

Ambush on the Sabbath, Part 1

Luke 6:6-11

We've been reading about Jesus. He and his disciples have been shadowed by the Jewish leadership. All the while, he's demonstrating his power, his strength, his might, his healing, his concern for people, his mercy. Jesus' ministry has attracted the attention of the religious authorities in Jerusalem. The scribes and the Pharisees, they went out from Jerusalem and Judea to go to Galilee, in that more rural area: Galilee of the Gentiles.

They went out to observe for themselves, this Jesus in his ministry, and they didn't, didn't really like what they found. From one perspective, it's really hard to understand why. Jesus has been healing diseases. He's been casting out demons. He's been cleansing lepers. He's been healing paralytics. And most importantly, he's been forgiving sinners. What is not to like about that?

What we're seeing here, is the prediction of old Mr. Simeon taking shape. This is the beginning of what Simeon told Mary at the temple when Jesus was just that little child of Bethlehem in her arms. She's holding baby Jesus in her arms in the temple environment, in Luke 2:34, and Simeon tells her, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed," and a sword will pierce through your own soul also, "so that the thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."

It was hard to see, at that time, as Mary's holding this tender child in her arms. A newborn baby. Hard to see how that child could be responsible for all of that. "That the thoughts of many hearts would be revealed." Whenever Jesus is truly revealed. When the truth about him, his ministry, his true words, are made manifest, when his message is clear and unambiguous, Jesus becomes a dividing line.

Those who embrace him and his words, well, they rejoice. They are raised up. They're encouraged in hope. But those who reject him. They resist. They reject. They oppose. They oppress. They pursue. We're watching that very thing happen. It's in

motion right here, in Luke chapter 6, with these religious leaders. The thoughts from their hearts are being revealed here in our text. As Jesus is executing a divine ministry directed from heaven itself, religious leaders don't like it. That is what is revealing their hearts. They're being exposed.

And from this point on, from this point forward, in Luke's Gospel, there is no masking their false religion. We know it's nature. We know the truth about it. They are hypocrites to the core. Though they parade worship. Though they parade religiosity. They are using an external form of religion to hide a murderous heart of selfish ambition and greed. We're going to see that here in the text.

Look at Luke 6 starting in verse 6. Now we're going to look at Luke 6:6 through 11. "On another Sabbath, he entered the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was withered. 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 the 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.”

Let's look at the situation. The situation, verse 6, tells us this happened on another Sabbath. That is a different one from the one we went through in verses 1 to 5. We don't know the time frame exactly between the two Sabbaths. How much time separates the Sabbath and verses 1 to 5, and then this one that starts in verse 6, likely just a few weeks or so. Jesus and his disciples may have even returned to Capernaum, on this occasion, from a period of itinerant ministry.

And the next events that we see coming in Luke 6, the naming of the Twelve, the Sermon on the Mount, all of that takes place in and around the Sea of Galilee, and very close proximity to Capernaum. So, the scribes and the Pharisees, they show up on

this occasion because they really knew exactly where to find Jesus. They show up there. They're a bit of a, a troop of inquisition, and they want to see him for themselves. But they have an evil motive in their heart.

Once again, we find Jesus in synagogue. He's doing that which it defines his ministry. Which describes his ministry. He is teaching. Jesus is a consummate teacher. It says, "On another Sabbath there, he entered the synagogue, he was teaching. A man was there whose right hand was withered, the scribes and the Pharisees, they watched him. They're sitting there listening to the teaching and they're watching him to see whether he would heal on the Sabbath, so they might find a reason to accuse him."

We just need to note here that not everyone who comes to church is interested in the teaching, right? Not everybody who comes to church, is, has the same heart that you do. Some come in the church doors with ulterior motives. It was true then. It remains true to this day.

Here are the scribes and Pharisees seated in the synagogue, and no doubt they are seated in positions of honor and authority. They are visiting Jewish dignitaries, and so they would have been given the best seats. And yet, from their honored position, they're relatively uninterested. We might say remarkably uninterested in what Jesus really has to say. They're not listening to the truth of his teaching. They're only listening out, for an occasion to accuse him.

That's the first of a number of ironies in this story. But here they are sitting in positions of honor. It's because of their spiritual authority that they're put in those positions. Their only real interest is in the honor of that position, though. Not in the true source of spiritual authority. And the true source of spiritual authority was standing right in front of them. Not only that, but what he was teaching was the source of authority. They were uninterested in that. They're interested in honor, in title, in power, in influence.

What's Jesus teaching? Like we've said before, he's teaching from the law and the prophets. He's expounding the word of God. The first five verses, that we went through in this

chapter, that gives really a hint, of Jesus, what Jesus' teaching must have been like, incredibly insightful. He made profound observations of the text illuminating what was clearly written on the page. But what is hidden from us, because we are sometimes so dull of seeing, and hard of hearing, and hard of heart. It's difficult for us.

For him, no sin clouding his judgment, no weakness in his mental faculties, and so his observations of the text, his explanations must have been perfect. He exposed the true meaning of the text. He helped people see how the Bible is really meant to be applied to our lives. Showed people the true implications of Scripture. Unleashed its power.

Jesus had merely summarized an account from 1 Samuel 21. There in verses 3 and 4, but then he boldly asserted, going directly from that summary, he boldly asserted, in verse 5, an implication of that teaching that, the son of man is the Lord of the Sabbath. For us, we're like that's incredible, how, how did he get from 1 Samuel 21 to his Lordship over the Sabbath? How did those two things connect?

And we had to sort of reverse engineer what he said. Taking his summary and conclusion back into 1 Samuel 21, and understand how he got from there to here. Incredible power of insight into the word of God that he had. Think about it. To sit in his very presence. To, to, listen to him actually teach with your own ears. That would be nothing short of mind-blowing. We find evidence of that kind of reaction all through the gospels.

Matthew concluded the Sermon on the Mount with this summary. He recorded the reaction of the audience. He said this, "When Jesus finished these sayings," The sermon on the mount, by the way, which we're going to get to Luke's version in just, well, a little while. But he said, "when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching. For he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes."

So, you can imagine for the Pharisees who listened to Jesus on this occasion, and particularly for the scribes, the profundity of Jesus insight had to grate on their every last



nerve of pride. There they were, sitting in seats of honor, listening to Jesus teach. And by the way, he's just a young man at this point in his early 30s. But his expositions of Scripture were crisp. They were clear, unencumbered with all the rabbinical citation, expert opinion. All these traditions just bold and plain elucidation of the text.

They'd spent their lives studying the word of God and come to the conclusions he had. They hadn't been able to make the observations he had. Rather than bow humbly before the authority of this unparalleled teacher, or at the very least, to acknowledge, that what he taught was true. Bow humbly before the word itself. Their hearts were bent in a more sinister direction. Incredible hardness of heart, here.

They have no interest in hearing Jesus. No interest in hearing even the scripture that he was teaching, which they said that they honored. That is the way with religious hypocrites. They only love the honor. They only love positions of influence. They love what religion gives them. They have no interest in submitting themselves to the standard of authority that's above them. Luke wants us to see that, right off the bat. He doesn't

waste any time. But he exposes us to the heart of Jesus opponents, because he wants us to see something else. He doesn't want us just to see their heart. He wants to see how Jesus handles what is really, a set up here.

Here, it's as if they're trying to ambush Jesus, and we're going to see how Jesus handles himself in this bit of conflict. How he really turns this ambush on its head. Turns the table on his opponents. So here he is, Jesus, in a crowded synagogue, he's engaged, as he always is, in teaching the word of God. He's being watched carefully, like a hawk, by his opponents. Luke presents the situation in some pretty mild non emotive terms.

Here he says, "A man was there, whose right hand was withered." That's it. Term withered in the ESV or literally means dry, as, as, if without fluids. It's like it's shrunken. You might consider a grape and then a, a, raisin. You know it's shrunken. It's shriveled. It's deformed. And it's lying useless on the end of his arm, paralyzed. As far as we can tell here, there's no indication that it's a life-threatening deformity. He is there after all, listening, but Luke does give us a detail that should elicit just a little bit of our sympathy. It was his

right hand that was deformed. None of the other gospel writers' points that out. But remember, Luke is a physician. It's a profession in which it's very important to tell right from left, especially when it comes to surgery or amputation.

The right side, though, is a favored side in those days based on right side dominance. That's pretty predominant among human beings. Right hand dominant, right eye dominant. It's an important factor when you're organizing say a fighting force. You wanna put all your right-handed people, right eye dominant people in one part, and you wanna put your left-handed people in another platoon.

When you're organizing a work crew. Any other situation in a pre-technological world, right-hand, left-hand division is important and the right side was favored in this society. It symbolized the position of honor. To sit at the right hand of someone in authority meant you were sitting in an honored place. And you'll note that that's where we always find Jesus pictured, as sitting right now, at the right hand of the Father. Symbolizes for us that Jesus is the strength of the Father. He's

on the father's dominant side. He is what you might call the business end of the Father's will.

So, to be without strength on the right side, this man's ability to work, to earn a living, very likely his wage-earning capability was significantly hindered. So, to restore his right hand, it very likely meant restoring the man to gainful employment. So, not only would healing his hand remove a social stigma that he felt every time people saw that hand. But in a very practical way, it could mean restoring his opportunity to provide for his family.

It was sad to have a paralyzed hand, but as we said, it was by no means a life-threatening disability, at least as far as we know, right? He could use his left hand to beg for food, or so the Pharisees thought. And that's the very point on which Jesus here is tested. Would he heal a non-life-threatening condition on the Sabbath? Because engaging in medical work like straightening out deformed limbs and such, it was universally recognized, in that day, as a clear violation of the principle of the Sabbath.

It was a non-life-threatening issue, so his healing could wait. Honor the Sabbath. Don't heal that guy. Wait. But he's begging with his left hand. It's okay. God's day is more important; onto the Sabbath, that's the accepted view. Rabbinical tradition had been reinforcing this attitude for a long, long time. One commentator notes, "Sabbath regulations could be overridden only in cases of endangerment to life. Otherwise, the various schools of Judaism were agreed that the Sabbath must be fully upheld."

First aid was deemed permissible to prevent an injury from worsening, but efforts toward a cure were regarded as work, that must await the passing of Sabbath. A withered hand was non-life-threatening and thus did not qualify as an exception to Sabbath rules. Rabbinic tradition, in fact, forbade quote "straightening a deformed body or setting a broken limb on the Sabbath," end quote. Interesting.

The scribes and the Pharisees watched him, verse 7, to see whether he was going to perform this healing. Which is an

unlawful work on the Sabbath. Watched him. It's a mild expression there. It's a mild way, really, of translating that verb *paratereo*, which actually is stronger than just watched him. They watched him very closely. They watched him intently. They observed him very carefully.

But at the same time, this hints at an insidiousness here. It's a malicious observation, but it's a watching out of the corner of the eye. It's not staring him down. It's, watch, watching surreptitiously, to kind of pretend like you're looking in one direction, but seeing is he gonna do it? Is he gonna do it? They're literally, these scribes and Pharisees, religious leaders, here, they're lying-in wait for him.

It's like they're waiting for an unsuspecting victim to walk into their trap, as we read earlier, David was facing in Psalm 57. They want him to walk into an ambush that they've constructed here. Which is inescapable, and they're acting with stealth, craftiness. They're hidden behind rocks and they're looking up. Is he gonna do it? Intending to do him harm.

There are times when small military units have to patrol in some pretty nasty territory. They can sometimes find themselves ambushed by the enemy. They're cut off in a good ambush. They're cut off from going right or left. They're cut off even from returning in the way they came in. And sometimes the only way out of an ambush is to go through the ambush. So, the squad stands up, in bravery. Stand up in a line. They present a unified front. They point their weapons at the ambushing enemy, and they start firing their weapons at the enemy, as they walk toward the enemy. For them it is kill or be killed. Jesus is facing such a situation here.

Penned in by the enemy. What's he gonna do? Some commentators have even suggested that this ambush, that the scribes and Pharisees planted here. They, they, they, think that the man was planted. This man with the withered hand is a plant in the synagogue, because they know that Jesus is gonna do what he always does. He's gonna have that dreadful compassion that violates Sabbath lawfulness. You know he's not gonna hesitate to heal a withered hand. They got him. I'm not sure if that's provable one way or another. It's an interesting thought, though.

If it's true, it takes their deviousness up another notch. Doesn't it? But it's enough to know here that Jesus is walking into a situation that's been set up. And whether we consider this as set up by human design or not, we do know that God set this up, didn't he? He providentially brought this man with a deformed hand into the synagogue that day. Because God had a point to make, about the Sabbath.

It is God's will here for Jesus to show everyone what true Sabbath observation looks like. That it is a day for rest. And a day for performing acts of mercy. And in an ironic reversal here, God intended to turn this ambush around and to expose these hypocrites for who they really are, as everyone can see their hearts on display. For his part, Jesus, he simply saw a need. He's compelled here by a compassion to heal. He knows their hearts. He goes forward anyway. Before healing the man, Jesus went on the offensive. He spotted that ambush. He saw it. He rose up and took aim at his opponents.



And that takes us to our second point, which we will call, the interrogation. The interrogation, verse 8. But he knew their thoughts. They didn't count on that. "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." First, notice the difference, here, between Jesus' way of operating and their way of operating.

Notice the difference between true leaders and false leaders. Jesus is bold. He's confident. He's outspoken. He's up front. Religious leaders here, they're devious. They're hidden. They keep everything bottled up. They don't tell you what they really think. They'll talk about it in dark corners, oh, but not in your presence.

Look at the word, thoughts, there. It's the word, *dialogismos*. It's talking about their internal reasonings. It's talking about hidden thoughts. These men are sneaky, and their motives are hidden. Their conversations are held in secret. Private meetings held far from the public eye. Their actions in public, they look pious, right? They look gentle, peaceful, mild, but they're furtive and stealthy. Jesus, by what he does

here, totally blows the lid off of their stealth, when he tells the man, "Stand up."

Literally, Jesus said to the man, "Come and stand here." He's right in the middle. Right in the midst of the people. Says literally, come and stand in the midst, right in the middle. And the, the, scribes and the Pharisees don't know it yet, but they're little ambush has not only failed, but they're about to be the victims of another ambush coming right at them. They're about to receive two well placed, well targeted rounds, fired at them.

Jesus is now ambushing them, and he's gonna use compassion. He's going to use the healing of deformity. Which in God's army is called, overwhelming the enemy with superior firepower. They have no idea what's about to hit them. I believe, in contrast to some commentators, who have suggested that this man's involved in a plot to trap Jesus here. I don't believe that. I, I, believe this poor man has come to hear Jesus. I believe he's come to receive healing.

If you wanted, if he was part of the plot, when he's exposed, he would have probably just run out of the synagogue. I think he came that day hoping to find mercy. There's actually a very early tradition that tells us that the man was a stone mason and he'd been reduced to begging, for want of the use of his right hand. It's probably impossible to confirm the legitimacy of that story, but it does show a prevalent, and a very early view, that this man was, in no way conspiring with the Pharisees here. But he's there in good faith.

I think the text bears that out. There was never a lack of people who sought healing from Jesus. The Pharisees knew that, so they spotted a needy soul, followed him into the synagogue, took their seats, and watched. Sat back patiently. They watched, they waited, and they were ready to pounce at the first hint of Jesus, unrestrained compassion and mercy, to break out and to heal. Ah, but on the Sabbath.

Jesus, could he have catered to their Sabbath traditions here? Could he have just restrained his compassion, just for, just for a few hours? Maybe do it later. I mean, he didn't need to, need to perform a Sabbath healing, did he? Couldn't he have

just healed a little bit later? Nothing obligated him to heal this man right there and then. Was he truly trapped in an ambush that he couldn't get out of except by healing the man? What do you think? I've set it up in a way that you know the answer.

Okay, look at verse 9, again. Jesus stops teaching. He knows the thoughts of the scribes and the Pharisees, and he takes note of this pitiable condition of this man, withered right hand, and instead of waiting until the lesson is over, he stopped. He called the man to stand up, come forward, stand in the middle of the synagogue. Every eye is on him. People know something is about to happen, so they're watching intently. Looking at Jesus. Looking at this man. They're waiting. What's gonna happen? You can cut the tension here with a knife, and Jesus said to them.

Notice he says to them, plural. All of them. I ask you. Plural. "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?" Is it lawful? Is it lawful? Jesus is not here talking about the scripture. He's not asking is it biblical. Is this in accord with the law of Moses or the teachings of the prophets? He's asking if their laws, if their

oral traditions, those human additions to those so-called elucidations to the scripture, are they going to make room for the true intent of the Sabbath or not?

Will their definition of lawfulness allow them to use the Sabbath for the good of mankind? To provide for physical rest and spiritual refreshment. Will their lawfulness allow them to save a life? What's more in keeping with true lawfulness; to heal this man or to let him wait until tomorrow. By asking the question that way, he's just cornered his critics. It's a brilliant question. Polarizing contrast. Is it good or is it evil? Is it lawful to save or to destroy?

He doesn't leave them any wiggle room here whatsoever. No shades of gray, stark black and white. You think, wow, waiting a few hours to heal the guy, is that really harm? Is it really evil? Is it really destroying his life? It's called antithetical thinking, here. It's looking at the world through a lens of contrast. Through a lens of thesis and antithesis. Notice how often the Bible calls us to think that way. Were to separate between the clean and the unclean, between the righteous and the

righteous, between the holy and the profane, between truth and error, between light and darkness.

We're called to put all of humanity in one box or another, aren't we? Categories of redeemed or unredeemed, saved or lost, children of God or children of wrath, saints or sinners. The more we grow in Christ, the more we see the world in those stark terms. And that's exactly the way our lord thought of the world and thought of people. As we see throughout his life and ministry, and by this very question, he thinks of the world in terms of contrast.

"Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life, or to destroy it?" He's asking at the very least: Why delay healing this man, if I can do good right now? Even more than that, the nature of his penetrating question consists, as one commentator put it, "in representing good omitted, as evil committed." That's an interesting way to put it, isn't it? A good omitted is really an evil committed. Is there biblical justification for that? Yes, there is. To heal on the spot is to do good. To delay healing him, at this particular moment, is to do harm or to do evil. There's no guarantee on tomorrow. You

don't presume that he's gonna be around at tomorrow. Heal him now.

Frederik Godet poses the question that becomes immediately to our minds. It may be asked, could he not have put off the care, the cure until the next day? Could he not have done that? To this question he would have given the same answer as to any one of us. Tomorrow belongs only to God. Only today belongs to me. Do you think like that? I know sometimes I don't. I asked the question, is there biblical justification for this view. For thinking like this, that if you're able to show mercy now, you should show mercy now.

Jesus looked back to a principle of Solomon, Proverbs 3:28, "Do not say to your neighbor, 'Go and come again and tomorrow I will give it.' when you have it with you." Jesus had it with him. He had what none of us had. He had the supernatural power to heal his neighbor right then and there. And so, not only was, it, it was appropriate, but it was right. Notice the difference? It's not just acceptable, it's righteous for him to do that act, right then and there.

The epistle of James says it, this way. James 4:17, "Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is a sin." So, we ask, was Jesus truly boxed in, in this situation? Absolutely he was. For him, he's committed to righteousness. For him, he is not gonna sin. So, it's not enough to simply go around and try to avoid doing harm. It's not okay to postpone showing mercy.

The spirit of the law, the heart of God himself, is this: God wants his people to actively seek to do good. To be aggressive in showing mercy and compassion for others in need. Beloved, I wish that our church would be known for being, you know, that's a church that it's aggressive in showing mercy. I mean, if you've got a need, you can't hide it from that church. Man, they are after you. Wouldn't that be awesome?

That's what God would have. That's what Jesus is after here. That's what he illustrated next, as he takes action. We've seen the situation. We've seen the interrogation, a third point; the action. Jesus fired two bullets from his rifle. Asking two



well aimed, deeply penetrating questions. What was the response there? You see it written? I don't either. They didn't respond. They were silent. Neither the religious leaders nor anyone else in the synagogue that day dared to respond to Jesus questions of interrogation.