

“Lord of the Sabbath,” Luke 6:1-11 (Fifth Sunday in Lent, April 7, 2019)

On a Sabbath, while he was going through the grainfields, his disciples plucked and ate some heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands. ² But some of the Pharisees said, “Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?” ³ And Jesus answered them, “Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: ⁴ 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?” ⁵ And he said to them, “The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.”

⁶ On another Sabbath, he entered the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was withered. ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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?” ¹⁰ And after looking around at them all he said to him, “Stretch out your hand.” And he did so, and his hand was restored. ¹¹ But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.

PRAY

We are working our way through the gospel of Luke on Sundays at Grace leading up to Easter, and when I planned out my preaching last fall I was sure I knew what the subject of this sermon would be. I was certain I was going to be preaching on the Sabbath.

So I had this great sermon planned on what the Sabbath was in the old covenant and how we observe it now in the new, I had exhortations on the difficulty of rest in the modern world, the importance of rest, and some ideas about how to go about it. I was all excited about it.

But then last week I sat down and I actually studied at the verses I had assigned myself for today, and I realized that the Sabbath is only incidental to the main point. It’s trivial compared to the main point (not that the Sabbath itself is trivial, it just isn’t the point of this passage).

The main point of this story, the reason Luke, Matthew, and Mark all include it in their gospels, is not the goodness of Sabbath rest but the incredible danger of legalism. Jesus uses the Sabbath as an occasion to confront the Pharisees, the religious leaders of his day, about their legalism.

Legalism is the unbiblical separation of a loving God from his rules for living, and I want to show you two things about it and then we’ll take the Lord’s Supper: first, the heart of legalism. Second, the cure for legalism.

First, the heart of legalism. Let’s read verses 1-2: “On a Sabbath, while he was going through the grainfields, his disciples plucked and ate some heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands. ² But some of the Pharisees said, ‘Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?’”

The significance of the disciples picking and eating the heads of grain is lost on us for a couple of reasons. First, if we did this, if we walked through a field and picked grain and put it in our mouths, we would do it because it is a **novelty**. “Look, it’s a field. And look, I can pick this grain and eat it. That’s kind of neat. I think I’ll try some.”

This wasn’t a **novelty** for them. It was **a necessity**. The disciples were actually hungry. That’s why they ate the grain. In the ancient world, most people most of the time only had bread to eat. They occasionally had vegetables and fruit, and rarely had meat.

But when you were on the move you might not have access to any bread at all. Of course, they had no grocery stores or convenience stores. Yet they needed their two thousand calories a day just like we do. So they ate raw grain. **This was a necessity for the disciples, not a novelty.** They were sincerely hungry. Yet look at the Pharisees. They do not care whether or not the disciples are suffering, whether they might help them find a meal. The disciples can starve for all they care. They only want to point out a possible violation of the Sabbath.

Second, the first century rabbinic interpretations of the law (called the *halakhah*) said that there were 39 types of work that were forbidden on the Sabbath. The Sabbath was and still is for Jewish people from sundown Friday until sundown Saturday. God modeled the Sabbath by creating the heavens and the earth in six days and resting on the seventh (you can read about that in Genesis 1-2), and then he formally instituted it in the law of Moses (Exodus 20).

Picking grain was on the list of forbidden Sabbath activities in the *halakhah*. **But this was not in the law of Moses**, nothing in the Bible itself mandated this. It was the result of an interpretation.

Now, verses 6-7: “On another Sabbath, he entered the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was withered. ⁷ 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.”

Again, the Pharisees see human suffering. They see a man with a withered, atrophied hand. Some kind of injury or birth defect or both had rendered one of his hands useless and deformed. But they don’t care. They evidently know Jesus has the ability to heal the man, as they watch to see if Jesus will do it. But they don’t advocate for the man. They don’t bring him to Jesus to alleviate his suffering. They are only concerned with preserving the Sabbath.

However, not even the *halakhah* said a miracle could not be performed on the Sabbath. Yet when Jesus healed the man we read in verse 11, “But the [Pharisees] were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.” Luke 6:11. Mark in his account makes it clear what it is they want to do to Jesus. “The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.” Mark 3:6.

Why were the Pharisees so angry? What was it about the Sabbath that set them off? The Pharisees built their entire lives around keeping not so much the law of God, but their interpretation of the law of God found in the *halakhah*. The *halakhah* had been designed so that, with enough effort, any individual could keep all the rules for living. With enough commitment,

you could please God and fulfill your obligations to society all by yourself. You could be good and noble and admirable *without anyone's help*.

Because they separated the law of God from the character of God, because they separated his concern for people from his rules for living, the Pharisees were legalists. And at the heart of legalism you'll always find **self-righteousness**. When you're self-righteous, ***you're in control***. ***As long as you can play the game well, you call the shots in life, and it feels good to be able to call the shots.***

But then Jesus comes along and flaunts their *halakhah*. He pays it no attention whatsoever, especially when it comes to Sabbath observance. In fact, just about every time we read about the Sabbath in one of the four gospels (the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), it's because Jesus is picking a fight with the Pharisees over their interpretation of the law. He pokes them in the eye regarding the *halakhah*, and the Pharisees are murderously angry about it **because by doing so he is threatening their legalistic self-righteousness**.

How does this play out today? Human nature has not changed over the last two thousand years and just like the Pharisees we long to be self-righteous. We can still see this in conservative, religious communities where when people don't keep the rules they are shunned and shamed for their norm violations, and those doing the shunning and shaming feel very satisfied about themselves. But we also see this in liberal, irreligious communities. Every time a public figure, such as a politician, business person, or artist, says something today that is deemed politically incorrect or insensitive, a feeding frenzy begins on social media. What's happening? The liberal Pharisees have come out in force to denounce the transgression of their modern-day *halakhah* and shame the wrongdoer until he or she repents, retracts, and resigns. It's self-righteousness, and all those casting stones at the transgressor feel so good because ***they are in control***. ***They can play the game well and call the shots in their lives, but the violators deserve what's coming to them.***

How about for us at Grace Bible? What are some markers of legalism and self-righteousness we can look for in our own lives? I'll give you two. *First*, you can know legalism has taken root in your heart when you walk around constantly frustrated because you think the people around you aren't pulling their weight.

A great illustration of this is from the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15. A certain man had two sons, the younger of which demanded his inheritance from his father before the father's death. He left and blew it all in a year or two on wild living, leaving him poor and hungry. But then he came to his senses and thought, "How many of my father's servants have plenty of food to eat. I know what I'll do. I'll go back to him and say, 'I'm am so sorry for what I've done. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Just let me be a servant in your house and I'll be content.'" He goes back to the father, but the father welcomes him back as a son, not a servant.

Then the older brother hears about this. He had been the obedient son his entire life. He had kept all the rules. Now, though, he is furious at his father and says, "Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat,

that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!” Luke 15:29b-30.

The older brother is furious, because he’s kept all the rules and pulled his weight but now his punk kid brother is being let off the hook. And he’s even more furious at his father for letting it happen.

If you look at the people you live with and you work with, or if you look at a certain class of people in society, and you are angry and bitter toward them because in your estimation they are not pulling their weight, and if you are especially angry at those who, like Jesus, like the father in the parable, are clearly pulling their weight but aren’t angry like you at those who aren’t, then legalism has taken root in your heart. **You’re in control, you’re calling the shots, you’re getting stuff done, and you want the violators to get what they’ve got coming to them!**

A second marker of legalism can be seen when you consistently find you can’t care for people because you’re too busy with your own projects. A good example of this can be found in the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10. A certain man traveling from Jerusalem down to Jericho fell into the hands of robbers, and they almost killed him. Soon after the attack, both a priest and a Levite, religious leaders, scrupulous men, came to the exact spot on the road where the man lay wallowing in his own blood. But they passed by on the other side.

How could they do that? Well, they each had to get to Jericho for an important meeting and they couldn’t be late. They had an agenda they had to keep. Plus, if the man died on them, they would become ceremonially unclean and they couldn’t go to the temple for worship for at least a week. The law said that in Numbers 19, and these two men were determined not to let that happen to them. So, just to be safe, they left him there to die.

Do you find that you are constantly bothered by people? That people and their needs and concerns are constantly getting in the way of your important projects, and it leaves you simmering in a perpetual anger? Then legalism has taken root in your heart.

But Jesus says, “Your *halakhah* might keep you from showing compassion to the people around you, by my law never will.”

Second, the cure for legalism. Let’s look back at verse 2. The Pharisees confront Jesus about the disciples picking heads of grain on the Sabbath. Jesus doesn’t reply, “You’re right, I’m sorry. I’ll make sure they behave in the future.” But you wouldn’t expect him to say that.

What you would expect is that the text would skip from verse 2 to verse 5, that in reply Jesus would simply say, “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” In other words, you’d expect Jesus to simply say, “Don’t give me your man-made rules, your *halakhah*. It isn’t binding on me. I am the Lord of the Sabbath.” But he doesn’t. He says something else first.

“And Jesus answered them, ‘Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: ⁴ 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?”
Luke 6:3-4. What in the world is that about?

Whenever you see Jesus say something that seems like a total *non sequitur*, something that seems to come out of nowhere, especially when he says it to the Pharisees, pay attention. It may not make sense to you, but those statements made perfect sense to them because it infuriated them. You'll miss the whole point of the passage if you don't force yourself to understand.

Jesus is referring to an incident recorded in 1 Samuel 20 and 21. David, the second king of Israel, is on the run from Saul, the first king of Israel. Saul is out to kill David, because he knows David will take over from him.

David flees to the little town of Nob outside Jerusalem. There the tabernacle, the portable temple of that day, is set up and **on the Sabbath day** he finds there Ahimelech the priest working in it. David lies to Ahimelech and says, “I am on an urgent, secret mission from the king, I had to leave in a hurry, and I need some food. Do you have any?” Ahimelech says, “All I have is the bread of the presence.” This was the shewbread, the bread devoted to the Lord and set in the tabernacle every Sabbath day, right in front of the ark of the covenant, and we read in Leviticus 24 that it was holy to the Lord and **only the priests could eat it in a holy place**. David was not a priest. But we read that nevertheless Ahimelech gave the bread of the presence to David and he ate it.

A lot of commentators, in fact all the ones I read last week, say the reason Jesus brought up this incident with the Pharisees was because he wanted to say, “See, the law of God can be set aside in a pinch, when there is a legitimate need. David could eat the shewbread, my disciples can pick heads of grain, and I can heal on the Sabbath.”

Here's the problem with that view: ***Jesus and his disciples did not break the law of God, while David and Ahimelech did.*** Nowhere in the Bible does it say that what David and Ahimelech did was ok. Jesus clearly says it was “not lawful.” It wasn't ok for them to do that. Jesus is not condoning their actions. If Jesus is merely trying to justify his actions, it makes no sense for him to bring up that story from the Old Testament. He would be comparing apples and oranges.

So why did Jesus bring it up with the Pharisees? Because to the Pharisees, David was the ultimate Israelite. He was their hero. No one was righteous like David. No one was as observant as David. David wrote the prayer book of the Bible, the book of Psalms. But Jesus wants to point out that David broke the Sabbath regulations and the temple regulations by eating the shewbread on the last day of the week.

Jesus is telling the Pharisees, “If you say I'm breaking the Sabbath, fine. Say that. But then you also have to admit that David, your hero, broke the Sabbath, too. And if David, the Israelite above all Israelites, was not righteous before the Lord, what chance do you Pharisees have?”

Jesus told that story not because he needed to defend himself. Jesus never defended himself. He was perfect; he had no need. **Jesus told that story because he wanted to break the Pharisees' legalism and sense of self-righteousness.**

Jesus did not break their self-righteousness because he hated the Pharisees; he broke it because he loved them. He wanted them to see their problem and the problem with the world was not something that could be solved with behavior modification and better Sabbath keeping.

Our problem is that we are born with hearts that actually do not want anything to do with God. Our problem is that we are in rebellion against God. At a heart level we enjoy our legalism because, like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son, we can say to God, “Look, I’ve slaved away for you for years. Now you owe me.” Legalists don’t want the God of the Bible in our lives. We rebel against him. We want someone we can pay off by keeping a few rules to get the life we want.

Now we don’t feel self-righteous in our culture because of Sabbath observance. It’s other things for us. Some of us are proud of our work ethic, because we get things done and people can count on us (unlike some other people we could name). Others of us are very ethical, morally upright people, and there are certain things we would never do (unlike some other people we know), and it makes us feel superior. Others are tolerant, open-minded people, and we’re not at all judgmental (like these other types of people we know). We are proud of how tolerant we are of all people, except those intolerant people, we can’t tolerate them. Because we’ve done all that we think God owes us.

But because Jesus loves you he will do something in your life, he will come in and shatter your sense of self-righteousness and bring you to your senses so you will say, “I don’t just need better behavior. **I need a new heart. I need a new heart that wants what God wants all the time (not just for what he can get me) and never feels superior to other people.**”

One of my favorite stories of change coming over a legalistic heart comes from the wonderful little movie *Chocolat*. It’s set in a small conservative, Catholic village in France in 1959. The mayor of the village is a devout man who takes his Catholic faith seriously, and he has been the one whose held the village together through hard times. He’s done a lot of good, but he also has to be in control. He must call all the shots in the village. He feels very good and sure of himself.

Just as the Lenten season begins a woman named Vianne moves into town and opens a chocolatier, a chocolate shop. At first all the villagers view her suspiciously, but over the course of several weeks she befriends more and more of them, they really enjoy her chocolate, and this drab little village starts to show signs of life for the first time since before the war.

But the mayor believes Lent is a time for abstinence and participating in the sufferings of Christ, so he refuses to patronize the chocolatier and a public feud begins between the two. He tries to keep the villagers away during Lent. Yet more and more of them are won over by Vianne and her sweets, so the mayor grows angrier and angrier. He is convinced they are being led away from the one true faith. On the Saturday night before Easter he breaks into the store and begins to smash all the chocolate displays to pieces.

But as he's destroying the place, a little fleck of chocolate lands on his lip. He tastes it, and it's so good and he hasn't had sugar in so long that he begins to run through the shop and cram his mouth with chocolate, so much so that he passes out in the window of the shop.

Easter morning dawns, and Vianne finds him the window and wakes him up. He looks at her in horror. His legalism and self-righteousness are shattered. Vianne can destroy him in the village. If she's a legalist he's dead. She can reveal his hypocrisy and ruin him. **She's in control; she can call the shots!** But Vianne only replies, "I won't tell a soul." What happened? She showed him mercy. He didn't deserve it. He had violated all his own rules, but he received mercy anyway *and from that moment on he's a changed man.*

Friends, Christianity is not primarily about sacrificing for the Lord. That's pagan religion, not Christianity. Christianity is about knowing you have received mercy from God through Jesus Christ, and out of gratitude turning and showing mercy to others, **and nothing shatters a legalistic heart like knowing that.** I'm sure that's why in Matthew's account of this event, we read that Jesus says to the Pharisees, "And if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless." Matthew 12:7.

Friends, in Jesus Christ God has had mercy on you. If he were a legalist you'd be toast, but Jesus lived the life you were supposed to live, and on the cross he died the death you were supposed to die. But now if you trust Jesus, he will give you the righteousness you so desperately need. Not a righteous you can make for yourself, but the perfect righteousness only God can give.

Yet make no mistake: if you receive this righteousness through the mercy of Jesus it will change you. It will be hard. C.S. Lewis explains the transformation this righteousness works in us like this: "Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself."

On October 23, 1740, in Middletown, Connecticut, a farmer named Nathan Cole left his field to hear the great evangelist George Whitefield preach. Thousands would flock to hear Whitefield in those days. Mr. Cole was a religious man. He was a hard worker, a provider, a man of his word. He considered himself a good man, but his encounter with George Whitefield changed all that. Later on Mr. Cole wrote an account of that day, and at the conclusion he said, "[M]y hearing him preach gave me a heart wound, and by God's blessing my old foundation was broken up, and I saw that my righteousness would not save me." Does that, in light of what we've taught today, make any sense to you? Does it reflect what's happening in your heart right now? Then come and welcome to the Lord's Table. AMEN