

Matthew 12:5

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Or have ye not read in the law, how that on the sabbath days the priests in the temple profane the sabbath, and are blameless?

Analysis

'Or have ye not read in the law, how that on the sabbath days the priests in the temple profane the sabbath, and are blameless?' Jesus's second argument appeals to ongoing temple practice: priests work on the sabbath—offering sacrifices (Numbers 28:9-10), changing showbread, trimming lamps—technically violating the sabbath rest command, yet they're 'blameless' (ἀναίτιοι/anaitioi, guiltless). The apparent contradiction dissolves when properly understood: sabbath regulations served God's worship, so necessary temple work didn't violate sabbath intent. Jesus's logic builds: if priests' sabbath work is lawful because it serves God's worship (lesser), how much more is disciples' work lawful when attending Jesus (greater)? Verse 6 completes the argument: 'one greater than the temple' is here. Reformed theology sees this demonstrating that New Testament principles supersede Old Testament regulations. The sabbath pointed forward to rest in Christ (Hebrews 4:9-10); He is its fulfillment. Ceremonial sabbath regulations, like all ceremonial law, find their meaning and conclusion in Him.

Historical Context

Levitical priests conducted extensive sabbath work: the morning and evening burnt offerings (Numbers 28:3-4) plus additional sabbath-specific offerings (Numbers 28:9-10)—two additional lambs, drink offerings, grain offerings. This required killing animals, preparing fires, arranging sacrifices, disposing remains—all typically prohibited sabbath activities. Yet God commanded these sabbath

sacrifices, demonstrating that His worship superseded sabbath rest. Pharisaic tradition acknowledged this exception—priests were guiltless—but hadn't extended the principle properly. Jesus did: if God's house (temple) justifies sabbath work, how much more does God's Son? The phrase 'have ye not read' (οὐκ ἀνέγνωτε/ouk anegnōte) is pointed: Jesus addresses Scripture experts, exposing their selective reading. They knew priests worked on sabbaths but hadn't grasped the principle: sabbath serves God's purposes; it doesn't bind God or His authorized representatives. The early church applied this: they transferred sabbath principle to Sunday (Resurrection day—Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 16:2, Revelation 1:10) and rejected sabbatarian legalism (Colossians 2:16-17).

Related Passages

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Psalm 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Study Questions

1. How does understanding that Jesus is 'greater than the temple' affect your understanding of Old Testament ceremonial laws?
2. What principles for sabbath observance can you derive from this passage—how do Christians practice sabbath rest today?
3. In what ways might contemporary Christians fall into sabbatarian legalism, adding human traditions to biblical principles?

Interlinear Text

ὴ οὐκ ἀνέγνωτε ἐν τῷ νόμῳ ὅτι τοῖς
Or not have ye in the law how that G3588
G2228 G3756 G314 G1722 G3551 G3754 G3588

σάββατον οἱ ἱερεῖς ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ τὸ
on the sabbath days the priests in the temple G3588
G4521 G3588 G2409 G1722 G2411 G3588

σάββατον βεβηλοῦσιν καὶ ἀναίτιοί εἰσιν
on the sabbath days profane and blameless are
G4521 G953 G2532 G338 G1526

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