

JESUS MASTER OF THE SABBATH

Luke 6:1-11

The Sabbath was always a point of contention between Jesus and the Pharisees, scribes and teachers of the Law. Giles explained to us who these groups were last week. Our reading today contains two stories which show how Jesus re-interpreted Jewish understanding of Sabbath Law and what it meant. Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and as such he claimed mastery over everything including the way the Sabbath Law was interpreted.

It's hard for us today to understand what the Sabbath Law meant for the Jews of Jesus' time. We think of the Sabbath as a holy day and a day of rest on which we don't work – and that's correct. But, by Jesus' time, the Jewish concept of 'don't work' had become strict and detailed. More rules surrounded the keeping of the Sabbath than any other commandment. Those of you who came to my Teaching Day on "The Chosen People" may remember that this was greatly intensified after the Jewish people returned from exile because the Israelites were trying to maintain a distinctly Jewish identity. As the laws became more and more detailed, the fences the Pharisees set around the Sabbath became larger and larger covering more and more actions. The Mishnah – the Jewish teachings on the Law of Moses – records 39 categories of acts forbidden on the Sabbath. But whilst setting up these rules the Pharisees became expert at finding loopholes in them. Their legalism lost all sight of the original idea that the Sabbath should be set aside as a holy day and a day of rest, and as we shall see later the Pharisees could even plot murder on the Sabbath whilst vowing to keep it holy. So it was predictable that the issue of the Sabbath would be an area for conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees and other Jewish legalists.

We're now going to look at what our reading today has to tell us about this Sabbath issue and as we study it together please either open your Bibles at page [***] or follow on the screen where the relevant verses will be displayed.

Let's start with verses 1 and 2:

“One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and his disciples began to pick some ears of corn, rub them in their hands and eat the kernels. Some of the Pharisees asked, "Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"” (Luke 6:1-2 NIV)

So Jesus and his disciples were walking along paths through the grainfields on the Sabbath. Depending on how far they walked this might itself have been a breach of Sabbath Law, as the Talmud – the Jewish commentaries on the Mishnah – taught that any journey of over 2,000 paces on the Sabbath was considered work – a slight intensification of the scriptural rules of Exodus 16:29 and Numbers 35:5. But we don't know the actual length of their journey and this issue was never raised.

There are six recorded confrontations between Jesus and Jewish leaders over Sabbath observance. Five of them involve healing, so this is the only recorded confrontation over another issue. Taking grain from the field wasn't itself wrongful under OT gleaning laws (Deuteronomy 23:25). It's not *what* the disciples are doing that's important, it's *when* they are doing it. The Pharisees saw Jesus' disciples pick some grain and rub the heads of grain between the palms of their hands to separate the kernels of grain from the hulls. The Pharisees considered this to be a work both of harvesting and winnowing and therefore forbidden on the Sabbath. Actually this is not completely obvious from OT Law. It was obligatory to observe the Sabbath even during harvest (Exodus 34:21), but scripture draws a distinction between plucking grain and harvesting with a sickle (Deuteronomy 23:25). Only later did scribal tradition deem plucking grain to be a form of harvesting and so forbidden on the Sabbath. In Israel a teacher was responsible for the behaviour of his pupils, so when the Pharisees complained to the disciples, Jesus answered them. The accusation was serious. Violation of Sabbath Law was punishable by death as Exodus 31:14 tells us.

Jesus answers them from scripture, just as Jesus answered Satan when he was being tempted by him in the desert after his baptism – look at verses 3 and 4:

“Jesus answered them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and taking the consecrated bread, he ate what is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.”” (Luke 6:3-4 NIV)
Here Jesus is obviously thinking of 1 Samuel 21:1-9 and he’s both assuming the prestige of David and saying that human need overrides ritual law, even the Sabbath Law. Jesus is telling the Pharisees that they don’t understand the true meaning of scripture. This would have been a real slap in the face for them. Luke doesn’t record their reaction, but I’m sure they were stunned and angry.

Jesus then goes on to assert that as the Son of God he was effectively the author of the Sabbath Law and thus able to clarify and determine its correct application – look at verse 5:

“Then Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”” (Luke 6:5 NIV)

Jesus is less concerned with changing the understanding of Sabbath law, and more concerned with bringing the grace of God to concrete expression in his own ministry, not least on the Sabbath. What is more, as lord of the Sabbath Jesus has the authority to do just that! Jesus is God’s authorized agent and so fully able to determine what is appropriate on the Sabbath.

But the Pharisees will have none of this, and continue to escalate the conflict with Jesus – look at verses 6 and 7:

“On another Sabbath he went into the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was shrivelled. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal on the Sabbath.” (Luke 6:6-7 NIV)

Only Luke the physician records the detail that it was the man’s more vital right hand that was crippled. I think the implication here is that the Pharisees were deliberately trying to trap Jesus and Jesus does not draw back from the confrontation. Jesus never drew back from

confrontation when that confrontation was justified. Very likely the Pharisees planted the man with the shrivelled hand to see if Jesus would heal him. They weren't interested in the man's welfare or the miracle of healing. They just wanted to have an excuse to accuse Jesus. Healing in their eyes would be work, and since the man's condition was not life threatening, healing it was forbidden on the Sabbath.

Jesus was well aware of their scheming, but he healed the man anyway, look at verses 8-10:

“But Jesus knew what they were thinking and said to the man with the shrivelled hand, "Get up and stand in front of everyone." So he got up and stood there. Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?" He looked round at them all, and then said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He did so, and his hand was completely restored.” (Luke 6:8-10 NIV)

Again Jesus gives a scriptural response to their planned accusation.

We can see the basis for verse 9 in Hosea 6:6:

“For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.” (Ho 6:6 NIV)

Actually it's difficult on the basis of Luke's account to see exactly what the Pharisees were complaining of. Jesus didn't even touch the crippled man he just spoke to him. How could that be work? The Pharisees were so concerned not to do evil they had forgotten the need to do good. Jesus emphasises mercy and compassion as being at the heart of the Sabbath Law. Even the hypocrites to whom he was speaking acted mercifully towards an animal in trouble on the Sabbath. Jesus was saying that it was much more important to show mercy to a human being. His argument being clearly correct, Jesus then proceeded to heal the man. Jesus intentionally brings his conflict with the Pharisees to a head. The man didn't ask to be healed but Jesus uses his healing as an object lesson.

The Pharisees had actually demeaned the Sabbath by robbing it of its rest and burdening it with onerous religious requirements. This is what Jesus meant when he said “The Sabbath was made for man and

not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). Mercy was supposed to be at the heart of the Sabbath Law and Jesus’ actions were consistent with this. He broke the letter of the Law, at least as the Pharisees interpreted it, to fulfil its true intent through an expression of mercy and compassion. But, the Pharisees were blinded by their devotion to legalistic interpretations of the Law. Concerned as they were for keeping all the details of the Sabbath Law, they amazingly see no problem in plotting to kill Jesus on the Sabbath – look at verse 11: “But they were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus.” (Luke 6:11 NIV)

So what does this scripture mean for us today? First of all this passage raises the issue of Sabbath observance. Just because Jesus rejected the detailed Pharisaic rules surrounding Sabbath observance doesn’t mean that he rejected the original concept of the Sabbath as a day on which we don’t work, a day of rest on which we set aside time to reflect on our God and to worship him. The word Sabbath is from a Hebrew root meaning to cease or stop, we need to stop what we usually do and rest and focus on God. We do that not because it’s Law, but because a day of Sabbath was God’s original intention for the way we should live. He modelled it for us and we would do well to follow his leading.

So how about you? Do you regularly allow your golf clubs, or your boat, or your garden to prevent you from coming to church and worshipping the Lord on Sunday? If so you ought to rethink your priorities. Do you regularly work on Sundays? Unless you’re working in the church or performing an important or essential service you ought to rethink your priorities. It’s been said that we worship our play and play at our worship – let’s not do that.

Secondly there’s the issue of legalism. In the outside world there are some very strange laws. Giles would be unhappy as a minister in Nicholas County West Virginia because there it’s illegal to tell jokes or humorous stories from the pulpit there. But, closer to home, within our churches, there are rules and expectations that are completely unhelpful and often damaging. We need to see that our spiritual life

can be stunted or even choked to death by the weeds of legalism. This morning we've seen that legalism prevented the Pharisees from recognising Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God.

In terms of our faith today legalism is an attempt to gain God's favour through our performance and it produces self righteousness and judgement and condemnation of others. It can make us narrow and divisive. But worst of all it makes it impossible for us to see and accept God's grace and mercy freely offered to us through faith in Christ. I lead a study group during the week and some of the people there find it really hard to accept the idea of salvation by and through faith. They feel they've got to keep lots of rules and laws. They believe it's too easy just to have faith and accept God's grace. But, Christianity is not fundamentally a matter of what we do or what we don't do – it's a matter of what has been done for us through Christ's death on the cross.

Don't misunderstand what I'm saying here. I'm not saying that it doesn't matter if we sin. It does matter. It matters very much, God hates it. But, what I am saying is that we can't defeat sin in our own strength by keeping detailed rules and regulations or indeed in any other way. We need God's grace and mercy.

When Jesus died on the cross He said "it is finished", and so it is. Christ has paid the price for our sins and we are forgiven. What we have to do is not to keep mountains of rules and regulations, but simply turn to Christ in faith and acknowledge him as our Lord and master. Then it is indeed finished and we can look forward with certainty to eternity with our Lord and Master. Jesus is Lord, but is he your Lord? If not turn to him in faith and make him Lord of your life this very day and then enrol on our Christianity Explored course so that you can learn more about our Lord.