render worship to God were Sabbath blessings provided by God.

CHAPTER 2

The Layers

There are three main layers to the scene recorded in Matthew 12:1-14. The first layer dealt with a technicality of Pharisaic legalism regarding the Sabbath and provided two points of clarification, one from the Law and the other from the Prophets (Matthew 12:3-5). The second layer offered a strong pronouncement of judgment directed at the Pharisees for failure to uphold the Sabbath (Matthew 12:7-8). The third layer was woven throughout the previous two and provided glimpses into the Divine Messianic nature of Jesus in connection with the Sabbath. The fourth and final layer centered on the regulation of goodness within the Law.

We will now proceed with a brief examination of these four layers.

28 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

LAYER #1: DAVID AND THE PRIESTS

When the Pharisees accused Jesus' disciples of violating the Sabbath by plucking heads of grain as they passed through a field, Jesus responded by using the story of David and the showbread found in 1 Samuel 21:1-6. The story of David and the showbread begins with David fleeing for his life from Saul. As he fled he stopped at the tabernacle where he requested bread and a sword from the High Priest Ahimelech. After inquiring about the holiness of David and his men, Ahimelech provided David with five loaves of showbread and the sword of Goliath. The oddity of the story is that David and his men ate showbread which was not usually lawful for them to eat.¹

The story of David and the showbread holds great intrigue and has confounded many Bible students through the centuries, both layman and scholar alike. For a detailed analysis of the five leading interpretations of this scene, please refer to Part 2 of this book. For the sake of brevity and clarity, I will state my position concisely and assume some of what is discussed later in Part 2.

It is my understanding that Jesus called forth the story of David and the showbread in order to declare the innocence of His disciples as equal to the innocence of David. Under normal circumstances

¹ Matthew 12:4 observes that ordinarily only priests could eat the showbread.

non-priests were not allowed to eat the showbread (Leviticus 24:9). Yet because the bread belonged to the priests once it was removed from the Presence, Ahimelech was required by law to give it to David upon his request of need (Deuteronomy 15:7-8), provided that he and his men were holy (1 Samuel 21:4-6).

If the law allowed David to eat holy showbread, were Jesus' disciples not justified in eating common grain? The example of the priests offering sacrifice on the Sabbath provided a supplementary argument and demonstrated God's provision for Sabbath sacrifice. Though God provided rest on the Sabbath from general labor, He also graciously provided sacrificial labor as an added blessing. If the Jews could recognize the blessed work of the priests in the temple, why could they not recognize the labors of the disciples in the Greater Temple?

Opposed to the gracious nature of God, the Pharisees forbade what God had allowed and placed an unlawful burden upon the Sabbath through their legalistic traditions. By calling up the examples of David and the priests, Jesus pardoned the innocent and convicted the guilty. The Lord of the Sabbath returned to man the intended blessing of the Sabbath (Mark 2:27) and glorified God in so doing.

LAYER #2: HOSEA 6:6

Having justified the disciples through legal interpretation of the Law, Jesus proceeded to rebuke the Pharisees with the words of Hosea. It is difficult to overstate how important it is to ground one's interpretation of Hosea 6:6 within its original context rather than imposing on it one's own assumptions. Due to a misinterpretation of Hosea's message, unscriptural arguments such as "Love trumps law!" and "Mercy outweighs sacrifice!" are raised with a lack of awareness or regard for their long-term consequences.

The key to interpreting Hosea 6:6 is a proper understanding of the Hebrew term *hesed* rendered "mercy" in this and other passages. What is unclear on the surface in English is the fact that *hesed* has a multifaceted meaning grounded in covenant commitment. Vine's has this to say in defining *hesed*:

"The term is one of the most important in the vocabulary of Old Testament theology... In general, one may identify three basic meanings of *hesed*, and these 3 meanings always interact—strength, steadfastness, and love. Any understanding of *hesed* that fails to suggest all three inevitably loses some of its richness. Love by itself easily becomes

sentimentalized or universalized apart from the covenant.²

The New American Standard Version renders *hesed* as “loyalty” in Hosea 6:6, indicating the concept involved is one of covenant faithfulness rather than mercy. The context of Hosea 6:6 confirms this understanding of *hesed* by describing those who lacked *hesed* as having “transgressed the covenant.”³

Hosea’s overall point was that Israel had abandoned covenant faithfulness while maintaining sacrificial worship, and God was not pleased. By quoting Hosea’s punchline to the Pharisees, Jesus made the same point. Neither Hosea nor the Lord advocated an abandonment of sacrifice in the name of mercy. Both argued for a return to covenant faithfulness and an abandonment of meritorious sacrifice that glorified man rather than God.

To argue for an abandonment of worship in the name of mercy on the basis of Matthew 12:7 is to rip the passage out of context and invest it with man-made meaning that contradicts what God intended.

² W. E. Vine, *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville: Nelson, 1996), 142-43.

³ For more discussion of *hesed* and its significance see Part 2 of this book.

LAYER #3: THE DIVINE MESSIAH

Rather than merely defending His disciples while attacking the Pharisees, Jesus accomplished both while highlighting His mission as the Divine Messiah.

Jesus was the King like unto David, yet greater. This brief comparison between David and Jesus in Matthew 12 is a small slice of Matthew's overarching theme of Jesus as the Messianic New David and highlights the rejection of the kingship of Christ by the Jewish leaders.

The comparison between Jesus and the temple is another grand theme carried throughout the Gospels and placed the work of the disciples in sacred context. It is not surprising that those who destroyed the temple and the sacrificial system (Matthew 24:38; 12:7) would also miss the point of the Greater Temple (Matthew 12:6) and Lamb of God (John 1:29).

Not only was Jesus the Great David and the Great Temple, He was also the Son of Man and the Lord of the Sabbath. The Son of Man title held great Messianic meaning and was borrowed from Daniel 7:13. By using the title Jesus claimed to be the Son of God and thus invested with the authority of the Father. Jesus was not merely an interpreter of the Sabbath; He was its author (John 1:3).

May we as God's people realize and appreciate the awesome person and authority of Christ without being blinded by our self-interests as were the Pharisees.

LAYER #4: THERE'S AN OX IN THE DITCH

What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. (Matthew 12:11-12)

A Sabbath dispute over Pharisaic tradition (Matthew 12:1-8) was followed by a Sabbath dispute caused by Pharisaic hypocrisy and wickedness (Matthew 12:9-14, Mark 3:4). Jesus upheld the Sabbath, defied the Pharisees, healed a man, and taught a sermon on goodness all at the same time.

The ox-in-the-ditch analogy was not a demonstration of the Lord setting aside the Sabbath; it was a demonstration of the Law regulating both Sabbath observance and mercy (Matthew 23:23-24). Peter Leithart captures the point well,

Pulling the sheep from the pit is not an exception to Sabbath-keeping. It *is* Sabbath-keeping because it's giving rest, just as it is "lawful to do good" by healing a man. Jesus' point is that Sabbath is for good and not for evil. He's saying the Sabbath was designed as an institution of compassion, not an institution of harshness. He's saying that the Sabbath is about rest, giving rest, rather than oppression. Jesus is *not* saying

34 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

that need trumps keeping the law. He's saying that what the law aims at is giving relief and rest, and therefore our keeping of the law should aim at and achieve that intention... Jesus never broke the Sabbath or made exceptions to the biblical Sabbath rules.⁴

Despite the straightforwardness of the passage, the Lord's example of the ox in the ditch is currently employed in conjunction with a misunderstanding of "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" to advocate the "goodness" of cancelling services in order to avoid potential harm to some of the membership.

Here is the basic argument set forth as a syllogism:

Major Premise: Showing mercy is good.

Minor Premise: Cancelling services in the midst of a pandemic is a demonstration of mercy.

Conclusion: Therefore, cancelling services in the midst of a pandemic is good.

The problem with this argument is seen when it is stated in the negative.

⁴ Peter J. Leithart. *Jesus As Israel* (Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2017), 246.

Major Premise: Being unmerciful is evil.

Minor Premise: Conducting services during a pandemic does not demonstrate mercy.

Conclusion: Therefore, conducting services during a pandemic is evil.

The main problem with this argument lies in the second premise. If cancelling services during a pandemic is a demonstration of mercy, then conducting services during a pandemic is a covenant violation. Since Matthew 12:7 and 12:11-12 contrast good and wicked behavior, basing an argument out of these passages to justify the cancellation of services during a pandemic makes the argument a matter of good versus evil. To put it another way, those who are in favor of cancelling services on the grounds of Matthew 12:7 are praised as being loyal while those who oppose the cancellation of services are implicitly accused of being disloyal to God. Some who uphold the goodness of cancelling services during the current pandemic have gone so far as to argue that encouraging church attendance could be encouraging people to “kill for Jesus.” It’s odd that some who advocate such continue to attend services while pressuring others to cancel.

Doing good is a matter of requirement; it is not a matter of liberty. One cannot simultaneously argue for the goodness of cancelling services and the goodness of attending services unless one is prepared to engage in situational ethics. Or, to state it another

36 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

way, to argue that cancelling services is evil in one situation while advocating it is good in another situation is to build an argument on the grounds of situational ethics.⁵ In scriptural terms, how can we urge people to both forsake and not forsake “the assembling of ourselves together” (Hebrews 10:25)?

Acts of mercy are not optional; they are matters of requirement. A covenant violation of mercy is always an act of evil.⁶ Asserting that canceling services is an act of mercy is one thing; proving it is another. If God has given us “every good work,” (2 Timothy 3:16-17) and cancelling services in the name of a pandemic is a good work, we should be able to find authority for such action in God’s word rather than merely asserting its goodness?⁷

⁵ Such an argument is the same as arguing that it is wrong to lie unless the Nazis are asking you questions about harboring Jews.

⁶ A similar argument is raised by some who argue it is good to cancel services during a pandemic as an act of submission to governmental mandates based on Romans 13:1-4 arguing, “For rulers are not a terror to good works.” The problem with this argument is that it, too, is a contrast between good and evil. If it is good to cancel services, it is evil not to cancel them. Romans 13 demands goodness, not liberty. Are those who advocate for the goodness of canceling services prepared to argue that those who continue to assemble are practicing evil? Should we not obey God rather than men? (Acts 5:29).

⁷ For more applications and implications of Matthew 12:9-14 see Chapter 11.

CHAPTER 3

General Application

We must now consider what application the teaching of Matthew 12:1-14 has within the church.

First, rather than teaching that the law or worship of God may be set aside in the name of mercy, Matthew 12:1-14 demonstrates that God's Law and worship must be upheld together. Jesus did not advocate an abandonment of the law; He upheld the law through proper interpretation.

Second, before an action is declared good, it must be demonstrated through the law that the action is good (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Third, if an action is deemed good, it is not merely allowed, it is required. A failure to do good is a commission of evil (Matthew 12:12; James 4:17).

Fourth, God's Law is meant to be a blessing not a burden. To forbid the blessings of God's Law is Pharisaical and a covenant violation.

Fifth, God requires covenant faithfulness and worship. Worship without covenant faithfulness is

38 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

vain, and covenant faithfulness without worship is an impossibility. Jesus stated it this way:

““Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithes of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. *These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.* Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!”¹

APPLICATION TO COVID-19 CRISIS

For specific points of application to our current COVID-19 crisis please read the final sections of Part 2 of this book, beginning with Chapter 10.

¹ Emphasis mine.

CHAPTER 4

Our Current Crisis

Our society stands paralyzed by fear because of the COVID-19 virus and a lack of faith, hope, and trust in God. All the securities of worldliness have disappeared overnight as man looks to science to provide all the answers. Yet try as it might, science proves over and over again that it does not have all the answers. Medical experts predict mass casualties into the millions causing great panic, only to revise their numbers time and time again. Best guesses are made in hopes of curbing the effects of the virus, yet these guesses do not bring comfort.

The media has capitalized on the momentum of fear and has chosen to fan its flames. It is impossible to turn on the television or the radio without hearing updates about the horrific nature of the pandemic. Hysteria is the currency of the commentator and doom the only outlook.

Social media is equally bad if not worse than traditional media. Thanks to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and the like, everyone has a voice and the

40 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

cry of fear becomes deafening. Rather than looking to God for guidance everyone looks to their peers and ends up infected with the same fear that has stricken others. One statistic after another is quoted in the hopes of providing solutions, but comfort does not seem to have been found in the statistics.

Fear has shut down our economy and taken jobs away from thousands creating even more fear. It was bad enough that many were already frightened by the prospect of death, but now they have to deal with the uncertainties of living.

To compound the issue even further the government of most states has deemed the church non-essential and arbitrarily restricted church gatherings to ten people or less. Sure, you can go to Wal-Mart and shop with thousands who recently discovered they needed toilet paper, but you can't assemble with the faithful to get on your knees and pray that God might grant mercy and relief. Ironically, the only institution God hears (John 9:31) has been commanded to disband in the name of safety. Skeptics ask, "Where is God!?" while prohibiting the faithful from entreating him collectively.¹

¹ Chapter 13 contains an expansion of this material.

HOW SHOULD THE CHURCH RESPOND?

The church's response must be a demonstration of faith in the gospel. As the world grows darker the glow of the church and her gospel must brighten. While the world is frozen in fear, the church must triumph in faith. As the world seeks answers the voice of the gospel must be heard clearly.

Christians should be the calmest, most collected, and most confident citizens in every community. They should have a different outlook having the ability to see things through the eyes of faith from heaven's perspective. Christians should have hope because Jesus robbed death of its sting and won victory over the grave (1 Corinthians 15:55). More than ever, being a Christian should provoke questions about the hope that lies within us (1 Peter 3:15).

We as the church have a hope that the world does not and cannot have. As the world falls apart, the gospel has greater appeal to those who are perishing. When was the last time our society stopped to consider the importance and fragility of life? When was the last time sports, recreation, school, and work were all placed on the back burner at the same time as people were forced to spend time with family and reflect on the blessings and tragedies of life? Rather than viewing our current pandemic as a hopeless moment of despair we should be looking for opportunities to share the gospel.

42 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

Rather than discouraging the assembly of the saints, we should be urging those who are weak, doubting, and lost to come and receive the saving power of the gospel. There are many within our communities who want to assemble and have been denied the opportunity to do so. Shall we not open the door to those who knock? There are others who are concerned with dying in a lost condition and seek salvation. Shall we not offer healing during the pandemic, as Jesus did on the Sabbath, even if it means persecution?

The greatest demonstrations of faith have always occurred in moments of despair. Faith cannot triumph if there is no conflict over which to gain the victory. When faith seems hopeless there it is most brilliantly displayed.

The inspired words of the Psalmist say it best:

“The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer,
my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge,
my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.
I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised,
and I am saved from my enemies.” (Psalm 18:2-3)

May God’s people take refuge in the rock and ground themselves in the only foundation that can weather the storm (Matthew 7:24-27).

Part 2

CHAPTER 5

The Big Picture

MATTHEW, THE OLD TESTAMENT, AND NARRATIVES

To appreciate the richness of Matthew's narrative in 12:1-8, we need to consider some general concepts regarding Matthew's use of the Old Testament.

It is widely recognized that Matthew wrote with a Jewish audience in mind and had a keen interest in the "fulfillment" of their Scriptures.¹ What is not recognized is how utterly dependent Matthew is on the Old Testament. As he presents Jesus as the "fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets," Matthew tells the story of Christ as the embodiment of both Israel and her covenant.

Patrick Schreiner's analysis is helpful,

My aim is to demonstrate that Jesus is not merely represented as a new individual but that Matthew's plot as a whole completes the story of the nation. Jesus not only embodies and mimics

¹ There are seventeen explicit references to the fulfillment of Scripture to pair with hundreds of echoes and allusions.

the life of characters but of Israel as a whole. Israel can be viewed through its individual figures, but Israel can also be conceived as a corporate entity. Matthew offers Jesus's life through both of these lenses, and therefore we would be remiss if we didn't follow the scribe in his teaching... If David is associated with the kingdom, Moses with the Exodus, and Abraham with family, then Israel's narrative can be put under the banner of exile. Matthew reveals Jesus through the curtain of the history of Israel; the story of Jesus is the story of Israel in repeat. Jesus is not merely the son of David, or the son of Abraham, but the Son of Yahweh, who perfects the narrative of Israel.²

Understanding Jesus as the new and greater Israel, David, Moses, Joshua, Abraham, Adam, Solomon, Jonah, Elisha, Jeremiah, Sacrifice, Prophet, Priest, King, Teacher, Temple, Tabernacle, Sabbath, Passover, Exodus, Eisodus, and more transforms the greatest Old Testament characters, institutions, and events into a marvelous tapestry displaying the awesome beauty of God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.³ No one man, institution, or event could

² Patrick Schreiner. *Matthew, Disciple, and Scribe* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 207-8.

³ For further development of these themes see Schreiner, *Matthew*. See also Charles L. Quarles. *A Theology of Matthew* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013) and Dale C. Allison Jr. *The New Moses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013).

ever provide more than a fraction of the fullness of Christ. When substance replaced shadow, the types faded and God's Transfigured Glory alone remained.

Matthew's narratives display multifaceted layers of brilliance depicting Jesus as the combination of multiple Old Testament pieces within a single scene. The following summation by Schreiner will help prepare us to understand and appreciate the richness we will encounter in Matthew 12.

Narratives function at several levels, and those who search for "one meaning" in narratives are not attending to the richness that lies within. Matthew doesn't have to restrict himself to one point. He can use one narrative to present Jesus as both a Moses-type figure *and* a David-type figure. He can intermix these not only because this is how narratives work, but also because all of Israel's history is unified in Jesus... For example, when Jesus is tempted in the wilderness, he is acting as the new Adam, new Israel, and new prophet. When he feeds the people on the mountain, he is providing food as both a new Moses and new Elisha. When Jesus gives the Great Commission, it is mirroring Cyrus's edict (2 Chron. 36:23), the commission of Moses (Deut. 31:14-15), and the commission to Joshua (Joshua 1:1-9). Matthew can be generous with his

intertextual links while also being structured and thoughtful.⁴

MATTHEW 12: SETTING THE SCENE

The scene begins with a disagreement between Jesus and the Pharisees over whether or not the disciples were guilty of working on the Sabbath by plucking and eating heads of grain as they walked through a field. This occasion was not the first disagreement between the Lord and the Pharisees, nor would it be the last.

Speaking of the interconnected nature of the four controversies in Matthew 12, R. T. France states the following:

At each point we meet people in positions of religious leadership who confront Jesus and challenge his authority to act as he has been doing, “the Pharisees” in vs. 2, 14, and 24 and “some of the scribes and Pharisees” in vs. 38. For them Jesus is a law-breaker (vv. 1-14), an agent of Satan (vv. 24-32), and a self-appointed “teacher” with no proper authorization (vv. 38-42)... Jesus sets his own status alongside that of the highest authority figures of the OT, David the King, the priests in the temple, Jonah the prophet, and Solomon the king and wise man, and (implicitly in the case of David but explicitly for the others)

⁴ Schreiner, *Matthew*, 209.

claims that “something greater” has now superseded those recognized authorities.⁵

France correctly observed that Jesus used the occasions of dispute in Matthew 12 to advocate His position as the “greater” King, Priest, Temple, Prophet, and Wise Man. Jesus intentionally brought His multi-faceted Messianic role into the scene to establish His authority and trump the authority of the religious leaders.

To France’s list of Messianic titles should be added the Divine titles of Son of Man and Lord of the Sabbath. We will discuss what Jesus meant by their use momentarily, but for now we are simply gathering the lay of the land.

Another facet of the scene is appreciated when one is familiar with the TaNaK arrangement of the Old Testament which divides the canon into the Law, The Prophets (the Former and the Latter) and the Writings. When Jesus referenced the story of David, He drew from the Former Prophets. When He referenced the priest serving in the temple, He drew from the Law. When He quoted Hosea 6:6, He drew from the Latter Prophets. And when He declared Himself to be the Son of Man, He referenced the Writings (Daniel 7:13).⁶ Jesus’ defense was grounded

⁵ R. T. France, *New International Commentary Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 451-52.

⁶ Knox Chamblin, *Matthew: A Mentor Commentary* (Great Britain: Focus, 2010), 641-47.

50 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

in the authority of the entire Old Testament - not merely a technicality. Jesus did not come to destroy the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill (Matthew 5:17). Recognizing this detail should provide a helpful insight into understanding whether or not Jesus broke or endorsed the breaking of the Sabbath.

THE ACCUSATION

As we begin our investigation, we must first understand the accusation of the Pharisees before we can understand the Lord's response. When the Pharisees accused the disciples of "unlawful" activity on the Sabbath we must ask, "Unlawful according to what law?" Had the disciples violated the actual Sabbath regulations, or had they merely violated the legalistic Sabbath regulations of the Pharisees?

The answer to these questions appears when Jesus' point in Matthew 12:5 is understood.

Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? (Matthew 12:5)

Profanation of the Sabbath was considered a rebellious sin worthy of God's wrath (Ezekiel 20:13). Would anyone accuse the priest of profaning the Sabbath through offering sacrifices commanded by God? No. But a profanation of the Sabbath is the conclusion one would have to reach if they held the Pharisaical view of Sabbath observance.

Having established the blamelessness of the priests, Jesus stated:

But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the *guiltless*. (Matthew 12:7)

The Greek word translated “guiltless” in verse 6 is the same word translated “blameless” in verse 5. The Pharisees falsely accused the disciples who were no more guilty of breaking the Sabbath than were the priests. The Pharisees had taken God’s blessing of the Sabbath and turned it into a burden by piling on restrictions (such as refusing people to eat as they passed through a field) that God never intended.

The whole point comes into clearer view when the larger context is considered. At the end of chapter eleven the Lord issued these words of comfort:

Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)

Set in this context, the Sabbath controversy illustrates the heavy and unreasonable yoke of

52 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

Pharisaic legalism.⁷ Burden binding was one of the constant offenses of the Pharisees that Jesus found deplorable (Matthew 23:4). Understanding the legalistic nature of the Pharisees as the root issue within Matthew 12:1-8 will prove extremely important to unlocking the scene in its entirety.

THE SYNOPTICS

Before proceeding further, please consider the similarities and differences of the scene before us within the Synoptic accounts.

At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath. And His disciples were hungry, and began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to Him, “Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!” But 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? Yet I say to you that in this place there is One greater than the temple. But if you*

⁷ Craig Evans, *Matthew: New Cambridge Bible Commentary* (New York: Cambridge, 2012), 249.

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.” (Matthew 12:1-8)⁸

Now it happened that He went through the grain fields on the Sabbath; and as they went His disciples began to pluck the heads of grain. And the Pharisees said to Him, “Look, why do they do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” But He said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he was in need and hungry, he and those with him: how he went into the house of God in the days of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the showbread, which is not lawful to eat except for the priests, and also gave some to those who were with him?” And He said to them, “*The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.* Therefore the Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:23-27)

Now it happened on the second Sabbath after the first that He went through the grain fields. And His disciples plucked the heads of grain and ate them, rubbing them in their hands. And some of the Pharisees said to them, “Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?” But

⁸ The italics text indicates the material that is unique to Matthew and Mark within the Synoptics.

54 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

Jesus answering them said, “Have you not even read this, what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he went into the house of God, took and ate the showbread, and also gave some to those with him, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat?” And He said to them, “The Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath.” (Luke 6:1-5)

It is evident through a side-by-side comparison of the Synoptic accounts that there is material within Matthew’s account that is not contained in the others. Likewise, there is material in the Marcan account that is not found in either parallel accounts. Luke alone does not contain any unique material.⁹ The Lord’s only defense in Luke’s account was the story of David and the statement that “The Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath.”

The importance of the Synoptic view is that it recognizes the story of David and the showbread as the only proof necessary for rebutting the Pharisees. All of the extra material supplied by Matthew and Mark is supplemental and does not change the conclusion, but serves to strengthen the point established in the story of David. The showbread

⁹ The diversity of the Synoptic accounts makes this passage a famously difficult passage for those who hold to the two-source hypothesis (a belief in “Q”).

scene is the key to unlocking the text and through its message Jesus proves that He is Lord of the Sabbath.

CHAPTER 6

David and the Showbread

THE POSITIONS

“Have you not read?” Jesus asked defiantly as He attacked the Pharisees. Jesus’ choice to attack rather than defend indicates His anger towards the Pharisees and prepares the reader for similar scenes later in the Gospel (Matthew 19:4; 21:16, 42; 22:31).

It’s fair to say Jesus’ passage of choice was unique and surprising. The Pharisees never saw the attack coming. The Lord’s words stung as they hit His opponents, yet they confuse as they strike us. How could Jesus perceive the answer so plain and yet modern readers find it so difficult?

Here are the most common positions New Testament Scholars take regarding David eating the showbread and why Jesus called the scene forth in His defense:

58 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

1. David sinned by eating the showbread, yet was excused because of who he was.

R. T. France takes this position and argues among other things that Jesus and His disciples were likewise excused because of who Jesus was as Son of Man and Lord of the Sabbath.¹ Others go so far as to say that the disciples had indeed broken the Sabbath and that Jesus justified their behavior on the grounds of his Kingship and Deity as one greater than David. In other words, if David was excused for eating the showbread, should not the Greater David be excused for allowing His disciples to eat grain?

The problem with these arguments is that the Pharisees did not accept Jesus' claims to authority generally, so why should they accept them on this occasion and allow Jesus to walk free? Had Jesus conceded that His disciples broke the Sabbath and claimed it was acceptable because He was the Messiah, the Pharisees would have arrested him for Sabbath violation. Yet when Jesus finally stood trial, His accusers could not trump up a single charge.

¹ See R. T. France, *New International Commentary Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 459.

2. David sinned by eating the showbread, yet was excused because of the circumstances he found himself in.²

The problem with this position is two-fold. First, it promotes situational ethics where Law can be set aside due to a person's need. Why would it be acceptable for David to break the law when he was hungry, but it was considered unlawful for a person to steal food when they were hungry (Proverbs 6:30-31).

Second, would the Pharisees accept Jesus' argument that it was okay for His disciples to eat grain on the Sabbath because they were hungry? Was eating due to hunger not the very reason why the Pharisees had raised their accusation to begin with? Would bringing forth an example of a guilty David justify allowing the disciples to go free?

3. David sinned by eating the showbread, and Jesus drew attention to this fact to show the inconsistency of the Pharisees.

² See I. Howard Marshall, *Gospel of Luke: New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 228-33.

60 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

Wayne Jackson³ and Eric Lyons⁴ both hold this third position and have used it to challenge the views of situational ethics (Position #2). Their argument is different from the previous two positions referenced above in that both Jackson and Lyons believe Jesus and His disciples did not sin. In other words, they see the scene of David and his men as a contrast with the Lord and His disciples rather than a comparison. The point of the alleged contrast is that the Pharisees are hypocritical for condemning Jesus while excusing David.

The problem with this view is that Jesus is left without proof of His innocence. Why should the Pharisees let Jesus and His disciples go? Could they not change their position on David in order to convict Jesus?

4. God made an exception in the case of David and the showbread and mediated the revelation of the exception through Ahimelech the High Priest.

³ See Wayne Jackson, "Did Jesus Endorse Situation Ethics?" *Christian Courier*, <https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/297-did-jesus-endorse-situation-ethics>, Accessed 12 April 2020.

⁴ See Eric Lyons, "Did David Break The Law in 1 Samuel 21?" *Apologetics Press*, 2019, <http://www.apologeticspress.org/APContent.aspx?category=6&article=5712>.

The “Special Permission” position is based on 1 Samuel 22:10 where Doeg the Edomite recounted to King Saul how Ahimelech the High Priest “inquired of the Lord for him (David), gave him provisions, and gave him the sword of Goliath the Philistine.”

If the “Special Permission” view is correct, David received grace from the Lord and was not guilty of sin. Yet the question would remain as to how this example freed the disciples from the accusation of the Pharisees. The answer would be that just as God’s allowance to David superseded the law of the showbread (Leviticus 24:5-9) so God’s provision for food superseded the Sabbath and allowed men to eat grain as they passed through a field.

Eric Lyons challenges the “Special Permission” position in favor of the third position stated above,⁵ arguing,

Simply because the treacherous and murderous Doeg and the incensed, unstable, and envious King Saul accused Ahimelech, priest of Israel, of inquiring of the Lord on David’s behalf does not mean that he did (1 Samuel 22:9-10,13). But didn’t Ahimelech himself confess to consulting the Lord in 1 Samuel 22:15? Admittedly, many English translations render the verse in such a way that certainly leaves the impression that

⁵ Ibid.

62 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

Ahimelech asked something of the Lord on David's behalf. ("Was that day the first time I inquired of God for him? Of course not!"—NIV.) However, could Ahimelech have actually meant that he did not inquire of God on David's behalf? "Have I today begun to inquire of God for him? Be it far from me" (ASV). Could this statement possibly mean, "I have never inquired of God on David's behalf, and I did not start doing so today"?

Lyon's critique is valid and should be expanded to include Psalm 52 where Doeg's actions were deemed deceitful. Since Scripture tells us Doeg lied, we must determine which part of what he told Saul was a lie. When Doeg gave his report to Saul he declared,

I saw the son of Jesse going to Nob, to Ahimelech the son of Ahitub. And he inquired of the Lord for him, gave him provisions, and gave him the sword of Goliath the Philistine. (2 Samuel 22:9-10)

Of the three actions Doeg attributed to Ahimelech, only two (giving provision and supplying the sword of Goliath) are verified by the account of 1 Samuel 21:1-6. Nothing is said in 1 Samuel 21:1-6 about Ahimelech inquiring of God on David's behalf. The point of contention between Saul and

Ahimelech, a point that Ahimelech strongly denied, was whether the High Priest had inquired of God on behalf of David (1 Samuel 22:15). Doeg simply lied about Ahimelech inquiring of God on behalf of David. Saul, wanting to believe a lie, commanded Doeg to slaughter the priests in violation of the Law which required the testimony of two or three witnesses before the death penalty could be invoked (Deuteronomy 17:6).

In the final assessment, it seems the “Special Permission” position is based on the fabrication of Doeg rather than the facts of the interaction between David and Ahimelech.

5. David no more broke the law in eating the showbread than the priests broke the Sabbath by offering sacrifice. David appealed to Ahimelech on the basis of the Law, and Ahimelech supplied David with the showbread based on his understanding of the Law.

This fifth position will be dealt with at length and will hopefully provide some keys to understanding the scene itself and why the Lord used it in His defense of the disciples.

DID DAVID LIE?

Before dealing with the guilt or innocence of David eating the showbread, we need to first set the scene by asking if David deceived Ahimelech when he first arrived at the tabernacle.

The Bible says Ahimelech the High Priest “was afraid” when David first showed up (1 Samuel 21:1). Ahimelech’s fear is meant to echo the fear of the elders of Bethlehem when Samuel arrived to anoint David as King.⁶ As David began to explain his arrival he informed Ahimelech that he was on a special mission from the King. Though many New Testament scholars accuse David of lying, several Old Testament scholars disagree.⁷ In 1 Samuel 20:22, Jonathan set up a test to determine if the Lord would send David away. Since David was sent away could it not be argued that the King of Heaven had sent him on His mission? Jonathan is also said to have sent David away (1 Samuel 20:42), and he appears to have the authority as the king’s son and heir apparent to act on behalf of the king (1 Samuel 20:28-29).

⁶ See Peter J. Leithart, *A Son to Me: An Exposition of 1 & 2 Samuel* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003), 126.

⁷ See Robert Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist* (San Francisco: Harper, 1989), 195. See also Ronald F. Youngblood, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: 1 Samuel – 2 Kings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 212. Also, J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on the Stylistic and Structural Analyses. Vol. 2.* (Assen: van Grocum, 1986), 396.

I believe James E. Smith's assessment of the situation holds true: "We should be reluctant to charge a man with lying unless there is no other possible explanation for what he is claiming."⁸

Rather than lying, David intentionally left Ahimelech in the dark in an attempt to protect him from Saul. David's action is the same action driven by the same motive as that of Samuel in 1 Samuel 16. Telling the truth does not demand revealing all the truth as Vern Poythress explains:

What about "partial truth"? The modern courtroom asks the witness to tell "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." It is a solemn pledge, appropriate to a courtroom that needs all kinds of pertinent facts to come to light. But the expression "the whole truth" is not appropriate for human communication in general. Scripture forbids gossip (Rom 1:29; 2 Cor 12:20; 1 Tim 5:13). "Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered" (Prov 11:13). The same principle applies when communicating with a wicked person. One avoids saying things that will be misused.

⁸ James E. Smith, *1&2 Samuel, A Commentary* (Lulu, 2018), 204.

66 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

We find a good example when the Lord sent Samuel to anoint David as king. According to 1 Sam 16:2, Samuel feared that Saul would find out about it and kill him. The Lord said to Samuel, “say, ‘I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.’” Samuel did say that (1 Sam 16:5). Of course, Samuel did not indicate all the reasons why he came to Bethlehem. He could have said more. But silence about the other purposes is not lying. What Samuel said was true. Nothing obliged Samuel to provide further information—especially information that, if it became known, might induce Saul to murderous action.⁹

The murderous action that Samuel and David feared was realized in 1 Samuel 22 when Saul killed Ahimelech and all the priests, save Abiathar. Though David intentionally tried to protect Ahimelech from Saul while receiving much needed food (1 Samuel 21:2), Saul’s wickedness ruled the day.

Many view the death of Ahimelech as resting on David’s shoulders because of his deceitful involvement of the priesthood, but I believe this places the blame on the wrong person. The punishment that came upon Ahimelech was the result of Eli rather than David. The curse against Eli pronounced in 1 Samuel 2:31-32 was partially

⁹ Vern S. Poythress, *Why Lying Is Always Wrong: The Uniqueness of Verbal Deceit*, WTJ (Westminster, 2013), 89.

fulfilled through Saul. When Ahimelech and all the priests were slain, only Abiathar remained. Abiathar and Zadock served as High Priests until the days of Solomon when Abiathar was deposed for conspiring with Adonijah to overthrow Solomon (1 Kings 1:7, 19, 25), thus finalizing the fulfillment of the curse against Eli. The blame for the slaughter rests squarely on the shoulders of Eli, Saul, and Doeg rather than David.

Speaking of Doeg, Psalm 52 pronounced a sentence of judgment upon him because of his deceitful actions that caused the death of Ahimelech and the priests.¹⁰ Though David felt somewhat responsible for the death of the priests (1 Samuel 22:22), it was not remorse based on sin that David felt. The sin belonged to Doeg and Saul.

REQUESTING THE SHOWBREAD

Having briefly explained his arrival, David couched his request for bread in an interesting manner by saying, “Now therefore what is under thine hand? Give me five loaves of bread in mine hand, or what there is present” (1 Samuel 21:3 KJV). David hereby invoked the Law which stated:

¹⁰ Those who would reject this point by arguing that the superscriptions of the Psalms are spurious must deal with E. W. Hengstenberg’s defense of the inscriptions. See E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Psalms Vol. III.* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1848), Appendix 22-31.

68 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

If there is among you a poor man of your brethren, within any of the gates in your land which the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother, but you shall open your hand wide to him and willingly lend him sufficient for his need, whatever he needs. (Deuteronomy 15:7-8)

Going to the priest and asking for bread while on a secret mission would assure that David's needs would be met while hopefully not endangering the lives of others. The fact that Saul chose to reject the testimony of the priests and slaughter them speaks to the depravity of his soul.

When David asked for bread, Ahimelech responded in verse 4, "There is no common bread on hand; but there is holy bread, if the young men have at least kept themselves from women." The "holy bread" on hand belonged to Ahimelech for it was bread that had been removed from the table of showbread and was given to the priests as wages by God.¹¹ Ahimelech was careful to distinguish between common and holy. Before he agreed to give the showbread to David, Ahimelech asked if the men had kept themselves from women, which was a technical

¹¹ See Leviticus 24:5-9 regarding the showbread as wages. See 1 Samuel 21:6 in reference to the bread given to David being bread that had been swapped out.

way of asking if they were sanctified (Exodus 19:10). The reason for this question is understood when it is recognized that Israel's soldiers were sanctified before worshiping God on the battlefield in Holy War.¹² Soldiers were sanctified because their mission was holy and because Holy God would be in their midst and fight with them.

David understood Ahimelech's question regarding sanctification and replied, "Indeed women have been kept from us, as usual whenever I set out.¹³ The men's bodies are holy even on missions that are not holy. How much more so today!" (1 Samuel 21:5 NIV).

David's argument is based on a lesser to greater construction. The young men were diligent to sanctify themselves for normal missions, and doubly sure on special missions such as this.¹⁴

¹² This is why Uriah the Hittite would not return to his wife at David's prompting. He did not want to defile himself so that he could rejoin the army and the battle. Understanding war as an act of worship explains why the spoils of Jericho could not be taken for they were a whole burnt offering to the Lord.

¹³ A technical term for "go to war." See 1 Samuel 8:20; 17:20.

¹⁴ Peter Leithart states his case this way, "Normally, commentators see David's action as an exceptional case, as illustration of the principle one can violate the details of ceremonial law for the sake of charity. But if the priest was bending the ceremonial law for a humanitarian reason, why did David and his men have to be "holy" (vs. 5)? David insisted that his men had been "kept from women," a reference to Leviticus 15:18, which informs us that sexual intercourse caused

70 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

Convinced that David and his men were holy, Ahimelech gave David the holy bread of the Presence. Consider this: If Ahimelech was justified in giving David the showbread simply because he was in need, why was there so much discussion regarding holiness? The reason is because even in times of need, holy things cannot come into contact with that which is defiled or common. Remember the case of Uzzah and the ark? The Bible does not allow for situational ethics in which necessity dictates which laws may be set aside.

Under ordinary circumstances only the priests were allowed to eat the bread of the Presence and only within the sanctuary. In principle, only holy men could eat holy bread in a holy place. It would appear that since the Law required providing for the needy, and based on the fact that David and his men were sanctified men and on a holy mission (place), Ahimelech was required to give David and his men the showbread for food. Though God's allowance would have violated Pharisaical tradition, David was innocent according to the Law. The bread of the

uncleanness. David did not, however, merely say his men were "clean," but that they were "holy," and the two terms are not identical... David's statement thus suggests that his men had "consecrated" themselves as part of their preparation for war (see Josh. 3:5; Is. 13:3), putting themselves under something like a Nazarite vow until their holy war was concluded."

Leithart, *A Son to Me*, 126-27.

Presence hence became the bread of God's provision.

The previous four positions outlined and critiqued above fail to take into account the discussion between David and Ahimelech regarding holiness. Since David felt his need and holiness allowed him to eat the bread, and since Ahimelech felt the same, maybe we should consider their reasoning more carefully than our own.

A SUMMARY OF THE ARGUMENT

It is my understanding that Jesus used the story of David and the showbread to declare the innocence of His disciples as equal to the innocence of David and his men. Under normal circumstances non-priests were not allowed to eat the showbread (Leviticus 24:9). Because David's request invoked the law of Deuteronomy 15:7-8, Ahimelech was required to provide David and his men with bread. The only bread Ahimelech possessed was the showbread that had recently been removed from the Presence. Before offering the showbread to David, Ahimelech inquired about the holiness of all who would eat the bread (1 Samuel 21:4-6), indicating that if they were not holy they could not receive the bread, even though the bread was in his possession, and they were in a state of need. The justification for Ahimelech's action is therefore grounded in Deuteronomy 15:7-8 and the qualification of holiness.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Some brethren have used the story of David and the showbread to teach that necessity negates Law. The actual point of the story is that God's Law self-regulates by providing its own allowances, just as in the case of the priests offering sacrifice on the Sabbath. Though David's actions would be considered unlawful according to Pharisaic tradition, they were justified by the law itself. David did not destroy the law of the showbread any more than the priests profaned the Sabbath. Necessity does not negate Law; Law regulates mercy (Matthew 23:23-24).

CHAPTER 7

Tactics

ASSESSING THE EXAMPLES

By choosing the examples of David and his men along with the priests offering sacrifices in the temple, Jesus skillfully highlighted all that was at stake. As in the case of David, Jesus served as the representative of His men who awaited His ascension to the throne. The Pharisees attacked Jesus rather than His men because Jesus was the one in charge, and His men acted under His approval. As in the example of the priests, the disciples served under God's authority in the Greater Temple. By using these two carefully chosen examples, Jesus answered the Pharisees and set His mission in royal and priestly context.

WHO IS ON TRIAL?

More importantly, however, instead of defending His disciples, Jesus turned the tables and launched an attack on the Pharisees.¹ The reason David needed

¹ The tactic the Lord employed on this occasion is reminiscent of how He would later turn the tables again in Matthew 21-23.

74 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

provision was because the wicked leadership of Israel (Saul) was persecuting him and seeking his life (Matthew 11:12). In the same way, the current controversy was the result of hatred, persecution, and rejection of God's anointed Son by Israel's leaders. Furthermore, to resist the mission of Jesus and His disciples was worse than resisting the temple offerings, for Jesus was greater than the temple!

In case the Pharisees refused to acknowledge the full weight of the Lord's rebuke hidden within His defense, Jesus proceeded to offer a scathing indictment: "But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless." (12:7)

The fact that Matthew recorded two separate occasions where the Lord quoted the same words from Hosea should give us pause and heighten our awareness of their importance (Matthew 9:13). Yet many Bible students and commentators have either failed to recognize the Lord's words as a quotation of Hosea 6:6, or having recognized the quotation, have failed to interpret its meaning in light of the original context.

The common interpretation of Matthew 12:7 is that mercy triumphs over sacrifice, or as some would put it, love trumps law. The idea expressed is that as long as one demonstrates love and mercy, the law does not matter.

If the whole point of the discussion is that mercy triumphs over sacrifice, why do the other Synoptic accounts not contain the Lord's quotation of Hosea? Why was Ahimelech concerned about whether David and his men were holy if mercy triumphs over sacrifice? And why did Jesus bother using the examples of David and the priests to begin with? Why didn't Jesus respond with Hosea 6:6 and dispense with the other arguments?

How interpreters understand Jesus' quotation of Hosea 6:6 determines how they understand Matthew 12:1-8 as a whole. "Mercy and not sacrifice" is the hinge on which the whole passage turns in the minds of modern readers. As a result, those who fail to grasp Hosea's message will wrongly interpret Matthew's as well. It is hard to over-emphasize the critical importance of this Old Testament quotation when interpreting the overall significance of the passage.

CHAPTER 8

Hosea 6

As Jesus concluded His chastisement of the Pharisees, He wielded the message of Hosea 6:6 and inflicted a climactic blow. In order to understand the intended meaning, Matthew 12:7 must be interpreted in light of Hosea's original message. Interpretive approaches that fail to employ proper rules of intertextual interpretation will result in false explanations of Jesus' message.¹

¹ The concepts of intertextuality and progressive revelation found in the Introduction still hold true and must be applied when examining Hosea 6:6. For a defense of the contextual understanding of Hosea 6:6 as a basis for interpreting Matthew 12:7 see Objection #1 and #2 in Chapter 10.

A Bird's-Eye View

The message of Hosea is divided structurally into three large units (Hosea 1-3:5, 4:1-7:16, and 8:1-14:9).² The first unit functions programmatically for interpreting the latter units and introduces the themes of apostasy, judgment, and restoration in the birth narratives of Hosea's three children. Hosea's marriage relationship with his harlot wife Gomer is also recounted to prophetically describe Israel's lack of covenant faithfulness to God.

The second major unit of Hosea (4:1-7:16) falls into two parts (4:1-5:15 and 6:1-7:16) and employs a heavy usage of trilogies.³

The first general accusation is threefold (4:1). The book then indicts three specific groups of people (religious leadership, 4:4-10; common people, 12-13a; and women, 13b-14). In 4:14-5:15, the text gives three extended warnings to Israel and Judah, and 6:1-3 follows this with a threefold call to repent. In 5:1 the text addresses three groups: the priests, the house of Israel, and the house of the king; and in 5:1-2 one reads of

² I have adapted and employed Duane Garrett's structural analysis of Hosea's message. See Duane Garrett, *The New American Commentary: Hosea and Joel* (Broadman, 1997), 37-8.

³ Matthew's proclivity for trilogies (as noted in the three-fold argument in Matthew 12:1-8) seems modeled on the prophets generally, if not Hosea particularly.

traps at Mizpah, Tabor, and Shittim. In 5:8 signals ring out at three places: Gibeah, Ramah, and Beth Aven. Yahweh then laments Israel's incapacity to repent and in particular cites the sins at Adam, Gilead, and Shechem (6:7-9) and the unforgiven status of Israel, Ephraim, and Samaria (7:1). In a book that bears strong resemblance to wisdom (see 14:9), focus on the number three cannot be considered accidental. The most reasonable explanation is that this pattern reflects the number of Hosea's children—three. Indeed, as this commentary seeks to demonstrate, 4:1-5:15 deliberately builds upon the three oracles of Jezreel, Lo-Ruhamah, and Lo-Ammi. Thus, 4:1-7:16 is shaped by the symbolism of Hosea's three children, and the text moves from a series of accusations and predictions of woe to a call to repent (6:1-3). It ends, however, in frustration, with Yahweh's recognition that this people is too deep in sin to repent (6:4-7:16).⁴

Hosea's third unit (Hosea 8:1-14:9) concludes the prophet's message with three major antiphonal proclamations (8:1-10:15, 11:1-13:16, and 14:1-9) in which God and His prophets have a back-and-forth discussion about the themes presented in the first two units.

⁴ Garrett, *Hosea*, 35-6

80 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

Garrett's summation of the big picture of the book is helpful,

The movement of the book is thus: first, linkage is established between Yahweh and his prophet in the account of the marriage to Gomer, and the major themes of apostasy, judgment, and restoration are developed (1-3). Second, using the three children of Hosea to shape the text, the book presents a series of accusations dominated by the number three, but ends this section with a threefold call to repent; nevertheless, it asserts that at this stage repentance is impossible (4-7). Third, in three series of antiphonal proclamations, Hosea presents a distressed Yahweh torn over what to do with his people but who finally resolves upon exile as the solution; this is followed by a final, more optimistic, call to repent (8-14).⁵

Hosea 6

A proper understanding of Hosea 6:6 must be derived from an examination of the immediate context (Chapter 6), the broader context (4:1-7:16) and the book as a whole.⁶

⁵ Garrett, *Hosea*, 37.

⁶ It should also be considered within the context of the Book of the Twelve, but such an examination is beyond the scope of our present work.

The sixth chapter of Hosea is divided into two parts with verses 1-3 containing promised blessings of restoration to those who repent and verses 4-11 issuing the Lord's verdict of judgment on the rebellious.

The "promised blessings of restoration to those that repent" in Hosea 6:1-3 follow the assurance of exile at the conclusion of Chapter 5. Homer Hailey believed Hosea 6:1-3 recoded Israel's half-hearted confession uttered in response to the prediction of exile (4-5:15), and concluded that verses 4-7 expressed the Lord's counter-rebuke.⁷ Though there are points of appeal to Hailey's interpretation, verses 1-3 are more likely a ray of hope within a setting of despondency.

Come, let us return to the Lord.
 For He has torn us, but He will heal us;
 He has wounded us, but He will bandage us.
 "He will revive us after two days;
 He will raise us up on the third day,
 "So let us know, let us press on to know the Lord.
 His going forth is as certain as the dawn;
 And He will come to us like the rain,
 Like the spring rain watering the earth. (Hosea
 6:1-2 NASB)

⁷ Homer Hailey, *A Commentary on the Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1972), 155-6.

82 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

Having foreseen the Assyrian exile, Hosea encouraged the wounded and weary exiles to repent so that they could be restored. The first three verses contain synonymous parallelism to emphasize and explain the message. Healing was needed because God had torn Israel like a lion (Hosea 5:14) and bandages were required due to the rottenness God had inflicted on Judah (Hosea 5:12). Hosea described God as both the Mighty Warrior who kills and the Great Physician who heals. The two-fold promise of healing is paralleled with a two-fold promise of raising and reviving that results in life. Raising and revival is nothing short of resurrection⁸ and Hosea goes out of his way to emphasize resurrection on the third day (a point we shall return to momentarily). Promise of healing and resurrection is followed by the assurance of dawn and a double blessing of spring rain. The promised dawning of a new day predicted a new stage of life and a reversal of the devouring darkness of the New Moon (Hosea 5:7). Spring rain would accompany the sure dawn and reverse the famine brought about by the whirlwind (see Hosea 4:19 and 8:7) while guaranteeing a bountiful harvest. God was willing to heal, raise, and bless if only Israel would return to covenant faithfulness through repentance and knowledge of God (Hosea 6:1, 3).

⁸ Ezekiel 37 picks up and expands the concept of Israel's resurrection.

Hosea 6:1-3 + Christ

Though Hosea 6:1-3 is not directly quoted in the New Testament with reference to Christ, Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are commonly understood to qualify him as the Great Physician who brings spiritual healing, resurrection to life, and abundant blessing from the Father. The life and ministry of Jesus are both explicitly and implicitly linked to the redemption of Israel (Matthew 1:1-18; 2:6, 15; 4:13-17; Luke 1:68; 2:25, 38, 30-32; 24:21; Acts 1:6; 28:20; Galatians 6:16), opening the door to the possibility that the restoration of Israel described in Hosea 6:1-3 could be connected to Jesus. The tie between Christ and Hosea 6:1-3 is strengthened with Matthew's declaration that the New Exodus (Hosea 11:1) found fulfillment in Christ (Matthew 2:15). The concept of corporate solidarity, in which an individual represents the corporate body, stands as the key to unlocking Matthew's usage of Hosea 11:1 and cements Jesus' role as the head of redeemed Israel.⁹ When the resurrection of Christ is understood to accomplish the restoration of Israel, the third day resurrection of the nation can speak of the physical resurrection of Christ.

⁹ See G. K. Beal's phenomenal explanation of Hosea 11:1. See G. K. Beale, *A Handbook to the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 60-5.

84 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

Paul seems to have alluded to Hosea 6:2 when he declared, “He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures,” (1 Corinthians 15:4) for it was through the resurrection of Christ our representative that we have hope of restoration unto life (1 Corinthians 15:22-28). The message of Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 seem to also echo the words of Christ in John 11:25-26 where Jesus stated, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.”

If we are correct in our assessment of Hosea 6:1-3, Jesus stands as the ultimate expression of the Father’s blessing to those who repent and pursue the knowledge of God in the person of Christ. Unfortunately, as Hosea proceeded to declare, the majority of Israel refused to seek the resurrecting power of the Great Physician.

HOSEA 6:4-7

What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?
What shall I do with you, O Judah?
For your loyalty is like a morning cloud
And like the dew which goes away early.
Therefore I have hewn them in pieces by the prophets;
I have slain them by the words of My mouth;
And the judgments on you are like the light that goes forth.
For I delight in *loyalty* rather than sacrifice,

And in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

But like Adam they have transgressed the covenant;

There they have dealt treacherously against Me.
(Hosea 6:4-7 NASB)

Despite God's unfailing love and eagerness to forgive, Israel and Judah, like Gomer, refused to remain loyal to their covenant relationship. While God's blessings were as sure as the morning sunrise and spring rain, God's covenant bride fled from Him like the dew at dawn. God was (and is) steadfast, gracious, and sure; Israel was disloyal, selfish, and faithless.

Because of Israel's waywardness, God sent the prophets to hack Israel and Judah down to size. The language of slaughter and division is sacrificial imagery. The prophets' words were meant to turn Israel into a proper sacrifice for the Lord. God would be glorified by the sacrifice of Israel one way or another, be it through sacrifices of repentance or judgment.

Notice the synonymous parallelism found again in verse 6,

86 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

For I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice, And in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. (Hosea 6:6)¹⁰

Loyalty is paralleled with having a knowledge of God, and knowledge of God was earlier paired with a return to covenant faithfulness (vs. 1, 3). One cannot claim loyalty to the King of heaven while refusing to submit to His word. When rebellious people offer God sacrifice, it angers Him. God delights in loyalty, not worthless sacrifice offered without humble submission and loving faithfulness. Worthless sacrifice is damning.

Loyalty carries with it the concept of covenant faithfulness which is the theme of verse 7. Israel and Judah went the way of mankind¹¹ and dealt treacherously with God by breaking his covenant. God thus sent the prophets to rain down covenant curses upon His wicked, bloodthirsty, murderous, villainous, whoring, and defiled people (vs. 8-11). Gary Smith sums up Hosea's message nicely,

¹⁰ Remember this is the passage quoted by Jesus in Matthew 12:7.

¹¹ Covenant theology posits that Adam is not a reference to mankind but to a creation covenant made with Adam. For a discussion of the difficulties surrounding vs. 7 see J. Angus Harley, *A New Covenant Theology Critique of the Adamic Covenant* (Harley, 2018), 45-9. Regardless of one's interpretation of "Adam," *hesed* is clearly used in a covenantal context.

In spite of this, all they can do is to mechanically bring their sacrificial gifts at their syncretistic temples to appease God (Hos. 6:6). What God wants is their “consistent covenant devotion” (not “mercy,” as in NIV). They need to know God by having a living relationship with him. Their worship at their temples does not satisfy the Lord because he wants them to love him, fear him, worship only him, serve him, and obey him (Deut. 10:12). Going through the religious motions will not cut it with God.¹²

Timothy Green concurs with Smith and concludes,

Obviously the prophet neither demonizes nor rejects the notion and practice of sacrifices. Rather, he renders them meaningless and empty if they are not accompanied by that which they are to represent in the first place, that is, the loyalty of God’s people and their intimate covenant knowledge of God.¹³

Hosea’s message is not unique, but rather shared by many of the prophets including Jeremiah as Christopher Wordsworth rightly notes as he

¹² Gary V. Smith, *The NIV Application Commentary on Hosea* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 112.

¹³ Timothy M Green, *New Beacon Bible Commentary, Hosea*, Olive Tree Digital (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2014).

88 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

connects Hosea 6:6 with Jeremiah 7:22 and then comments on the latter passage,

Do not imagine (says God by the Prophet) that when I gave to your fathers the Levitical Law, I commanded them to bring burnt offerings and sacrifices *as such*; as if sacrifices themselves were what I desired. Do not suppose that I “eat bull’s flesh, or drink the blood of goats” (Ps. 1. 3). No. I instituted them to be tests and exponents of your faith, and love, and obedience to Me; and without the inward *sacrifice of yourselves* - of your hearts and wills - all sacrifices are vain, yea, they are loathsome and abominable. Cp. 1 Sam. 15:22. Ps. 40:8; 41:17. Proverbs 21:27. Isa. 1:11; 48:3; 66:3. Mic. 6:6-8. Hos. 6:6. Matthew 9:13. The true sacrifice which I require is Obedience to My will and word; if that is absent, ye cease to be My people, your Temple and City will be a desolation, and ye will be outcasts from My presence.¹⁴

HESED

The contextual meaning of Hosea 6:6 is radically different from the interpretation many have drawn from its usage in Matthew 12:7. Hosea did not share

¹⁴ Christopher Wordsworth, *The Holy Bible with Notes and Introductions, Volume 5, Pt. 2* (Waterloo Place, London: Rivertons, 1871), 19.

the modern concept that love and mercy allow man to put aside law and sacrifice. The Israelites were not allowed to shout “Love trumps law!” as they abandoned the covenant, nor did God overlook their rebellion.

The point of modern confusion arises from both a failure to interpret Hosea 6:6 contextually and a failure to understand the Hebrew word *hesed* translated “mercy” in the New King James Version (NKJV) or King James Version (KJV). I have intentionally used the New American Standard Version (NASB) when quoting Hosea 6 because it accurately translates the term *hesed* as “loyalty” in both verse 4 and 6. In the NKJV or KJV it is not easily recognized that the same Hebrew word is used in verses 4 and 6 where the first occurrence (vs 4) was translated “faithfulness” or “goodness” and the second usage (vs 6) was rendered “mercy.” By using two different English words to translate the same Hebrew word, the NKJV and KJV demonstrate the multi-faceted nature of *hesed*.

Another complication arises because there are two different Hebrew words that are translated as mercy in English bibles: *hesed* and *racham*. While *racham* is consistently used to describe the English concept of mercy, love, and compassion, *hesed* is almost always used within a covenantal context. In Hosea 6, for instance, the *hesed* of verse 6 is followed by an acknowledgement of covenant violations in verse 7. Earlier in Hosea a lack of *hesed*

90 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

(4:1) is described in terms of covenant violation (4:2). The covenant concept of *hesed* is crucial.

Vines explains the covenantal significance of *hesed* further and underscores the importance and richness of the term:

The term is one of the most important in the vocabulary of Old Testament theology... In general, one may identify three basic meanings of *hesed*, and these 3 meanings always interact - strength, steadfastness, and love. Any understanding of *hesed* that fails to suggest all three inevitably loses some of its richness. Love by itself easily becomes sentimentalized or universalized apart from the covenant.¹⁵

Yet strength or steadfastness suggests only the fulfillment of a legal (or similar) obligation. *Hesed* refers primarily to mutual and reciprocal rights and obligations between the parties of a relationship (especially Jehovah and Israel). But *hesed* is not only a matter of obligation but is also of generosity. It is not only a matter of loyalty, but also of mercy.¹⁶

¹⁵ W. E. Vine, *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Nashville: Nelson, 1996), 142-43.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Biblical usage frequently speaks of someone "doing," "showing," or "keeping" *hesed*. The concrete content of the word is especially evident when it is used in the plural (eg, La 3:22). God's "mercies," "kindnesses," or "faithfulnesses" are His specific, concrete acts of redemptive love in fulfillment of His covenant promises. An example appears in Isaiah 55:3. And I will make an everlasting covenant with you, according to the faithful mercies (*hesed*) shown to David.¹⁷

Hesed has both God and man as its subject. When man is the subject of *hesed*, the word usually describes the person's kindness or loyalty to another; cf. 2 Sa 9:7.¹⁸

David Hill captures the meaning of *hesed* in Hosea 6:6 well when he states,

The entire message of Hosea is dominated by the theme of covenant obligation, and when, in the midst of a denunciation of Israel's failure, the prophet expresses the divine demand as being for *hesed* rather than sacrifice there can be no doubt that he means covenant-loyalty, i.e. devotion and fidelity to Yahweh.¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ David Hill, *Hosea VI. 6 in Matthew's Gospel*, New Test. Stud. 24 (Cambridge), 108.

92 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

The best way to capture the essence of *hesed* is to think in terms of *covenant faithfulness* or *covenant loyalty*. Recognizing the richness of the term is critical to understanding the point of Hosea 6:4, 6 and Old Testament writers at large.

CHAPTER 9

Matthew's Use of Hosea 6

So how are we to understand Jesus' usage of Hosea 6:6 within His confrontation with the Pharisees in Matthew 12:1-8? In order to answer this question properly, we need to recognize the principle of progressive revelation and first consider Jesus' usage of Hosea 6:6 in Matthew 9:13. If the earlier passage proves easier to interpret, we will have extra guidance for a proper understanding the more difficult text.

Hosea 6:6 + Matthew 9:13

When the Lord rebuked the Pharisees for a lack of mercy in Matthew 9:13, He introduced Hosea 6:6 with the statement, "But go and learn what this means." David Hill explains this statement as a rabbinic formula known as a halakha "that does not mean, 'go and find out what you do not already know' but rather 'go and discern the sense of Scripture' or 'go and make a valid inference from the

94 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

scriptural statement.”¹ The significance of Hill’s point is critical and underscores the fact that the meaning of Hosea 6:6 had not changed over time and was discoverable through a Scriptural investigation. To further emphasize this point, Richard Hayes makes the following comment about the relationship between verses 12 and 13 of Matthew 9,

It is hardly accidental that Matthew links Jesus’ saying about the need for a physician to a prophetic passage that depicts Ephraim and Judah as crying out, “Come, let us return to the Lord; for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us” (Hos 6:1; cf 7:1). The passage in Hosea deals with the hope that God will bring healing to Israel, a torn and broken nation. Thus, if the Pharisees go to learn what Hosea 6:6 means, they will need to read more than one verse.²

If we are to understand the meaning of Hosea 6:6, we must do so in light of its original context as per the Lord’s command. While focusing attention on Hosea’s original message, Jesus simultaneously fulfilled its meaning by offering restoration to wayward sinners and tax collectors who were willing to turn and learn of God. Matthew himself was one

¹ David Hill, *Hosea VI. 6 in Matthew’s Gospel*, New Test. Stud. 24 (Cambridge), 11.

² Richard B. Hayes, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels*. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 126.

such sinner who took Jesus' words to heart that day and learned of God's healing, life giving, abundant blessings in the person of Jesus.

No other gospel writer record's Jesus' usage of Hosea 6:6, yet Matthew records it twice. When bible writers use repetition, they do so to underline and write in bold print.³ Since Matthew twice highlighted Hosea 6:6 and used it to describe the scene of his conversion, it is reasonable to assert that Hosea's message had a major impact on Matthew's understanding of Christ.

HOSEA 6:3 + MATTHEW 11:27-30

The restoration of Israel was predicated on their willingness to pursue a knowledge of God (Hosea 6:3). Shortly before referencing Hoses 6:6, Matthew records Jesus' claim,

All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him. Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from

³ I learned this important point from Dale Ralph Davis in his excellent work on preaching the Old Testament. See Dale Ralph Davis, *The Word Became Fresh* (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2006), 22.

Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light. (Matthew 11:27)

The two-fold promise of ultimate rest was predicated upon a pursuit of the knowledge of God through the person of Christ. God's Ultimate Sabbath could only be enjoyed in God's Ultimate Son to whom Israel's Sabbath pointed. Jesus' words, "You will find rest for your souls," echoed Jeremiah 6:16, and combined with His allusion to Hosea 6:3⁴ described Israel's current state as that of exilic bondage. Covenant violation was the root cause of Israel's foreign yoke (Hosea 11:4 and Jeremiah 27-28) as Jeremiah described Israel's rebellion as a refusal to walk in the "good way" (Jeremiah 6:16). The "good way" was now present in the person of Christ (John 14:6) as Jesus re-issued Jeremiah's offer of rest.

Israel's state of bondage, paired with Jesus' offer of rest, ground Matthew 11:27-30 and Matthew 12:1-14 in New Exodus terms and portray Jesus as both the New Moses and New Joshua.

⁴ C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures* (London: Nisbet, 1953), 77.

HOSEA 6:6 + MATTHEW 12:7

As Jesus drew His attack of the Pharisees to a close, He quoted Hosea 6:6 to indict the leaders of Israel for doing what they had always done. Jesus stood on the shoulders of Hosea and called the Pharisees back to covenant faithfulness. Yet the wounded Pharisees refused to turn so that Christ could heal them. Their corruption was so complete that they could not recognize the Loyal Son, the Ultimate Sacrifice, the True Sabbath, the Greater Temple, or the Divine King as they stood in His presence. No wonder Jesus soon began to use Isaiah's message to describe them,

And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled,
which says:
'Hearing you will hear and shall not understand,
And seeing you will see and not perceive;
For the hearts of this people have grown dull.
Their ears are hard of hearing,
And their eyes they have closed,
Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with
their ears,
Lest they should understand with their hearts and
turn,
So that I should heal them.' (Matthew 13:14-15)

CHAPTER 10

Answering Objections

There have been two objections raised against the material presented in chapter 9 that need to be addressed. Both objections agree with the conclusion of the other, namely that Jesus desired mercy rather than loyalty, but each has arrived at their conclusion through different argumentation.

FIRST OBJECTION:

First, it has been objected that Matthew's quotation of Hosea 6:6 is from the LXX and that his usage of the Greek word *ἔλεος*, rather than the Hebrew word *hesed*, changes the intended meaning of the text. The new alleged meaning is that mercy must be rendered towards man, rather than loyalty demonstrated towards God.

There are three main problems with the aforementioned argument. First, the argument

assumes Matthew quotes from the LXX.¹ Second, even if Matthew's quotation is taken from the LXX the argument does not understand the LXX's usage of *ἔλεος*. Lastly, the argument does not take into consideration the contextual meaning of *eleos* within the rest of Matthew's gospel.

MATTHEW AND THE LXX

The idea that the LXX's usage of *ἔλεος* in the translation of *hesed* alters the meaning of Hosea 6:6 does not take into account a Jewish usage of Greek terms. Collin Brown explains the problem,

The Heb. concepts betray a completely different background of thought from the predominately psychological one in Gk. They are based on logical concepts. *Hence, we have to interpret the LXX translation from the standpoint of the Heb. original and not the other way around.* Philo is the first Jewish writer in whom a penetration of the Gk. concepts is observable in our word-group.

¹ David Hill disagrees and argues that Matthew's rendering of Hosea 6:6 is his own. For this reason, and others, Hill believes the theological meaning of *hesed* passed into Matthew's usage of *ἔλεος*. We will not develop this thought further but I feel it should be noted. See David Hill, *Hosea VI. 6 in Matthew's Gospel* (Cambridge. New Test. Stud. 24), 107-8.

Hesed means proper covenant behavior, the solidarity which the partners in the covenant owe one another (→ Covenant). The covenant may be between equals, or it may be made by one who is stronger than his partner in it. In either case it may result in one giving help to the other in his need. So the connotations of ἔλεος meaning *hesed* may stretch from loyalty to a covenant to kindness, mercy, pity.²

Davies and Allison get it right when they state,

Perhaps, then, we should consider the possibility that ἔλεος still carries for Matthew the connotations of *hesed* and that he understands Hos 6:6 as did the prophet: cultic observance without inner faith and heart-felt covenant loyalty is vain. On this interpretation, the Pharisees are castigated because their objections show that despite their concern with external ritual their hearts are far from the God they think they honor (cf. 23.5-6).³

² Emphasis mine. Collin Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 2. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. 1976. p. 594.

³ Davies, W. D. and D. C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew. Vol. 2. ICC* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 105.

MATTHEW'S USE OF ἔλεος

Within Matthew's gospel Jesus engaged in frequent debate with the Pharisees, and on three of those occasions (including Matthew 12:7) the Lord rebuked the Pharisees for a neglect of ἔλεος. In order to determine the meaning of ἔλεος in Matthew 12:7, interpreters need to cross-check their findings with 9:13 and 23:23.

Hill comments on Matthew's usage of ἔλεος in Matthew 23:23,

When Luke has Jesus condemning the Pharisees for being concerned with the tithing of herbs and neglecting κρίσις and the ἀγάπη του θεου, Matthew has them indicted for neglecting the 'weightier matters of the law' (Τά βαρύτερα του νόμου) namely κρίσις, ἔλεος, and πίστις. This triad recalls Micah vi. 8 and if Bornkamm is right (as he almost certainly is) in claiming that πίστις here stands for 'faithfulness' to the will of God revealed in the law and the prophets, then ἔλεος, must be equivalent to *hesed* (and κρίσις to *mispāt*) and will denote that loyal love to God which manifests itself in acts of mercy and loving-kindness.⁴

⁴ Hill, 110. I have used English characters rather than Hebrew within the quotation for the benefit of readers.

Bornkamm and Hill are joined by Craig Blomberg, R. T. France, Harold Fowler, Mike Criswell and a host of other commentators who recognize the link between Matthew 23:23 and Micah 6:8. Since the two passages are clearly connected, Matthew 23:23 provides a strong proof of Colin Brown's contention that the Jewish usage of *ἔλεος* contained the original meaning of *hesed*. Matthew 23:23 uses *ἔλεος* in a covenantal context while addressing covenantal violation and upholding sacrifice. Micah 6:8 therefore stands in harmony with Hosea 6:6 and requires that Matthew 23:23 be harmonized with Matthew 12:7 and 9:13. The kicker is that Matthew 23:23 requires mercy and sacrifice, whereas modern interpreters want Matthew 12:7 to mean that mercy negates the need for sacrifice.⁵

When the Lord rebuked the Pharisees for a lack of *ἔλεος* in Matthew 9:13, He introduced Hosea 6:6 with the statement, "But go and learn what this means." As cited in the previous chapter, Hill explains this statement as a rabbinic formula known as a halakha "that does not mean, 'go and find out what you do not already know' but rather 'go and discern the sense of Scripture' or 'go and make a valid inference from the scriptural statement.'"⁶ The significance of Hill's point is critical and underscores

⁵ See the further discussion of this point under "Second Objection."

⁶ Hill, 111.

104 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

the fact that the meaning of Hosea 6:6 had not changed and was discoverable through a Scriptural investigation.

SUMMATION

Simply put, Matthew's use of *ἔλεος* in the place of *hesed*, be it his own rendering or that of the LXX, does not inject Hosea 6:6 with new or different meaning. A Greek translation has no more power to change the original meaning of the Hebrew than our English translation. Whether or not Jesus changed the meaning of Hosea 6:6 on His own authority will be discussed in a moment, but merely quoting from the LXX is not enough to warrant a different understanding of what Hosea originally meant.

SECOND OBJECTION

The second objection asserts that Jesus meant “something different” in His usage of Hosea 6:6 than was originally intended by injecting it with “new meaning.” Advocates of this position are not arguing for a strengthened understanding of the original meaning, but rather a radically different meaning that had never before existed until Jesus inserted it into the passage. Jesus’ “new meaning” would be better rendered “foreign meaning” because its meaning is completely foreign to Hosea.

The “foreign meaning” advocates assert that God’s original demand for loyalty to Himself and rejection of worthless sacrifice has been replaced with a new demand that mercy (not loyalty) be rendered to men (not God) and that legitimate sacrifice (not false sacrifice) be set aside when necessary to demonstrate that mercy.

The “foreign meaning” position is indeed foreign to anything Hosea conceived (see Chart #1) and is also foreign to what Christ intended. Changing the meaning of *hesed*, the recipient of *hesed*, and the nature of sacrifice is an utter rending of the passage⁷ that must be rejected for the following six reasons:

First, the “foreign meaning” position fails to account for how Jesus prefaced His quotation of Hosea 6:6 when he stated, “But if you had known what this means...” This same phrase was used by the Lord on three different occasions (Luke 19:42, John 8:19; 14:7) and each time had reference to a knowledge that originated within Scripture. “But if you had known what this means...” removes the possibility that Jesus used the quotation in a purely rhetorical sense and must be interpreted in conjunction with the “Have you not read” statements of Matthew 12:3, 5.

There is a difference between arguing that Jesus used Hosea 6:6 rhetorically and arguing that Jesus

⁷ Peter’s warning in 2 Peter 3:16 should give pause.

Chart #1

Hosea's View	The Pharisees' View	The "Foreign Meaning" View
<p>God desired <i>loyalty</i> demonstrated towards Himself along with <i>acceptable sacrifice</i>.</p>	<p>The Pharisees wanted meritorious sacrifice <i>without</i> the requirement of covenant faithfulness.</p>	<p>Brethren are now advocating the destruction of acceptable sacrifice in the name of mercy <i>directed towards men</i>.</p>
<p>Jesus upheld the Law and sacrifice while demanding loyalty.</p>	<p>The Pharisees rebelled by destroying both the Law and sacrifice.</p>	<p>This position is radically different from what both the Lord and Pharisees advocated.</p>

used Hosea 6:6 in a rhetorical sense that was devoid of its Old Testament contextual meaning. G. K. Beale states it this way,

Thus we are not skeptical that NT writers use the OT rhetorically but believe that when this happens, the OT contextual meaning of the passage cited enhances the rhetorical impact.⁸

Charles Quarles agrees with Beale and argues,

As one examines the old testament quotations and allusions, he should carefully explore the larger contexts of these Old Testament passages. He will discover that Matthew does not snatch Old Testament verses from their original context and use them without sensitivity to their original meaning. Instead, he handles the Old Testament very carefully and often assumes familiarity with the broader context of a quoted passage.⁹

How could the Pharisees have understood what Hosea 6:6 meant if they had to await the new interpretation provided directly by Jesus? And why must we understand the first two Scriptural allusions

⁸ G. K. Beale, *A Handbook to the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 11.

⁹ Charles L. Quarles. *A Theology of Matthew* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 24.

108 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

to still contain their original meaning, while at the same time necessarily understand the “foreign meaning” in the final quotation?

Arguing that a passage must be understood in a way that was foreign to the original author violates the basic principle of hermeneutics expressed by Alexander Campbell,

... nothing can be rationally inferred from any verse in the Bible that is not in it; and whatever can be logically deduced from any sentence in the Book, is as much the revelation of God as anything clearly expressed in it.¹⁰

Campbell is spot on when he says, “nothing can be rationally inferred from any verse in the Bible that is not in it.” To argue that a passage must be understood to have new meaning that was not originally present is to open the doors wide for all kinds of heretical interpretations. If the Lord or the apostles were allowed to inject Scripture with radically foreign meaning, and if we are to handle the Scriptures as they modeled, should we expect to find radically foreign meanings as well? What hermeneutical rules shall we apply to discover foreign meanings in passages? To be more precise, what hermeneutical rules must we apply within Matthew

¹⁰ Alexander Campbell, *Christianity Restored* (Indianapolis, IN: Faith and Facts, 2004), 69.

12 in order to understand the “foreign meaning” that is alleged to exist?

The “foreign meaning” position thus destroys the continuity between Jesus and the Old Testament prophets that Matthew labored so hard to establish.¹¹ There is a difference between a passage receiving fuller meaning through the process of progressive revelation and an interpreter being allowed to invent foreign meanings and insert them wherever he wishes. To allege that God so acts, while at the same time requiring that men discover what has been hidden from them, is to accuse God of being unfair and the author of confusion. There is a difference between expecting an audience to receive clearer understanding of a passage through progressive revelation and expecting an audience to grasp the unrevealed meaning of an ever-changing text.

Second, the “foreign meaning” objection argues in favor of a different meaning of Hosea 6:6 than the Lord had already recognized in Matthew 9:13 where Jesus told the Pharisees to study the passage and

¹¹ Peter Leithart’s quote is helpful, “Jesus is the last and greatest of the Prophets. He is *the* Prophet that Moses predicted (Deut. 18). That means He gives the final word, brings the blueprints for the final temple, speaks the final world into existence, and has complete and permanent access to the divine court, where He can offer a defense for His people. Everything prophets have done, Jesus does more, and more.” See Peter Leithart, *The Least of These* (Theopolis Institute, September 17th, 2014). <https://theopolisinstitute.com/article/the-least-of-these/>.

110 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

discover its meaning.¹² In his earlier use of Hosea 6:6, Jesus claimed that “I desire mercy and not sacrifice” was a call for sinners to repent, i.e. return to covenant faithfulness. How could the Lord now use the same passage to teach a radically different meaning and expect the Pharisees to have already understood the point? Matthew’s usage of the same Old Testament passage in two different debates indicates that Jesus found Hosea’s message particularly applicable to the Pharisees.

Third, the “foreign meaning” view stands in contradiction to another indictment of the Lord:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!
For you pay tithes of mint and anise and cumin,
and have neglected the weightier matters of the
law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought
to have done, without leaving the others undone.
(Matthew 23:23-24)

The choice is not between offering sacrifice and demonstrating mercy towards men, for, “These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.” The choice is between covenant faithfulness and unbelief. Love, mercy, and sacrifice are all baked into the Law and regulated by it, for neither can be demonstrated outside the Law (1

¹² See the discussion of this point in the section above labeled “First Objection.”

Corinthians 13). Mercy toward man is a component of covenant faithfulness, but not its sole expression. To argue that “Love trumps Law” is to argue that God’s Law is devoid of love, which is in direct contradiction to the Lord’s analysis that love is the basis of Law (Matthew 22:40).

Fourth, if the Lord intended to provide His own authoritative assessment of the Pharisees, why bother with quoting Hosea 6:6? When Jesus asserted His own authority on other occasions in Matthew He stated, “But I say to you” (Matthew 5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44) rather than “But if you had known what this means.”

Fifth, extracting Hosea 6:6 from its original context strips the passage of the Messianic implications of Hosea 6:2. Since verses 6 and 8 of Matthew 12 are both expressions of Jesus’ Messianic role, should we not understand the quotation of Hosea 6:6 in verse 7 (a passage contextually saturated in Messianic meaning) as standing in continuity with its immediate context?

Lastly, it seems incredible that The Prophet would quote an exilic rebuke to an exiled people (Matthew 11:27-30), and yet mean something entirely different by it. Rather than seeing no connection with the original meaning of the quotation, we should see a heightened meaning. Whereas Hosea promised temporary exile (Hosea 5:8-15) with hope of restoration (Hosea 6:1-3), Jesus held out no hope of restoration for those who

112 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

rejected His message. What is hinted at in Matthew 12:7 is made explicit in Matthew 23:37-24:28.

In the final assessment, both the first and second objections fail as a result of poor hermeneutics in the field of intertextuality.¹³ Jesus no more destroyed the meaning of the Prophets than He did the meaning of the Law (Matthew 5:17). The only “foreign meaning” being inserted into Matthew 12:7 is that of some modern interpreters.

Summation

Using Matthew 12:7 to justify cancelling services during our current pandemic is merely an old argument dressed in new clothes. “Mercy and not sacrifice!” is simply a different way of saying, “We must observe the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law.” The “spirit of the Law” vs. “letter of the law” pits the law against itself and results in every man doing “what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25).

David Hill’s comment on Matthew’s use of Hosea 6:6 fits well with our assessment of the “foreign meaning” position,

This Matthean insertion could be taken to suggest that in the evangelist’s opinion need takes

¹³ For more information on intertextuality see G. K. Beale, *A Handbook to the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012).

precedence over the commandment, but it seems unlikely that he would propound such a potentially dangerous doctrine: it could never be his opinion that God's commandments could be generally set aside in times of need.¹⁴

Though Hill is too generous in his initial statement, his overall point is on the mark. Matthew did not change the meaning of Hosea 6:6 and to teach that He did is dangerous on many levels. Rather than attempting to eliminate the need for sacrifice during our pandemic while advocating for mercy, what we should be doing is advocating mercy in conjunction with sacrifice and covenant faithfulness as the Lord taught. God's people have always understood and advocated the need for mercy toward the sick and the shut-in without claiming the need to set aside worship. Mercy, sacrifice, and faithfulness must all be upheld together.

¹⁴ David Hill, *Hosea VI. 6 in Matthew's Gospel*, New Test. Stud. 24 (Cambridge), 114.

CHAPTER 11

There's an Ox in the Ditch

What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. (Matthew 12:11-12)

A Sabbath dispute over Pharisaic tradition (Matthew 12:1-8) was followed by a Sabbath dispute caused by Pharisaic hypocrisy and wickedness (Matthew 12:9-14, Mark 3:4). Jesus upheld the Sabbath, defied the Pharisees, healed a man, and taught a sermon on goodness all at the same time.

Despite the straightforwardness of the passage, the Lord's example of the ox in the ditch is currently employed in conjunction with a misunderstanding of "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" to advocate the "goodness" of cancelling services in order to avoid potential harm to some of the membership.

116 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

Here is the basic argument set forth as a syllogism:

Major Premise: Showing mercy is good.

Minor Premise: Cancelling services in the midst of a pandemic is a demonstration of mercy.

Conclusion: Therefore, cancelling services in the midst of a pandemic is good.

The problem with this argument is seen when it is stated in the negative.

Major Premise: Being unmerciful is evil.

Minor Premise: Conducting services during a pandemic does not demonstrate mercy.

Conclusion: Therefore, conducting services during a pandemic is evil.

The main problem with this argument lies in the second premise. If cancelling services during a pandemic is a demonstration of mercy, then conducting services during a pandemic is a covenant violation. Since Matthew 12:7 and 12:11-12 contrast good and wicked behavior, basing an argument out of these passages to justify the cancellation of services during a pandemic makes the argument a matter of good versus evil. To put it another way, those who are in favor of cancelling services on the grounds of Matthew 12:7 are praised as being loyal while those

who oppose the cancellation of services are implicitly accused of being disloyal to God. Some who uphold the goodness of cancelling services during the current pandemic have gone so far as to argue that encouraging church attendance could be encouraging people to “kill for Jesus.” It’s odd that some who advocate such continue to attend services while pressuring others to cancel.

Doing good is a matter of requirement; it is not a matter of liberty. One cannot simultaneously argue for the goodness of cancelling services and the goodness of attending services unless one is prepared to engage in situational ethics. Or, to state it another way, to argue that cancelling services is evil in one situation while advocating it is good in another situation is to build an argument on the grounds of situational ethics.¹ In scriptural terms, how can we urge people to both forsake and not forsake “the assembling of ourselves together” (Hebrews 10:25)?

Acts of mercy are not optional; they are matters of requirement. A covenant violation of mercy is always an act wickedness.² Asserting that canceling

¹ Such an argument is the same as arguing that it is wrong to lie unless the Nazis are asking you questions about harboring Jews.

² A similar argument is raised by some who argue it is good to cancel services during a pandemic as an act of submission to governmental mandates based on Romans 13:1-4 arguing, “For rulers are not a terror to good works.” The problem with this argument is that it, too, is a contrast between good and evil. If it is good to cancel services, it is evil not to cancel them.

118 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

services is an act of mercy is one thing; proving it is another. If God has given us “every good work,” (2 Timothy 3:16-17) and cancelling services in the name of a pandemic is a good work, we should be able to find authority for such action in God’s word rather than merely asserting its goodness?

While advocating for cancelled services as an act of mercy, people have ignored the oppression that such “mercy” inflicts on others. At best, a cancellation of services has caused several to violate their consciences through failure to assemble while being healthy and able. At worst it has completely disregarded a command of the Lord (Hebrews 10:25) because of the potential danger obedience would involve. How is forcing people to violate their conscience or break the Law of God a demonstration of mercy?

Cancelling services in the name of mercy places an emphasis on the physical needs of a few above the spiritual needs of the majority. Did Jesus not command that we fear not the destruction of the flesh but, rather, fear the destruction of the flesh *and* soul (Matthew 10:28)?

Doing good to the healthy while also doing good to the sick is not merely a possibility but a requirement. Encouraging brethren to do both is not

Romans 13 demands goodness, not liberty. Are those who advocate for the goodness of canceling services prepared to argue that those who continue to assemble are practicing evil? Should we not obey God rather than men? (Acts 5:29).

a violation of church autonomy nor is it an expression of wickedness.

Another issue with the ox-in-the-ditch argument brethren are making is that it attributes potential good and potential evil to actions whose outcome cannot possibly be known. In order to claim that good has been accomplished actual good must be accomplished.

Furthermore, the ox-in-the-ditch argument also equates preventative measures with curative measures. Though a Jew was allowed to remove his ox from his ditch on the Sabbath, he was not allowed to spend the day building fences because one of his oxen might potentially end up in a ditch. Preventative measures cannot be equated with curative measures.³

The ox-in-the-ditch analogy was not a demonstration of the Lord setting aside the Sabbath; it was a demonstration of the Law regulating both Sabbath observance and mercy (Matthew 23:23-24). Peter Leithart captures the point well,

Pulling the sheep from the pit is not an exception to Sabbath-keeping. It *is* Sabbath-keeping because it's giving rest, just as it is "lawful to do good" by healing a man. Jesus' point is that Sabbath is for good and not for evil. He's saying the Sabbath was designed as an institution of

³ If they can, drinking a glass of wine a day in the name of preventative health should be allowed.

120 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

compassion, not an institution of harshness. He's saying that the Sabbath is about rest, giving rest, rather than oppression. Jesus is *not* saying that need trumps keeping the law. He's saying that what the law aims at is giving relief and rest, and therefore our keeping of the law should aim at and achieve that intention... Jesus never broke the Sabbath or made exceptions to the biblical Sabbath rules.⁴

⁴ Peter J. Leithart, *Jesus As Israel* (Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2017), 246.

CHAPTER 12

Pandora's Box

I remember attending the Sulphur, OK 4th of July meeting a few years ago and hearing Brother Joe Hisle preach a powerful sermon entitled “Pandora’s Box.” It was an “old school,” repentance-driven sermon that described engaging in sin as the unleashing of Pandora’s box. I sat mesmerized as he preached, and in the words of his wife Darlene, “It made me want to go up and make a confession. I didn’t, but I wanted to.”

When I think about the argument that is currently made based on a misunderstanding of Matthew 12:7, I am greatly concerned about the far-reaching implications it has beyond our current crisis. While focusing on the immediate needs of the moment, I fear we have lost sight of the future.

For example, if services can be cancelled in the name of mercy because of potential harm, can they be canceled in times of persecution? Rather than suffering martyrdom, why not disband until persecution has ceased? An argument that allows for

cancelled services in one instance due to potential health hazard, while forbidding it in another, is a situational ethics argument.

If mercy negates the need for sacrifice, should we encourage brethren to become doctors and firefighters while teaching them that church attendance is merely optional on their part if they are called in to work?

Does mercy allow us to set aside Scripture that regulates how we are to use the church treasury so that we might do good through orphanages, hospitals, and nursing homes? What about the Social Gospel? Are we prepared to rethink evangelism in the name of mercy trumping law?

If mercy allows for the setting aside of Hebrews 10:25 in the name of sickness prevention or health concern, how are we to determine which sicknesses merit cancelling church and which ones do not? Should we cancel services every flu season or any time there is a hint of snow? What about when it rains? Or, might mercy even allow us to revoke the burden of weekly assembly in its entirety making attendance optional so we don't oppress those who might have to miss a baseball game or fishing trip.

If mercy allows the setting aside of law when there are health concerns, be they actual or merely potential, should we not give up the common cup and adopt the practice of using individual communion cups in the observance of the Lord's Supper? All my life I have heard brethren argue the

necessity of using one cup in communion regardless of sanitation concerns. Are we prepared to now give that argument up?

Does mercy negate the requirement of faith and trust in God? Or can faith and trust be trumped by love as well?

Once we have unleashed the argument, where will it end?

CHAPTER 13

Our Current Crisis *Expanded*

Our society stands paralyzed by fear because of the COVID-19 virus and a lack of faith, hope, and trust in God. All the securities of worldliness have disappeared overnight as man looks to science to provide all the answers. Yet try as it might, science proves over and over again that it does not have all the answers. Medical experts predict mass casualties into the millions causing even greater panic, only to revise their numbers time after time. Best guesses are made in hopes of curbing the effects of the virus, yet these guesses do not bring comfort.

The media has capitalized on the momentum of fear and continues to fan its flames. It is impossible to turn on the television or the radio without hearing updates about the horrific nature of the pandemic. Hysteria is the currency of the commentator and doom the only outlook.

Social media is no better than traditional media. Thanks to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and the like, everyone has a voice and the cry of fear becomes

deafening. Rather than looking to God for guidance everyone looks to their peers and ends up infected with the same fear that has stricken others. One statistic after another is quoted in the hopes of providing solutions, but comfort does not seem to have been found in the statistics.

Fear has shut down our economy and taken jobs away from thousands creating even more fear. It was not bad enough that many were already frightened by the prospect of death, but now they have to deal with the uncertainties of living.

To compound the issue even further the government of most states deemed the church non-essential and have arbitrarily restricted church gatherings to ten people or less. Sure, you can go to Wal-Mart and shop with thousands who recently discovered they needed toilet paper, but you can't assemble with the faithful to get on your knees and pray that God might grant mercy and relief. Ironically, the only institution God hears (John 9:31) has been commanded to disband in the name of safety. Skeptics ask, "Where is God!" while prohibiting the faithful from entreating him collectively.

HOW SHOULD THE CHURCH RESPOND?

The church's response must be a demonstration of faith in the gospel. As the world grows darker the glow of the church and her gospel must brighten. While the world is frozen in fear, the church must triumph in faith. As the world seeks answers the voice of the gospel must be heard clearly.

Christians should be the calmest, most collected, and most confident citizens in every community. They should have a different perspective having the ability to see things through the eyes of faith from heaven's perspective. Christians should have hope because Jesus robbed death of its sting and won victory over the grave (1 Corinthians 15:55). More than ever, being a Christian should provoke questions about the hope that lies within us (1 Peter 3:15).

We as the church have a hope that the world does not and cannot have. As the world falls apart the gospel has greater appeal to those who are perishing. When was the last time our society stopped to consider the importance and fragility of life? When was the last time sports, recreation, school, and work were all placed on the back burner at the same time and people were forced to spend time with family and reflect on the blessings and tragedies of life? Rather than viewing our current pandemic as a hopeless moment of despair, we should be looking for opportunities to share the gospel with those who are seeking.

128 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

When was the last time the majority of false religions were shut down and the Lord's church was the only one assembling? Rather than discouraging the assembly of the saints, we should be urging those who are weak, doubting, and lost to come and receive the saving power of the gospel.

We need to ask ourselves why we assemble and realize the reasons for assembly are still present in the midst of the pandemic.

We assemble primarily to worship God and to proclaim the sacrificial death of the Lord until He returns (Acts 20:7). Through proclamation of the death and resurrection, we proclaim hope and the defeat of death. God is still worthy of praise in the midst of chaos, and now more than ever we need reminding of the hope of the cross.

We also assemble to strengthen the brethren. God's people need to hear God's voice proclaimed collectively, and the brethren need built up. Part of God's design was for the building up to take place within the assembled body through worship. Consider the admonition of the Hebrew writer:

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and

OUR CURRENT CRISIS *EXPANDED* 129

so much the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:23-25)

Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed. (Hebrews 12:12)

When life is its most difficult, where better to be than in the presence of the Lord (Hebrews 10:19-22) where you can find rest for your soul?

Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light. (Matthew 11:28-30)

The invitation is open to all, both believer and unbeliever. All who are weary are invited to partake in the rest of the Lord. For this reason, the church must continue to assemble and offer the peace that can only be found in Christ. There are many within our communities who want to assemble and have been denied the opportunity to do so. Shall we not open the door to those who knock? There are others who are concerned with dying in a lost condition and seek salvation. Shall we not offer healing during the

130 COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

pandemic as Jesus did on the Sabbath, even if it means persecution (Matthew 12:9-14)?

The greatest demonstrations of faith have always occurred in moments of despair. Faith cannot triumph if there is no conflict over which to gain the victory. Crushing the Devil has always meant dying in faith. Where faith seems most hopeless, there can its glory be most brilliantly displayed.

The inspired words of the Psalmist say it best:

The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer,

my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge,
my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.

I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised,

and I am saved from my enemies. (Psalm 18:2-3)

May God's people take refuge in the rock while the storms of life rage (Matthew 7:24-27).

These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation¹; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world. (John 16:33)

¹ See Revelation 6:7-8. Tribulation includes pestilence.

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