

The Lord of the Sabbath, Part 2

Luke 6:1-5

Go back to Luke 6, Luke chapter 6. As I said, inserted between chapter 5 and chapter 6 of Luke is this whole scene in John 5, controversy about Jesus' equality with the Father. It started with a Sabbath issue; it continued with a controversy about his identity. Theology, Christology helps us to know and understand that connected to Jesus' Sabbath-day actions are his claims of equality with God the Father. So the, the Jews were opposing him, not just for ignoring Sabbath-day traditions, but because of his reason for ignoring those social ordinances. Jesus is here claiming to be equal with God. God's working even on your Sabbath, and I'm working too.

Jesus spent the rest of John 5 explaining the nature of his relationship with the father. And beloved, that is one of the clearest passages in the whole New Testament about the relationship between God the Father and Jesus, the Messiah

acting as the Son of God. So thank God for that conflict arising, right?

Some rich theology in John 5. But that's why we see the Pharisees showing up here in the grain fields. Following Jesus and his disciples around, they're now looking for an opportunity to catch him in some violation, saying something wrong. They are building a case here for destroying him, one that they can take back to the religious authorities in Jerusalem.

Now the time of year would have been after the Feast of the Jews mentioned in John 5:1. Which feast that is, exactly, it's not exactly known, but it was either the Passover in March, which would make the picking of the grain, the grain fields would make this the barley harvest or it could have been the feast of Pentecost around May, which would have made this the wheat harvest.

In any case, Jesus and his disciples, they're out there, and his disciples are hungry for a little lunch. They're not in Capernaum, which is obvious. Otherwise, they would have just

headed to Levi's house and raid the fridge for leftovers. They had probably just come out of a synagogue service. They're hungry. They're walking, walking through the grain fields after gathering a few snacks. Jesus was teaching in the synagogue. They come out and like us coming out of church on a Sunday morning, what are the, what's the first thing on our mind? Right, lunch. So same thing here.

So it's, it's springtime. They're plucking heads of barley grain. If it's early summer, they're eating heads of wheat. When it says they're passing through the grain fields, here, don't picture them crashing through some poor farmer's crop. They're, they're walking on a pathway, here, between two fields, really gleaning at the edges of the fields. There's no crime in that. Deuteronomy 23:25 says it's permissible to get a little lunch like this from your neighbor's field, as long as you're not reaping that crop for profit. Says in Deuteronomy 23:25, "If you go to your neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor's standing grain." So just enough to satisfy the immediate need, that's all they're doing.

But out of nowhere, seemingly, in the text, some Pharisees materialize here, to challenge the disciples about this Sabbath violation. Luke's account gives us really no warning. It almost seems like the Spanish Inquisition here, popping up out of nowhere in the most inopportune moments, pointing crooked fingers of condemnation, calling everyone to give an account for transgression, for all their carefully delineated Sabbath-day stipulations and proscriptions.

“Why are you doing what is not lawful?” That verb there, it is not lawful, it's a single verb, kind of a technical word that refers to violations like this of Jewish law as explained by the scribes and the Pharisees, so Mishnah types of ordinances, what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath, that is according to their tradition, which that they had elevated to the level of Mosaic Law.

The Talmud contained a section that outlined 39 articles or kinds of labor prohibited on the Sabbath day. You might call these the 39 articles of labor. Why 39, you ask? Great question.

Evidently the number 39 represents the number of times the word labor appears in the biblical text. I'm going to take their word on that. I didn't count. Very biblical, these guys. Thirty-nine, 39 prohibited activities; and they fell, those 39 activities, fell into one of four categories.

The first category, number 1-11 on the prohibition list, has to do with the preparation of bread. Number two category, that's ordinances number 12-24, all connected with what you wear, dress, whether it has to do with stitching, sewing, tailoring, all that kind of stuff. Category number three, ver, ordinances 25-33, connected to hunting and writing. You say, Hunting and writing? Yeah, because this, the, they used to write the, the parchment that they would use to write was made out of animal skins. You couldn't hunt, skin, get rid of all the, the fur and everything and then try to, to, to, uh, tan the skin and do all the things, preparing that for writing. Number four category, ordinances 34-39, all about the work, ness, necessary within a private home. All of this was carefully described and prohibited.

I'm going to spare you the full reading of all 39 articles, but let me read you the prohibitions that are pertinent to the violation here that the disciples seem to be guilty of. These are in the first category about the preparation of food, supposedly forbidden in Scripture, and they are these: Sowing, plowing, reaping, binding sheaves, threshing, winnowing, sifting or selecting, grinding, sifting in a sieve, kneading and baking. All prohibited. So what have the disciples done? Look at verse 1 again. "Disciples plucked and ate some heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands." Okay, so the fact that they're eating the grain, the heads of grain, well, that put them in the food prep category, right? Okay, so that's in the, clearly in category number one, they plucked the heads of grain, which is what constituted reaping, violation number one.

But their transgression went even further. They also, they also rubbed the head of grain in their hands, which, believe it or not, led to multiple transgressions, here. One action violated no less than three different prohibitions: threshing, sifting, and winnowing. So by crushing that grain between their fingers, they are threshing. By separating the edible grain from the inedible husks, they're sifting. And by throwing away the

husks, they're winnowing. As Phillip Ryken put it, "With every mouthful, the disciples were violating the law four different ways." Sounds like tax code or something. We're always in violation of something federally, aren't we? Simple snack for some hungry disciples led to very serious transgressions with the, with the Pharisees. They were on hand so helpfully to point all this out. That's the tradition. That's the context of the controversy.

But what we want to understand here is what gave rise to these oral traditions in the first place, and why were the Jewish leaders so diligent and so fastidious in writing this out, carefully delineating all these 39 articles of labor in the first place? We want to spend a few minutes to look at the biblical text concerning the Sabbath, forming the basis of their traditions.

And folks, listen carefully. This is where we need to take a deep breath. We do need to reflect on what the Bible actually does say about observing the Sabbath. Because listen, as American evangelicals, living in the 21st century, we have fallen out of step with most of our brothers and sisters

throughout church history who have taken the Christian Sabbath, which is what they call it, the Lord's Day, they've all taken this very seriously. We should probably listen to them. We need to think more carefully about this. Christians for most centuries would actually come and stand in judgment on us. They'd be shocked at how we so casually profane the Lord's Day, doing pretty much whatever we want to do on Sundays. They judge many of us evangelicals as treating the Lord's Day with contempt, as if it were just another day.

We have a Confession of Faith posted on our website. It's about 300 years old, but recent, considering the 2,000 years of church history. These seventeenth-century divines, they were no theological slouches. They said this about Sundays: "As it is the law of nature, that in general a proportion of time, by God's appointment, be set apart for the worship of God, so by his Word, in a positive moral, and perpetual commandment, binding all men, in all ages," that is, not just the church age, but all men in all ages, "he hath particularly appointed one day in seven for a Sabbath to be kept wholly unto him, which from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Jesus Christ was the last day of the week, and from the resurrection of



Christ was changed into the first day of the week, which is called the Lord's Day. It is to be continued to the end of the world as the Christian Sabbath, the observation of the last day of the week being abolished."

Next paragraph, "The Sabbath is then kept holy unto the Lord when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering their common affairs aforehand, do not only observe an holy rest all day, from their own works, words and thoughts about their worldly employment and recreations, but are also taken up the whole time in the public and private exercises of his worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy." That confession was written by our ancestors, our Baptist forebears. And it calls the Lord's Day, a law of nature, which is in effect from the beginning of the world to the end of the world. Where do they get that?

Let's start with the most obvious passage at the very foundation of the Law of Moses. Turn back to Exodus chapter 20, verse 8. Exodus 20, verse 8. This is the fourth of the Ten Commandments. This command prescribes the observance of the Sabbath day. Exodus 20:8-11. God told Moses there, "Remember the

Sabbath day to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but on the seventh day is a Sabbath holy to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male servant, your female servant, your livestock, the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the seventh day," Sabbath, "and made it holy."

Pretty comprehensive, right? No work on the Sabbath, no labor. You have six days to get everything done: working to make a profit, household chores, all your shopping, laundry, running around. The seventh day is special, though. It's holy. It's a Sabbath of rest of the Lord your God. No working.

Turn a few chapters ahead to Exodus 31, Exodus 31 in verse 12. Just in case they missed the point, God reinforced the ordinance by repeating it. Exodus 31:12: "The Lord said to Moses, 'You're to speak to the people of Israel and say, "Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you. You shall keep the Sabbath, because it

is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work upon it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people.

““Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death. Therefore, the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations as a covenant forever. It's a sign forever between me and the people of Israel, that in six days the Lord made the heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.””

That principle is repeated in Exodus 35, Leviticus 23, again in the reiteration of the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy 5. Very clear precept. Violation results in death, and the threat of death there is repeated three times. In case they felt there was some kind of wiggle room, the Lord provides an illustration. Take a look at Numbers 15, Numbers 15, a couple books later. Numbers records the years that Israel wandered in the wilderness. They'd refused to believe and obey God, so God punished that generation.

One particular incident of Sabbath disobedience that helped Israel understand how serious God is about obeying that ordinance: Look at Numbers 15, verse 32. "While the people of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day. Those who found him gathering sticks brought him to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation. They put him in custody because it had not been made clear what should be done to him. The Lord said to Moses, 'The man should be put to death. All the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp.' And all the congregation brought him outside the camp stoned him to death with stones, as the Lord commanded Moses."

That made the Lord's intention pretty clear, right? No working on the Sabbath, period. No working for personal gain, that is, making a little money on the side. No working for personal convenience because you failed to manage your time well enough during the week, gather those sticks before the Sabbath day started. In fact, in this case of a man gathering sticks, presumably to start a fire in his home, it was related to another law recorded in Exodus 35:3, "You shall kindle no fire in your dwelling places on the Sabbath day." A fire could burn

throughout the Sabbath, but they couldn't start a new fire. Why not? Because that would tempt them to gather sticks, to chop wood, perform other work on the day of rest. So this command, "No kindling new fires on the Sabbath day," it kept them away from labor on the Sabbath. They had to organize all their labor during the week in such a way that the Sabbath was well-provisioned, well prepared for rest.

Two things to point out about that. First, this helps us to see how this oral tradition developed, right, originally as a help to the people to keep them from violating the Sabbath, lest they die. Problem is, they started to elevate all that Mishnah, those oral traditions, to the same level of Scripture. They meant to help people avoid violations, but they made the mistake of elevating them too high. That's what we're seeing here, as the Pharisees accuse Jesus' disciples, as they write people tickets for carrying bedrolls and the like. They become self-appointed watchdogs for Sabbath-day purity.

But second thing to point out: Notice how careful and thoughtful the Jews were to be preparing for the Sabbath day. Even though all that's written about the Sabbath doesn't apply

to the Lord's Day today, we have to acknowledge that, we're not putting people to death for not attending church, right? Okay, but still, we need to take better care to get ourselves ready. All the preparation they did, think about inwardly. How do we prepare our hearts and minds? How do we prepare our families for treating the Lord's Day as holy.

Honoring the Lord's Day, it has not been abrogated by the New Testament, as Jesus said in Luke 6:5. What did he say? "The Son of Man is," and we might add, remains, "Lord of the Sabbath." He is its Lord. It's not import, unimportant to our Lord how we treat the Lord's Day, is it? Principle goes all the way back to Genesis, as you hear, all the way back to the end of the Creation week. Six days of creation activity are capped off by the seventh day, marking the end of God's creative work, memorializing it by calling it a day of rest. Genesis 2:2-3: "On the seventh day, God finished the work that He'd done. He rested on the seventh day from all his work he had done. So God blessed the seventh day. He made it holy because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation." Six days of labor, one day of rest sets the pattern for our week that we still observe.

So by principle in Genesis, and example, by precept in Exodus and Deuteronomy, by illustration in Numbers, the Sabbath day is to be treated as holy. The Lord's Day is to be set apart from the normal activities of all the other days, and the practice of Israel, it's patterned on the creation week, which is the way that God intended for all humanity to live.

God intended human beings to enjoy rest from their labors. He's concerned about your rest and my rest, and that's why it's a day that was not just holy to the Lord, Exodus 31:14 says, "It's holy to you," for you for your benefits. Work diligently for six days, do pretty much whatever you want to do on those days, as long as it's not in violation of the law. But on the seventh, rest in devotion to your God. So for the Jews, that's Saturday, the literal Sabbath. But for Christians, that's Sunday, the Lord's Day, which is the first day of the week, the day on which God said, "'Let there be light,' and there was light." We observe the Lord's Day.

All of humanity, folks, has been guilty of violating the Lord's Day. All those people out there that are treating this day like any other day, they're, they're not treating it as holy. They're not living according to the pattern set forth in Creation. Many continue to use the day to make a profit, or more commonly today in our country, to use the day to indulge in pleasure and recreation, ignoring completely their responsibility to worship God as holy. We don't have time now to cover this, Jeremiah 17:19 and following, Jeremiah 17:19, just keep reading. And then Isaiah 58:13-14.

Because Israel, God's people, they were guilty of this, too. They used the Sabbath to make money, Jeremiah 17. They used the Sabbath to indulge their own pleasures, Isaiah 58. And God called the nation to repent of, quote, "Doing your pleasure on my holy day and going their own ways, seeking their own pleasure, and," get this, "talking idly." He called them to obey. He called them to call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable. And if they would do that, he would bless them. "I will make you ride on the heights of the earth. I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."



Listen, we laugh and poke fun a bit at those 39 prohibitions for the Sabbath, and that's understandable. It did go too far, but not for them. We, we need to appreciate where those regulations came from to understand why this was such a heightened controversy for Jesus and his disciples, why the scribes and Pharisees took all this so seriously.

Go ahead and turn back to Luke 6. We're just going to wrap up here. Assuming the best about the motives of the people who wrote the Mishnah and came out with the oral tradition, they're writing out those regulations to set boundaries for people. And it started out as a desire to seek God's blessing. In fact, notice Jesus' response to their accusation. He actually doesn't, here, quibble with them about whether or not the disciples' behavior constituted a violation of the Law. In some circumstances, yeah, but there were extenuating circumstances he intended to show them, here.

And that's point two in our outline. Point one was about an unjustified accusation. We're going to see that more clearly in

point two as we develop it. But he gives them an unparalleled illustration. An unparalleled illustration. That's point two. Take a look at verse 3. Just time to introduce this. "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 priest to eat. And he also gave it to those with him.' He said to them, 'The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.'"

For the moment, I just want you to see the nature of his response. He asked them, "Have you not read?" He's not suggesting they haven't been reading their Bibles. He knows they've been reading their Bibles. This is why he just summarized this salient portion of the account that they're familiar with. I just want you to notice he made the argument saying, "Have you not read?" This is a question that goes directly to the issue of authority, and the only standard that has a legitimate claim on the consciences of men and women. The fundamental issue in this controversy is that only Jesus as the Lord of the Sabbath, only he has the right to interpret God's

Word on the Sabbath. Only he has the right to command the consciences of men and women.

Pharisees, they had elevated all their interpretations, traditions, prescriptions, proscriptions. They put it on par with Scripture, and they made things like circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, according to their rules. They made that the mark of Jewish identity, Jewish fidelity to God. And even though these Pharisees had attacked the disciples, challenging them, Jesus stepped in to break the chains of all that tradition which held Israel in bondage.

Listen, beloved, I know your conscience like mine, has been pricked a little bit by failure to honor the Lord's Day. We've all done that. We've all been guilty of it. We're thankful that we have the Lord Jesus Christ who's forgiven us of all sin, including these sins we not, are not even aware of sometimes. But listen, no one but Jesus Christ can command your conscience about how to treat the Lord's Day as holy. What about church authority? Our job is to teach, to inform your conscience about what God's Word does and does not say. I mean, if you're

neglecting the Lord's Day altogether, we need to talk about that.

But church leadership has to be very careful not to assert opinions, personal preferences, scruples of conscience, and bind the consciences of God's people, because that's exactly what these Pharisees, these scribes, were doing to their people. That's why our elders have very wisely added a qualifying statement, just to make it clear, under our statement on the Confession that's posted on our website about the Lord's Day.

Here's what it says, "The elders affirm the 'one day in seven' principle as a holy day of devotion to and refreshment in God. This is the Lord's Day, Sunday, which has replaced the Old Testament Sabbath, Saturday, and is holy to the Lord. The elders do not believe the Law of Moses governs the Lord's Day. While the regular attendance to the Lord's Day worship is required (Hebrews 10:24-25), the elders do not intend to bind the saints in matters of conscience (Colossians 2), or necessity, like military and law enforcement, emergency services." It is never going to be our intention as elders, as church leadership, to act like those Pharisees, to shadow your every move so we can

adjudicate on matters of conscience. Holiness is first and foremost a matter of the heart, but it does show up in how you manage your work and recreation throughout the week, how you treat the Lord's Day.

But Paul says very clearly, Colossians 2:16-17, "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come. Substance belongs to Christ." "Belongs to Christ." Holiness, ultimately, is a matter of the heart. None of us elders want to find ourselves in the foolish position of butting heads, like these Pharisees did, with the Lord of the Sabbath.