

Matthew 12:11

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And he said unto them, What man shall there be among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on the sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out?

Analysis

'And he said unto them, What man shall there be among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit on the sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out?' Jesus answers the Pharisees' trap question (v.10) with practical reasoning they cannot deny. He appeals to their own practice: if even one sheep (valuable property) falls into a pit on sabbath, would they not rescue it? The question expects affirmative answer—of course they would. Pharisaic law itself permitted saving animal life on sabbath. Jesus's argument moves from lesser to greater (qal vahomer, rabbinic reasoning style): if saving sheep is lawful, how much more saving human? The verse demonstrates Jesus's skill in debate: He doesn't reject their question but reframes it, exposing their inconsistency. They'd save property but object to healing people. This reveals their warped priorities: tradition over compassion, rules over people, system over humanity. Reformed theology applies this principle: biblical interpretation must serve love for God and neighbor, not replace it.

Historical Context

Sheep were valuable in ancient agrarian economy—providing wool, milk, meat, and ritual sacrifices. Palestinian terrain included numerous pits, cisterns, and ravines where animals could fall. Pharisaic tradition developed detailed regulations about sabbath animal rescue. The Mishnah (tractate Shabbat) discusses permissible sabbath actions to save animals—they could be provided

with food and water in the pit, and cushions to prevent injury, though technically pulling them out might be prohibited. However, most rabbis agreed that saving valuable animals was permitted. Jesus's argument was therefore rhetorically powerful: He appealed to what they already practiced, then extended the principle logically. If animal welfare justifies sabbath action, human welfare certainly does. The Pharisees couldn't deny the premise without looking cruel; accepting it required accepting Jesus's healing. Their silence (v.13 implies they didn't answer) spoke volumes.

Related Passages

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Study Questions

1. How do you recognize when religious rules or traditions have been elevated above genuine compassion for people?
2. What does Jesus's reasoning teach about proper biblical interpretation—how do we apply Scripture without legalistic rigidity?
3. In what areas might contemporary Christians prioritize religious correctness over genuine human need?

Interlinear Text

ὁ δὲ εἶπεν αὐτὸ τίς ἔσται ἐξ ὑμῶν ἄνθρωπος
G3588 **And** **he said** **on it** **What** **shall there be** **among** **you** **man**
G1161 G2036 G846 G5101 G2071 G1537 G5216 G444

ὃς ἔξει πρόβατον ἓν, καὶ ἐὰν ἐμπέσῃ τοῦτο τοῖς
that **shall have** **sheep** **one** **and** **if** **fall** **it** G3588
G3739 G2192 G4263 G1520 G2532 G1437 G1706 G5124

σάββασις εἰς βόθυνον οὐχὶ κρατήσῃ αὐτὸ καὶ
on the sabbath day **into** **a pit** **not** **lay hold** **on it** **and**
G4521 G1519 G999 G3780 G2902 G846 G2532

ἐγερεῖ;
lift it out
G1453

Additional Cross-References

Deuteronomy 22:4 (Parallel theme): Thou shalt not see thy brother's ass or his ox fall down by the way, and hide thyself from them: thou shalt surely help him to lift them up again.

Luke 14:5 (Parallel theme): And answered them, saying, Which of you shall have an ass or an ox fallen into a pit, and will not straightway pull him out on the sabbath day?