

LUKE

“Lord of the Sabbath”

Luke 6:1-11

Sunday, May 14, 2017 (Mother’s Day)

By David A. Ritchie

“On a Sabbath, while he was going through the grainfields, his disciples plucked and ate some heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands. But some of the Pharisees said, ‘Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?’ And Jesus answered them, ‘Have you not 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 bread of the Presence, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those with him?’ And he said to them, ‘The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.’ On another Sabbath, he entered the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was withered. And 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. But he knew their thoughts, and he said to the man with the withered hand, ‘Come and stand here.’ And he rose and stood there. And Jesus said to 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 after looking around at them all he said to him, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ And he did so, and his hand was restored. But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus” (Luke 6:1–11, ESV).

Almighty and everlasting Father, in this season celebrating the resurrection of your Son Jesus we acknowledge that you are the fountain of our truest joy, our truest peace, and our truest life. As we come before your holy word today, we pray your Holy Spirit would rest up our hearts, so that our hearts would find their rest in you. In Jesus’s might name we pray, AMEN.

I. Introduction

- This spring, we’ve been studying the gospel according to Luke.
- To catch you up on our journey, it is still relatively early in the ministry of Jesus.
- Jesus has already become a nationally famous rabbi who not only preaches the word of God, but also performs mighty miracles of God.
- However, recently we have witnessed Jesus transition from being a famous rabbi to being a controversial rabbi.
- In fact, in this portion of Luke there are *five back-to-back controversies* between Jesus and a group of Jewish religious leaders known as the Pharisees.
- Today’s Scripture reading contains episodes four and five of those controversy accounts.
- And through these controversies, two things are happening: 1.) the Pharisees are becoming more and more opposed to Jesus and his disciples, and 2.) their question is no longer whether or not Jesus possesses supernatural power, but rather determining the nature of Jesus’s power.
- They are asking: “Is he a true prophet sent by God? Or a false prophet that is empowered by the demonic?”¹

¹ Robert H. Stein, [Luke](#), vol. 24, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 189.

- Thus, in today's passage the Pharisees arrange a *litmus test* to gauge whether or not Jesus is a true prophet of God – does Jesus honor the Pharisees standards of the Sabbath?
- They use the Sabbath intentionally because it is a massively important feature of the law of God and the identity of the nation of Israel as God's people.²
- However, as we will see, Jesus will use this opportunity to reveal the that he is not just a prophet – he is the Son of Man who is **"Lord of the Sabbath."**
- It is a bit of a complicated text so I want to approach our study with three clarifying questions: **1.) What is the Sabbath?, 2.) Did Jesus break the Sabbath?, and 3.) How does Jesus's relationship with the Sabbath apply to us today?**

II. Text

1.) What is the Sabbath?

- Before we dive headlong into our text today, I want to make sure we build a background of understanding what the Sabbath is and why it would have been so important.
- The word Sabbath derives from the Hebrew word "*shabbat*" (שַׁבָּת), which means, "*to cease, stop, be at a standstill...stop working, take a holiday.*"³ In the Bible, it refers to the day of the week when the people of God were to regularly cease from their labors as a sign of worship and devotion unto the Lord. Thus, if we are to build a definition of what the Sabbath is we are combining to ideas: *the idea of rest and the idea of worship*. Sabbath is when God's people intentionally cease from work and business rest in the worship of God.
- And it is interesting that the Sabbath isn't just a good suggestion that can be taken or ignored at will. Sabbath isn't merely a ceremonial issue – it is a moral issue. In fact, to observe the Sabbath is commandment four the Ten Commandments: **"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy"** (Exodus 20:8–11, ESV).
- Not only does this passage show that the Sabbath was a part of God's moral law, along with things like don't kill people and don't commit adultery, it shows us that the Sabbath is what theologians call "a creational ordinance." In other words, it did not come about through the Old Testament law. It is woven into the fabric of creation. When we go against Sabbath, we are rubbing against the way God created us and the world around us.
- The penalty for breaking the Sabbath was fairly severe. In ancient Israel it was a capital offense punishable by death (Ex. 31:6).
- Why was this case? Well, the quick answer is that keeping the Sabbath was a sign of God's people keeping their covenant with God. By breaking the Sabbath, people were saying they were not interesting in knowing or worshipping God as Lord.⁴

² Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 81.

³ Holladay, William L. *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament: Based on the Lexical Work of Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 680.

⁴ Peter Enns. *The NIV Application Commentary: Exodus*. The NIV Application Commentary Series. Edited by Terry Muck. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 545.

- Some Christians believe the principle of the Sabbath is irrelevant, in the same way all of the sacrifices and temple rituals and dietary laws (the “ceremonial laws) were brought to completion in Christ.
- However, as we have seen, the Sabbath is not just a part of the Old Testament ceremonial law, it is a part of the moral law as well as the fabric of creation.
- But whatever your doubts may be about the continuing relevance of the Sabbath, can’t we just agree that our anxious age needs the Sabbath more than ever?
- I truly believe one of the most counter-cultural things Christians can do is be a people who exude Sabbath rest in the midst of a world of hurry and haste.
- **Sabbath might be the greatest need in your life that you don’t know you need.**

2.) Did Jesus break the Sabbath?

- Now as I mentioned earlier, the two episodes that are contained in the Passage before us are united by the fact that they both involve the Sabbath. In both passages, the Pharisees are accusing Jesus and his disciples of breaking or profaning the Sabbath.
- In this first passage Jesus’s disciples are walking through grain fields, picking grain as they walk, rubbing it in their hands, and eating it as they walk. The issue here isn’t whether or not they were stealing.⁵ What they were doing was totally allowed. The issue was that it was a Sabbath day. And by the Pharisees’ interpretation of the Law, they were harvesting grain and therefore breaking the Sabbath.⁶
- Notice what Jesus does not say: he does not say the Sabbath is now irrelevant
- Instead, he uses this as an opportunity to clarify two things: who he is as well as what the real purpose of the Sabbath is. And approaches his teaching from a very interesting and unexpected angle.
- This is an example of how one confusing passage in the Bible is explained by another confusing passage in the Bible (in this case 1 Sam. 21:1-6).
- This that Jesus uses is about David, the shepherd-warrior who is destined to become the greatest ancient king of Israel.
- It is a story about David fleeing for his life from the wicked king Saul, during which he comes to the tabernacle ,which was essentially a portable temple in Israel – the place where God’s presence dwelt on earth.
- However, David wasn’t just fugitive on the run – *he was also the anointed king.*
- *He and his rag-tag followers represented a new kingdom breaking through and emerging in the midst of the old.*
- In this story, David asks the priest for food. The only thing the priest has is what is known as the bread of the presence, which are twelve loaves of bread that sit before the holy presence of God. And the priest gives it to him because these men have taken a vow of consecration, and are therefore qualified to have priestly access to the holy food.⁷
- *Why does Jesus respond with this story? He is revealing who he is and the authority he possesses. He is not a normal rabbi that has to subscribe to the Pharisees’ very narrow view of the Sabbath. He, not the Pharisees, has the right to interpret the Sabbath.*

⁵ See Deut. 23:25. Craddock, 82.

⁶ “The act of plucking could be regarded as part of harvesting, which was forbidden on the Sabbath (Shab. 7:2; SB I, 615–618). The preparation of food by rubbing corn was also forbidden, so much so that one was required to prepare a meal in advance for any traveller who might happen to arrive on the Sabbath (Peah 8:7).” I. Howard Marshall, [The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#), New International Greek Testament Commentary (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 231.

⁷ Peter J. Leithert. *A Son to Me: An Exposition of 1 & 2 Samuel*. 127. (Moscow, Idaho: Cannon, 2003), 127.

- *By using this exact illustration Jesus is saying, he is not just true prophet. He is the true king, whose kingdom is breaking through in the midst of the old. He is the true priest, who is mediating a new relationship between God and man. And more than that, he is the true and living presence of God on earth. Thus, the grain the disciples are eating are not just any normal grain. They are eating holy bread of presence, because they are in the presence of the Lord himself. Jesus isn't breaking Sabbath law; he is Lord of the Sabbath.*
-
- However, it's one thing to talk the talk, it is indeed another to walk the walk.
- Then, Jesus's right is backed up by his might.
- The second episode of this passage is the healing of the man with a withered hand.
- Again it is another Sabbath day. And this time the Pharisees seem to have colluded in creating a trap. They bring to a Jesus's synagogue service a man with a withered hand.
- Luke specifically points out the man's right hand is withered, which means he couldn't work; in other words, this is debilitating condition.
- However, in the Pharisees estimation this was not a life-threatening issue, thus to heal him on a Sabbath would have constituted work. They want to have grounds in order to make an accusation against Jesus. New Testament scholar Robert Stein notes: "The term 'to accuse' refers to finding a legal accusation that could be used in court against Jesus."⁸ They are literally trying to build a case against Jesus.
- The Pharisees had absurd arguments about Sabbath that seemed to get further and further way from the God they were supposed to be worshiping.
- In fact, there is a part of the Talmud in which the rabbis argue about whether or not executing a Sabbath breaker on the Sabbath is actually itself an act of breaking the Sabbath⁹
- More than that, they couldn't care less about the legitimate pain and suffering of this man with a withered hand. They just want to use him to get Jesus to make a mistake.
- Jesus's words and subsequent healing are exposing how ridiculous this argument is, and in the process reminding what Sabbath is intended to do – to restore mankind through the worship of God.
- *Thus, Jesus is not breaking the Sabbath, but rather the man made laws and interpretation of the Sabbath. And in the process he is continuing to reveal who he is as well as the true purpose of the Sabbath.*
- The passage ends with the rage of the Pharisees.
- Mark's account even says this is when they began plotting how to kill Jesus (Mk. 3:6).

3.) How does Jesus's relationship with the Sabbath apply to us today?

- If we are to understand Sabbath as Christians, we must understand through it the lens of Christ.¹⁰
- So what can how can we from this passage build out a Christian definition of the Sabbath from this passage?
- ***True Sabbath is to walk with Christ, minister with Christ, and be nourished by his presence, as the disciples walking with Jesus through the fields of grain.***
- ***True Sabbath is to encounter Christ in worship, and be restored and healed by his power, as the man with the withered hand.***

⁸ Stein, 189.

⁹ *b. Yeb.*, 27.

¹⁰ Craddock, 82.

- I believe that this text also implicitly shows us two ways to go wrong with the Sabbath.
- Firstly, we can get so legalistic about it that we remove forget that it is to be a gift to be enjoyed; that the Sabbath is for our benefit and our good and our joy.
- For example, some denominations would say it is a sin to play catch with your kid on a Sunday afternoon; I think this is unhelpful, and like the doctrine of the Pharisees misses the point of why the Sabbath exists.
- Secondly, and I think this is going to be the problem for most in this room, we can forsake the Sabbath. We can mistakenly think that it is no longer relevant for Christians today. But remember Sabbath is a creation ordinance. Like marriage and the sanctity human life, it is woven in the fabric of creation.
- We are built to need Sabbath rest. Sabbath rest is like we need spiritual oxygen that gives life and nourishment to our souls. And for this reason, only Sabbath can give us the deep rest we need.
- Because Sabbath is a call not only to rest, but it is to rest in worship.
- Now, at this point we should note there are exceptions even in the Bible. These exceptions include: works of necessity (like the people who guard our nuclear weapons), mercy (like health care professionals, and ministry (like myself).
- But these exceptions are exceptions, not the rule.
- Parents, listen to me:
- The vast majority of people I know who regularly miss worship do not miss it because of their job or emergencies. They miss it because of largely elective busyness (meaning busyness they choose) or else simple convenience – whether it be a kid’s sports league, weather that’s too cold that you’d like to just stay inside and sleep in or a day the weather is so nice that you want to just go play outside all day.
- When you slip into doing life this way – which is very easy to do – you are discipling your children to worship Jesus, but only when there isn’t something a little but more convenient to do.
- Recreation is fun, and there is a place for it. But it can’t come at the expense of worship.
- Don’t miss this opportunity in this season of life, to expose your children to worship on a regular basis.
- ***We live in a world that is still very much broken and fractured by sin, and often that brokenness wounds us. It deforms us, like the man with the withered hand was deformed. But on the day of Sabbath, we are invited to cease from our works. We are invited to worship. And in that place of rest and worship, we are invited to encounter Jesus through his word and his Spirit; that he might heal us and restore in us that which is bent and broken.***
- In this way corporate worship is like a spiritual chiropractic adjustment. I realigns us.
- We are spiritual beings than need spiritual nourishment. We were created to find our rest in God. Nothing else will satisfy. As the great Saint Augustine of Hippo prayed on the first page of his book *Confessions*, ***“You awaken us to delight in your praise; for you made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until our hearts rest in you.”***¹¹

¹¹ An modernized rendering of Augustine. *The Confessions*. Trans. Edward Bouverie DePussey. (Philadelphia: Franklin Library, 1982), 5.

III. Conclusion

- I'll conclude by answering a question I often receive: "If the Sabbath is so important, why do Christians celebrate the Sabbath on Sundays instead of Saturdays like the Jesus? And historical and biblical evidence shows us Christians have done this ever since the age of the apostles.
- And the reason why is because Jesus completed a work on a Sunday that gives us the ability to know true rest.
- You see our task list will never be completed. We will never get to a place where we truly earn our rest. But we are to rest anyway. Why?
- But by Jesus's cross and his empty grave, he has finished the greatest work on our behalf. And our choice to rest in Sabbath is a sign of resting in his completed work
- ***We do not rest because our work is finished, but because Jesus' work is!***

- So today, if you are exhausted and hungry for rest in your soul, know that your rest is found in the work Jesus has done. Come to him. Trust in him. Find rest in him. Hear the words of Jesus, *"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, 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"* (Matthew 11:28-30, ESV).

Community Group Discussion Questions

- 1.) *What is the Sabbath and why was it so important to Jewish life (see: Ex. 20:8-11 and Deut. 5:12-15)?*
- 2.) *What is Jesus's relationship to the Sabbath in Luke 6:1-11? Does he break the Sabbath, or is it possible that Jesus is revealing the true purpose of the Sabbath?*
- 3.) *What would the benefits be if we enjoyed Sabbath rest more often? How should we order our lives if we want to enjoy Sabbath rest?*
- 4.) *How should the finished work of Christ on the cross help us know true Sabbath rest?*