

Lord of the Sabbath

We are on a journey through the Gospel of Luke, focusing on the words of Jesus (hence the series title *Church in the Red* since some Bibles print the words of Jesus in red).

Today's passage marks a turning point in the life and ministry of Jesus, made clear by the last sentence in our passage. Verse 11 reads:

¹¹ But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus. ¹

Religious leaders, before this point in the ministry of Jesus, were *keeping track* of this unusual preacher, prophet, and miracle worker. They observed Jesus and questioned Him... but they weren't necessarily in opposition to Him until this point. But with these conflicts over *Sabbath keeping*, Jesus threatened the religious order of things. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law would not stand for it.

Of all the various rules and rituals observed by Jews, strict Sabbath keeping is among the most important.

It is *number 4* of the 10 Commandments.

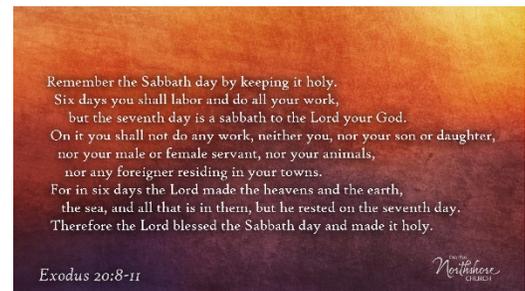
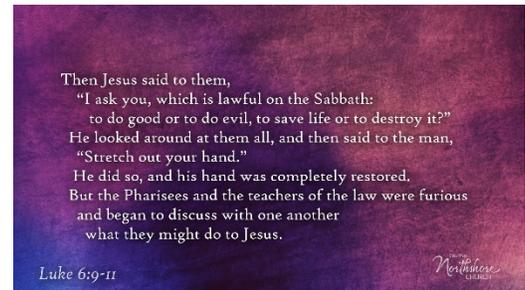
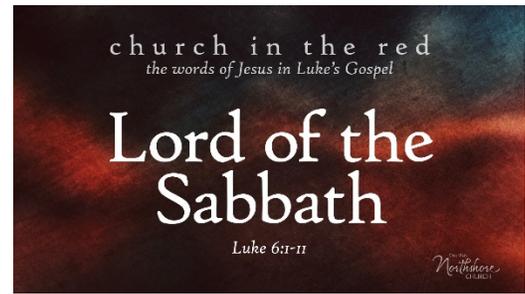
Sabbath keeping is aligned with the account of creation.

For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

²

Beyond the Commandment, there are several pages in our Old Testament that expand on Sabbath keeping, and the Jewish Talmud and related commentaries provide for volumes of pages written on Sabbath keeping. To this day, strict Sabbath keeping is a primary way of identifying practicing Jews.

I suppose Jesus should have known better than to *mess with* the Sabbath. Of course, Jesus **did** know better.



¹ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 6:11). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

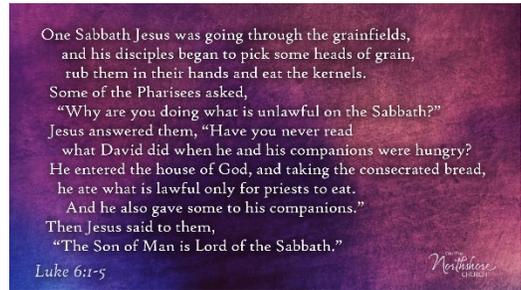
² [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Ex 20:11). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

It started like this:

One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and his disciples began to pick some heads of grain, rub them in their hands and eat the kernels.³

We might think this was enough to *tick someone off* as it appeared these guys were **stealing**

grain... just helping themselves to some farmers crop. But it wasn't considered stealing, or in any way illegal (at least on any other day). In fact, it was illegal for a farmer to *forbid* such a thing. These were among the ways that the Law extended hospitality to travelers and care for the poor.



² Some of the Pharisees asked, "Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"⁴

Like I said, it wasn't that they were doing something that was unlawful, on the Sabbath; it was that they were doing it on the Sabbath that made it unlawful.

It is disputable, actually, whether or not it was exactly *unlawful*. The law was clear that **harvesting** was forbidden on the Sabbath... but were they harvesting? It was only in the rabbinic writings that picking grain by hand for personal consumption was likened to harvesting, and rubbing grain in ones hand was likened to thrashing and milling.

The rabbis had a way of putting fences around the law. At the center was the law, and then they would set up rings around the law, with claims that one thing might lead to another. They would invent layers of strict barriers with hopes of keeping pure. The more strict and fundamental, or even radical, one was the more extensive and farther out the fences.

It is the sort of thing we see in clothing restrictions in some cultures today. For example, guarding against lust is a good thing (based in the 10 Commandments) which leads to modesty in dress... which, carried to an extreme, results in head-to-toe covering of women in restrictive dress like a burka. In today's Muslim cultures we can see a broad range of dress, starting with the sort of dress common in our midst today all the way out to a burka. Those on that far extreme would consider themselves the most devout and pure.

Christian culture has our way of doing such things. Some of you *old timers* might still be uncomfortable with playing cards (for example)... presumably because they are associated with gambling (thou shalt not gamble is one of the Commandments, right?), which I suppose could be considered a form of stealing.

³ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 6:1). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁴ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 6:2). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

We could go on and on identifying such ranges of acceptable behavior. There are the kinds of environmentalists like me who recycle as long as it is really convenient... and those on the other end of the spectrum who only ride in electric vehicles and wear clothes made from repurposed hemp. I enjoy a Star Wars movie because of talking robots, weird aliens, and good guys always win... while there are others who are really nerdy about minute details and strict adherence to the Star Wars cannon (whatever that is).

We all have our *fundamentalists* in various forms, and continuums of acceptable behavior and practice.

So, accused of *crossing the line*, breaking the Sabbath...

³ Jesus answered them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry?"⁵

Have you never **read**? Those were *fighting words*. These were religious academics; pretty much all they did was read and write.

Jesus didn't bother quibbling with them about whether this was actually legal or not. Rather, Jesus cited an instance from the life of David; we can read the account in 1 Samuel 21.

David, before he was king, and his men were *on the run*. They were hungry and found that the only food available was consecrated bread, reserved for special purposes in worship; only to be consumed by priests. Under normal circumstances, they shouldn't have eaten it... but their need took precedence over religious observance.

Jesus cited an example when judgement was used, when physical need superseded the requirements of religion. Furthermore, Jesus proclaimed that **He** was qualified to make that judgement, proclaiming:

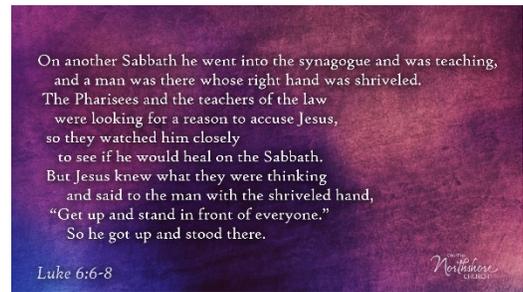
"The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."⁶

It is an unusual title, *Lord of the Sabbath*, found nowhere else in the Bible until this episode in the Gospels. It had to be confusing to hear... but it also had to seem clear that Jesus was claiming extraordinary authority that extended to authority over the Law. This was an intolerable claim.

⁵ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 6:3). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁶ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 6:5). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

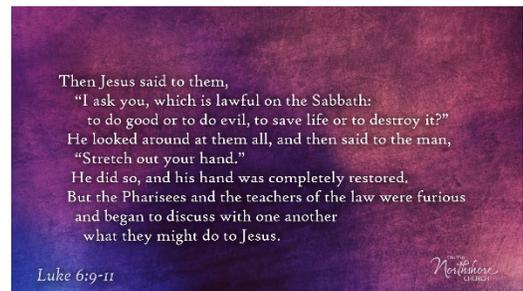
⁶ On another Sabbath he went into the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was shriveled. ⁷ The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal on the Sabbath. ⁸ But Jesus knew what they were thinking and said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Get up and stand in front of everyone." So he got up and stood there. ⁷



Jesus had healed, before, on the Sabbath, in a synagogue... apparently without controversy (see chapter 4). But now things were changing, and the religious leaders were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus.

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?" ⁸

There is no answer recorded. Apparently, the religious leaders were silent. They didn't have an answer because the answer was clear from Scripture. It was always appropriate to do good and to save a life. The Law even provided for the saving of livestock on the Sabbath, let alone healing a person.



The question "which is lawful" implies another question: "**Who** decides what is lawful on the Sabbath?" Is it a matter of interpretation or judgement? Is it a matter of words or a matter of Spirit? Where is the power to decide, and who has that power?

Even that may seem like a dangerous question. If it is a matter of *judgement and Spirit* over Law, doesn't that seem like everyone would be out of control? Wouldn't that lead to anarchy? Such liberal, or perhaps *libertine*, attitudes could undo everything. But, let's face it, skilled interpreters (academics and lawyers and such) can just as easily twist words.

It seems that Jesus advocated for *judgement and Spirit* to rule the interpretation of Law. Grounded in the Heart and Mind of God, revealed in the Word of God, and empowered by the Spirit of the Law, there is room for liberty.

⁷ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 6:6–8). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁸ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 6:9). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁰ He looked around at them all⁹

With all their dumb looks on their faces, unable to say anything worthwhile, just standing there in their funny hats and robes (not in the Bible... my interpretation).

¹⁰ He looked around at them all, and then said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He did so, and his hand was completely restored.¹⁰

Jesus didn't bother to answer with words; Jesus answered with action... teaching us again that actions speak louder than mere words.

The core purpose of the Sabbath was **restoration**. Jesus restored that man, but it would cause trouble for Jesus. The Sabbath was for rest, yet the religious leaders made it a burden.

Jesus demonstrated what it meant to return to the meaning of Sabbath, restoring the man.

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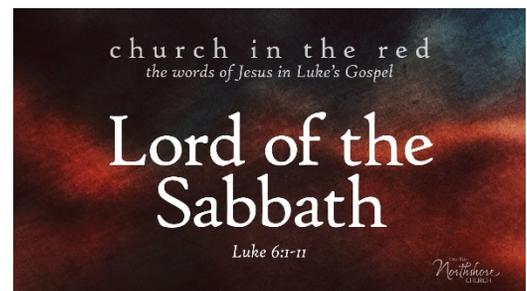
The religious leaders had a system of rules based on their meticulous interpretation... erring on the side of being strict, heaping burdens on the people to be acceptable.

Jesus demonstrated that there was room for judgement based on circumstances... erring on the side of being generous, restoring and releasing people from burdens, sickness, and hunger.

For Jesus, it always seems like **today** is the day for salvation, **today** is the day for healing, **today** is the day for doing good... no matter what day it is.

Funny... I wonder if **we** have things *flipped*. For the Pharisees, they seemed fine for Jesus to work on any day but the Sabbath day; in our culture it seems like we **only** want Jesus to work on the Sabbath day, staying out of the other six.

Everyday is a day for Jesus to work. Everyday is a day for Jesus to restore... so, in very real ways, everyday is a *Sabbath* day.



⁹ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 6:10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁰ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 6:10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹¹ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 6:11). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Sabbath rules had devolved into that which restricted and isolated. More than anything else, *Sabbath keeping* resulted in identifying who was **not** a Jew, who was not part of the tribe; *Sabbath keeping* kept people **out** rather than inviting people **in**.

Jesus invited people in. Jesus, especially, invited the *outsider* in.

What kind of people are we going to be?

Those with a system of rules based on our meticulous interpretation... erring on the side of being strict, heaping burdens on the people to be acceptable. Or...

Those with **room** for judgement calls based on circumstances... erring on the side of being generous, restoring and releasing people from burdens, sickness, and hunger.

How do we find ourselves?

Are you an outsider or an insider?

If you feel like an outsider because of the way church people, even we church people, have treated you... I am sorry. We are working to be better. I am working to be better. We want to be like Jesus. We really do. But we so routinely fail. Don't stay away from Jesus just because His followers so often fail.

Are we keeping ourselves out?

Perhaps you have determined that you haven't kept the rules, or can't keep the rules, or somehow can't be acceptable. See the Christ of Christianity. See how he broke the rules to let people in. See how Jesus made the way, is The Way. Believe Jesus today. Turn to Him. Follow Jesus. Find yourself **in**.

Are we keeping others out? Believers... let's search ourselves and examine our ways and purposefully drop barriers that might keep people **out**. God help us to make our piety attractive, not repelling. May our righteous pursuits be the sorts of things that draw people in, not send them away.

I suppose such talk might concern some. If you have determined that I am some sort of *theological liberal*, or even heading that way... well, then you don't know me very well. I am just saying, that whenever possible, whenever we can make room... let mercy and grace have power over Law.

There is room. There is room for all types. Room for the strict and room for the *not so strict*. Let's make room for one another, and let's make room for the others... those not yet here among us. This is the Jesus way.