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Luke 6:1-11

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Bernard Bell

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LORD OF THE SABBATH

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

Today is Sunday. For most people here in California it is a day for doing things: for playing, going to the beach, watching the game, taking kids to their games, working on the house or in the yard. Many of you here in this service are thinking about what you will do the rest of the day. But in many states it is still a day for not doing things. Blue laws continue to prohibit certain activities on Sundays: buying alcohol, shopping for a car, hunting. These laws don't always make sense, especially to us here in California who are used to unencumbered Sundays. In Indiana, for example, you can't buy wine at a grocery store on Sunday, but you can buy it at a winery. In Pennsylvania, hunting is not permitted on Sunday, except for crows and coyotes.

Some other countries take a much stricter attitude to Sunday. Among strict churches in Scotland the day is still widely called the Sabbath. The attitude to the Sabbath is reflected in the movie *Chariots of Fire*, in which Eric Liddle says, "Sabbath is not a day for playing football, is it?" Sabbath is a day for not doing things. Last August I spent three weeks in Scotland, two of them in the west where Sabbath observance is still strong among churches. Prior to going I used the web to try to find a local church. I was surprised to find that one denomination even closes its web site on the Sabbath: "in recognition of the observance of the Lord's day."

Sabbath behavior was a controversial topic in Jesus' day as well. Today we consider two controversies between him and the Pharisees over what was lawful and not lawful on the Sabbath.

I. Working on the Sabbath (6:1-5)

On a Sabbath, while he was going through the grainfields, his disciples plucked and ate some heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands. But some of the Pharisees said, "Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?" And Jesus answered them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those with him?" And he said to them, "The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath." (6:1-5 ESV)

As Jesus was walking along his disciples grew a little hungry. Not having any Clif bars with them, they picked some ears of grain to eat, rubbing away the outer husk to get to the edible kernel. Their behavior did not go unnoticed: some Pharisees noticed. Probably they went out of their way to notice, shadowing Jesus wherever he went, and observing all that he was doing. These Pharisees didn't like what they had seen, and so they asked, "Why are you doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" There was nothing wrong with the act itself. The disciples weren't stealing; they weren't shoplifting someone's field. The Law (Torah) specifically allowed them to do this:

"If you go into your neighbor's vineyard, you may eat your fill of grapes, as many as you wish, but you shall not put any in

your bag. If you go into your neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor's standing grain." (Deut 23:24-25)

The disciples' action was lawful, but they were doing this on the Sabbath, which the Pharisees considered to be unlawful. What is lawful and not lawful on the Sabbath? This question echoes through our passage, being asked in each of the two stories (6:2, 9). Sabbath observance was a core part of Israel's identity. It is one of the Ten Commandments:

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (Exod 20:8-11)

The Sabbath was also a sign for Israel:

"Above all you shall keep my Sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the LORD, sanctify you. You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death. Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed." (Exod 31:13-17)

On the seventh day God rested and was refreshed. He invited Israel to do likewise; he invited Israel to imitate him.

Throughout most of Israel's history the Sabbath was characterized more by neglect than by observance. This was true also of Torah, the whole body of law which God had given Israel to show how to live in covenant with him. But Israel broke covenant and God sent her into exile so she could come to her senses. In exile a new profession emerged: scribes such as Ezra who devoted themselves to studying Torah. In the early second century BC, at a time when Jewish leadership was enamored with Hellenistic culture, the Pharisees developed. The name means "separated ones." These separatists separated themselves from religious compromisers.

Pharisees have a bad reputation, but that was not so at the time of Jesus. These were people who were serious about following God; they were pious and devout, held in high regard by the people. They understood that God had given the Torah to Israel as a gift, to show

how to walk with him, how to be in fellowship with him, how to be like him. In the Torah they counted 613 commandments. This was the written Law, given by God on Mt Sinai and written down by Moses. So seriously did they take the Torah that they built a fence around it to protect it. The fence consisted of additional laws, the oral Law, which they believed was also given by God on Mt Sinai, but handed down verbally through the generations until it was finally written down around AD 200 as the Mishnah. This oral law they called *halakah*, “walking,” for it governed their daily behavior, how they walked through life. This oral law is mentioned several times in the gospels as “the traditions of the elders” and it lies behind many of the encounters between Jesus and the Pharisees.

Later Luke records a lawyer, an expert in the Torah, who tried to put Jesus to the test. Jesus asked him a probing question:

“What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” (10:26)

This question underlies every encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees: “How do you read the Torah?”

It is a common misperception that the Pharisees were trying to earn their salvation by keeping Torah. That’s not the case. Torah-observance wasn’t about justification: they were God’s people by virtue of being children of Abraham, circumcised on the eighth day with the sign of the Abrahamic covenant. Torah observance was about sanctification: how to be holy, how to be like God. At the heart of the Torah lay the Lord’s oft-repeated command, “Be holy as I am holy.” Torah showed the Jews how God expected them to live, and the oral law gave them more specific direction for implementing Torah in daily life. As Tevye says in *Fiddler on the Roof*: “Because of our traditions everyone of us knows who he is and what God expects him to do.”

Sabbath observance was one of the most important ways of being like God: he worked six days and then rested; so should Israel. The Torah says simply, “Do not work on the Sabbath.” The oral law, as written down in the Mishnah, specifies 39 forms of work that are prohibited on the Sabbath. The disciples managed to break several of these prohibitions: reaping, threshing, winnowing. Furthermore, they had prepared their food on the Sabbath, which they should have done the previous day.

This attitude to the Law survives today in Orthodox Judaism. Those of you who have visited Israel have probably encountered Sabbath elevators, which automatically stop at each floor without anyone having to press a button.

Another major area of Sabbath prohibition concerns the carrying of burdens. The Torah says, “let no one go out of his place on the seventh day” to collect manna (Exod 16:29), and “the people were restrained from bringing” because more than enough had been contributed for the tabernacle (Exod 36:7). From these two statements the rabbis developed the prohibition on transferring a burden between domains, including it in the list of 39 activities prohibited on the Sabbath. A burden is anything carried, even the kleenex tissue in your pocket. But rabbis have come up with a way to ease the burden of this burden: a Jewish community can designate a boundary which serves to create, for the duration of Sabbath, a symbolic walled courtyard encompassing a single domain within which the transfer of burdens is permitted. This boundary is called an *eruv*. Within its boundaries observant Jews can carry their burdens between home and synagogue, be that burden their keys, their prayer book or their baby.

In 2007, after eight years of contentious debate, an *eruv* was designated around Palo Alto. This continuous boundary stretches 13 miles, encompassing nearly all of the city. Yesterday I went looking for it. The easiest sections to find were the “gateways” that allow roads to pass through the boundary. I found several of these gateways near the VA Hospital on Foothill Expressway. Each gateway consisted of two tall metal posts, one either side of the road, with a thin wire strung between their tops. This wire carried the boundary from one side of the road to the other. The entire boundary has to be checked each week to ensure its integrity, so that the carrying of burdens on Sabbath can be deemed lawful, not unlawful.

This was the sort of world Jesus had entered. He was asking, “What is written in the Torah? How do you read it?” The Pharisees and scribes were asking, “Why do you do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” How would Jesus respond to the charge of unlawful work? How did he read Torah?

As so often Jesus answered the Pharisees’ question with another question, pointing them to their own Scriptures and to a story about David (1 Sam 21:1-6). “Have you not read?” Of course they had read! They had read that when David fled from Saul he came to Nob and to Ahimelech the priest. Since David and his men were hungry, he asked Ahimelech for any food he had on hand. The only bread available was holy bread, the Bread of the Presence: the twelve loaves of shewbread that were placed in the tabernacle representing the twelve tribes of Israel before God. Each Sabbath they were replaced and the priests were allowed to eat the old bread. Assured by David that he and his men were on a holy expedition, Ahimelech gave him the holy bread to eat, even though it was not lawful for any but the priests to eat. The Scriptures do not rebuke David for this unlawful act, nor did Jesus, nor, evidently, did the Pharisees.

What was Jesus’ point? He was implicitly using an *a fortiori* argument, what the rabbis called *qal wahomer* (light and heavy). If it was permissible for David and his men to do something that was technically unlawful, how much more so for Jesus and his men. Jesus was implying that he and his men were greater than David and his men. David was no ordinary man. He was already the anointed king, though he had not yet taken his throne. Similarly, Jesus was now the anointed king, anointed after his baptism, and he too had not yet taken his throne. David had his band of men; Jesus had his men. So much greater was Jesus than David that he described himself as the bridegroom with his attendants.

Jesus followed the story with the punch line: “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” The Sabbath was a precious gift from God to mankind, for mankind’s benefit. As Mark adds, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (2:27). The Sabbath was a gift by God to Israel. God called Israel to live a different life from the other nations. On the Sabbath they lived a still more different life. The Sabbath was a gift with a future. The rabbis understood it to be a token of eternity, “a this-worldly moment that bespeaks eternity.”¹ It was a day with a future, a day with an eschatology. One day a week God invited Israel to live a day of the future in the present.

Now the Son of Man was here. To be *a* son of man means that one is truly human. But Jesus called himself *the* Son of Man, a reference to Daniel 7. In a vision Daniel saw the world ruled by a series of tyrannical beastly rulers, but then saw “one like a son of man” come on the clouds into the presence of the Ancient of Days, to be given the eternal kingdom. Not only was the true human present, but he was also the true ruler of God’s kingdom. In Jesus the age to come had

arrived! The age of which the Sabbath was a foretaste was here! The Sabbath is not lord of Jesus, but Jesus as the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. When the Lord of the Sabbath appears, Sabbath bows in submission. Sabbath gives way to its Master, its Lord.

2. Healing on the Sabbath (6:6-11)

On another Sabbath, he entered the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was withered. And the scribes and the Pharisees watched him, to see whether he would heal on the Sabbath, so that they might find a reason to accuse him. But he knew their thoughts, and he said to the man with the withered hand, "Come and stand here." And he rose and stood there. And Jesus said to them, "I ask you, is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?" And after looking around at them all he said to him, "Stretch out your hand." And he did so, and his hand was restored. But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus. (6:6-11)

On another Sabbath, Jesus went to the synagogue, perhaps the one in Capernaum. As on other occasions he was invited to teach. There was great tension in the air, for present was a man with a withered right arm. Why was he there? It is quite likely he had been planted there by the Pharisees, who then watched Jesus intently to see what he would do. These Pharisees were in an interesting position. Supposedly they would not have wanted Jesus to desecrate the sanctity of the day, for that would have repercussions on all Israel. But they really did want Jesus to heal, so that they could accuse him of unlawful activity. They were in an interesting ethical dilemma! They didn't care about the sick man: whether he should be set free from his burden that day was irrelevant. Jesus knew their thoughts, the machinations of their minds, their convoluted thinking. This would not have been difficult: their intent must have been evident to everyone present.

Knowing their thoughts, Jesus did something that was surely provocative: he told the man to get up and stand in the middle. Imagine this man's discomfort. He was in the middle of a hostile crowd. Perhaps he could sense the tension, could sense that the Pharisees who held the power were hostile to Jesus and to himself. Imagine the Pharisees. They were on the edge of their seats, watching intently, probably with growing excitement: "He's going to do it! Jesus is going to heal the man! We've got him!" The man stood there in the middle as Exhibit A, while Jesus asked, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath?" Again it comes back to the question, "What is written in the Torah? How do you read it?" Again the Pharisees were probably thinking, "He's playing right into our hands! He's going to do what is unlawful. We've really got him this time!"

Jesus continued the question: "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?" What a masterful reply. Jesus had turned the tables on the Pharisees. Silence! There was no reply. What reply could the Pharisees possibly give?

Jesus looked around the congregation. What was he thinking as he looked at everyone there? Mark tells us: it was "with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart" (Mark 3:5). Into the silence Jesus spoke a simple command, "Stretch out your hand." The man now had a choice. It had been a long time since he had been able to stretch out his withered hand. Years ago I broke my elbow. Even though the orthopedic surgeon employed an aggressive rehabilitation program, it was a long painful process for me to regain the ability to stretch

out my arm again. Jesus was asking this man to do something that seemed impossible, something that was beyond his hope. The man had to have faith: faith in who Jesus was, faith that Jesus could heal him, faith in the power of his word, faith that was stronger than the hostility of the Pharisees, faith that was stronger than all the tradition that encumbered Israel. The man had faith. He responded in faith, doing as Jesus said. He stretched out his hand, and as he did so it was restored.

The Pharisees were now in a quandary. The man was healed, just as they had hoped. But Jesus hadn't done any work! He hadn't touched the man. He hadn't made any mud with his saliva to spread on the man, as he did in other healing miracles. And the man hadn't done any work. The only thing he had done was to stretch out his hand, scarcely an act that could be considered work. So who had done the work? It was the word of Jesus that had done the work! But speaking on the Sabbath was not on the Pharisees' list of 39 prohibited activities; it was not unlawful.

These two Sabbath controversies are the last in a string of five controversies between Jesus and the Pharisees. The Pharisees had already been upset that Jesus claimed to have authority on earth to forgive sins (5:24), and that he ate with tax collectors and sinner (5:30). People were puzzled that he didn't fast regularly with his disciples, like the Pharisees did (5:33). Now these two Sabbath controversies were the final straw! The simmering controversy boiled over. The Pharisees were out of their minds with fury. They viewed Jesus as such a threat to their understanding of how to live life that they began discussing what they might do to him. They obviously did not intend to do good to him. This drips in irony. On a Sabbath day, as Jesus was doing good and saving life, on that very same Sabbath day, the Pharisees, the strict Sabbatharians, were plotting how to do harm, how to destroy life. How could that be lawful on any day, let alone on the Sabbath?

The real issue in these two stories is not distinguishing lawful from unlawful activity on the Sabbath. The real issue is the identity of Jesus. Who is this man? What is the relationship of Jesus to the Sabbath, to the Torah, to the temple? These are the issues at the heart of all five controversies.

For Israel the spatial meeting point between heaven and earth was the temple; this was where God met with his people. But with Jesus present on earth the meeting point between heaven and earth, where God met with his people, was Jesus himself. The temple was the place for the forgiveness of sins, but Jesus announced to the paralytic lowered through the roof, "your sins are forgiven you" (5:21). Jesus had replaced the priests in the temple as the locus for the forgiveness of sins. When the Pharisees muttered the charge of blasphemy, Jesus said, "The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." The kingdom of God and its rightful ruler, the Son of Man, were here. The Messianic banquet had begun, as Jesus dined with tax collectors and sinners. The bridegroom was present with his attendants, already on their way to the wedding. The future had arrived. But the Pharisees refused to welcome it. They refused to welcome Jesus. They refused to come to God.

Simeon had told Mary, as he held the baby Jesus in his arms,

"Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed...so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed." (Luke 2:34-35)

The image is of a stone laid down. The leper, the paralytic lowered through the roof, Levi, and now the man with the withered hand,

had been raised up. They found Jesus to be the cornerstone to new life. But the Pharisees found him to be a stumbling stone over which they tripped.

Sabbath rest is indeed a time for not carrying burdens. God longs that we surrender the burdens which encumber us. He longs that we imitate him by entering into rest. But the place for laying down our burdens is no longer the Sabbath. Nor do we need to resort to the device of designating an *eruv* around our neighborhood so we can keep carrying our burdens even on the Sabbath. Instead, Jesus invites us to bring our burdens to him and lay them at his feet. Matthew precedes his account of these two Sabbath controversies with these familiar words:

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matt 11:28-30)

The Sabbath was a token of eternity, a foretaste of the future. That future has arrived in Jesus. Come to Jesus and find rest for your weary soul.

Jesus, I am resting, resting
 In the joy of what Thou art;
 I am finding out the greatness
 Of Thy loving heart.
 Thou hast bid me gaze upon Thee,
 And Thy beauty fills my soul,
 For by Thy transforming power,
 Thou hast made me whole.

1. Jacob Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 60.

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