

New Endings

Luke 6: 1 - 11

** One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grain fields, and his disciples began to pick some heads of grain, rub them in their hands and eat the kernels. Some of the Pharisees asked, "Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"

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." Then Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

** On another Sabbath he went into the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was shriveled. 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. 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.

**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 around at them all, and then said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He did so, and his hand was completely restored. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus.

**

I read a joke this week where someone was describing different philosophies of life using the example of a person with two cows... **Socialism** says 'keep one cow and give the other one to the government'. **Communism** says, 'give both cows to the government, and if you're lucky, you may get some milk and cheese back'. **Nazism** would shoot you and take both your cows. **Democracy** says, 'sell one cow and buy a bull'.

Well, another system we might add to this list is **Legalism**, in which there are so many rules and regulations that no one would want to bother with a cow in the first place! Legalism is deadly in any environment, but it is especially deadly in religion. Fanaticism almost always leads to a bad end, no matter what the religion, because there is no room for mercy and grace.

New Endings

Legalism is a way of life that characterized the Pharisees of Jesus' day, and which was especially evident through their attitudes and actions in the text we just read from Luke 6. This fanatical devotion to the minute details of the Law (which, as Jesus pointed out, led them to miss the whole point) was dramatically evident in their rules pertaining to the keeping of the Sabbath.

** A Jewish volume called 'The Mishnah' spelled out the 'oral law' of the Rabbis which had developed around the law of Moses. By Jesus' day, the Mishnah had been in place for over 100 years. The idea behind it was noble, it was honorable. The Law of Moses says, "Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy... You shall do no work on the Sabbath." So, these people wanted to honor God by keeping this law. The obvious question was, "What constitutes *work*?" What is work? How can we be sure that we're not breaking the Law? So, they discussed these questions and spelled their answers out in meticulous detail.

The Mishnah says: 'He that reapeth corn on the Sabbath to the quantity of a fig is guilty; and plucking corn is reaping.' Rubbing the grain out was threshing. Even to walk on the grass on the Sabbath was forbidden because it was a sort of threshing.

** A later book of Rabbinical interpretations of the Law (which included the Misnah) is called the Talmud. It's over 6,000 pages long, and further elaborates on the questions of 'reaping' and 'work'.

A passage in the Talmud says: 'In case a woman rolls wheat to remove the husks, it is considered sifting; if she rubs the head of wheat, it is regarded as threshing; ... if she throws them up in her hand, it is winnowing' [Jer. Shabt, page 10a].

Even today the Sabbath rules are very precise for Orthodox Jews. Cooking in most all forms (boiling, roasting, baking, frying, etc.) is forbidden on the Sabbath. If the hot water

New Endings

tap is accidentally left on, it cannot be turned off on the Sabbath. Escaping gas can be turned off, but not in the normal way. One must turn off the tap of a gas burner with the back of the hand or the elbow.

The Old Testament Law (cf. Exod. 35:3) says that one cannot light a fire on the Sabbath. Strict Judaism extends this to prohibit turning electric lights on or off on the Sabbath. (The problem can be solved, however, by using a timer.) So, too, an air conditioner cannot be turned on by a Jew on the Sabbath, although a Gentile might be persuaded to do so.

When we visited Israel, the elevators in the Hotels would run all day on the Sabbath automatically stopping at every floor. I remember that, particularly because we had a room right across the hall from the elevator, which 'dinged' all night long!

** So, this was the context of the events that we read about here in Luke 6. But what we see happening is that in the first part of this passage (the disciples walking in the grain field) the intent wasn't so much to honor God as it was to discredit Jesus.

Because, we have to wonder why the Pharisees were following Jesus around in the first place!

(And, by the way, one of the first things that might come to the mind of a 'non-Jew' reading this passage is 'Why were the disciples stealing wheat from this field?' But, actually they were not stealing. One of the stipulations in the Jewish Law provided for travelers and the poor, by allowing them to eat from fields just like this. They weren't allowed to harvest grain, but they were allowed to eat it for themselves. It was a form of practical welfare. And even when the farmers would harvest their grain crop, they were required to 'leave the corners of the fields' for the poor, and the widows. We see this in the Book of Ruth. So, the intent of the Law was not to hurt people, or make life intolerable, but there was mercy evident.)

New Endings

But these Pharisees were in this place to discredit Jesus, to catch him doing something that they could use against him. At this point, they were not trying to 'learn', they were out for blood. They had already made up their minds. You can see this, too, from the simple fact that while it was Jesus' *disciples* who were eating the grain, the question was directed to Jesus: "Why do *you* do what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"

Jesus' response to them was not what we might have expected. For one thing, he didn't say, "Hey, it wasn't me! Blame *them!*"

He also didn't say, "Well, that's just *your* interpretation of the Sabbath!" The Sabbath Law was quite precise: "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy." Jesus actually concedes that their interpretation of the Law was correct – that he was in fact, breaking the Sabbath Law. His defense took a quite different tact.

He begins with a stinging introduction: "Haven't you even read what David did when he and his companions were hungry?" The Pharisees were professional students of the law. This was their claim to fame – they had a T-shirt that read: "We know Law!" (not really!) So Jesus begins by asking if they ever even read this text – kind of a slap in the face to these proud students of the Law. Because what Jesus was implying was that this was a rather elementary question, and they had a very poor grasp of the Law.

But Jesus' argument was very simple and went something like this: "Why don't you condemn David for what he did?" And the answer that he was looking for was not,

New Endings

“Well, David was hungry and might have died without eating that bread that was only meant for the priests.” What he was looking for was for them to admit that they didn’t condemn David’s actions simply because *David* did them! David was so revered by the Pharisees that they didn’t dare condemn *anything* he did, even though it was a technical violation of the law.

So here’s Jesus’ argument: “If David could break the law simply because of who he was, Jesus could also break the law, for He is greater than David. So, the central issue here, is not whether Jesus broke the Law, but *who Jesus was*. And, in verse 5 he sums this up:

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

Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath in the sense that he is greater than the Sabbath, and so able to set it aside. *He* has the authority over the Sabbath, the Sabbath does not have authority over him... and if *that* is true - then Jesus claiming authority over *the entire Law of Moses*. So we might begin to get an understanding of why the teachers and Pharisees became so upset by these actions!

Now, quickly, let's look at the next vignette. It's 'another Sabbath Day', Luke says. So, this isn't meant necessarily to be chronological; Luke is simply grouping together two similar events. In this case, it is a Sabbath, and again *"The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus"*. It says "...so they watched him closely to see if he would heal on the Sabbath."

** (painting by James Tissot) Don't miss the bigger picture... here is a man who has, apparently, suffered his entire life with a malformed hand. And 'suffered' would be an understatement in that day and age - there were no laws to protect or help people with special needs. You have one hand, (it was an unforgiving world) you do half the work,

New Endings

and you get half a wage - if that. He was probably reduced to begging, and (as happened on other occasions) could have well been a 'plant' from the Pharisees. "Go stand there... let's see what Jesus will do." They knew that Jesus would act compassionately - so they were planning to use the Compassion of Jesus against him!

So here's a group of 'religious professionals' who are very calculating and cold in the face of a human need. They didn't give a hoot about this man, whether he lived or died, healthy or not. He was just a pawn in their power game, he was a piece to use to protect their 'neat' way of life that was being challenged by this upstart named Jesus, as well as their interpretations of what was right or wrong, and what God wants from us.

How easy it would have been for Jesus to have avoided this conflict! He could have said to this man, 'Look, just wait a bit... and meet me _____', and I'll take care of you. But Jesus wanted to meet this challenge head on. So we read... "*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.*

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?"

Someone pointed out that technically speaking, Jesus didn't break the Sabbath Law with this man, because he *never even touched him!* He simply told him, 'stretch out your hand'. And when he did, it was completely healed.

The passage ends with this: "*the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus.*"

A few weeks ago I showed a short video entitled 'Judged'. A group of real people sharing their true stories about how they felt rejected, condemned in their churches because of certain struggles that happened in their lives... the churches couldn't handle

New Endings

these things, and they rejected them. Well, instead of telling you about it, let's just look at it again...

** [video... judged] 4:27

Do you see why this came back to me in the context of this passage? Every *one* of these eight people experienced judgement, but - the people who were doing the judging all felt that they were (in a context for today) *keeping the law*. In their opinion, their belief was that they were upholding righteousness.

I wonder if Jesus would go to that pastor who asked the woman to leave his church because she had a child and wasn't married, or confront that pastor who told the 5 year old boy that he was "going to hell" because he did something that he thought would make his grandmother happy... "Have you ever even read... this book?" How could you miss the point so badly?

But you know, it happens, doesn't it? We get so focused on ourselves and on our own comfort level, so scared of people who see some things differently than we do, or who (frankly) aren't as mature as maybe we are in the faith - that we lash out in anger, and rejection. Then we mentally build up our cases against these people to justify our actions. We see people as pawns - just like the Pharisees did, they're just part of our 'argument'. And ultimately... in these circumstances we oppose Jesus and what he came to do.

There is an outrageous statement that I want to make here... and it's outrageous because I know that it can be taken wrong, and it can be abused. I know all this... but I'm going to say it anyway! And trust you to sort it out.

When Jesus makes his claim here to be "Lord of the Sabbath" and by extension, "Lord over all the Law", *he* became the final authority on all things moral... he became the last word, the highest standard, the decisive ground in every moral argument. And what does he say to us? "**Here's my commandment:**

New Endings

**** "Love one another as I have loved you."** The Law of love trumps the Laws of Moses... it trumps the laws of the church, (written and unwritten). When we ask, "What would Jesus do" in a situation, aren't we asking, "What is the loving response here?" And, clearly, we will often conclude that the loving response has to be ... grace. Compassion. Sacrifice. Healing. Mercy. Because that's how Jesus loved. And he told us to do the same.

Mark Gali, who wrote the book "Not A Fan", in an interview about that book in Christianity Today, quotes Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann's journal:

**** "One can love religion like anything else in life: sports, science, stamp collecting. One can love it for its own sake without relation to God or the world or life. Religion fascinates; it is entertaining. It has everything that is sought after by a certain type of person: aesthetics, mystery, the sacred, a feeling of one's importance and exclusive depth, etc. That kind of religion is not necessarily faith."**

Faith is much deeper than simply something we 'do'. It touches on and makes us who we *are*. It changes who we are. And faith recognizes that the final word has been given to us in Jesus. faith focuses our eyes on him.

**** (blank) closing prayer**

(5:30 & 9:30)

As we prepare to come to the Table of Grace, and celebrate the Love that gave its all for us, let's join in singing as a song of invitation "Draw Me Near". Our hope is in knowing that the door to God is open, not because we have made ourselves righteous, but because Jesus has done that for us. Draw us near, O God...