

Different Work

They were hungry. That is the first thing the text says about them.

The disciples were walking with Jesus through somebody's wheat field on the Sabbath, and they were hungry, so they began to pick the heads of grain and eat them.

It is a small action. You reach out as you walk, take a head of grain, rub it between your palms to loosen the husk, and eat what is left. Anyone who has walked past a paddock in summer has done something like it without thinking. The law allowed it.¹

So no one is stealing. The complaint is not about the grain. The Pharisees see it and say to Jesus, *look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.*

Hungry men, eating as they walk, on the day God gave for rest – and being told off for it.

The answer to the objection is in the paragraph before. Not a chapter before. A paragraph.

Matthew 11 ends with Jesus saying *come to me, all you who are worn out and loaded up, and I will give you rest.* Matthew 12 begins in the wheat field. Between them sits a chapter division that no one who wrote the Gospel put there. The chapters were added much later, for finding things.²

So we preach the rest. We preach it at funerals and print it on cards and give it to people who are tired, and we are right to. And then we preach the Sabbath controversy, another week, as a separate matter – a question about law, or about the Pharisees, or about what counts as work.

One offer of rest. One argument about the day of rest. Read straight through, they are not two subjects.

Take the invitation on its own for a moment, the way we usually hear it.

Come to me, all you who are worn out and loaded up, 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.

Read quickly, that sounds like the end of work. Lay it down, come here, rest.

But he does not say lay down the yoke. He says take mine.

A yoke is a shaped timber beam that sits across the shoulders of two animals so they can pull together. It is not a symbol. It is a working part. And in Jesus' world the word had a second, ordinary use:

teachers spoke of taking up the yoke of the Torah, meaning you accepted a way of life and a master and got under it.³

So the offer is not no work. The offer is different work.

And the reason it is light is in the next word – *my*. It is his yoke. He is already in it. You are not being handed a load and pointed at a field; you are being invited under a beam that is already on his shoulders.

Learn from me.

Not learn about me. He does not say study my teaching, or take notes, or work out my position. He says learn from me, and then, without pausing, he tells you what the lesson is: *for I am gentle and lowly in heart.*

That is an odd thing to teach. It is not a doctrine or a rule. It is a posture.

And we have just watched him do it. Two paragraphs earlier, in the same speech:

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for such was your good pleasure.

Yes, Father. He is not resigned. He agrees. His Father has done something Jesus did not choose and would not have designed, and Jesus says yes to it and calls it good.

That is the lesson. The thing we are to learn from him is the way he is with his Father.

Which is why the yoke is light. What he is offering is not a lighter version of religious work. It is a share in his own relationship with his Father.

There is a verse behind all of this, and Matthew has used it before.

Three chapters earlier, Jesus is eating at Matthew's house with tax collectors and people the town had written off. The Pharisees ask his disciples why their teacher eats with such company, and Jesus answers them with a line from Hosea:

Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.

Go and learn. It is homework, set for the men who knew the text better than anyone.

Then the wheat field, and the same verse again:

If you had known what this means, "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice," you would not have condemned the guiltless.

Same quotation. Same accusation. But the verb has moved. The first time it is *go and learn*. The second time it is *if you had known* – a tense that reaches back and finds nothing there.⁴ The homework was set

in chapter nine and it was not done.

Matthew is the only Gospel writer who quotes this verse, and he quotes it twice.⁵ Mark and Luke both tell the story in the wheat field. Neither of them reaches for Hosea. Both times against Pharisees. Both times about a text they could recite.

Hosea's line is longer than the part Jesus quotes.

חֶסֶד חִפְצָתִי וְלֹא־זֶבַח וְדַעַת אֱלֹהִים מַעֲלֹוֹת

I desired hesed and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

Two things God wants, set against two things people brought him instead. The first is *hesed* – the word English has to translate half a dozen ways, none of them quite right: mercy, steadfast love, loyalty, kindness that keeps its word. The second is *da'at Elohim*, the knowledge of God. Not information about him. Knowing him, the way you know a person you have lived alongside for years.

Jesus quotes the first half. He stops at *sacrifice*.

He does not need the second half. He has just spent a whole speech on it – hidden from the wise and understanding, given to little children; no one knows the Father except the Son. The knowledge of God was the subject of the paragraph before the wheat field.

So when he says *if you had known what this means*, he is holding a verse in which *hesed* and *da'at* stand side by side, and speaking to men who have missed both. They brought sacrifice instead of *hesed*. They brought expertise instead of knowing.

Then the last line of the argument.

For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.

That is not a general claim about authority dropped in to end the conversation. It answers something said a few sentences earlier, on the other side of the chapter number:

All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son.

All things. The Sabbath is one of them.

So the man standing in the wheat field, being asked to account for his disciples' breakfast, owns the day. He is not arguing about how the rule should be applied. He is telling them whose day it is, and what it was for.

And he had already said what it was for. *Come to me, all you who are worn out and loaded up*. The one who offers rest is the one who owns the day of rest. When he sees hungry people on it, they eat.

I can remember where I was when I first glimpsed the depth of this.

We were in worship at a combined churches gathering, in someone else's building. I was standing at the back with my hands raised. I cannot remember the name of the song. It was built around mercy, and I had just sung the words *love mercy*.

Then the world stopped.

It is like a scene in a film where someone in a crowded room stands apart from it. The noise drops away and you hear what the person is thinking.

LOVE MERCY.

Not tolerate. Not condescend. Not even choose. Love it.

Mercy was not something God did reluctantly. He was not waiting for us to fail so he could reach into a cupboard and dispense it. He loved being merciful. It is who he is.

Mercy is not a consolation prize for those who fall short. It is God's first and best choice. And we all fall short, and nothing else will ever make up the difference.

So my prayer from that time until now has been to learn to love mercy.

¹ Deuteronomy 23:25 – “If you go into your neighbour's standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbour's standing grain.”

² The chapter divisions in common use are generally credited to Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury, in the early thirteenth century. The verse divisions came later still.

³ The rabbinic expressions “the yoke of the kingdom of heaven” and “the yoke of Torah” appear in Mishnah Berakhot 2:2 and Pirkei Avot 3:5 (3:6 in some editions). The Mishnah was compiled around AD 200, so the phrasing is later than Matthew, though the idiom is likely older.

⁴ Greek ἐγνώκειτε, pluperfect of γινώσκω – “if you had come to know.” The pluperfect describes a state that should already have been in place.

⁵ Matthew 9:13 and 12:7. Hosea 6:6 is quoted nowhere else in the New Testament. The Sabbath scene appears at Mark 2:23–28 and Luke 6:1–5, in both cases without the citation.

This article did not begin with artificial intelligence. It began with years of ministry, reading, prayer, suffering, and conversation.

During its development, AI became a conversation partner. It challenged assumptions, tested arguments, suggested structures, and helped refine expression. Many of the words here emerged through that dialogue.

The experiences, convictions, interpretations, and conclusions remain my own.