

Luke 6:1-11

The Lord of the Sabbath

When Jesus began preaching the response was generally positive. People were amazed. He was “praised by all” (Luke 4:15). Crowds gathered, people were healed, demons were driven out, and the people “were all struck with astonishment and began glorifying God” (Luke 5:26). But envy is a powerful emotion, and the leaders who had at first followed Jesus out of curiosity turned against Him when they recognized Him as a rival.

After all, Jesus ate with sinners. He engaged in conversations and fellowship with those the Pharisees would never be seen with. As the popularity of Jesus grew with the people, the more threatening He became to the religious establishment. Not only that, but what He said undermined their teachings. Jesus preached a message that contradicted the Pharisees. Where they taught Law, Jesus taught grace. Where they insisted that only those who followed the Law could merit favor with God, Jesus claimed that it was the poor, blind, and oppressed who would inherit the kingdom of God. The two understandings were incompatible. They could not be mixed.

The Law had many rules, but certainly a main focus of first century Judaism was the Sabbath. It should not surprise us that Jesus and the Pharisees confronted each other over this most important day.

The Sabbath

The Sabbath had been established by the Mosaic Law. The word itself means to “rest,” and the idea was that God’s people should rest from their labors and focus the day on the worship of God. In Exodus it states “⁸Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you” (Exodus 20:8-10) and later “You shall work six days, but on the seventh day you shall rest; even during plowing time and harvest you shall rest” (Exodus 34:21).

The restrictions of this original injunction increased over time. The Talmud contains twenty-four chapters describing Sabbath regulations. These had been expanded upon by the Pharisees until no less than thirty-nine general actions, with six subcategories under each, created a nearly impossible to remember list of things that could not be done on the sabbath.

“The [number of] principal *Melachot* is forty minus one. [The forbidden *Melachot* are]: Sowing, plowing, reaping, binding sheaves, threshing, winnowing, sorting, grinding, sifting, kneading, baking, shearing wool, whitening it, combing it, dyeing it, spinning, weaving, making two loops, weaving two threads, separating two threads, tying [a knot], untying [a knot], sewing two stitches, tearing for the purpose of sewing two stitches, hunting a deer, slaughtering it, skinning it, salting it, curing its hide, scraping it, cutting it, writing two letters, erasing for the purpose of writing two letters, building, demolishing, extinguishing a flame, lighting a flame, striking with a hammer, carrying from one domain to another. These are the principal *Melachot* - [they number] forty minus one.” Mishnah Shabbat 7.2

A chair could not be moved, lest it create a rut in the dirt floor and be considered plowing. A bath could not be taken in case water spilled and the floor was washed. As one might expect, the rules were so inhibiting that means were found to escape them. For example, it was not permissible to travel more than 3,000 feet from one's home on the Sabbath, but if one had placed food at a given location, that could be considered their home and an additional 3,000 feet of travel could be allowed. Or one could place a string across a narrow street or alley and that could be considered the doorway and the 3,000 feet could begin at that point.

These requirements have continued to be elaborated to fit today's society. For example, to make coffee or tea on the Sabbath, the following requirements must be followed, The water may be heated on a gas flame or electric burner which has been turned on before the Sabbath and can be used as long as the source of heat is covered. This is usually done by covering the stovetop with a thin sheet of aluminum referred to as a *blech* (Yiddish for "tin"). It is preferable for the *blech* also to cover the control knobs for those burners which it covers, to prevent one from adjusting the flame on the Sabbath. To make coffee or tea, one must pour the hot water from the kettle into a clean, dry cup, then pour the water from this cup into another cup, and then add teabag, tea essence, coffee, sugar or milk. If one was using a teabag, it could neither be squeezed nor removed from the cup.

No wonder the people felt oppressed and responded when Jesus said "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

The Crime

In this passage, the disciples were "passing through some grainfields" (v. 1). As they did so, they were "picking the heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands, and eating the grain" (v. 1). This in itself was accepted under the Law, for "when you enter your neighbor's standing grain, then you may pluck the heads with your hand, but you shall not wield a sickle in your neighbor's standing grain" (Deuteronomy 23:25). The problem was not that they were stealing, but that this action had been done on the Sabbath.

(As a side note, we should never expect the following of Jesus to guarantee a certain lifestyle. Here were the disciples, exactly where Jesus wanted them to be, following closely in His footsteps, and yet they had so little to eat that they needed to gather bites of food as they went along their way.)

The disciples had committed three violations of the Law. First, the disciples had plucked heads of grain (clearly reaping), and then added to that the action of rubbing the heads of grain together to remove the shell and reveal the kernel (clearly threshing), and finally discarded the husks (clearly winnowing).

Hypocrites pay a great deal of attention to trifles. These very Pharisees who would stretch the understanding of the Sabbath beyond reason, would ignore the clear meaning of the tenth commandment (Luke 16:14). They had let secondary things interfere with first things. They had forgotten the difference between outward ceremony and moral duty.

The Response

Jesus did not leave His disciples to fight this battle alone. He responded to the Pharisees head on. "Have you not even read" (v. 3) challenged those who claimed to be experts in the Law in a very direct way.

After all, Jesus reminded them, David had “entered the house of God, and took and ate the consecrated bread which is not lawful for any to eat except the priests alone, and gave it to his companions” (v. 4).

This bread was the showbread, twelve loaves placed on a table three feet long, one and one-half feet wide and two and one-fourth feet high. The table was overlaid with pure gold and had gold rings by which it could be carried. It was set in the Holy Place just outside the Holy of Holies (Exodus 25:23-24). On each Sabbath the loaves were exchanged for fresh ones and the old loaves were eaten by the priest. (Leviticus 24:8-9).

David had come to Nob, located about one mile north of Jerusalem. He and his men were hungry, so he asked the priest, Ahimelech, for something to eat. The only food available was the sacred bread. Even though he had done this with the permission of the priest, clearly David had violated the Law of God. The point Jesus was making is that in a case of similar need, His disciples had only violated man-made regulations; the Law, itself, had not been violated. Mercy, compassion, even common sense were more important than blind obedience to ceremony. Jesus emphasized His point when He said “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath” (v. 5).

This was an unequivocal assertion of deity. Jesus was claiming that He had authority to determine what behaviors were appropriate on the Sabbath. Since the Sabbath had been instituted by God, only God alone had authority over it. Jesus was claiming to be God.

But we must also note that Jesus did not repeal the fourth commandment. His point was not that the Sabbath was to be ignored, but that the man-made rules of the Pharisees were not within the original intent of the Law. The fourth commandment is as valid as the sixth, seventh, or eighth. We should no more ignore it that we should murder, commit adultery, or steal. Our tendency today is not to abuse the Sabbath with regulations, but rather to ignore it altogether. Our temptation in this age of grace is to liberty, not legalism.

The Escalation

The conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees intensified in this next passage. No longer are the Pharisees challenging His disciples, here they direct their attack toward Jesus, Himself. Also, rather than simply responding to what they considered to be sin, the Pharisees are intentionally looking for fault. Perhaps they just happened on the scene when the disciples ate the grain, but here they “were watching Him closely” (v. 7).

On this occasion, Jesus “entered the synagogue and was teaching” (v. 6). His message is not mentioned by Luke, but it must certainly have been the same message of the gospel. As Jesus taught, there was a man present whose right hand was withered” (v. 6). Luke, again the doctor, informs us that it was the right hand. Ever malicious, the Pharisees were watching to see “if He healed on the Sabbath, so that they might find reason to accuse Him.” (v. 7). The word used to describe the actions of the Pharisees means to observe carefully. This was not a group of disinterested observers, the Pharisees were intentional in their interest to catch Jesus in an act by which they could discredit Him.

We ought to note two important things at this point. First, the Pharisees did not doubt that Jesus could heal the man. They fully acknowledged His power to do miracles. They were not wondering if He *could* heal the man, but if He *would*. Second, the hearts of the Pharisees were so hardened that they actually hoped Jesus would heal the man, so they might accuse Him. They were actually hoping the Sabbath rules, which they so strictly upheld and observed, would be broken.

Cyril of Alexandria, “The nature of an envious person is such that he makes the praises of others food for his own disease and is wickedly maddened by their reputation.”

The Sabbath rules were so convoluted and the various interpretations of the Law so many that not all Pharisees, themselves, agreed about what could be done to help a sick person on the Sabbath. The liberal disciples of Hillel argued that such an act might be permissible, but the more conservative disciples of Shammai taught that such an act could only be performed if the person's life was in danger or perhaps in the case of a woman giving birth. Generally, at this time, the more conservative view was applied by most rabbis.

And as a rabbi, Jesus was already skating on thin ice. He had claimed the power to forgive sins, shared a meal with sinners, and allowed His disciples to violate the Sabbath. Also, this was not a medical case in which the man's life was in imminent danger. There is no reason to think that the man's hand had not been withered for some time. Nevertheless, in this instance Jesus took the offensive. That “He knew what they were thinking” (v. 8), is yet another demonstration of His deity. Jesus is God, and as God He can know every thought. There is nothing hidden from Him.

He told the man to step forward. Remember that this is the Sabbath, and Jesus is in the synagogue. Every good Jew for miles around was there. Jesus did not confront the Pharisees privately, He did not do things secretly; what Jesus did was done publicly and boldly. We are here reminded that even when we are being watched, perhaps especially so, we ought to honor God rather than man with our actions.

The Miracle

Jesus makes His point by asking a rhetorical question. “I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to destroy it?” (v. 9). This question put the Pharisees in an impossible spot. If they said it was acceptable to do good, then they could not accuse Jesus of breaking the Sabbath laws if He healed the man. If they said it was not lawful to do good, they would reveal their own wicked hearts to everyone present. By forbidding the man from being healed, the Pharisees were, themselves, doing harm. Jesus wanted to save a life. By healing the man Jesus would give him the opportunity change his life from one of begging to one of self-sufficiency. Which of these was more in line with God's true requirements for the Sabbath? The point was clear and the Pharisees knew it.

Isaiah 1:11-17,

“¹¹What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?”

Says the Lord.

I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams

And the fat of fed cattle;
And I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs or goats.
¹²When you come to appear before Me,
Who requires of you this trampling of My courts?
¹³Bring your worthless offerings no longer,
Incense is an abomination to Me.
New moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies—
I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly.
¹⁴I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts,
They have become a burden to Me;
I am weary of bearing them.
¹⁵So when you spread out your hands in prayer,
I will hide My eyes from you;
Yes, even though you multiply prayers,
I will not listen.
Your hands are covered with blood.
¹⁶Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean;
Remove the evil of your deeds from My sight.
Cease to do evil,
¹⁷Learn to do good;
Seek justice,
Reprove the ruthless,
Defend the orphan,
Plead for the widow.”

As ever, the healing was immediate and complete. No sooner had the man put forward his ruined limb than “his hand was restored” (v. 10). The word means to return something to its original state. The hand was as it was before whatever injury or disease affected it.

The Turning Point

The response of the crowd is not mentioned, but it is reasonable to presume that as usual, they were filled with that mixture of wonder and fear so commonly reported in the gospels. The response of the Pharisees is not a mystery. They were “filled with rage and discussed together what they might do to Jesus” (v. 11). The word implies a senseless anger or madness. They could hardly contain themselves. They had been embarrassed publicly. They had no response to either the question, or the action, of Jesus. Since they refused to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah only one course was now available. They “began conspiring with the Herodians against Him, as to how they might destroy Him” (Mark 3:6). The Herodians were not normally allies with the Pharisees, but both groups shared a common enemy in Jesus, so they would work together to plot His death.

Jesus had not backed down. He had honored God on the Sabbath. That it set in motion against Him an unrelenting hatred that would result in His death was no matter. He had done good on the Sabbath.

Take Aways

We must remember that, though we are no longer under the Law, there is such a thing as the Sabbath. But let us also remember that the Sabbath is not about specific rules, but honoring God.