

## **“The Lord of the Sabbath”**

### **Luke 6:1-11**

Beginning in Luke 5 we have studied a series of questions raised by the scribes and Pharisees. Either directly or through suggestion they have asked Jesus:

“Who can forgive sins, but God alone?” (Luke 5:21)

“Why do ye eat and drink with publicans and sinners?” (Luke 5:30)

“Why do the disciples of John fast often, and make prayers, and likewise the disciples of the Pharisees; but thine eat and drink?” (Luke 5:33)

In Luke 6 we see a fourth question raised by the Pharisees, “Why do ye that which is not lawful to do on the sabbath days?” (Luke 6:2)

From this text, through both the miracle that Jesus performed and the answer Jesus gave we learn this great truth: That Jesus is Lord of the sabbath. By the grace of God may we faithfully apply it.

#### **I. The Question**

Luke gives us an interesting detail at the beginning of verse 1. He tells us that the account which follows comes on the “second sabbath after the first.” The Jews would count the seven weeks between the Passover and Pentecost by numbering the sabbaths as we read here in verse 1. This lets us know that it was the

spring of the year and the first harvest of grain would just be turning ripe. And that corresponds with what the rest of verse 1 tells us.

Verse 1 goes on to tell us that on that sabbath day: “He (Jesus) went through the corn fields, and his disciples plucked the ears of corn, and did eat, rubbing them in their hands.” It’s a very simple scene that is laid out before us in this text. It was the sabbath and as Jesus and his disciples walked through this field the disciples picked some heads of grain and ate it. On the surface, nothing seems remarkable about this scene.

But in verse 2 the Pharisees ask a question. Verse 2 tells us, “And certain of the Pharisees said unto them, Why do ye that which is not lawful to do on the sabbath day?” What was it in verse 1 that the Pharisees had an issue with?

Was it the walking? Probably not. They were ok with people walking on the Sabbath day. As long as you didn’t walk further than 2000 cubits, as that was what they had determined to be an acceptable Sabbath day’s journey.

Maybe it was the walking through a field of grain? No, again, that isn’t the issue. Though their rules did forbid people from going to their own fields or gardens on the sabbath day, even just to look at them, you were not forbidden from walking through your neighbor’s fields.

Maybe it was the disciples just taking someone’s grain that bothered the Pharisees. No, once again, that’s not the problem. The Mosaic Law specifically allows this behavior. In Deuteronomy 23:25, we read, “When thou comest into the

standing corn of thy neighbor, then thou mayest pluck the ears with thine hand; but thou shalt not move a sickle unto thy neighbor's standing corn.” So what the disciples did here was perfectly fine under the Law of God.

The issue for the Pharisees was the actual plucking of the grain and eating it on the Sabbath day. This was an offense to them. This act they saw as a terrible violation of the sabbath. Their actual rule concerning this says, “He that reaps (on the sabbath day) ever so little, is guilty (of stoning), and plucking of ears of corn is a derivative of reaping.”<sup>1</sup>

Here is an example of the Jews making a religious rule that not only goes beyond what God had revealed in the Law, but actually contracts what God said. Listen again to Deuteronomy 23:25, “When thou comest into the standing corn of thy neighbor, then thou mayest pluck the ears with thine hand; but thou shalt not move a sickle unto thy neighbor's standing corn.” Here the law God gave makes a clear distinction between plucking ears of corn and reaping. But the Jews, in the rules and forms they had invented in their attempts to keep the law, had equated the two. And so when the Pharisees see the disciples of Jesus plucking grain and eating it on the Sabbath day they ask, “Why do ye that which is not lawful to do on the sabbath days?”

Jesus answers them directly beginning in verse 3. First Jesus says, “Have ye not read so much as this.” Jesus is about to refer to an event that is recorded in the

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from Jewish sources by John Gill in his comments on Matthew 12:2.

book of I Samuel to vindicate his disciples. But in this opening, Jesus calls into question the authority of the Pharisees.

They claimed to be great supporters and ardent students of the Old Testament Scriptures. And yet their questions make them appear ignorant of what those very Scriptures say. If they had not read the Scriptures they certainly were not fit to be teachers of others, much less to be judges. And more than that, if they were not thorough students of Scripture then they had neglected the study of that which was most important. Now, we can be almost certain that the Pharisees were familiar with this episode in I Samuel to which Jesus is about to refer. They knew what God's word said. But their first loyalty was to their traditions and rules.

Now look at the actual example Jesus cites in verses 3 and 4, "David . . . when himself was an hungred, and they which were with him; . . . he went into the house of God, and did take and eat the shewbread, and gave also to them that were with him; which it is not lawful to eat but for the priests alone?"

This is a fairly well-known story. If you grew up in a Christian environment you are probably familiar with this account from the life of David.

King Saul was jealous of David. King Saul had determined he would kill David, even though David had been a loyal and devoted servant. David escaped from King Saul's initial plots against his life and he was a fugitive, on the run. And he had nothing. When he got to the city of Nob where the tabernacle was set up at that time, he asked Ahimelech the priest for some bread. Ahimelech told him, "I

have nothing. The only bread I have is the shewbread.” The shewbread (showbread) had several distinctive and symbolic elements to it, and you can read about it in Leviticus 24:5-9, but what’s important for us to know is that the ceremonial law says that the bread is to be eaten by the priests in the holy place. Ahimelech gave David this bread which he took with him for his journey.

Why? Because David was in distress. He had a genuine need for the bread and thus the priest gave him the bread. What does this account illustrate? That the ceremonial law of God is not intended for the hurt of man. There was room in the ceremonial law of God for compassion to meet present and pressing needs. And if that is true of even the ceremonies which God appointed, certainly it was true of the traditions of the Pharisees.

So far from this text we have seen Jesus questioned by the Pharisees about his disciples’ behavior on the sabbath day: “Why do ye that which is not lawful to do on the sabbath days?” Jesus answered with an Old Testament illustration to show that his disciples had not violated God’s Law.

Then Jesus makes this incredible statement in Luke 6:5, “The Son of man is Lord also of the sabbath.” Keep this statement in mind, we are going to come back to it. But right now we are going to go on to the miracle of healing we find in this text.

Luke’s gospel goes from this scene in a corn field to another occasion in the Lord’s ministry when he healed a man with a withered hand on the sabbath day.

## **II. The Miracle**

In verses 6 and 7 we are introduced to the three main characters or groups in this account. First, in verse 6 we are told, “It came to pass also on another sabbath, that he entered into the synagogue and taught.” This was a separate occasion, on “another sabbath.”

And look where Jesus went: “Into the synagogue.” The synagogues were the local centers for worship. The Jews would be gathered there on the Sabbath day. There the Old Testament scriptures would be read and taught. Though there were serious flaws in the worship of the Jews, yet we find Jesus faithful in his attendance at the synagogues. Where the scriptures were read and the people were taught, there we see our Lord. May we follow his example and be faithful to sit under the reading and teaching of the Word of God.

Verse 6 tells us Jesus had an opportunity to teach the people. In this text we have another example of an occasion in the life of Christ where he preformed a miracle, but the miracle was not the main reason he was there. The miracles performed by Jesus Christ supported and were auxiliary to his teaching and preaching ministry.

The second important character in this account is found in the second part of verse 6: “And there was a man whose right hand was withered.” We are given very few details about this man. All we know is what we are told here: He was a man.

His hand was withered, or dried up. Crippled. There was something terribly wrong with his hand. And he was at the synagogue on the sabbath. That's all the background information we have.

And finally, in verse 7 we are told, "And the scribes and Pharisees watched him." There was a contingent of the scribes and Pharisees present and they were watching Jesus. Why were they watching Jesus? Verse 7 tells us: they were watching him to see "Whether he would heal on the sabbath day." They are not interested to learn from Jesus. They were not interested in seeing miracles for miracles sake. They were following Jesus around, watching him, to see if he would heal anyone on the sabbath day.

Why does this matter? They wanted to find fault with Jesus. The end of verse 7 says, "That they might find an accusation against him."

Do you remember the story of Daniel and the lion's den? Remember the enemies of Daniel could not find any fault in his life, try as they might. So they had to plot and scheme and contrive a way to get Daniel in trouble for the good things he did.

So it was for the scribes and Pharisees They could not find anything in the life of Jesus to discredit his ministry. Their questions and arguments have proven futile. And so now, like the enemies of Daniel, they tried to find a way to accuse Jesus for the good deeds he performed.

So far in our study of Luke we have seen several questions brought to Jesus, but on this occasion Luke tells us Jesus began the questioning. Verse 8 begins by telling us, “He (Jesus) knew their thoughts.” The thoughts, the plans, the schemes, the ill-intentions of the scribes and Pharisees were not hidden from the Lord. This may have been divine insight, or it may have just been apparent to anyone who was there. The scribes and Pharisees had not been subtle about their opinion of Jesus and his ministry. Jesus knew why they were there and he forced the issue with his question.

Jesus said to the man with the withered hand, “Rise up, and stand forth in the midst.” Put yourself in the position of this man for a moment. Again, we hardly know anything about him. We don’t know how old he was. We don’t know what happened to his hand. Was he born this way? Was this the result of some sort of accident? Was he in pain? Was he embarrassed by this physical deformity? Had he struggled with the question, “Why did this happen to me? Why did God allow this?” Was he hopeful that Jesus would heal him? We don’t know.

But we do know that he was at this synagogue where the Word of God was read and taught. He was there when Jesus was there and he was listening. We know he was listening because when Jesus told him to do something, he immediately obeyed. The end of verse 8 tells us, “He arose and stood forth.”

Then Jesus turned to the scribes and Pharisees and said, “I will ask you one thing; Is it lawful on the sabbath days to do good, or to do evil? to save life, or to



destroy it?” Jesus cut to the heart of the issue. The scribes and pharisees are watching to see if Jesus would heal anyone on the Sabbath day. Their concern is about the sabbath. Would Jesus keep or break the sabbath according to their rules and customs?

What were their rules and customs?

It shouldn't surprise us that the Jews had very strict regulations about healing on the sabbath day. Again, we see that the Pharisees were very sincere in their beliefs. They were very serious about their beliefs. They thought about every possible activity and whether or not that should qualify as permissible work for the Sabbath.

Here is an excerpt from the rules concerning healing on the Sabbath, “If a man had an ailment in his throat, he [may] not gargle oil, but he may swallow a large quantity of oil, and if he was healed, he was healed, It was very well, it was no breach of the sabbath; they may not chew mastic, nor rub the teeth with spice, on the sabbath day, when it is intended for healing; but if it is intended for the savour of his mouth, it is [allowed].”<sup>2</sup> And there are many more examples like this. But the point is that they made very fine and minute distinctions about what was or was not allowed on the sabbath.

The question Jesus asked brings up a much broader issue: What is lawful to do on the sabbath? What is the sabbath for? What is the point? Is it lawful to do

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted from Jewish sources in John Gill's commentary on Matthew 12.

good or evil on the sabbath day? Is it lawful to save life or destroy life on the sabbath day?

Verse 10 tells us that after Jesus had asked his question, he looked “round about upon them all.” Have you even been in a situation where someone has asked a question that followed by a long, awkward silence because no one wants to answer? I imagine that’s what this was like.

Jesus asked them the question in verse 9, and no one answered. Jesus gave them time. He looked around the room at all of them. And you wonder if, when Jesus looked at them, they broke eye-contact and looked down or looked away. Mark's account gives us this detail, “But they held their peace. And when he had looked round about on them with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts.” (Mark 3:4-5)

None of them would answer Jesus. They knew what was right, but their hearts were hardened. They would rather see the man with the withered hand continue to suffer than give up their grounds to accuse Jesus. This grieved Jesus. They were the religious leaders. They should have had compassion for this man. But their interest in this man’s suffering only went as far as it was related to their desire to accuse Jesus.

Verse 10 continues, “He [Jesus] said unto the man, Stretch forth thy hand. And he did so: and his hand was restored whole as the other.” Jesus wasn’t interested in debating the sabbath with the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus knew what

was right. He knew that the Sabbath was for good, and not evil. For saving life, not destroying life.

The scribes and Pharisees had hard hearts and were more concerned with the minutia of their rules than the suffering of this man. But Jesus is not bound by their disapproval. His heart is not hardened to the needs and suffering of this man. With a heart of love and compassion Jesus healed this man. By performing this miracle Jesus settled the issue and he drove home that statement he had made in verse 5: “The Son of Man is Lord also of the sabbath.”

This did not please the scribes and Pharisees. Verse 11 tells us, “They were filled with madness; and communed one with another what they might do to Jesus.” This word “madness” means a “lack of understanding, folly, that expresses itself in violent rage.”<sup>3</sup>

They were mad at Jesus. The scribes and Pharisees did not receive a rebuke from the Lord here. They were rebuked, certainly. But they did not receive it. They did not benefit from it. By the words and deeds of Jesus they should have been corrected in their thinking and set back on the right path. But instead they were filled with madness at Jesus.

They may have been mad at the people. Previously the scribes and Pharisees had enjoyed great popularity and authority among the people. But Jesus had challenged their authority, had openly rebuked them, had demonstrated their error,

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<sup>3</sup> Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, “madness” B. 2.

and the people (at this point) had sided with Jesus. How dare they! They may have been mad at the people.

They may have been mad at themselves. With great subtlety the scribes had introduced questions that were designed to undermine the authority and popularity of Jesus and cast a cloud over his ministry. But every question has been answered by Jesus and turned back upon them. And in the end the questions of the scribes and Pharisees have only served to undermine their authority and popularity and cast a cloud over their ministry. And they may very well be mad at themselves for their failure to deftly handle this carpenter from Galilee.

And they began to plot about what they might do to Jesus. “Is Jesus a problem for us?” was no longer a question for the scribes and Pharisees. They were now firmly established in their opposition to Christ and His ministry and they began to plot how they could get rid of him.

We have reached the end of this text, but it isn't the end of the sermon. We studied the question raised by the Pharisees in verse 2, “Why do ye that which is not lawful to do on the sabbath days?” and we saw the response of Jesus in the use of an Old Testament illustration to show that the ceremonial law was not established for the hurt of man.

And then we went on and studied the miracle Jesus performed in this text when he healed the man with the withered hand to demonstrate that it is lawful to do good and save life on the sabbath day.

Now I want us to go back and carefully consider the statement made by Jesus in verse 5. Luke 6:5, “And he said unto them, That the Son of man is Lord also of the sabbath.”

### **III. Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath**

In this statement Jesus calls himself: “The Son of man.” Out of all the titles used for Jesus in the New Testament, “Son of man” was the title Jesus used for himself most often. Jesus used this title for himself 78 times. It was also used to refer to Jesus by Stephen in Acts, the writer of Hebrews, and John in Revelation.

What is the significance of this title? Why did Jesus use this title for himself? It was a fairly innocuous title for the Jews. It was not immediately offensive to them. It could be interpreted multiple ways by first century Jews. Had Jesus always referred to himself as the “Son of God,” the Jews would have cried, “Blasphemy!” And we see examples of that happening in the Gospels. But especially early on in the ministry of Jesus, the title “Son of man,” did not excite them in this way. This title didn’t immediately give his enemies any ammunition to use against Jesus. And again, this was because it could be interpreted multiple ways. This title alone didn’t offend the Jews unless Jesus also clearly defined what he meant by this title in the immediate context.

The title “Son of man” has prophetic significance. By using this title Jesus identifies himself with prophecies about the Messiah, particularly those found in

Daniel 7. Daniel 7:13-14 speaks of the “Son of man,” who receives a universal and everlasting dominion from God. This title with this prophecy identifies Jesus as the human representative of God’s people before God (Daniel 7:13). Christ’s suffering, His glory, His return in the clouds of heaven: all this and more is prophesied there in Daniel 7 and this title: “Son of man,” identifies Jesus with these prophecies.

One further word of clarification: the title “Son of man” in no way detracts from Jesus’ claims of divinity. Some people point to this title and say, “See, Jesus called himself the son of man, and not the son of God.” They will use this to claim that Jesus wasn’t really God. They extrapolate from Jesus’ use of this title to their erroneous claim, their false claim, that Jesus never said he was God.

Very quickly I’m going to give you two examples in Scripture that demonstrate that the Son of Man and the Son of God were united in the man Christ Jesus. The first example is in Matthew 16. In Matthew 16:13 Jesus asked his disciples, “Whom do men say that I the *Son of man* am?” (emphasis added) In verse 16 Simon Peter answered and said, “Thou art the *Christ, the Son of the living God.*” (emphasis added) And in verse 17 Jesus answered and said to Peter, “Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.” So there is one very clear example of the title Son of Man, being used in the same context as Son of God. Were Peter wrong in his confession of faith, certainly Jesus would have rebuked him. But Jesus didn’t rebuke Peter. Jesus told Peter God revealed this to him.

Another example is in Matthew 26. In Matthew 26:63 the high priest said to Jesus, “I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, *the Son of God.*” (emphasis added) And in verse 64 Jesus answered, “Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, Hereafter shall ye see the *Son of man* sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.” (emphasis added) Again, the language Jesus uses here alludes to the Messianic prophecies in Daniel 7. In response to this statement those Jews who were present at this mock trial for Jesus rent their clothes and said, “Blasphemy!” Son of man wasn’t a confusing title for them when used like this. They knew Jesus was claiming to be God. And they wanted to kill Him for it.

When Jesus said, “Son of man” he did here in verse 5 of our text, he is referring to himself, the Son of God, the Messiah. And what did he say about himself, the “Son of man?”

Jesus said, “The Son of man is Lord also of the sabbath.” Remember, Jesus was responding to the question raised by the Pharisees in verse 2: “Why do ye that which is not lawful to do on the sabbath days?” With an Old Testament illustration, Jesus has already shown that there was nothing wrong with what the disciples were doing. But Jesus goes even further in his response. In effect, what Jesus said here is that the Son of man, the Messiah, has every right to interpret the true meaning of the sabbath and to do or allow or command whatever he wills on the sabbath.

Here is a question: Does God have the right to say what can or cannot be done on the sabbath?

God instituted the Sabbath. We see it all the way back in Genesis on the last day of the creation week. There is a large amount of formal instruction given about the sabbath in the Law. God established these rules and regulations which surrounded the ceremonial keeping of the sabbath. So certainly in that sense God has the right to say what can or cannot be done on the sabbath. But does God have a right to change those portions of the Law, or give commands that supersede those instructions concerning the sabbath?

Yes. Again, God instituted the sabbath and He can do with it as He pleases. Jesus gives an example of someone “profaning” the sabbath in *obedience* to God in the parallel account of this text in Matthew’s gospel. In Matthew 12:5 Jesus said, “Or have ye not read in the law, how that on the sabbath days the priests in the temple profane the sabbath, and are blameless?” If the sabbath was innately holy, then the priests in their manual labor in the temple on the sabbath would profane it, and indeed did profane it. But the sabbath itself isn’t the point. The Law of God instructed men to abstain from their menial work on the sabbath days. The Law of God did not forbid services of religion, like the work of the priests in the temple. Nor did the Law forbid works of necessity or works of mercy on the sabbath.

An Old Testament example which illustrates this same truth would be the siege of Jericho. In Joshua 6 we read how the Lord instructed the army of Israel to



take Jericho. For 6 days they were to march around the city once. And then on the 7th day (presumably the sabbath) they were to march around the city 7 times, then shout, and God would cause the city walls to fall and the army would be able to take this Canaanite stronghold and utterly destroy it. And that's exactly what happened. For 6 days they marched and then on the 7th day God leveled the walls and Jericho was destroyed by the army of Israel.

Jewish comments on this passage say: "The day on which Jericho was taken was the sabbath day; and . . . though they slew and burnt on the sabbath day, he that commanded the sabbath [observed], commanded [it be profaned]."<sup>4</sup> Clearly, God has every right to command what he will on the sabbath.

And Jesus here in our text Jesus said he is Lord of the sabbath. He claimed to be greater than the sabbath. Just as he is Lord over everything else, he is Lord of the sabbath. On his authority it stands or falls. Really, when you look at this statement, it is a claim to Deity. Jesus is claiming lordship over the Sabbath, and the only way he could have such authority is if he was God.

This incredible truth, that Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath, was received by the pharisees unto wrath. Through the words of Jesus and the deeds which confirmed this truth, the Pharisees were filled with madness. How dare Jesus make such a claim, that the Son of man is Lord of the sabbath? This troubled them. This angered them. This was a hard truth that turned them back from Christ.

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted from Jewish sources by John Gill in his commentary on Matthew 12:8.

But for us, as disciples of Jesus Christ, we should be in awe. We should be amazed. Jesus is Lord. Jesus is God. Jesus is greater than the Law. Jesus is both the giver and fulfiller of the law. This truth that maddened the Pharisees should humble us. It moved them to anger, it should move us to worship. It moved the Pharisees to plot against Jesus, it should move us to order our lives in obedience to him.

For the unbelieving: See the claim Jesus makes in this passage: The Son of Man is Lord of the sabbath. It is a claim of deity. It is a claim of Lordship. The day will come when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:11). For the vast majority of people this will be a confession made in judgment. People who, like the scribes and Pharisees did not recognize Christ when he was revealed to them. People who hardened their hearts to the gospel. Don't harden your hearts to the gospel. Tomorrow may be your dying day, let today be your repenting day. Turn from your sin and to Jesus Christ. Know him as Lord in His mercy and grace, or you will face him as Lord in judgment.