

Lord of the Sabbath

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[0 : 00] All right, as we come to the Word of God this morning, we're continuing on. The story of Jesus is told by Luke. If you have your Bible with you, you can open it up to Luke.

And we are just getting into chapter 6. Last Sunday we heard about how the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were accusing Jesus and his disciples of being immoral, gluttons, and drunkards.

After they went to a party hosted by Levi, the self-righteous Pharisees asked Jesus, How come you and your disciples are not fasting like we are?

And we heard Jesus explain how fasting was inappropriate because this was a time for feasting and celebration. God is doing something new and wonderful. The bridegroom is here. He used a wedding analogy.

And so the old way of things, which routine fasting was part of, must give way to the new way of things, to the celebration, to the feast which Jesus is bringing in.

[1 : 04] Well, next Luke wants to tell us about another issue where Jesus found himself at odds with the Pharisees. And it's the challenging issue of the Sabbath and keeping the Sabbath.

Luke starts by telling us about a memorable incident. In chapter 6, verse 1, 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? Now, some of you might be quite familiar with the whole idea of the Sabbath, if you've read through the Bible or heard sermons or teaching on it.

But for some of you, this may be altogether unfamiliar. It may be new. So we're going to just unpack it a little bit. What is the Sabbath? The word Sabbath comes from the Hebrew word meaning to rest or to cease.

And it's first mentioned in the Bible all the way back in the days of Moses. And the Exodus. God instructed the children of Israel in those days to cease from their work and rest on the seventh day of every week.

[2 : 22] And so the seventh day of the week came to be called the Sabbath day. It's also worth mentioning that there were some other Sabbath days that were connected with some of the annual festivals and remembrances.

So it's not just the weekly Sabbath, but the weekly one is the main one that's in view in our passage today. Keeping the Sabbath day holy or special was one of the ten commandments that God gave the Israelites at Mount Sinai.

Back in Exodus chapter 20, God said this. He said, Remember the Sabbath day by keeping 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, neither you nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns.

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.

[3 : 37] And so for thousands of years since then, it was the practice of faithful Jews to abstain from work and rest on the seventh day of the week. And for Jews back then, days were counted from sunset to sunset.

And so for the purpose of the Sabbath, Jews even still today in Israel mark it from sunset to sunset. And so technically speaking, the seventh day of the week, the Sabbath goes from Friday at sundown to Saturday at sundown.

It was commanded by God to be a full 24 hours of ceasing from regular work and of resting to the Lord. It's also worth mentioning here that it's the only ceremonial or ritual commandment of the Ten Commandments.

The other nine have to do with how they were to relate to God, how they were to relate to one another, to their fellow man. But this one has to do with how they were to live differently on a particular day of the week.

As we go through the story of Israel in the Old Testament, there's a number of notable instances in which the Israelites blatantly disregarded God's commandment regarding the Sabbath.

[4 : 56] And as you can imagine, that angered God. I mean, how do you feel when, for those of you who are parents, your child knows full well what you ask them to do, and yet they do the very opposite in defiance.

Much later in the story of Israel, this blatant defiance is cited as one of the reasons for why God brought punishment on the people of Israel. They ignored the commandment regarding the Sabbath, and they treated it like it was just one of all the other days among many of the other wicked things that they did.

And so God brought disaster on them and sent them into captivity to Babylon. But now, centuries later, the Jews are back in their land. The cities have been rebuilt.

The temple of God has been rebuilt in Jerusalem. And now, many of the Jews have gone too far the other way. Instead of blatant disregard for the Sabbath, there's now this hyper-legalistic obsession with rule-keeping regarding the Sabbath.

It's almost as if they wanted to ensure that they never went back to profaning the Sabbath like their forefathers did. And so they incorporated all these extra-religious rules that in a sense erect a fence around the commandment so that you can't even get close to breaking the commandment.

[6 : 23] We want to ensure nobody ever breaks it again. John MacArthur, a preacher from the States and pastor, in one of his commentaries has described really well what this kind of Sabbath-keeping had become in the days of Jesus.

and so I'm just going to actually quote a longer passage from one of his sermons because it's just so well-written. He writes, over the ensuing 15 centuries from the time of Moses to the ministry of Jesus, the Sabbath accumulated a vast number of additional rabbinic rules and restrictions which made observing the seventh day an overpowering burden.

No less than 24 chapters of the Talmud the central text of rabbinic Judaism focus on Sabbath regulations meticulously detailing the almost innumerable specifics of what constituted acceptable behavior.

Almost no area of life was spared from the Sabbath regulations of the rabbis. There were laws about wine, honey, milk, spitting, writing, and getting dirt off of clothes.

Anything that might be contrived as work was forbidden. Thus, on a Sabbath, scribes could not carry their pens, tailors their needles, or students their books.

[7 : 53] To do so might tempt them to work on the Sabbath. For that matter, carrying anything heavier than a dried fig was forbidden. And if the object in question had been picked up in a public place, it could only be set down in a private place.

If the object were tossed into the air, it had to be caught with the same hand. To catch it with the other hand was constituted as work, and therefore would be a violation of the Sabbath.

No insects could be killed. No candle or flame could be lit or extinguished. Nothing could be bought or sold. No bathing was allowed since water might spill onto the floor and accidentally wash it.

No furniture could be moved inside the house since it might create ruts in the dirt floor and thereby constitute plowing. An egg could not even be boiled if all one did was to place it in the hot desert sand.

A radish could not be left in salt because it would become a pickle. And pickling constituted work. Sick people were only allowed enough treatment to keep them alive.

[9 : 03] Any medical treatment that improved their condition was considered work and therefore prohibited. It was not even permissible for women to look in the mirror since they might be tempted to pull out any gray hairs they spotted.

Nor were they allowed to wear jewelry since jewelry weighs more than a dried fig. Other activities that were banned on the Sabbath included washing clothes, dyeing wool, shearing sheep, spinning wool, tying or untying a knot, sowing seed, plowing a field, reaping a harvest, binding sheaves,

threshing wheat, grinding flour, kneading dough, hunting a deer, or preparing its meat.

One of the more interesting restrictions, says MacArthur, related to the distance that people could travel on the Sabbath. a person was not allowed to travel more than 3,000 feet from home or they actually didn't have feet back then so they measured into steps.

1,999 steps is all you're allowed and of course they chose that number because 2,000 was really the number but let's just set the bar back just one step just in case, you know.

And due to practical concerns the rabbis devised creative ways to get around this so if you placed food at the 3,000 foot point before the Sabbath began then that point was considered an extension of your home which would allow you another 3,000 feet beyond that.

[10:37] Or if a rope or piece of wood was placed across a narrow street or alley it would be considered a doorway and it would make part of one's home connected to the next building or the next person's home which would allow the 3,000 feet to kind of be outside of that.

And apparently even in modern times Jewish neighborhoods are connecting houses together using these cords and ropes known as irav and doing so from the perspective of rabbinic law creates a single home out of every connected building allowing people to move freely within the defined area without being limited to that 3,000 foot restriction so that they can carry certain household items like keys, medicine, strollers, canes, and babies.

The man-made traditions writes MacArthur perpetuated by the Pharisees and scribes clearly placed a crushing weight on the people. Now I thought that sounds ridiculous that sounds extreme is that how it really was?

So I had to look up some of these things and sure enough they are in the Jewish Talmud and the Mishnah to that degree and it's worth noting that the Pharisees didn't see all these add-ons as optional.

Like if you break these rules you are working on the Sabbath. You are leaving home on the Sabbath. You're sinning against God. You're breaking his commandments and if you keep these rules if you keep all these things then that's righteousness.

[12:13] That's what pleases God. So it's like they came up out of the ditch of blatantly ignoring the Sabbath and they went right off the other side into the ditch of a legalistic self-righteous man-made religious striving.

And so this gives us some understanding of the Sabbath and why the Pharisees would say something like this to Jesus and his disciples. I mean here they are they're out on a walk having a stroll on the Sabbath day.

They're presumably hungry which is why they started just you know grabbing some grain gleaned from the field and the Pharisees it seems were lurking nearby and keeping a close eye on them and they see them pick those heads of grain oh that's that's harvesting they're harvesting they see them rubbing it between their hands oh that's threshing that's that's food preparation right there they're working on the Sabbath day why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath well how does Jesus respond to this verse three 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 now this response of

Jesus is very difficult to understand we all understand intuitively that it's Jesus arguing back against what the Pharisees are saying but how does this argument work what is Jesus point another commentator John Nolan put it this way he said there's no shortage of suggestions about how this argument operates but consensus has remained elusive he goes on in his commentary to list five different explanations for how for what this means that Jesus said how this argument works and then he says the list is not complete there's some I didn't put in why is this such a difficult answer first of all Jesus uses a rhetorical question referring to an Old Testament event which kind of implies he's making a statement but what is that statement what is he saying to the Pharisees second Jesus refers to

King David's story from 1st Samuel chapter 21 verse 1 to 9 and David's fleeing from King Saul in that passage who's trying to kill him even though he's done nothing wrong David lies to the priest and says the king sent me on a mission when in fact he hasn't and so it kind of raises some of these questions of well was David acting rightly in that situation or was he acting out of fear then there's the tabernacle regulations that Jesus refers to in this argument it all revolves around specific regulations at the tabernacle which was like the set up and take down temple that the Israelites had

and one of the things at the tabernacle was this consecrated bread they were to put out fresh bread 12 loaves of it in the holy area every Sabbath day and they had to change it each week on the Sabbath and Jesus basically says well this consecrated bread was meant only for priests and yet the priest gave it to

[15 : 52] David and David ate it which was not lawful for him to do so it pushes us to this big question of well was David justified in eating this bread or not I mean Jesus states that it was unlawful even more strongly we see in the gospel of Matthew and yet David wasn't condemned God didn't punish him there was nothing of that so was this an exception of mercy all of that pushes us even further into this ethical discussion does mercy sometimes necessitate breaking commandments are some commandments are some commandments limited in scope and can be set aside when it comes into conflict with a greater one and then at the end of all that we have to figure out how does that apply to Jesus and his disciples right now who are gleaning in the field is Jesus suggesting that they can do what is unlawful without guilt just like David did or is he saying something to the effect of you Pharisees you wouldn't apply your legalistic Sabbath rules to King David and condemn him even though technically he broke the law but you're now applying it to us here and now even though technically we haven't broken God's command to keep the Sabbath only broken your man-made rules about the Sabbath we could go on here but I think you get the point this is not an easy thing of Jesus to understand and I spent hours on this studying reading and I'll be honest I do not know how this argument from the story of David works and what Jesus meant by it but there are some things that are clear that Jesus said after this and we're going to focus on that this morning in the gospel of

Matthew there's more that Jesus said that we hear of Matthew chapter 12 verse 5 Jesus goes on with a second example he says haven't you read in the law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent this one's a little clearer the priests were commanded to offer sacrifices and to change the bread among other things on the Sabbath so they were commanded by God to do their duties to work on the Sabbath despite the fourth commandment and in doing so Jesus said they're innocent they're not breaking it and so maybe we need to adjust our understanding of the scope of God's commandments or be open to the possibility that one commandment at times may trump another if the two seem to be in conflict next we also notice in Matthew's gospel Jesus said this he said if you had known what these words mean

I desire mercy not sacrifice you would not have condemned the innocent he says this to the Pharisees here and this quote is I desire mercy not sacrifice is something God said through the prophet of Hosea long ago so Jesus himself says that he and his disciples are innocent this is Jesus verdict right here we're not breaking the Sabbath command that's not what it was intended to mean we're not we're not they haven't failed to keep the Sabbath day holy just because they're picking grain and eating the kernels!

while walking along regardless of what the Pharisees think this is the verdict of Jesus they are innocent maybe they've broken the man-made religious rules of the Sabbath but they haven't in God's eyes done any wrong and these words I desire mercy not sacrifice seem to be really key and powerful in this situation there's two words there mercy and sacrifice one of these words describes the outward behavior the ritual the ceremony the other describes the heart in other words Israel long ago and the Pharisees now missed the heart behind the law they missed the very heart of the Sabbath commandment they transformed what was intended by God as a gift to rest and refresh into something utterly burdensome another religious obligation like quick we gotta you know get home and we gotta tie the ropes between our houses so that we can go back and forth between our houses tomorrow without having to count steps or hurry if we don't set the food out near the edge of the property we won't have enough steps to make it to grandma's house tomorrow to check in on her like that's not the kind of life that

[21 : 11] God intended for his people when he gave that commandment that's not the kind of relationship that he had in mind for them that's heartless man-made religion and rule following that's the sacrifice that God doesn't want I desire mercy not sacrifice God wants a relationship with us characterized by mercy by compassion by loving kindness he doesn't want mere lip service or heartless ritual observance this comes out especially with what Mark reports in his gospel each one of them saw or took note of a different thing Jesus said Mark chapter 2 verse 27 then Jesus said to them the Sabbath was made for man not man for the Sabbath God didn't make human beings

because there was an important day that needed to be kept holy and he needed some people to keep it holy rather he instituted the

Sabbath day as a benefit for the people that he had created as a gift a needed day to rest and spiritually a day to cease from strivings and remember that God is our provider think of it this way do you like holidays I like holidays even the word comes from holy day meaning special day a day set apart from the rest where we all take a break and we enjoy relationship we go out and enjoy God's creation or we go visit family or we sleep in or we do some recreational activity we have a nap whatever now imagine that you lived in a society where there were no holidays no days off ever everybody works seven days a week and the only days you get off are if you're too ill to work so as God set up his covenant law with the Sabbath was like God saying you guys have been slaves all your lives you've been working seven days a week with no break and now you're free and as we do this now as you are my people and I am your God I'm not just going to give you three holidays a year or even just one a month I'm going to give you a holiday every week at the end of the week a day off a day to rest for six days you'll do your work and then on the seventh day rest don't do your regular work that day we often smile when the boss says you've been working too much and not taking your days off I'm sending you home take your day off well that's what the fourth commandment was it was God saying you've been working too much take a day off from now on take that day rest remember me keep that day special keep it set apart keep it holy to put it another way in the mind of the

Pharisees if all the Jews in Israel were to be wiped out it would be a massive problem why because who would keep the daily sacrifices going at the temple who would keep the candles lit who would keep changing the show bread every Sabbath who would be there to keep the Sabbath day holy nobody as if God needed these things to be done for him like to!

keep him happy but Jesus is saying no that's all backwards we're thinking about the wrong way it's not that he needs us to keep his temple ordinances or that he needs the sacrifices to be happy the whole purpose of all of that is to facilitate relationship between him and his people that's what the temple was everything in it from the bread to the garments the priests wore to the sacrifices that were to be offered to the way that it was set up and how things were marked out it was there to remind them of different aspects of their relationship with God and who he is he is holy he is pure he is worthy and to remind us of who we are we are sinners in need of forgiveness and cleansing we are dependent on him for everything it was a place to draw for cleansing and forgiveness but also for fellowship and worship and prayer it was a place where they sang it was a place to be in his presence which is what the bread symbolized the temple was instituted for the purpose of relationship with us with man and the same thing applies to the

[26 : 40] Sabbath it's not as though God made the day first and then said okay I'm going to make man now to keep this day holy to keep it special no the Sabbath was made for man not man for the Sabbath finally we come to that last verse and my favorite part of this whole encounter and it's how Jesus brings this conversation with the Pharisees to a close and it's an absolute mic drop moment then Jesus said to them the son of man is lord of the Sabbath the son of man is lord of the Sabbath let's think about this title of lord what does it mean to be the lord of something if you're the lord of the manor it means that you are the one in charge of the house you're the top guy you're the home owner it's your house it's your manor and everything in it and everyone in it is under your authority if you're the lord of the land what does it mean to be the lord of the land it means you're the top guy it means that you're the one in charge of that land it's your land and everything that goes on in it that's under your jurisdiction that's under your charge means you make the rules in the land you're the top judge in the land and so what does it mean to be lord of the sabbath Jesus is claiming to be the one in charge of the sabbath the one to whom the sabbath belongs all things sabbath are under his authority under his jurisdiction it means he makes the rules regarding the sabbath as Jesus says this think about how the pharisees might have been feeling and the teachers of the law i mean they saw themselves as the experts and the judges of everything sabbath related they were like sabbath police going to and fro and reminding the people of exactly what they could and could not do enforcing all those rules and regulations and giving their legal interpretations Jesus looks him right in the face and says no i am the lord of the sabbath you guys don't tell me how to keep the sabbath i will tell you the true purpose and meaning of the sabbath and how you've missed it back to John MacArthur he had another great piece of his sermon here Jesus dropped the bomb of all bombs on their self righteous minds i am the sovereign ruler over the sabbath i am the sovereign of this day i

designed this day i'm the creator doesn't john say that at the beginning of his gospel everything was made by him jesus and without him jesus was not anything made and so it was he jesus who ceased to work on that very first sabbath it was he who ordained this day to be blessed and separated from work i am the sovereign of this day i am the interpreter of the will of god for this day you do not rule the sabbath you do not set the standards of behavior for the sabbath i do that's from macarthur wow what a claim and as we'll see next sunday this claim and what we're about to read of next is enough to make the pharisees and the teachers

of the law furious with jesus well there's one thing we still haven't talked about and it's whether we as followers of jesus today must keep the sabbath and if so how is sunday now to be our sabbath or was the sabbath commandment only fit to the old covenant lord willing we're going to talk about all that next sunday but for today let us fix our eyes on jesus the lord of the sabbath our compassionate and loving god who stands against heartless empty burdensome religion let us fix our eyes on him who desires a love relationship with us and not just a ritual sacrifice from us let's pray lord jesus we thank you that we got to just see a little bit this morning of what happened those many years ago as you walked through the fields with your disciples and we thank you that that's who you are the lord of the sabbath the lord of all and we give you praise and we thank you for your love for us your compassion towards us we ask that you would continue to teach us and to work in us what is pleasing to you for your glory amen and and and