

Luke 6.1-11
The Lord of the Sabbath

1. The Context—"New Wine and Old Wineskins"

Who has the authority to interpret the law? That's an age old question. In our government, we have a judiciary entrusted with that task—to interpret and apply the received law in specific situations.

But the problem, *of course*, is that all human judges are fallible. They may even act with the best of intentions, but still make faulty decisions. And, *of course*, we also know that they often *may not* act with the best of intentions.

Well, in 1st century Judaism, there was an established, authoritative interpretation of the Law God revealed to Moses. And that was the interpretation given by the scribal tradition, which by the 2nd century B.C. had become a highly developed and established rule of practice.

Well that's the historical context in which this debate on Sabbath observance between Jesus and his antagonists in Luke 6 took place.

And then there's also the narrative context of Luke's Gospel. *Last week* we looked at chapter 5, verses 27-39—the account of Jesus and his disciples eating and drinking with people who were known to be sinners. And the conflict that brought with these Scribes and Pharisees.

And we finished up by looking at those two parables in 5.36-39 about the garments and the wineskins.

And in each of those parables, the point was that you can't force something new into old structures. Because if you do, you'll *ruin* both the old and the new. It's like trying to patch up an old garment with a piece torn off a new one, or putting new wine into old wineskins.

And here at the beginning of chapter 6, we see sort of an application of that principle. As the Pharisees and scribes had an established and *very rigid* understanding of the Sabbath commandment. Much like the old wineskins Jesus was talking about just before.

And they wanted to make sure Jesus and his disciples abided by that tradition. But here Jesus makes it very clear that it *wasn't their* interpretation of the Law that was authoritative, *but his*.

And so in the last couple scenes, we saw Jesus' authority to forgive sinners. And now here, we see his authority to *interpret the law*.

And this account is made up of two scenes purposely placed back to back in order to demonstrate one main point. And that point's encapsulated in verse 5: *Jesus, the Son of Man, is Lord of the Sabbath*.

And as the Lord of the Sabbath, *Jesus' interpretation* of the Sabbath Law—and the Law in general for that matter—is the right one. And these two scenes show that in *2 ways*: First there's Jesus' *teaching* in verses 1-5, and second there's the *miracle* of verses 6-11.

So, *once again*, we see the dynamic we've been seeing throughout Jesus' ministry in Luke's Gospel—word and deed *intimately connected*. The sign goes along with Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom in order to verify the *truth* of his claims.

2. The Teaching—Jesus Is Lord of the Sabbath (verses 1-5)

Now, focusing in on the first of these two scenes, we see that Luke sets the stage in verse 1 by telling us it's a *Sabbath day*.

Jesus and his disciples are walking through the grain fields. And they're hungry. So as they're walking, they start plucking heads of grain and eating the kernels. A seemingly small thing. But not to the Pharisees.

Now, the Old Testament, of course, prohibits working on the Sabbath. And that includes harvesting. But the later scribal tradition took this much further to include any *plucking* of grain on the Sabbath as reaping, *rubbing* as threshing, and *throwing* on the *ground* as winnowing.

So, according to the Pharisees, the disciples of Jesus here were clearly working on the Sabbath. And they were actually guilty of *at least 3 specific violations* of the Sabbath commandment.

And so they ask the question in verse 2: “*Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?*”

But Jesus doesn’t grant that their interpretation of the law is correct. And so he responds in verses 3 and 4 with an example from the life of King David, in 1 Samuel 21.1-6. And notice how he frames his response: “*Have you not read?*”

Remember, he’s talking here to the appointed teachers of the Law. And he’s right at the outset calling into question their ability to interpret Scripture. Surely they’ve read the passage Jesus is referring to.

But the point’s that they haven’t grasped its meaning or its importance for applying the Law to *specific situations*. You see, they may have known the *scribal tradition* like the back of their hand. But they *didn’t* have a proper understanding of God’s word.

Now, the example from David’s life Jesus gives in verses 3 and 4 is from 1 Samuel 21.1-6. And it might seem like an odd example at first. I mean, *Why didn’t he just give a straightforward interpretation of the Sabbath commandment?*

But, I think if we understand what’s really going on here, we’ll see that this response was *truly genius*. Because, for starters, citing this passage *established Jesus’ continuity* with King David.

Jesus is the Son of David. And in the context of 1 Samuel 21, David was the one anointed by Samuel to be King of Israel, and to replace the old king—King Saul.

And further, using this passage in this context sort of indirectly links the Pharisees with King Saul. Because Saul was representative of the old regime who in 1 Samuel 21 was at the beginning of his pursuit of David, *God’s anointed servant*, in an attempt to maintain his own power.

And the Pharisees, like Saul, stood for maintenance of the old established order. And they were just beginning *their pursuit* of God’s servant Jesus, King David’s greater Son, who was anointed to bring in the Kingdom of God.

And Jesus' use of 1 Samuel 21.1-6 here demonstrates precedent in King David's life for the principle Jesus is teaching.

Rightly interpreting the Law requires wisdom to apply it to specific situations. And love for God and other people are the two great laws *under which* all the other more specific laws are to be subordinated.

You see, in Leviticus 24.8-9, the Law demanded that the bread of the Presence was holy bread to be eaten *only* by the Priests:

Every Sabbath day Aaron shall arrange it before the LORD regularly; it is from the people of Israel as a covenant forever. And it shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place, since it is for him a most holy portion out of the LORD's food offerings, a perpetual due.

But in 1 Samuel 21, when David and his men were fleeing from Saul and needed something to eat, an exception was made. Because sustaining human life was more important than a rigid, inflexible interpretation of the letter of the law.

Now, of course, the law prohibiting work on the Sabbath is good. Jesus *doesn't deny* that. But the point's that the law itself doesn't extend to plucking heads of grain and eating them when you're hungry.

And to say it does is to have a *fundamentally flawed* understanding of the purpose and function of the Law.

And so, Jesus concludes with strong statement about his own authority. Not only is he son of David. He's in fact the *Lord of the Sabbath*. *He has* the authority to interpret the Sabbath commandment.

And, if the Pharisees missed the reality of who Jesus is, and placed the law, or their interpretation of it, over Jesus or *even* on a par with him, then they *entirely missed* the significance of his coming—*He is Lord of the Sabbath*, and what he says is the final word.

And so, we have another stage in the revelation of Jesus' authority. We've seen that he has authority over demons and human sickness. He has authority to forgive sins and call sinners to repentance.

And now we see that he *even* has authority over the Law. Because his interpretation of the law is authoritative. And he fulfills the Law.

3. The Sign—Healing on the Sabbath (verses 6-11)

And the next scene serves to prove just that point. As in verses 6-11 Jesus performs a miracle in a synagogue on the Sabbath which both demonstrates his authority, and further teaches about proper observance of the Sabbath.

The Pharisees and scribes are there again. And Luke makes it clear that at this point they're really spying on Jesus. They *haven't submitted* to his authority, but instead they're holding onto their own.

So, they wanted to catch him in the act of breaking the law in a public place with witnesses. And in verse 7 we see how consumed with zeal they were for their own established ways. As Luke says—*“the scribes and the Pharisees watched him, to see whether he would heal on the Sabbath, so that they might find a reason to accuse him.”*

And on this particular Sabbath day, they got just what they wanted. As Jesus heals this man with a withered hand.

Now, this guy's situation is bad. But it's not quite as bad as what we've been seeing up to this point—demon possession, high fever, leprosy, paralysis. And notice that the guy doesn't even ask to be healed.

But Jesus sees him and heals him anyway in order to make this *specific point*. Because the scribal additions to the Sabbath law allowed for one exception to not working on the Sabbath. And that was tending to someone who's life was in *immediate danger*.

But since this man wasn't in that category, healing him wouldn't have been included in that exception. So, Jesus here is *purposely* working outside the bounds of the accepted interpretation of the Law.

And he demonstrates the proper understanding of the Sabbath and the *whole Law*—showing love and mercy to other human beings is the *most important thing*. And that *supersedes* everything else.

And, the *Sabbath itself* was meant for *restoration*. But the scribes and Pharisees interpreted the law so rigidly that they didn't allow for healing and doing good on the Sabbath.

That's the irony here. *In their attempt* to be so rigid in their supposed obedience, they actually missed the point altogether.

And Jesus knew their thoughts, as we see in verse 8. And he used this as an opportunity to demonstrate what *true Sabbath observance* looks like. For he restored what had been broken by the curse.

So he tells the man with the withered hand to stand in front of him. And much like the Pharisees did with him and his disciples in the previous scene, Jesus *interrogates them* on what's lawful to do on the Sabbath.

Remember, in verse 2 they asked him, "*Why are you doing what's not lawful to do on the Sabbath.*" And now in verse 9 Jesus asks them: "*I ask you, is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?*"

And the right answer was clear—what's lawful is to do good and to save life on the Sabbath, not to do harm and destroy it.

You see, there's no middle ground here. If you can show mercy, heal, or save someone on the Sabbath, and refuse to do it because of a pretense that you're "*obeying the law,*" then you *actually break the law!*

So, for instance, if you're driving to church one Sunday morning, and you see someone in pain on the side of the road, and you refuse to stop to make sure everything's OK and offer some help because, "*Oh, it's Sunday, and I really need to show my service to God by making it to church on time*"—then you've neglected the *greater, more fundamental* responsibility of loving your neighbor as yourself.

No. Proper observance of the Lord's Day would be to stop and help the person in need. And try your best to make it to church once you've done that.

That's something like what Jesus is trying to get across to these people here in Luke 6. In trying to catch him healing on the Sabbath, they've *actually demonstrated* that they're hypocrites.

Because they've *completely misunderstood* the *entire purpose* of the Law. And they therefore don't follow the Law themselves.

You see, the point *isn't simply* that Jesus thought they should lighten up a little. The point's that they had an *entirely mistaken* understanding of the Sabbath, and the Law as a whole for that matter.

And so, Jesus didn't *just* heal this man. But he demonstrated *through* the healing just what true Sabbath observance was.

So it's not simply that doing deeds of mercy like healing this man's hand on the Sabbath was *permitted*. It's that if you're going to properly keep the Law, it was *required*.

Because remember, the Sabbath commandment itself is rooted in Creation. And its *ultimate purpose* has to do with the good of God's creatures. Just as Jesus says in Mark's version of this story: "*The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.*"

And there's no middle ground here. To be able to do good *and to not do it*, is to commit sin and break the law. To be able to heal and save, *and not do it*, is to destroy. That's the point of the miracle.

And remember, all this is done in the context of Luke's ongoing presentation of Jesus' *authority*. He's in a controversy with the leaders and teachers of God's people. It was supremely *their responsibility* to do good and heal the broken on the Sabbath.

And so the *real issue* here is, *who has the authority to interpret the law?* Jesus, or the Pharisees?

Well, the answer at this point is *resoundingly clear*: Jesus, the Son of Man, is Lord of the Sabbath. And this authority *cancel[s] out* any pretension to authority the Pharisees and scribes might have claimed.

And all this led them to want to get Jesus even more—verse 11: “*But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.*”

Now, think about what Jesus has done here. He’s attacked the established way of doing things at its very foundations. He’s refuted the *entire scribal tradition*, that was assumed to be authoritative, at its root. And he’s demonstrated his own authority to interpret the law.

But instead of accepting this revelation about who Jesus is, their hearts have become *increasingly hardened*. And contrast this with what we saw last week in 5.27-39—sinners repenting of their sins, leaving everything and following Jesus.

But the Scribes and Pharisees *weren’t willing* to repent. They *weren’t willing* to leave anything behind and follow the Lord of the Sabbath.

Instead, they militantly held onto their established ways and opposed Jesus’ correction. And because of their stubbornness, their old wineskins are about to burst.

4. The Sabbath in the Age of Fulfillment

Ok, so let’s try to *tie this all together* and think about what importance this passage about Sabbath observance in the 1st century has for the church in the 21st century.

The Lord Jesus, by his life, death, and resurrection, has fulfilled the Sabbath. He’s *truly Lord of the Sabbath* because he’s the *substance* that fulfills *everything* the Sabbath pointed toward.

By his resurrection from the dead, he’s opened up the *Day of God’s everlasting rest*, for us to enter in through faith.

And because of that, we now celebrate the Lord’s Day on the first day of the week. Because by his resurrection, Christ began the *New Age of fulfillment*.

As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, Christ is the first-fruits of the resurrection of the dead. He went through the ultimate *Sabbath rest* of death and was laid in the tomb on the *seventh day*. But he *rose from the dead* on the *first day*.

And so, as Paul also says in 2 Cor. 5.17, if any man is *in Christ*, there is a *New Creation*—the old has passed away; the new has come.

And in that age that *pointed forward* to Christ's coming, believers did their weekly work with a *view toward* the rest they'd receive at the *end* of the week. In other words, the *goal* of the week was *future rest*—*pointing forward* to fulfillment.

But now that the *fulfillment* of the whole Law *has come* in Jesus, and he's inaugurated the New Creation by his resurrection, we *begin* the week with a celebration of his *finished* redemptive work—pointing to the fact that we *now live* in the age of fulfillment.

As we partake of *resurrection life* through rest in Christ and worship on the *first day* of the week.... That's what the catechism of our church teaches in question 59:

From the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, God appointed the seventh day of the week to be the weekly sabbath; and the first day of the week ever since, to continue to the end of the world, which is the Christian sabbath.

But there are some things we need to keep in mind about what it means to properly observe the Lord's Day, especially with respect to this passage in Luke 6.

First and foremost, we need to be ever mindful of the main points Jesus makes in this passage: *He is Lord of the Sabbath*. And so, it's *his interpretation* of the law that is the right one.

And as we've seen, according to Jesus, it's *not* a rigid, *absolutely inflexible* interpretation of the law our God wants. Instead, he desires wisdom in our application of the law to *specific situations*.

And that wisdom begins with recognizing that love for God and our fellow human beings are the *two great commandments* that sum up the whole law.

So if your observance of the Lord's Day precludes showing mercy to other people, then there's something wrong about your observance.

Remember, there's *no middle ground*. To have the ability to save life and not do it, is to destroy it. And to do that *completely invalidates* any pretense to observing the law.

And as people who *rightly* take the Lord's commandments very seriously, we need to be on our guard against any tendency toward legalism we might have. Because it can be really easy to get *so bogged down* in formal details that you lose sight of the big picture — Love of God and neighbor is the *very essence* of the Law.

So, in addition to attending to public worship, our celebration of the Lord's Day should hold things like showing mercy to others, and fellowship with our brothers and sisters, as *also vitally important*.

Because the Lord's Day isn't a day for *inactivity*. It's a day for worship, fellowship, and mercy. And as we gather on the Lord's Day, we should be looking for those among us who might need healing—some help, or even just a word of encouragement.

And in everything, we need to remember that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. It was instituted for our good, not to be a burden to weigh upon us and beat us down.

Our God tells us to set aside one day in seven for rest and worship because he cares for us and he's good to us. And because of that, *we're called* on that day to spend our time *exemplifying* that care and goodness of God in *our love* and *care* for one another....

Certainly throughout the week, but on this day above all others, the world should know we're disciples of Jesus by our love for one another.

And so, *brothers and sisters*, may the *Lord of the Sabbath* grant us as his church the grace to do just that.