

11. Jesus, Lord of the Sabbath

Luke 6:1-11

Luke: A Walk Through the Life of Jesus

Did you have a lot of rules growing up as a kid? Were there any rules that you considered to be unfair or just plain silly? Looking back, do you think that they were for your own good?

The Fence of the Rule Keepers

As we turn to chapter six of Luke's Gospel, we read of more conflicts that the Lord Jesus endures at the hands of the Pharisees and scribes, the religious elite of the day. These thoughts from Luke are helpful to the Christian pilgrim because the conflict that Jesus endured, i.e. words, criticisms, and controversies, the mature believer in Christ will also endure. In the foresight of God and His training of the Body of Christ, the Church, it is the normative experience of the disciple to go through transformative events that test and refine character.

¹⁹If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. ²⁰Remember the word that I said to you, "A slave is not greater than his master." If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also. ²¹But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake because they do not know the One who sent Me (John 15:19-21).

From the point in Luke 5:14 where Jesus healed the leprous man, i.e. telling the healed ex-leper to go and show himself to the priesthood in Jerusalem, we see the religious leadership following closely and trying to discredit the ministry of Jesus in front of the people. Part of the reason for their attacks on Messiah was jealousy and envy that the people were flocking to Him, but behind that, we also see a warfare that is spiritual in nature. Those that opposed Jesus in the religious community believed they were doing so out of concern for the truth, to uphold the religious system and the Law. They did not realize that, in siding against Jesus who had been sent by the Father, they were, in fact, taking sides with the enemy, Satan, who sought to destroy Jesus.

We should not discount the thought that the religious elite were being inspired by Satan and that the Pharisees and scribes at this time were a tool that was being used to try and intimidate Jesus and thwart the work of the Kingdom of God. Religious deception is very powerful. Even the Apostle Paul, whose name was Saul in his earlier days, was totally deceived into thinking that he must do everything he could to hinder the growth of the early church, e.g. by killing them and trying to force the early believers to blaspheme (Acts 26:9-11). There are different religions and sects that are of an opposite spirit to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. As believers, we must expect persecution at the hands of deceived individuals who are pawns of Satan. We must be careful in our response to conflict because people are never our enemies. We are in a spiritual war with an unseen enemy. We do not battle against flesh and blood but, rather, against principalities and powers.

Before we get into our passage, it will help us to understand the complex rule system that had developed. The system of the Law had developed over hundreds of years to the point where it had become very complex. It went beyond the laws that were originally given to Moses. In fact, there were laws within laws. It got to such a point that Jesus referred to their religious system of laws as heavy burdens, for in speaking of the Pharisees, He said:

They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them (Matthew 23:4),

How did this system of laws and observances become so complex? It is helpful to understand that, after so many years of serving false gods and after King Manasseh sacrificed his son in the fires of the false god Molech (2 Kings 21:5-7; 2 Kings 17:17), God had to judge faithless Israel. In 586 B.C., He allowed Babylon to conquer the nation of Judah and the people were all deported to Babylon and had to serve the King of Babylon for seventy years (Jeremiah 25:9-11).

While the Israelites were in Babylon, they “came to themselves,” and, like the Prodigal Son in Luke 15, they reviewed their ways in order to ask the hard questions as to why the Lord allowed Babylon to enslave them. They rightly concluded that it was their idolatry and lack of keeping God’s laws that brought this upon them. The Jewish religious hierarchy then proceeded to build a fence around God’s law so that, if they were to break the fence, hopefully, they would not break the law and bring another judgment on themselves. The scribes became interpreters and teachers of the law. In their zeal to protect the Law, they added to its requirements, so if the Law of God said you shall not work on the Sabbath, they began to define what it was to work by adding to the Word of God.

Often, the Lord uses difficult experiences in our lives to bring us back to Him. Does increasing the amount and detail of the rules really change the heart? What do you think?

However, God’s commandment not to work was simple:

⁸Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. ¹¹For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy (Exodus 20:8-11).

The Hebrew word, *Shabbathon*, means to cease or to rest, i.e. not to work; that was it! If God said the Israelites were not to work on the Sabbath, what did that mean? What would be God’s definition of work? Thirty-nine basic actions were laid down by the interpreters of the Law, and among them were reaping, winnowing, threshing, and preparing a meal. The fence didn’t stop there. It was laid down in the rabbinic rules that it would be work to walk more than 3,000 feet, commonly called a Sabbath day’s journey (Acts 1:12). However, if a person deposited food there beforehand, you could go another 3,000 feet because where the food was deposited now became your home. Along with the distance one could go, the scribes laid down that you couldn’t carry a burden on the Sabbath, and a burden was defined as anything in weight over two

dried figs. Even today, if you are in a hotel on a Sabbath in Israel, you have to be careful which elevator you are in because, usually, at least one of the elevators is on automatic, stopping at every floor so that you don't break the Sabbath by working at pushing the elevator button to your floor. When Sandy and I were living in Israel for a short time, we would sometimes take a walk on the Sabbath. We were living in an orthodox Jewish community, and we noticed that there were tape lines set up throughout the neighborhood, similar to the tape you would see at a crime scene. It was explained to us that this was the distance mapped out for those who would take a walk on the Sabbath so that they would know the permitted distance for a Sabbath walk.

The *Talmud*, a Jewish commentary, had twenty-four chapters of Sabbath laws on the ramifications of the Sabbath commandment not to work. The scribe couldn't carry his pen, the tailor couldn't carry his needle, and the student couldn't carry his books. Nothing could be bought or sold. A bath could not be taken due to water falling off you and washing the floor. No fire could be lit. There was to be no cooking. (Today, Jewish homes often have a small "back burner" on their stoves that they are allowed to keep lit in order to keep the Sabbath dinner warm.)

The Sabbath became the worst day of the week for the common Jewish people. It had become so restrictive that one couldn't do anything on the Sabbath. The problem was that the hedges and fences started overshadowing the people they were designed to protect. "When that happens, we are no longer wrestling with the core problems of drunkenness and adultery. Rather, we are fighting mock battles at the new fences we have erected. Now the new laws become the really important battlegrounds. Soon we will test a person's orthodoxy by his respect for the fences," said commentator William Coleman.

The Conflict as to the Sabbath

In the next two passages, Luke shows us Christ attacking all the extra rules that God never commanded them to keep.

¹One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and his disciples began to pick some heads of grain, rub them in their hands and eat the kernels. ²Some of the Pharisees asked, "Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" ³Jesus answered them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? ⁴He entered the house of God, and taking the consecrated bread, he ate what is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions." ⁵Then Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" (Luke 6:1-5).

The passage starts out by telling us that it is the Sabbath when this conflict takes place. We see the Pharisees spying out the disciples and Jesus as they are going through the grain fields. I wonder if the Pharisees had gone over their 3,000-yard limit? The *Mishnah* listed three of its thirty-nine clarifications of work as "reaping...threshing, winnowing" (M. Shabbath, 7.2). When the disciples were plucking the heads of grain, they were reaping. When they were rubbing them in their hands, they were threshing and winnowing the grain. These actions by the disciples were disallowed by the rigid "rule keepers of the fence."

Jesus was concerned for His people. In His view, the scribes and Pharisees were so anxious to keep the law and the fence of rules around it that they failed to understand or make good on the spirit of the law. He refused to be bound by all their additions, which was what brought Him into conflict with the religious elite. God had given them the Sabbath as a time to rest, but the Pharisees and scribes made a system of rules in order to construct a way of salvation by rule-keeping. Jesus' men had violated Code 146b, section 42, paragraph 16, line 4, sub clause 16d, of the Sabbath Protection Act of AD12 (Chuck Swindoll). Jesus had to break down their fence!

This is what the LORD commanded: "Tomorrow is to be **a day of rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD**. So bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil. Save whatever is left and keep it until morning." ²⁴So they saved it until morning, as Moses commanded, and it did not stink or get maggots in it. ²⁵"Eat it today," Moses said, "because today is a Sabbath to the LORD. You will not find any of it on the ground today. ²⁶Six days you are to gather it, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will not be any." ²⁷Nevertheless, some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather it, but they found none. ²⁸Then the LORD said to Moses, "How long will you refuse to keep my commands and my instructions? **Bear in mind that the LORD has given you the Sabbath**; that is why on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days. Everyone is to stay where he is on the seventh day; no one is to go out." ³⁰**So the people rested on the seventh day** (Exodus 16:23-30).

But why was the Sabbath day of rest so important to God? Why would God introduce this law in the first place?

God is not looking for robots. He has graciously given us at least one day in seven to rest, relax, and recuperate. It was originally given as a blessing, i.e. to protect man and allow him a time of rest and rejuvenation. How we need that in our culture today! There needs to be a day set apart where we can feed not only our bodies but also our souls and have a break from the usual working grind. Having made man, God knows mankind's need for rest and relaxation. There have always been people who want others to work for them seven days a week with no break. God was strong about the Sabbath to His people. The Sabbath was made for man to rest, not the other way around, i.e. man being made for the Sabbath. It was not only to be a blessing for the people but also a symbol of something deeper.

A Sabbath Rest for the People of God

Jesus Himself said:

²⁸Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For My yoke is easy and My burden is light (Matthew 11:28-30).

The yearning of our God is to bring us close to Himself. The Israelites did not understand God's heart toward them. They had no value for taking a day a week to seek God, for what profit was there in it? The Sabbath was more than just a day of rest. It spoke ahead to a time when, just as God rested from His six days of labor in the creation of the world, there would be a spiritual

Sabbath rest. Remember that throughout the *Tenach*, the Old Testament, so many things that God did for the people of Israel served as a shadow of the true fulfillment that would come when the Messiah walked on the earth. Paul the Apostle talks about this principle that we see in the Old Testament:

These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come (1 Corinthians 10:11).

Egypt was a type of the world system in which we are living today as strangers and pilgrims. Pharaoh was a type of Satan, the one who had placed burdens on the backs of the Israelites. Moses was a type of the deliverer, Jesus, who would come to deliver them from the slave market of Satan. The Passover lamb was a type of the substitutionary sacrifice of the Lamb of God, Who came to take away the sin of the world. The blood of the lamb had to be placed over the door and on each side of the door, thus forming a cross that today stops the destroying angel from coming into the house of our lives. The pillar of fire giving them light during the night time march was a type of the Light of the World, Jesus. The Rock that was struck was a type of the crucifixion that brought the water of life to the world. We could go on and on. The Sabbath spoke of something that God would do when the initiator of the New Covenant would come on the scene.

Just as the Passover from the bondage of Pharaoh spoke to us about Jesus' delivering us from the bondage of sin, the Sabbath speaks of the Sabbath rest from a works-oriented salvation, which is no salvation at all. Here's how the writer to the Hebrews in the New Testament puts it:

¹Therefore, **since the promise of entering his rest still stands**, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. ²For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, **because those who heard did not combine it with faith**. ³Now **we who have believed enter that rest**, just as God has said, "So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'" ⁴And yet his work has been finished since the creation of the world. For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: "And on the seventh day God rested from all his work." ⁵And again in the passage above he says, "They shall never enter my rest." ⁶It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience. ⁷Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." ⁸For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. ⁹There **remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; ¹⁰for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work**, just as God did from his. ¹¹**Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest**, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience (Hebrews 4:1-11, Emphasis mine).

The writer to the Hebrews is saying that Joshua's bringing the children of Israel into the land of Canaan did not give them the true rest because the true rest of God comes only by Jesus the Messiah. The winning of the land of Canaan was just a type and a shadow of what Jesus would do to bring all those in the New Covenant into His rest.

Need Overrides Rules – The Sabbath for Man, not Man for the Sabbath.

Here is an example of an instance in the Old Testament that illustrates the spirit of the law being more important than the letter of the law. Jesus referred to this passage below when He answered the Pharisees in Luke 6:3-5. In explaining why He considered it lawful for His disciples to pick and eat grain on the Sabbath, Jesus reminds them of a time when David, while running from Saul with his band of men, was hungry, and he ate sacred bread meant only for the priests to eat;

¹Then David came to Nob to Ahimelech the priest; and Ahimelech came trembling to meet David and said to him, “Why are you alone and no one with you?” ²David said to Ahimelech the priest, “The king has commissioned me with a matter and has said to me, ‘Let no one know anything about the matter on which I am sending you and with which I have commissioned you; and I have directed the young men to a certain place.’ ³“Now therefore, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever can be found.” ⁴The priest answered David and said, “There is no ordinary bread on hand, but there is consecrated bread; if only the young men have kept themselves from women.” ⁵David answered the priest and said to him, “Surely women have been kept from us as previously when I set out and the vessels of the young men were holy, though it was an ordinary journey; how much more then today will their vessels *be holy*?” “So the priest gave him consecrated *bread*; for there was no bread there but the bread of the Presence which was removed from before the LORD, in order to put hot bread *in its place* when it was taken away (1 Samuel 21:1-6).

The bread being referred to here was the “bread of the presence.” It was bread that had been consecrated. As it was replaced, priests were allowed to consume it as part of their sustenance. Although the priests shared the bread with David and his men, it was intended for the priests only. The priest obeyed a higher law by sharing with the men in need. Because it was God’s provision to the priests for their dedicated service, the priests asked David if his men were ritually clean.

How does this story of David apply to Jesus and His disciples?

When David came to the priest at the Tabernacle and told him the half-truth that the King had sent him on mission, David was referring to sending himself. He had been anointed king by the prophet Samuel, but Saul was still on the throne. In the same way, the anointed King Jesus, was there incognito in front of them, just not yet crowned as King Jesus. He is the Lord of the Sabbath. While God had given the bread of the presence on the table before Him to the priests to eat, God never intended for those that were not priests to starve while the bread sat there. There are some things that override the rules and Laws. Kindness and mercy are such things that override law. Jesus had spoken of what the Lord was seeking: “**But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice’**” (Matthew 9:13).

As David was the true king at that time, even though his authority as king was not yet recognized, he had authority to give the sacred bread to his men. In the same way, King Jesus, not yet recognized as the true king, had authority to eat grain on the Sabbath and also His

companions with Him. He was demonstrating that the Son of Man was, indeed, Lord of the Sabbath.

Another Sabbath Conflict

⁶On another Sabbath he went into the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was shriveled. ⁷The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal on the Sabbath. ⁸But Jesus knew what they were thinking and said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Get up and stand in front of everyone." So he got up and stood there. ⁹Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?" ¹⁰He looked around at them all, and then said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He did so, and his hand was completely restored. ¹¹But they were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus (Luke 6:6-11).

Again, we see the Pharisee's and teachers of the law spying on Jesus, looking for an opportunity to accuse Him of law-breaking in order to have something against Him. This issue of Sabbath keeping was a major issue to the Jews; in fact, it was one of two things for which they murdered Him:

¹⁶For this reason the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because He was doing these things on the Sabbath. ¹⁷But He answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working." ¹⁸For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God (John 5:16-18).

The Lord Jesus was not complying to all their rules on keeping the Sabbath. In the synagogue that morning was a man with a right hand that was withered. The word that is translated *withered* was used of something that was shriveled up or atrophied, as in a dried-up plant or fruit. Verse 7 of Luke 6 tells us that, again, the Pharisees and teachers (scribes) were watching Him closely. They were probably there early in order to get on the front row, choosing the best places in the synagogue in order to scrutinize His every move. I wonder if the Pharisees had deliberately brought the man in order to find an occasion against Jesus by seeing if they could catch Him healing on the Sabbath? The teachers of the law and the Pharisees seem to be there on the spot just as a man with a withered hand is brought to Jesus on the Sabbath day.

The Lord was angry with all the silly little laws that made life difficult for His people. It loaded people down with burdens that took away the joy of simple life. He took the opportunity to face down His adversaries, and He compassionately healed the man.

Try to picture it: Jesus is there in the Synagogue. Does the man with the withered hand just walk in? He seems to be noticed by everyone, including Jesus. Notice that Jesus did not just heal him immediately. He calls the man to stand and then questioned the Pharisees' theology about God. He challenges them, "I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?" (v. 9). To Jesus, to withhold healing just because the day was a Sabbath day was absolutely cruel and spoke more of evil than good. Jesus was willing to break tradition and

rules for the sake of mercy and compassion. The Pharisees represented God as being law-centered and not caring for His people. He doesn't touch the man, but He tells him to stretch out his hand, and as he does so, he is wonderfully healed in full view of all. The Lord defiantly heals the man after silently looking around the room expecting for people to see reason (6:10). How infuriated were the rule-keepers! Where was the love and mercy of God in them! You'd think that they should be full of wonder and joy for the man with the withered hand; instead, they are absolutely crazy with anger at the result of this face-off. The literal Greek words bring out that they were filled with *unreason*, describing a hot-headed impulsive hostility toward the Lord for healing the man and belittling them at the same time.

How important it is for us to be moved to help people more than loading religious laws on them. We need to be careful that, as Christians, we do not become legalistic ourselves and lose sight of what is really important. When I was a young believer, I remember being scolded for things that I did not understand, having not been brought up in the church. Once I was scolded for stopping in at a store called an off-license (which is a store that sold alcohol, among other things) on a Sunday. I had stopped in to get some snacks to take to a youth meeting. I was unaware that others would see this as not honoring the Sunday Sabbath. I was on my way to a church meeting at the time. God sees our hearts. We should be careful not to quench the joy of those who are new Christians with a new set of rules and regulations.

While we do need to disciple new believers, it is important that they are not overwhelmed with a whole new list of do's and don'ts, which become another standard. The principle that I see in Scripture is a picture of how the Israelites possessed the land promised to them. Through Joshua, they took back the land of Canaan, one battle at a time. When taking the land, the Israelites did not attack all their enemies at the same time. The land was won by concentrating their efforts on forts and towns, one at a time. The land of habitual sin in our hearts is to be captured or possessed over a period of time, and it will not be won by concentration on rules but on receiving grace.

The ways of God are known by His Word. He reminds us and instructs us by His Spirit, and it is His grace that enables us to live according to His Word. Imagine what it would have been like to walk with Jesus as the disciples did. Jesus did obey and keep the Law at that time. He observed rituals and feast days. He also saw ahead to what these things represented, and He displayed truth and grace in a way that caused others to see God the Father in a new light. People were seeing the Kingdom of God come in a way that they had never seen before through their own system of works. No wonder the Pharisees and religious rulers were enraged by him!

Doesn't it seem amazing that they did not see their own hypocrisy as they were walking away and thinking thoughts of murder? ¹¹“**But they were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus**” (v.11).

They knew the Word of God, and yet they did not know the God of the Word. They thought more of the recipe book than the meal itself. The book tells us about how to have a living relationship with the God of the book. Let's be careful to seek the heart of the God who wrote the book.

Prayer: Thank You for the liberating power to live for You. Keep us in Your love, Lord Jesus.
Amen.

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