

Matthew 12:4

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

How he entered into the house of God, and did eat the shewbread, which was not lawful for him to eat, neither for them which were with him, but only for the priests?

Analysis

'How he entered into the house of God, and did eat the shewbread, which was not lawful for him to eat, neither for them which were with him, but only for the priests?' Jesus references 1 Samuel 21:1-6 where David, fleeing Saul, ate consecrated bread normally reserved for priests (Leviticus 24:5-9). Jesus's argument is multi-layered:

1. David's human need superseded ceremonial restriction—preserving life trumped ritual rules
2. David's action, though technically unlawful, wasn't sinful because circumstances justified it
3. If David could violate ceremonial law for lesser reason (hunger), how much more can disciples of David's greater Son (Jesus) do so? The phrase 'not lawful' (οὐκ ἐξὸν/ouk exon) refers to ceremonial regulation, not moral law.

Reformed theology distinguishes between moral law (Ten Commandments, unchanging) and ceremonial law (rituals, sacrifices, now fulfilled in Christ). Jesus wasn't advocating lawlessness but establishing proper priorities: human need matters more than religious ritual (verse 7: 'I will have mercy, and not sacrifice'). This prepares for verse 8's climax: Jesus as 'Lord of the sabbath' has authority to interpret and fulfill the law properly.

Historical Context

The incident Jesus references occurred during Saul's persecution of David (1 Samuel 21:1-6). David, desperate and hungry, appealed to Ahimelech the priest at Nob. The priest gave him showbread (literally 'bread of the Presence')—twelve loaves placed weekly before the Lord in the tabernacle (Exodus 25:30, Leviticus 24:5-9). Only priests could eat this bread after replacing it. David's action violated ceremonial law technically, yet Scripture records no divine condemnation. Jesus cites this to answer Pharisees' complaint about sabbath grain-plucking (Matthew 12:1-2). His logic: if David, though not priest, ate sacred bread without sinning when hungry, how much more can Jesus's disciples satisfy hunger on the sabbath? The Pharisees had created elaborate sabbath regulations far exceeding biblical requirements—the Mishnah lists 39 categories of prohibited work. Jesus cuts through their legalism by appealing to Scripture's own example and proper priorities. This confrontation escalated Pharisaic opposition, contributing to their plot to destroy Him (Matthew 12:14).

Related Passages

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Study Questions

1. How do you distinguish between moral laws (binding always) and ceremonial regulations (fulfilled in Christ)?
2. What does this passage teach about the spirit versus letter of the law—rules serving humanity rather than humanity serving rules?
3. How can Christians maintain high view of God's law while avoiding Pharisaic legalism that adds human traditions?

Interlinear Text

πῶς εἰσῆλθεν εἰς τὸν οἶκον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τοὺς
How he entered into the house of God and G3588
G4459 G1525 G1519 G3588 G3624 G3588 G2316 G2532 G3588

ἄρτους τῆς προθέσεως φαγεῖν ὅντις οὐκ ἐξὸν ἦν
the shewbread G3588 G4286 did eat which not lawful was
G740 G5315 G3739 G3756 G1832 G2258

αὐτοῦ φαγεῖν οὐδὲ τοῖς μετ' αὐτοῦ εἰ μὴ τοῖς
for him did eat neither for G3588 them which for him G1487 G3361 G3588
G846 G5315 G3761 G3326 G846

ἰερεῦσιν μόνοις
for the priests only
G2409 G3441

Additional Cross-References

Exodus 25:30 (Parallel theme): And thou shalt set upon the table shewbread before me alway.

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