

Jesus and the Pharisees (Matthew 12: 1 – 14)

The scene is somewhere on the Judean countryside on a Saturday during the harvest season in about 28 A.D. There's a dirt road bordered by cornfields. Jesus and his disciples enter, leaving the road to walk through the field, casually pulling ears of corn from the stalks and eating the kernels. Nearby is another group, dressed in distinctive Pharisee garb, watching Jesus and his disciples. Finally, one of the group calls out to Jesus.

Pharisee: Look, your disciples are doing something that is forbidden on the Sabbath.

Jesus: (looking at the disciples) They're hungry.

Pharisee: But it's the Sabbath, and it's forbidden.

Jesus walks to the middle of the road, nearer the Pharisee.

Jesus: Haven't you read about David? He went into the house of God and ate the priests' bread. Even in the law — where you're expert — the Temple priests break the Sabbath and don't get blamed for it.

Pharisee: What's that got to do with anything?

The crowd around the Pharisee murmur and nod their heads. Jesus stares at them for a moment. His disciples continue to pull corn from the corn stalks.

Jesus: I'll tell you. Here is something greater than the Temple. And if you understood your own scriptures, you'd know what the Lord meant when He said "What I want is mercy, not sacrifice. Then you wouldn't be so quick to blame the blameless.

Jesus and his disciples exit, leaving the Pharisees standing there shaking their heads.

Helps in understanding this scene.

The *Pharisees* were one of the three prominent parties of Judaism at the time of Christ. (The other two were Sadducees, and Essenes.) According to some scholars, the word "Pharisee" means "the separated ones." Although they were not large in numbers — one authority estimates that there were only about 6,000 Pharisees at the time of this scene — they were large in terms of influence. The Pharisees followed both the written and oral law, and severely criticized those who didn't. They were the religious leaders of the Jews (as contrasted to the more liberal Sadducees, who were the political leaders.) Although the Pharisees are often shown in a less than favorable light in the New Testament, they were by far the most religious people in the country. They tried to live up to their other name: *Chasidim*, which can be translated "loyal to God."

The Priests' Bread, also called "The Bread of the Presence" or "Shewbread" (KJV) was a dozen loaves of bread kept on a table in the outer chamber of the tabernacle, along with dishes, incense, and cups. It was replaced each week.

Gleaning, what the disciples were doing in the field, was a tradition dating back to the beginning of the Jews' occupation of the Promised Land. They were commanded not to harvest the corners of their fields, leaving food for those who came along and were hungry.

Questions for Discussion

Who do you identify most closely with in this scene: the Pharisee, Jesus, or the disciples?

Was the Pharisee right in his accusation that Jesus' disciples were violating the Sabbath?

How did Jesus' view differ from the Pharisee's?

What is the basic conflict between the two views, and how do we resolve them?

Was there something else that Jesus could have done that would not have irritated the Pharisees?

Planning for Living

Do I need to change my thinking to conform more closely to Jesus'? If so, how?

What does this scene tell me in terms of living my life every day?