

Lesson 22
Controversy Over Sabbath
Luke 6:1-11

Last time we studied the call of Matthew to be a disciple and the subsequent banquet he held at his home to introduce all his low-life friends to the Messiah and how this provoked the scribes and Pharisees to question Jesus' behavior. To introduce this in Luke 5:27, Jesus went out near the border of Antipas and Philip's tetrarchies and there was a tax collector named Levi, sitting in the tax booth collecting the export taxes. Of the two classes of tax collectors, Matthew was one of the lower tax collectors. They were more hated than the chief tax collectors because they were agents of Rome and extorted vast amounts of money from their fellow Jews. As such they were ostracized from Jewish society and prohibited from Temple worship. But Jesus said to this man, "Follow Me." Jesus was calling Matthew to committed discipleship. It is my thinking that Matthew had heard John the Baptizer's teaching about repentance and he was no longer extorting money from the people but was only collecting the amounts required by law. He had also believed in the one John pointed out as the Messiah. And now Jesus was calling him to committed discipleship, to follow Him. And verse 28 says he responded to the call by leaving behind his whole life as a tax collector. He got up at that time and began to follow Him.

In verse 29 he gave a big reception for Jesus in his personal home. He wanted to introduce his unbelieving friends to the Messiah. The only people who would enter his home were fellow tax collectors and those classified by the Jews as sinners, such as prostitutes. The house was full of guests and they were fellowshiping around food and drink. Sometime later, verse 30 indicates that the Sanhedrin had begun their second phase of investigation; the interrogation. During this phase the scribes and Pharisees would ask questions, critically examine and look for a basis for acceptance or rejection of Jesus' Messiahship. Because of Jesus' associations, in verse 30 the scribes began criticizing His disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" What they were saying was that if Jesus was really the Messiah, He wouldn't be fellowshiping with people that were beyond the pales of repentance. He would have been fellowshiping with the Pharisees and would be a Pharisee. But in verse 31, Jesus answered, "It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call those who are righteous, but those who are sinners." In other words, Jesus came for those who realized they were sinners, not for those who were self-righteous and didn't sense their need. The tax collectors and other sinners realized their need. Jesus knew they could have a change of mind regarding their ways and believe in Him. But at that point in the discussion the scribes dropped that point and in verse 33 came against Him with another point. "And they said to Him, "The disciples of John often fast and offer prayers, the disciples of the Pharisees also do the same, but Yours eat and drink." In other words, why don't your followers abide by all the traditions of the Elders? What were known at the time as the laws of the Sopherim or the Mishnah that had been built up as a hedge around the Mosaic Law and given equal authority to the Scripture. In this case, the additional rule taught that fasting made prayer more efficacious. Because of that they fasted and prayed twice a week. But apparently Jesus and His disciples did not do that, so they interpreted them as unspiritual. Jesus' response was four-fold. First, in verses 34-35, the wedding analogy; it's not proper to fast when the Messiah is present; it's only proper to fast when He is absent. Because He was present it was not time to fast, but a time was coming when He would be absent and then it would be appropriate for His disciples to fast. Second, verse 36, the garment

analogy; you don't tear up a new garment to fix an old one and if you do it won't fit. The point is His teachings did not fit with the Pharisaic teachings. They were different teachings, incompatible. Third, verse 37, the wineskin analogy; you don't put new wine into an old wineskin because it will cause it to burst and all the wine will be wasted. The point is that you couldn't put His teachings into the mold of Pharisaism. And fourth, verse 39, the old wine analogy; old wine is better than new wine. The old Mosaic teachings were like old wine, much better than the new wine of the Pharisees. As such, He and His disciples would follow the old Mosaic laws.

The short story is that there was a division between what the Mosaic law taught and the rabbinic Judaism or Mishnah of the 1st century. It was this division which led the Pharisees to reject Jesus as the Messiah. They expected Messiah to come as a Pharisee and to help them continue to make new rules by use of the *pilpul* logic used by the Sopherim and now the Tannaim. But Jesus rejected these new rules and held to the Mosaic law as totally sufficient. Some would follow Him, but most would follow the scribes and Pharisees and thereby reject the Messiahship of Jesus. But in light of the rejection, the gospel would go out to all nations, which is the theme of the Gospel of Luke.

Today we come to Luke 6. This is a continuation of the second section of Luke's Gospel. The first section is 1:1-4:13 where the Son of Man is Introduced. The second section is 4:14-9:51 where the Son of Man Ministers in the Galilee. We are still in the Galilee and our passage tonight is Luke 6:1-11. Here Jesus is being interrogated by the scribes and Pharisees in the Galilee. This is a part of the second step of their investigation. This time the controversy is not fasting, but Sabbath keeping and what activity is acceptable on Sabbath. There were three such controversies recorded in the Gospels; 1) the healing of the paralytic in John 5:1-17, 2) the picking of the grain in Luke 6:1-5 and 3) the healing of the man with the withered hand in Luke 6:6-11. To understand why there was controversy over what could and could not be done on the Sabbath and why Jesus and His disciples were being criticized for what they were doing on the Sabbath, we have to understand the biblical versus the Pharisaic interpretation of the Sabbath.

Just as with leprosy and fellowship, we are again involved in studying the historical background so we can understand the text. Now, biblically, the *sabbath* was a day of rest. It began Friday evening at sunset and ended Saturday evening at sunset. Throughout the OT period, the Sabbath was second in importance only to the Temple. The rabbis added the *Kiddush*, a prayer that began the Sabbath, thanking God for the Sabbath and the *Havdalah*, a prayer that ended the Sabbath, praising God for distinguishing the Sabbath from the other days of the week. They also added special instruction on the Sabbath from the Law and the Prophets, so that the Sabbath became the "great educator of Israel." According to the sages, the Sabbath was equal in importance to all the laws of the Torah. Because of this, they reasoned that if all Israel were to properly keep the Sabbath just one day, then the Messiah would come. The day was so important that it was the only day of the week that was named in Hebrew. The other days were numbered and the first, second and third days were considered "after" the Sabbath, while the fourth and fifth and evening of the sixth were considered "before" the Sabbath. It was also viewed as the bride of Israel, because being the seventh day it was the only day that did not have a mate. The first day was mated with the second, the third with the fourth and the fifth with the sixth, but the seventh had no eighth and so God made Israel its mate. Thus the Sabbath was considered the bride of

Israel. The official start was when three stars were visible in the sky. If only one star was visible it was definitely day, if two it was questionable whether it was night, but if three then it was definitely night, the Sabbath had begun. Though there was just one Sabbath Law that God gave to Moses, “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy” (Exod 20:8), there were eventually 39 categories of laws including a total of about 1,500 rules that surrounded the Sabbath. The development of these laws began with the generation that returned from the Babylonian captivity. In order to ensure that they never broke the Mosaic law as they had before and fall into idolatry and go into captivity, they started a school of rabbis who used *pilpulistic* logic to deduce other laws and rules that would serve as a hedge around the Mosaic Law. These rabbis were known as the Sopherim, a Hebrew word that means “scribes.” For 450 years they developed these rules until the Sopherim were dissolved and a new group, the Tannaim arose, about AD30. The Tannaim accepted all the rules of the Sopherim and decided that while a Tanna could be questioned, a Sopher could never be questioned. This meant that the oral laws of the Sopherim were now considered equal to Scripture in authority. This became official at the time of Christ and eventually became a part of what was later known as the Mishnah. In order to justify this to the people they argued that God had given these rules to Moses in oral form and he passed them down to Joshua who passed them on to the judges who passed them on to the prophets who gave them to the Sopher who gave them to the Tannaim.

When it came to the Sabbath, a day of rest, they had to define labor in order to define rest. They decided to define labor by looking at all the work that went into constructing the Tabernacle. Through studying this the rabbis identified 39 categories of labor. Fruchtenbaum listed them as follows: “sowing, plowing, reaping, binding sheaves, threshing, winnowing, selecting food, grinding, sifting, kneading, baking, shearing wool, washing wool, beating wool, dying wool, spinning, weaving, making two loops, weaving two threads, separating two threads, tying, untying, sewing two stitches, tearing in order to sew two stitches, trapping (a deer), slaughtering, flaying, salting, curing a hide, scraping a hide and cutting it up, writing two letters, erasing two letters, building, tearing down, extinguishing a fire, kindling a fire, hammering, and transporting an object from one domain to the other.”²¹ As mentioned before, within these 39 categories they deduced about 1,500 individual rules and regulations. These were added to the one Sabbath law given by Moses and answered for them what Sabbath rest really was. Now hopefully you can see the center of the controversy between Jesus and the Pharisees over Sabbath keeping. Jesus was following the one law given by Moses, a day of rest, the Pharisees were keeping these 1,500 other rules that had been added.

That helps us understand this second Sabbath controversy in Luke 6:1. **Now it happened that He was passing through some grainfields on a Sabbath; and His disciples were picking the heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands, and eating the grain.** In the parallel of Matt 12:1, the only additional information we are given is that the “disciples became hungry.” So that was the occasion for them picking the grain. And evidently they had been under the Messiah’s teaching regarding Sabbath because if they hadn’t they would have been following the teaching of the Pharisees and they would never have done this. What would they have never done? They never would have picked the heads of grain, rubbed them in their hands and eaten the grain. This violated at least three and probably four of the 39 categories of labor on the Sabbath. **First**, they were picking the heads of grain, which violated the category of reaping. **Second**, they were rubbing them in their hands, which violated the category of threshing. **Third**, not mentioned

but they would have likely blown away any of the chaff, which violated the category of winnowing. Fourth, they **were eating the grain**, which violated the category of storing. Holdcroft, in a statement of irony said that, according to the rabbis, the disciples committed “four distinct breaches of the Sabbath in one mouthful.” Hopefully that gives you some idea of how extreme the rules and regulations had become. Rabbinic Judaism at the time of Christ was indeed a burden that was too large to carry, a yoke that was too heavy to bear. The Sabbath was no longer a day of rest but a day of extreme inconvenience.

But, having seen them break four of the rabbi’s Sabbath laws, are we surprised to read verse 2? **But some of the Pharisees said, “Why do you do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?”** The very question shows that **the Pharisees** were keeping a very close watch on Jesus and his disciples. They watched them walk through a field and what they saw them doing they did not like at all. They perceived them as desecrating the **Sabbath**. Yet, in truth they had not broken the biblical Sabbath at all, only the rabbinic rules concerning the Sabbath that went way beyond the Scriptures.

In response, Luke reports two of Jesus’ answers and the parallels in Matthew and Mark record three additional answers, for a total of five answers to this question. But here Luke only records two. First, in verses 3 and 4 we have Jesus’ answer from the example of David in 1 Sam 21. **Jesus answering them said, “Have you not even read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him, how he 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?”** What happened in 1 Sam 21? In 1 Sam 21 David and his men were on the run from King Saul. They were hungry and so David went to the priest Ahimelech and requested bread. Since there was no common bread on hand, the priest gave David the showbread that was being removed and replaced with hot bread. The fact it was time to remove the bread indicates that it might have taken place on the Sabbath, and therefore what took place would have been a double-offense; eating what belonged to the priests alone and eating it on Sabbath. If so, what David did was worse than what His disciples did. And in fact, Jesus makes this very point in verse 4 saying that eating **the consecrated bread...is not lawful for any to eat except the priests alone**. And that is what David did. David broke the Mosaic Law. In other words, there could be a real legal dispute over what David and the priest had done. That really was against the Law. However, they did not dispute over what David had done. Why not? Because there were situations where the Mosaic Law could be waved because of higher priority issues. And here’s one, the case of necessity. Meeting the problem of human hunger was a necessity. So, in the case of David, the Mosaic Law on that point was waved because human hunger was more important than a ceremonial use of the showbread. This is easy to understand and people should and usually do function this way. Constable gave an example, “Suppose you pass a house that is on fire. You stop, run up to the front door, bang on the door, and ring the doorbell. You look in the window and see someone lying on the floor. You then kick in the door and drag the unconscious person outside to safety. Even though breaking into someone else’s house is a criminal offense, the law will not prosecute you since you saved that person’s life.” In the same way, David and his men’s hunger was more important than the showbread being reserved for the priests. They needed it and it was all they had. The problem the Pharisees now face is this; if David and the priest had done this and the Pharisees did not condemn them, then why were they condemning Jesus’ disciples? What the disciples had done was not even a real breach of the Sabbath law, only

their rabbinic laws, so it was something far less than what David did. So they were not being consistent. This fact led Jesus to begin His inquiry in verse 3 by asking, **Have you not even read what David did?** In other words, do you not even know what the Bible says? This made His point a very sharp one. They should have known better. All their additional rules and regulations developed by *pipulistic* logic had ended up negating the true spirit of the Sabbath law and creating contradictions with other breaches of law.

Jesus' second answer is verse 5, **And He was saying to them, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."** Here Jesus is claiming to be the son related to mankind, who is Messiah. The title **Son of Man** comes from Dan 7 where He is seen coming up to the Father to receive a kingdom. It emphasizes that He is related to mankind, the last Adam and the heir of the kingdom. Jesus referred to Himself as the Son of Man most frequently and Son of God very infrequently. He also refers to Himself here as **Lord**. **Lord** is the Greek word *κυριος* and has reference to His authority. Bock said, "Jesus...has authority as Son of Man to evaluate and interpret tradition and law." He gave the law to Moses and He knew what it meant. He therefore had authority over it. He could annul it if He wanted, but He did not. He simply showed that what His disciples had done did not violate the Sabbath law that He had given. He was the ultimate interpreter of His law. And the law of Sabbath was simply a day set apart unto God, a day of rest. If they became hungry they could eat. To say they could not would make the day a burden, which is contrary to rest, the very purpose of the day.

In verses 6-11 we come to another Sabbath and the third controversy over the Sabbath. This shows once again that the Sabbath was very important, second only to the Temple itself, and viewed as equal in importance to all the laws of Torah. Verse 6 says, **On another Sabbath He entered the synagogue and was teaching; and there was a man there whose right hand was withered.** On this occasion Jesus was in **the synagogue...and was teaching.** Jesus' ministry is typified by His emphasis on **teaching.** That's why we emphasize **teaching.** On this occasion **there was a man there whose right hand was withered.** The parallels in Matt 12:10 and Mark 3:1 simply say "a man's hand was withered," whereas Luke specifies it was his **right hand**, showing his greater interest in the details as a medical doctor surely would be.

In verse 7 **The scribes and the Pharisees were watching Him closely to see if He healed on the Sabbath, so that they might find reason to accuse Him.** The word **watching** is from *παρατηρεω*. Bock says this word "is emotive; it means to spy on or watch out of the corner of one's eye, which adds a sinister note." There is every indication from this word that this man was planted in the assembly by the **scribes and Pharisees.** The parallel in Mark 3:4 says much the same and the parallel in Matt 12:10 confirms, saying "they questioned Jesus, asking, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"—so that they might accuse Him." Because they knew that He had healed on the Sabbath on previous occasions, and they considered this to be a violation of the Sabbath, they wanted Him to heal the man so they could **accuse Him** of breaking the Sabbath. Interestingly, they knew He could heal the man. There was never a question as to whether Jesus could do the miracles. Everyone knew He could do them. But what they wanted Him to do was heal on the Sabbath so they could use it as a basis for rejecting Him. As Fruchtenbaum noted, "Since this occurred during the interrogation stage, the religious leaders were still looking for a basis to accuse and reject Him."ⁱⁱ The rabbinic law taught that on Sabbath only those who were in danger of dying could be attended to. One author wrote, "External lesions...might be attended

to, if they involved danger to life. Similarly, medical aid might be called in, if a person had swallowed a piece of glass; a splinter might be removed from the eye, and even a thorn from the body...But...the man with the withered hand could not be classed with those dangerously ill..." Therefore, if Jesus healed the man He would be interpreted as violating the Sabbath.

In verse 8 we see that Jesus knew exactly what was going on. **But He knew what they were thinking, and He said to the man with the withered hand, "Get up and come forward!"** The Greek text says, **"Get up and stand in the middle!"** He was calling the man to Himself in the center of the synagogue, where He was teaching. Most synagogues had benches along the sides for seating and a large floor in the center where Jesus would have been standing and others sitting on the floor. By calling Him to the middle of the synagogue He was putting this man on center stage in the synagogue. And the man **got up and came forward.**

Now on stage, in verse 9 **Jesus** posed a 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?"** The word translated **lawful** is from *εξεστιν* and means "is it permitted?" or "is it proper?" Or "is it right?" It is a question about what is right to do on the Sabbath. Is it right **to do good or to do harm?** The word **do harm** is *κακοποιησαι* and is the antonym of **do good**. It really means **to do evil**. He's really asking if it is right to do good or evil on Sabbath. And the answer should be obvious but Jesus clarifies by asking, **to save a life or to destroy it?** Of course, they all knew the answer. Their only recourse might be to try to insist that since the man's life was not in danger that nothing should be done on that day, but that was no real answer. So, the parallel in Mark 3:4 says "they kept silent." They would not answer the question. And this revealed their insensitivity and lack of compassion. In verse 10 we are told that He **looked around at them all** and the parallel in Mark 3:5 it says He looked "around at them with anger, and grieved at their hardness of heart." He had given them the opportunity to answer and the answer was abundantly clear, but they would not answer. What was wrong with them that they would not permit the doing of good to others? Answer: they had hardness of heart. They were hardened against God. The real problem was not Jesus and His willingness to make a man whole on the Sabbath but their calloused hearts. And so, **after looking around at them all, He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand!" And he did so; and his hand was restored.** Jesus was able to heal the man's hand by simply giving an order. Fruchtenbaum said, "...the healing was immediate. The Messiah did not ask the man if he believed or had faith; at this point, faith was not essential. Although the man was a plant, Yeshua went ahead and healed him, because at this point in His ministry, the purpose of His miracles was to authenticate His messianic claims."ⁱⁱⁱ When the man stretched **out his hand** the text says it **was restored**. The Greek word **restored** comes from a word which means "to change to an earlier good state or condition." This man had once had the use of his hand, but it had been damaged in an accident. Now it was restored fully and instantaneously. Such is the power of the Messiah.

In verse 11 we see two of the Pharisees responses. **But they themselves were filled with rage, and discussed together what they might do to Jesus.** The first response is that **they...were filled with rage**. The word **rage** is from the Greek word *ανοια* which comes from the word *ανοοσ* which means "without mind." *Ανοια* is "a mindless rage, an irrational fury." They could not control their emotions and went into a fit of rage. The second response is they **discussed together what they might do to Jesus**. The parallel in Matt 12:14 says they were discussing

“how they might destroy Him.” This is when they began to discuss how to kill Him. They had already made their decision to reject Him. Not mentioned here but in the parallel of Mark 3:6 it says they “conspired with the Herodians.” The Herodians hated the Pharisees and vice versa. They stood on opposite ends of the political spectrum. But they had found a common enemy. And their alliance on this occasion would come to its climax during the labyrinth of bad reasoning during the trials and consequent crucifixion of Christ.

In conclusion, Pentecost noted, “The Sabbath controversy, then, marked an important development. The opposition of the Pharisees was no longer veiled but open. They were determined to put Him to death and were soliciting help from other parties in the nation to accomplish their goal.”^{iv}

In summary, in Luke 6:1, Jesus had been teaching His disciples the true intent of the Law given to Moses over and against the rabbinic system of laws that had been added to it. In verse 1 we read that as He was passing through some grainfields on a Sabbath, His disciples were picking the heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands, and eating the grain. This constituted at least three and perhaps as many as four violations of the rabbinic Sabbath; reaping, threshing, winnowing and storing grain. The Pharisees were disgusted by these acts of desecration. So in verse 2 some of the Pharisees said, “Why do you do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” On this occasion Jesus was not eating the grain, but His disciples were, they addressed the disciples but Jesus addressed them in return in verse 3 saying, “Have you not even read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him, how he 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? David and the priest in 1 Sam 21 would also need to be condemned by the Pharisees if they were going to condemn Jesus’ disciples. The problem was they weren’t willing to condemn David and the priest. And further, verse 5, the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. He defines its true meaning and nothing had been violated because the Sabbath was simply a day set apart for rest. If one became hungry he could eat and to say he could not made the Sabbath into a burden, the opposite of the Sabbath. In verse 6, on another Sabbath He entered the synagogue and was teaching as was His custom. On this occasion there was a man there whose right hand was withered. This man had lost the use of his hand in some prior accident. In verse 7 we learn that the scribes and Pharisees had planted this man in the assembly and were watching Jesus closely to see if He healed on the Sabbath. They wanted to find a reason to accuse Him, not to believe in Him. But in verse 8, Jesus was privy to what they were thinking, and He said to the man with the withered hand, get up and come stand in the middle. And he got up and stood in the middle. And Jesus posed a question to them, “I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do evil on the Sabbath, to save a life or to destroy a life?” He gave them time to answer but they kept silent, and in verse 10, after looking around, Mark says with anger and grief over their hardness of heart, He said to the man, “Stretch out your hand!” And he did so and his hand was restored to its earlier condition before injury. But regardless of the joy they should have all had over this man being made well, in verse 11 the scribes and Pharisees were filled with mindless fury, and they discussed together how they might kill Him, and Mark adds, conspiring His death with the Herodians, their most hated political opponents.

In conclusion, what can we learn? First, there are important issues about Sabbath keeping today. Many in the Church think that Sunday is the new Sabbath. This is never stated in Scripture. The

Sabbath is always from Friday at sundown to Saturday at sundown. Nor does the Bible ever refer to Sunday as “the Lord’s day.” That is just a tradition. Sunday is not a prescribed day of worship. All the Scriptures teach is that we are to meet regularly for corporate worship. The day that we decide to do this is totally up to each local church. Jesus warned against distorting the law regarding Sabbath and yet not only did the scribes and Pharisees do this, but much of the Church. **Second**, the dangers of applying extreme analysis of the Scriptures by human logic. Human logic is a tool given to man that can be used to interpret and organize the Scriptures. However, extreme applications of it, such as the rabbi’s *pupulistic* logic resulted in folly and contradiction. They came to conclusions that were the opposite of the spirit of the law and thereby negated it. Therefore, we have to be very careful with logic in our organization of Scripture and not extend it so far that it violates the spirit of the text. The short story is that we can be logically correct but Scripturally wrong. I’ve come to the conviction over the years that the Scriptures were not given for over-analysis because you will find yourself in logical binds. Therefore, the important thing is to find the authors intent and the spirit of that intent and only allow logic to work within those parameters.

ⁱ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Yeshua: The Life of Messiah from a Messianic Jewish Perspective*, 222.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, Fruchtenbaum, 257.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, Fruchtenbaum, 258.

^{iv} J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ*, 168.