

JESUS IS LORD OF THE SABBATH

Luke 6:1-11

Key Verse: 6:5

“Then Jesus said to them, ‘The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.’”

In today’s passage, two events take place on Sabbath days. In the flow of Luke’s Gospel, these events reveal a growing tension between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders. Based on his divine teaching and miracles, the religious leaders should have recognized Jesus as the Messiah. Instead, they hardened their hearts. Then they saw Jesus as a mere man and rejected him. Jesus and his ministry were like new wine in new wineskins, while the religious leaders were like old wineskins. The old leaders felt threatened by Jesus, and reacted with hostility, attacking his disciples and Jesus himself. Undaunted, Jesus revealed himself all the more clearly. Jesus defended his disciples, healed a man with a shriveled hand, and declared himself the “Lord of the Sabbath.” Let’s learn what this means to us.

In order to understand this passage we need to think about the meaning of the Sabbath. The word “Sabbath” means “rest” in Hebrew and is used to refer to the seventh day of the week. This is the day on which God rested after finishing his work of creation. God blessed the seventh day and made it holy (Gen 2:2-3), as a day for people to rest from their labor and have fellowship with him. But since humankind broke the relationship with God through disobedience, there has been no rest. People seek rest in many ways, but do not find it. They become restless wanderers like Cain in Genesis. When the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, they worked hard every day with no rest. In fact, they did not know how to rest. After delivering them from bondage, God gave them the Law, commanding them to keep the Sabbath holy, so they might find rest. This was God’s blessing. It became the symbol of being God’s chosen people. And throughout their history, keeping the Sabbath was an indicator of their spiritual condition. During the time between the Old and New Testaments, the Pharisees fought hard to preserve the Sabbath from the strong secular tide of Greek influence. Then, they were the shepherds of God’s people. But in the time of Jesus, they had become legalistic. They enforced many regulations to keep the law. But in doing so, they lost the point and bound people in legalism. Jesus wanted to restore the purpose of the Sabbath. Let’s see what Jesus did.

First, Jesus defended his disciples with a Bible story about David (1-5). One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and his disciples, who were always hungry, stretched out their hands instinctively and began to pick some heads of grain, rub them in their hands and eat the kernels voraciously (1). We should understand them. Jesus worked hard every day from early morning to late night, and traveled frequently. The disciples struggled just to keep up and often missed meals and sleep (Mk 8:31). Once in a while, they enjoyed delicious

banquets in the homes of the rich, but mostly it was sandwiches on the go. They say that “hunger knows no shame.” At this moment, the disciples ate grain vigorously. Only the sounds of munching and crunching could be heard as they devastated the corner of a grainfield.

Out of nowhere, some Pharisees appeared. They pointed their fingers at Jesus’ disciples and said, “Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?” (2) The law permitted people to pick grain in others’ fields, but the act of rubbing it in their hands was interpreted as threshing and winnowing, which were not allowed on the Sabbath. We can see how they had become legalistic. Using a few words from God’s commandment about the Sabbath, “On it you shall not do any work” (Ex 20:8), they made four major orders, 39 categories, and 1,261 regulations which forbade specific activity on the Sabbath. They strictly applied these regulations and still do today. For example, there is a law against “lighting a fire on the Sabbath,” which includes pushing an elevator button.¹ To cope with this, special Sabbath elevators were designed which stop automatically on each floor. Or one may ask a Gentile to push the button for them. Yet some Rabbis forbid any use of elevators on the Sabbath. Ironically, their followers must use the stairs—working harder than normal. Then and now, their minute regulations were so complex that ordinary people needed interpreters. They depended on the rabbi to tell them what was lawful. This created a system that gave religious leaders power over ordinary people. These leaders became condescending, and lost compassion and mercy. They were not considerate of the weak or needy, but only what was lawful; and they became judgmental. How easy it is for us to become like this. When we lack compassion or mercy, we easily become critical of others with petty reasons. A legalistic environment is formed which prohibits people from growing spiritually. Fostering an environment for spiritual growth is vital in raising disciples of Jesus. Jesus shows us how to do so.

Let’s see how Jesus responded to the criticism against his disciples. He did not say to them, “Why are you always causing trouble for me? Can’t you control your appetite for just a little while?” No. In fact, he did not direct his words to them at all. Rather, to defend them, he began addressing the Pharisees, “Have you never read...?” It was a rebuke of their ignorance of Scripture. Their problem was not an intellectual one, but a heart problem. They studied the Scriptures diligently, but their attitude was not right. They were not humble, listening to God, willing to learn and obey. So they failed to relate to God or know his heart (Jn 5:39-40). Their Bible study puffed them up. They taught their own ideas instead of God’s word, and led people astray. Now, in their arrogance, they were using the Bible to attack Jesus’ disciples. Their real target was Jesus, the Messiah.

Jesus went on to teach them a Bible story about David, a man after God’s own heart. David was God’s anointed servant, but due to King Saul’s jealousy his life was in danger,

¹ https://www.broydeblog.net/uploads/8/0/4/0/80408218/escalators_on_sabbath.pdf

and he had to flee as a political criminal. David and his men were hungry and desperate. David went to Nob and entered the house of God and asked the priest Ahimelek for five loaves of bread, or whatever he could find. Ahimelek was surprised but did not question David. He simply replied that he had no ordinary bread, only consecrated bread (1Sa 21:1-4). He was referring to the “bread of the Presence,” which only priests could eat (Lev 24:8-9). Ahimelek was merciful toward David in his time of need, not legalistic. He was a priest who knew God’s heart. By eating the bread, David broke the Levitical law. But God did not condemn David. God saw his need and had mercy on him. Even though God made the law, he is not legalistic. If we know God’s heart we will be merciful to people in need. If the Pharisees had known God’s heart they would not have criticized Jesus’ hungry disciples. The fault was not with Jesus’ disciples, but with the religious leaders. By pointing this out through a Bible story, Jesus protected his disciples from criticism.

We can learn here Jesus’ wisdom in protecting young disciples. They had just begun to open their spiritual eyes and see who Jesus was. They were following him with commitment and willing to learn. They were full of spirit and vitality. But the trained religious leaders painted them as uneducated and undisciplined Sabbath breakers. They intended to indict Jesus for being permissive with the Sabbath law. It seemed reasonable for Jesus to criticize his disciples and protect his own reputation. But if Jesus had done so, his disciples would be hurt. They could fall into self-condemnation, losing their trust in Jesus. To Jesus, there was no hint of saving himself. He immediately came to his disciples’ defense, risking his own reputation. Jesus always loved, supported and protected his disciples. The only times he rebuked them was to plant faith in their hearts (Lk 8:25; 12:28; 18:8). Even this rebuking was rare. In this way Jesus helped them to grow. To Jesus, they were very precious. Jesus was full of hope for them to be men of God like David. We learn from Jesus to have the hope of God and defend young believers from criticism. Then they can grow as great men and women of God. In this way, we can make a safe space for young people to grow, like Jesus did.

After defending his disciples, Jesus said, “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath” (5). This is an amazing declaration. “The Son of Man” refers to the glorious Messiah, foretold by the prophet Daniel (Da 7:13-14). This Messiah receives authority, glory and sovereign power from God Almighty and is to be worshiped by all creation. This Son of Man is “Lord of the Sabbath.” It means that Jesus is the very Son of God and the center of the Sabbath. Keeping the Sabbath is not a matter of following human regulations, but of following Jesus. It is to love him, worship him and serve him as Lord. As we do so, real rest comes upon us. Jesus invites us, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, 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” (Mt 11:28-30).

What makes us weary, burdened and restless? There may be many things. The main cause is sin: pride, lust, greed, jealousy, rebellion, and the like. Having these evils in

our hearts makes us restless. This restlessness is expressed through frantic media usage, drug and alcohol abuse, hopping from club to club, or engaging in casual relationships. These things may soothe temporarily, yet the underlying restlessness remains and even gets more acute. But when we come to Jesus and confess our sins, he forgives us, cleanses our consciences, and sets us free from all the power of sin (Heb 9:14; 1Jn 1:9). Another thing that makes us restless is a legalistic mindset. When we become judgmental and critical toward others, we become anxious and irritable. There is no peace or rest. But when we come to Jesus and receive grace, our minds are full of peace and we have room to embrace others. Then again, an unthankful heart and complaining spirit robs us of peace and rest. However, when we come to Jesus with repentance and begin to thank him, the peace of God will guard our hearts and minds and anxiety flees away (Php 4:6-7). Let's come to Jesus, who gives us true rest.

Second, Jesus healed a man with a shriveled hand (6-11). On another Sabbath Jesus went into a synagogue and was teaching. Jesus always taught the word of God as a priority. Jesus knew that what people need most is the word of God. The word of God makes us wise for salvation and gives us eternal life (2Ti 3:15). The word of God gives us power to resist temptation and live victoriously (Lk 4:4,8,12). The word of God equips us for every good work and makes us fruitful (2Ti 3:17).

As Jesus was teaching, a man with a shriveled right hand was there. Due to his condition, he suffered a great deal. Daily activities that were easy for most people were very difficult for him. This was a cause of endless frustration. He was not qualified for many good jobs. So his marriage prospects would be limited. Most of all, feelings of shame were rooted in his heart. He might have had a victim's mentality that tormented him constantly. He was vulnerable to Satan's temptation to doubt God's love. Like him, many suffer from debilitating life problems that cause them to shrivel up within. They are thirsty for God's love and in need of healing. The Pharisees and teachers of the law should have been shepherds for this man. But they totally ignored his suffering and wanted to use him to trap and accuse Jesus. They knew that Jesus was compassionate. So they watched Jesus closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath (7).

When Jesus saw this man, his heart went out to him and he decided to heal him. Jesus knew the religious leaders wanted to exploit this situation in order to persecute Jesus (8a). He could have healed the man privately in order to avoid confrontation. However, Jesus challenged the darkness to expose their evil thoughts. Jesus said to the man with a shriveled hand, "Get up and stand in front of everyone." This was not easy for him to do. It required standing on Jesus' side in a hostile, legalistic environment. But when he heard Jesus' words, he sensed the love of God in Jesus and trusted him. So he got up and stood there with faith (8b). Then Jesus said to the religious leaders, "I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?" (9) The answer is very obvious. But the religious leaders were silent. Jesus looked around at them all, one by one,

seeking any hint of repentance. But their hearts were hardened. According to Mark, Jesus was angry and deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts (Mk 3:5).

Then Jesus said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” This must have been hard for him. He had to publicly reveal his shameful shriveled hand. He had to overcome self-consciousness and the judgmental spirit of the religious leaders. Yet in this way, he could learn the power of faith in Jesus and receive healing. The man must have sensed the deep love and mercy of Jesus in his command. The man stretched out his hand. It was an act of faith, an act of obedience and an act of prayer. His shriveled hand was completely healed and restored. Not only was his hand restored, but his agonizing life problem was solved. In this way, he could have deep rest in Jesus.

Jessica Long² was born in Bratsk, Russia to unwed teenage parents and without fibular bones in her legs. Her mother gave her up to foster care. God moved the hearts of Steve and Beth Long, a Christian couple in Baltimore, to adopt her. With the medical care they provided, she was able to use prosthetic legs and seemed to walk like normal people. But inwardly she was angry for having no legs. She harbored a sense of rejection by her birth mother and felt she was a burden to her adoptive parents. She was told constantly that God loved her and had a plan for her life. But this made her more angry. She felt that no one could understand her; she was totally alone and in constant pain. Then she discovered swimming and began to compete against normal girls. It was thrilling for her to beat the girls with legs. She competed in the 2004 Paralympic Games in Athens, Greece and won three gold medals at the age of 12. Fame and success followed. But these things did not assuage her lonely and angry soul. One night, after a youth group Bible study, she stretched out her hand to Jesus in prayer. Immediately, she experienced a love and a peace she had never known before. Her anger and loneliness vanished. She knew she was accepted by God as his precious child—a member of his family. A few years later, she visited her birth parents in Russia. They shed many tears, confessing their guilt for abandoning her. As she remembered Jesus’ grace, Jessica forgave them. In that moment, she realized that God indeed loved her and had a great plan for her life. Her life problem was solved and she found true rest. She married a godly man and has two children. She is one of the most decorated female athletes in American history, winning 23 medals in four paralympic games. Yet her joy and peace and meaning in life is found truly in Jesus Christ. Jesus can heal us, restore us, and give us true rest. Let’s stretch our shriveled hands to Jesus!

The Pharisees and teachers of the law had just witnessed a miracle of God’s grace. They should have given glory to God and recognized Jesus as the Messiah. Instead, they were furious. They began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus. Jesus’ life was in danger. Ultimately, Jesus would go to the cross and die, shedding his blood, to

² <https://www.iamsecond.com/film/jessica-long/>

save humankind from our sins and the condemnation of the law. This was the cost of healing the man with the shriveled hand and upholding the true meaning of the Sabbath.

Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath. His lordship does not rest on the oppressive power of the law like the religious leaders. Jesus' lordship is rooted in his sacrificial death for our sins. He invites us to come to him on the Sabbath to find forgiveness, healing, restoration and true rest. Let's stretch out our hands to Jesus by faith. Let's learn the mind of Christ as shepherds for young people and make a safe space for them to grow spiritually.