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Lord of the Sabbath (Luke 6:1–11)

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. But some of the Pharisees said, “Why do you do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” And 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?” And He was saying to them, “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” On another Sabbath He entered the synagogue and was teaching; and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. 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. But He knew what they were thinking, and He said to the man with the withered hand, “Get up and come forward!” And he got up and came forward. And Jesus said to them, “I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to destroy it?” 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

themselves were filled with rage, and discussed together what they might do to Jesus. (6:1-11)

The initial reaction to the Lord Jesus Christ was generally positive. Speaking of His early ministry in Galilee, Luke noted that when “He began teaching in their synagogues [He] was praised by all” (4:15). The Lord was so popular that when He “left [Capernaum] and went to a secluded place . . . the crowds were searching for Him, and came to Him and tried to keep Him from going away from them” (4:42). After Jesus healed a leper, “the news about Him was spreading even farther, and large crowds were gathering to hear Him and to be healed of their sicknesses” (5:15). In the aftermath of His healing of a paralytic, the people “were all struck with astonishment and began glorifying God; and they were filled with fear, saying, ‘We have seen remarkable things today’” (5:26). Even the religious leaders were unable to restrain their curiosity at first (5:17).

But curiosity eventually turned to hostility, which by the time the events in the sixth chapter of Luke’s gospel occurred was escalating severely. The religious leaders had come to view Jesus as the most dangerous man in Israel, the biggest threat to their religious power and prestige. Their fears were well-founded. Jesus was the most powerful teacher the world had ever seen or ever will see, and He was assaulting their ritualism, legalism, and prideful hypocrisy. Even worse, while attacking them, the Lord was associating with the tax collectors, prostitutes, and other riffraff of society. When Jesus showed concern about their sins, since He came “to call . . . sinners to repentance” (5:32), some of them responded with repentance and faith. But when He confronted the Pharisees and scribes, because they were the leaders of the religious establishment and the proud, unrepentant purveyors of the damning lie that God was pleased by self-righteousness, legalism, and ritualism, they found the Lord’s discrediting of them to be intolerable and infuriating. They also found His choosing of common men instead of members of the religious elite as His apostles insulting.

The Lord did not escalate the conflict by being insensitive or ungracious, but by His uncompromising proclamation of the truth. The truth of God is the most important thing in the world (cf. Prov. 23:23). It is the message of sin, forgiveness, salvation, and the hope of eternal life. All the truth must be proclaimed no matter what the effects are, whether people embrace it, or are offended by it; whether they accept it and are saved, or reject it, and are eternally lost. There is no common ground between the truth and error.

Jesus spoke the truth in every situation, not under compulsion or against His will, but by His deliberate choice. By doing so, He exposed

error both to those who taught it, and to anyone else who might have been attracted to it. The Lord never minced words when dealing with either false religion, or the wicked false teachers who purvey it (cf. Matt. 7:15–20; 23:1–36). His bold preaching of the gospel, which was incompatible with the Jewish religion of His day (Luke 5:36–39), forced people to choose between the gospel of grace and the works-righteousness system of contemporary Judaism.

At the heart of Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees and scribes was the Sabbath. Much of their self-righteous attempt to earn salvation by good works focused on keeping the Sabbath regulations. Because its observance was the mainstay or anchor of first-century Judaism, the Sabbath inevitably became a major point of contention between Jesus and the Jewish leaders. In this section of his gospel, Luke records two incidents in which Jesus boldly confronted their false view of the Sabbath, and established Himself as Lord over the Sabbath. The first incident took place in the grainfields; the second in a synagogue.

IN THE GRAINFIELDS

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. But some of the Pharisees said, "Why do you do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" And 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?" And He was saying to them, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." (6:1–5)

The **Sabbath** was originally given by God in the Mosaic law (not before) to be a day of rest (the Hebrew word translated "Sabbath" comes from a verb that means, "to cease," "to desist," or, "to rest" [cf. Gen. 2:2]), refreshment, and worship for His people (Ex. 20:8–11). But by the first century, it had accumulated an enormous number of extrabiblical restrictions and regulations, so much so that it had become the most oppressive and burdensome day of the week.

The Talmud devotes twenty-four chapters to Sabbath regulations, describing in painfully exhaustive detail what was and was not permitted to be done. The result was a ridiculously complex system of external behavior restraints—so much so that one rabbi spent two and a half years studying just one of the twenty-four chapters.

For example, traveling more than 3,000 feet from home was forbidden. But if one had placed food at the 3,000 foot point before the Sabbath, that point would then be considered a home, since there was food there, and allow another 3,000 feet of travel. Similarly, a piece of wood or a rope placed across the end of a narrow street or alley constituted a doorway. That could then be considered the front door of one's house, and permit the 3,000 feet of travel to begin there.

There were also regulations about carrying items. Something lifted up in a public place could only be set down in a private place, and vice versa. An object tossed into the air could be caught with the same hand, but if it was caught with the other hand, it would be a Sabbath violation. If a person had reached out to pick up food when the Sabbath began, the food had to be dropped; to bring the arm back while holding the food would be to carry a burden on the Sabbath. It was forbidden to carry anything heavier than a dried fig (though something weighing half as much could be carried two times). A tailor could not carry his needle, a scribe his pen, or a student his books. Only enough ink to write two letters (of the alphabet) could be carried. A letter could not be sent, not even with a non-Jew. Clothes could not be examined or shaken out before being put on because an insect might be killed in the process, which would be work. No fire could be lit, or put out. Cold water could be poured into warm water, but not warm into cold. An egg could not be cooked, not even by placing it in hot sand during the summer. Nothing could be sold or bought. Bathing was forbidden, lest water be spilled on the floor and wash it. Moving a chair was not allowed, since it might make a rut in a dirt floor, which was too much like plowing. Women were forbidden to look in a mirror, since if they saw a white hair, they might be tempted to pull it out.

Other forbidden things included sowing, plowing, reaping, binding sheaves, threshing, winnowing, grinding, kneading, baking, shearing, washing, beating, dyeing, or spinning wool, tying or untying a knot, catching, killing, or skinning a deer, salting its meat, or preparing its skin. (For a detailed discussion of the rabbinic Sabbath restrictions, see Alfred Ederheim, "The Ordinances and Law of the Sabbath as Laid Down in the Mishnah and the Jerusalem Talmud," Appendix XVII in, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974], 2:777-87.)

It was to people crushed by the unbearable burden (Matt. 23:4; Luke 11:46; Acts 15:10) of manmade, legalistic regulations that the Lord Jesus Christ said, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30).

This particular Sabbath found the Lord and His disciples **passing**

through some grainfields. *Sporimos* (**grainfields**) literally means, “sown fields”; the crop being grown in these particular fields was probably either wheat or barley. Since the grain was ripe enough to eat, it was probably spring or summer. As they walked along the paths between the rows of grain, the **disciples were picking the heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands, and eating the grain.** To do so was not wrong in itself; travelers were permitted by the Mosaic law to pick grain from their neighbors’ fields to satisfy their hunger (though not, of course, to harvest it): “When you enter your neighbor’s standing grain, then you may pluck the heads with your hand, but you shall not wield a sickle in your neighbor’s standing grain” (Deut. 23:25).

But to do so on the Sabbath was a violation, not of the Mosaic law, but of the rabbinic restrictions described above. Specifically, the disciples were guilty in the eyes of the **Pharisees** of reaping (picking the grain), threshing (rubbing the husks together to separate them from the grain), and winnowing (throwing the husks away), and thus preparing food. The self-appointed guardians of the Sabbath were quick to pounce on the blatant violation of their silly regulations. **“Why do you do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?”** they demanded. Although they addressed their question to the entire group, the Pharisees’ rebuke was directed primarily at Jesus, since His disciples were surely following His teaching and example. They viewed the incident as a direct attack on their whole religious system to which, as noted earlier, the Sabbath was central. Obviously, their presence in the grainfields indicates the constant scrutiny to which the religious leaders subjected Jesus, as they dogged His steps looking for an excuse to condemn Him.

Assuming responsibility for His disciples’ actions, Jesus responded with a mildly sarcastic rebuke of the Pharisees’ ignorance. They, of course, knew the history He was about to relate, but had ignored its true significance. As He frequently did (cf. 5:23; 10:26; 20:3-4, 24) **Jesus** answered their question with one of His own: **“Have you not even read (cf. Matt. 19:4; 21:42; 22:31; Mark 12:10) 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?”**

The incident the Lord referred to is recorded in 1 Samuel 21:1-6. Fleeing Saul’s relentless pursuit of him, David came to Nob, about a mile north of Jerusalem. David **was hungry**, as were **those who were with him**. Seeking food, they **entered the house of God** (the tabernacle), and asked Ahimelech the priest for five loaves of bread. The tabernacle, of course, was not a bakery, and the only bread available there was the **consecrated bread**. Also called the “bread of the Presence” (Ex. 25:30),

it consisted of twelve loaves, placed each Sabbath on the golden table in the Holy Place. After the bread was replaced with fresh loaves, it could be eaten, but only by the priests (Lev. 24:9). Ahimelech was willing to give some of the consecrated bread to David and his men, on the condition that “the young men [had] kept themselves from women” (1 Sam. 21:4) (i.e., were ceremonially clean). After David assured him that they had done so, Ahimelech gave them the bread and they ate it.

The point of the account, which was lost on the Pharisees, was that mercy, compassion, and human need were more important than rigid adherence to even biblical ritual and ceremony. Mark 2:27 records that Jesus also said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath,” while Matthew records His rebuke, “But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire compassion, and not a sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent” (12:7). If a human priest could permit David to violate part of God’s ceremonial law (perhaps even on a Sabbath, since the old bread being replaced had not yet been eaten by the priests), how much more could the Son of God allow His disciples to violate unbiblical human traditions?

Then Jesus stunned and outraged the Pharisees by declaring, **“The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”** As such, He alone had the right to decide what behavior was appropriate on the Sabbath; He is the interpreter of God’s will, law, and word. Since the Sabbath was established by God (Ex. 20:8–11), He, the Son of God, had authority over it. Thus, by claiming authority over a divinely instituted ordinance, Jesus was claiming full equality with God. Compare John 5:9–17, where our Lord was again confronted over His Sabbath activity and replied, “My Father is working . . . and I Myself am working” (v. 17). Here again He clearly declared His equality with God, as evidenced by His sovereignty over the Sabbath.

IN A SYNAGOGUE

On another Sabbath He entered the synagogue and was teaching; and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. 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. But He knew what they were thinking, and He said to the man with the withered hand, “Get up and come forward!” And he got up and came forward. And Jesus said to them, “I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to destroy it?” 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 themselves were filled with rage, and discussed together what they might do to Jesus. (6:6–11)

On another Sabbath, Jesus again confronted the Pharisees over the issue of the Sabbath. Luke does not specify when this incident took place, or the location of the **synagogue** (possibly Capernaum). However Matthew, Mark, and Luke all place it immediately after the incident in the grainfields, which suggests it happened soon afterward, perhaps on the next Sabbath. In keeping with the priority of His ministry, Jesus **was teaching** (cf. 4:14–15, 31, 44; 5:15, 17). The content of His message was not recorded, but He would have been preaching the gospel (3:18; 4:18; 7:22; 20:1; Mark 1:14)—the good news that the poor, prisoners, blind, and oppressed could be freed from their sin and the heavy burden of a false, damning, legalistic religion (4:18–21).

In the synagogue on that particular Sabbath **was a man . . . whose right hand** (only Luke, with his careful attention to medical detail, notes that it was his right hand) **was withered**; that is, atrophied due to paralysis. This man was the main object of Jesus' attention, and his healing was another assault on the Pharisees' restrictions for the Sabbath.

As always, the **scribes and the Pharisees** were there, hoping to find something for which they could condemn the Lord. As always, these zealous legalists **were watching** Jesus **closely. Watching closely** translates a form of the Greek verb *paratēreō*, which means, "to observe carefully," "to be on the lookout," or "to pay heed to." Often, as it does here, the word takes on a sinister tone, and could be translated, "to lurk," "to watch for an opportunity," or "to lie in wait" (cf. 14:1; 20:20; Mark 3:2). The scribes and Pharisees were by no means neutral observers, but rather spies.

Specifically, they were watching Jesus **to see if He healed on the Sabbath, so that they might find reason to accuse Him.** Ironically, these self-appointed guardians of the Sabbath system did not want to stop Jesus from breaking their Sabbath rules; they actually wanted Him to perform a healing, so they would have cause to indict Him. Christ's performing a healing would thus best suit their heinous hatred. Interestingly, never throughout His entire ministry did they doubt His ability to heal (cf. 5:17–26), which proved His ability to forgive sin (5:24). Yet the convoluted reasoning in their sinful, prideful, obstinate hearts was that if Jesus did heal, the consequence would be that they could charge Him with breaking the Sabbath.

Needless to say, ministering to a sick person was by no means a violation of the Old Testament regulations concerning the Sabbath (cf. Matt. 12:7). The rabbis, however, had decreed that no one, whether a physician, friend, or family member, could treat a sick person on the Sabbath.

To do so, they taught, would be work and hence a violation of the Sabbath. The only two exceptions they allowed were cases when a person might otherwise die before the Sabbath ended, or a pregnant woman who gave birth on the Sabbath. Other than those two situations, showing compassion and mercy to a suffering person made one a blaspheming lawbreaker.

As He had earlier done (5:22) and would later do (11:17), Jesus in His omniscience **knew what they were thinking**. The Lord was fully aware of their vicious, hateful thoughts toward Him; that they were waiting for Him to heal so they could accuse Him of breaking the Sabbath. Ignoring their legalistic, merciless regulations and intentions, Jesus **said to the man with the withered hand, “Get up and come forward!”** He was the perfect candidate to help the Lord stage His assault on their twisted view of the Sabbath. His condition was clearly not life threatening, so there was no possible justification under the death exception for helping him.

The crippled man **got up and came forward** and stood before the synagogue audience. It was a dramatic moment, as the people waited to see what Jesus was going to do. Addressing the scribes and Pharisees, who no doubt had front-row seats (11:43; 20:46; Matt. 23:6; Mark 12:39), Jesus asked the self-proclaimed experts on the law a pointed question. **“I ask you,”** He demanded, **“is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to destroy it?”** As was often the case, the Lord’s question impaled His opponents on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, answering that it was lawful to do good on the Sabbath would officially authorize Jesus to heal the man. They could not then indict Him for breaking the Sabbath. On the other hand, answering that it was not lawful to do good would reveal their wicked, merciless hearts. That would tear down their veneer of self-righteousness and piety and expose them as the hypocrites they were.

The scribes and Pharisees knew the correct answer to Jesus’ question, which the book of Isaiah records. In two passages in Isaiah God indicted Israel for their superficial, shallow, false religion—the very issue Jesus was addressing:

“What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?” says the Lord. “I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed cattle; and I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs or goats. When you come to appear before Me, who requires of you this trampling of My courts? Bring your worthless offerings no longer, incense is an abomination to Me. New moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly. I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts, they have become a burden to Me; I am weary of bearing them. So when you spread out your hands in prayer, I

will hide My eyes from you; yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood. Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the ruthless, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” (1:11–17)

Is this not the fast which I choose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free and break every yoke? Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked, to cover him; and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then your light will break out like the dawn, and your recovery will speedily spring forth; and your righteousness will go before you; the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry, and He will say, “Here I am.” If you remove the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger and speaking wickedness, and if you give yourself to the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then your light will rise in darkness and your gloom will become like midday. And the Lord will continually guide you, and satisfy your desire in scorched places, and give strength to your bones; and you will be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters do not fail. Those from among you will rebuild the ancient ruins; you will raise up the age-old foundations; And you will be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the streets in which to dwell. If because of the sabbath, you turn your foot from doing your own pleasure on My holy day, and call the sabbath a delight, the holy day of the Lord honorable, and honor it, desisting from your own ways, from seeking your own pleasure and speaking your own word, then you will take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; and I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. (58:6–14)

As those two passages indicate, God rejected religious ritual divorced from compassion, mercy, and doing good. The Sabbath above all days was a day to express goodness; to show mercy and kindness to the needy. But the rabbinic restrictions had so strangled the Sabbath as to render such kindness forbidden.

The real issue was not the healing of the crippled man; Jesus was not concerned primarily with their attitude toward him, or whether it was right to do good to him. The deeper question was who was honoring God: Jesus, who wanted to show mercy to a needy individual, or the scribes and Pharisees, who wanted only to destroy Jesus? Sabbath observance was as they defined it—a litmus test of faithfulness to God. Paradoxically, these religious errorists scrupulously observed the minutiae of their Sabbath laws while at the same time plotting to murder the Lord of the Sabbath. As David Gooding observes,

The religious mind is a curious thing. It is not necessarily interested in common morality; still less in relieving human misery and affliction. It is interested in keeping rules; particularly the rules which spring from its own cherished interpretations of Scripture or tradition; and to these interpretations it will attribute the inflexible authority of God himself. Let God incarnate, contrary to its interpretations, interpose with a miracle of divine goodness to relieve human misery, then instead of revising its interpretations it will plan to stop such miracles happening again. (*According to Luke* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 116)

There was a long pause while the Lord waited for a reply. But the scribes and Pharisees, shocked into silence, said nothing. Finally, **after looking around at them all** “with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart” (Mark 3:5), Jesus **said to** the crippled man, **“Stretch out your hand!” And he did so; and his hand was restored.** Jesus deliberately broke their Sabbath restrictions.

After witnessing this astonishing creative miracle, one would expect the next verse to read, “And the scribes and Pharisees believed.” Such was not the case, however. Instead, **they themselves were filled with rage, and discussed together what they might do to Jesus** to destroy Him (Matt. 12:14). *Anoia* (**rage**) literally means, “folly,” or “foolishness.” It denotes in this context an irrational rage; they were out of their minds with fury at Jesus’ direct assault on their hypocritical religion. Their reaction reflects the blindness and obstinacy of heart of those deeply involved in false religion. Amazingly, the Pharisees even enlisted the help of their bitter enemies the Herodians (Jews loyal to the Herodians) in their search for a way to eliminate Jesus (Mark 3:6). Such an alliance was highly unusual, since about the only thing the two parties had in common was their hatred of Jesus.

The Pharisees’ irrational hatred of and fury toward Jesus was motivated by self-preserving fear. The Lord was striking monumental blows at the very heart of their religious system. Here, long before Passion Week, the religious leaders were already plotting Jesus’ death. Their hatred would drive their continued opposition to Christ until they finally succeeded in having Him arrested and executed.

These two incidents bring out the stark contrast between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders. It is the contrast between the representative of God’s truth, and the representatives of false religion; between divine truth and human tradition; between profound knowledge and madness; between goodness and wickedness; between compassion and cruelty; between open honesty and hidden deception; between divine power and human impotence; between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan.

Yet God’s grace can penetrate even the most hardened heart. Not

all of the Pharisees permanently rejected the Lord Jesus Christ. Acts 15:5 notes that there were “some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed.” One of those believing Pharisees, Saul of Tarsus, became the great apostle Paul. The self-proclaimed foremost of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15), he was called by the risen Lord to preach the gospel throughout the Roman world.