

Showdown on the Sabbath

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[0 : 0 0] All right, well this morning we are continuing our way through the Gospel of Luke, which tells the story of Jesus. And we're in Luke chapter 6. And we've started to see how conflict is ensuing! between Jesus and the Pharisees. First it was over the issue of eating with sinners and religious fasting.

Then we heard about how Jesus had a run-in with the Pharisees on the Sabbath day in the grain fields. And now Luke is going to tell us about another incident which took place between Jesus and the Pharisees on the Sabbath day. We are in Luke chapter 6, verse 6.

On another Sabbath, Jesus went into the synagogue and was teaching. And a man was there whose right hand was shriveled. As we've talked about in the past few messages, the Sabbath was the seventh day of the week, Saturday. And it was a normal, respected, and common practice for Jews to gather at the local synagogue on this day. Scripture was read aloud and there was prayer. And what's interesting is that there was no specific command given in the Old Testament for them to have synagogues or to meet at the synagogue like this. It was kind of a later development during the years of the exile. And then it continued on after that. So attendance was common, but not everyone went every week. Participation was more regular among men than women. And it wasn't structured as a whole family gathering like church in modern times has been.

The elderly and the very young would often stay home. And regular attendance was more common among those who lived in towns or cities. For those Jews living in rural areas, travel on the Sabbath was limited by tradition to about 2,000 cubits or roughly a kilometer. And so if the nearest synagogue was beyond that distance, it was kind of understood that you would just stay home and observe the Sabbath at home.

And so sometimes we imagine going to the synagogue was kind of like the Old Testament version of going to church on Sundays. But in reality, there were significant differences. We see in the gospel accounts, though, that Jesus deliberately used this tradition, this cultural thing, as part of how he proclaimed the word of God. He went from town to town, and he read scripture, and he taught, and he proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues on the Sabbath days. And so you can almost imagine what this might have been like in those days. Word begins to spread around town that Jesus is on his way to your town. And you've heard that he typically speaks in the synagogue on the Sabbath day. Maybe you never went to see Jesus preach out at the lake like some people did, but this is now your chance to see him and to hear him in person. Maybe you weren't even planning on going to the synagogue this week, where it had been a while.

[3 : 2 0] But this Sabbath day, you'll be there, because there's a special and famous guest speaker coming to town. Well, this is probably one of the reasons why the Pharisees and the teachers of the law envied Jesus so much.

Because when he comes to town and speaks, attendance at the synagogue suddenly goes through the roof. So this is some of the cultural background to all of this, and Luke sets the scene.

We notice Luke's description of this man's condition. His right hand was shriveled.

That's probably significant that it was his right hand. I had to look this up, but roughly 90% of people on earth are right-handed. So it's the dominant hand. It's the good hand of most. And this should make us think of what life has probably been like for this man. We don't know how long he's had this condition or how it happened, but it's probably affected his ability to work and to do a lot of different things. He has probably, for many things, become dependent on others, unable to do those things for himself. And then there are the social stigmas that often people carry towards others who have visible disabilities. People are often uncomfortable or awkward around them. What are they thinking?

They're thinking, look at his hand. I wonder how that happened. If we look closer at the word shriveled, there's a little more there. The word has also been translated as withered. And the original word used there is often used in reference to dry land or dried out dead trees or branches. [5 : 30] And so when it's used metaphorically like this to refer to a part of the body, it often indicated that the part of the body was no good anymore, unable to be used, possibly shrunken, deformed, damaged, and likely immobile or paralyzed. Now there's all kinds of reasons why a person might come to have a withered or shriveled hand like this. It could be that way because of nerve damage or because of a stroke. It could happen because of poor blood flow or from damage related to an injury or an infection.

Probably most of us have seen someone with a shriveled hand and it kind of has an unnatural look to it. And the reason is owing to how all of those different causes I just mentioned affect the muscles muscles and tendons and ligaments in the hand. When it comes to muscles, they come in pairs. There are the flexors which open the hand and then there are the extensors which help with closing the hand. And so if the extensors become weak or waste away first and the flexors overpower them, they kind of pull the fingers back into a bent position and they can get stuck like that. And if it's stuck like that in that curl position for weeks or months, the tendons and ligaments actually physically shorten. And it's called contracture. It makes the hand stiff and not just weak. And so people who have this are likely to have it for life because of the underlying causes, whether nerve damage or loss of control, contracture of ligaments and tendons. Sometimes it's possible to get some of that movement back through exercise and physio, but oftentimes not. And so we can only imagine how frustrating and how difficult life must have been for this man. As he goes about his life, almost everyone around him has two good hands and seems that they take it for granted. Meanwhile, he's struggling to get by with only one. And so Jesus is there and he's teaching. And this man with the shriveled hand is there. And the Pharisees and the teachers of the law are also there. And we notice that they are there for a very specific purpose. Verse 7, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law looking for a reason to accuse Jesus. So they watched him closely to see if he would heal on the Sabbath. So this is very deliberate. They are looking for a reason to accuse Jesus. And that word accuse here is key. In the original language this was written in, it's actually derived from a technical legal term. They were looking for legal grounds to haul Jesus into a religious court kind of scenario for breaking the law. Luke says they watched him closely. This is very intentional. They are after Jesus. They're lurking like hunters on a mission. Luke tells us they already had in mind what the grounds of their accusation would be. They're hoping to charge Jesus with working on the Sabbath, breaking the Sabbath law. That's what this is about. I mentioned it a few sermons ago, but the Jewish rabbis over the centuries had piled up a massive amount of man-made religious rules that they added on to help people keep the Sabbath commandment.

At least they thought it was helping. They turned Sabbath keeping into this sort of hyper-legalistic religion of its own. And if you missed that message and want to hear more about that, you can find it on the church website. It was May 18th and it's titled Lord of the Sabbath. But one of the rules that they had added was that when it comes to doing the work of a doctor or nurse on the Sabbath day, you were only permitted to do as much as needed to save a person's life or to keep them from dying. Anything beyond that that was aimed at just helping them generally improve, you had to wait till Sunday to do that work for them.

[10 : 29] And so this kind of helps us understand the mindset that they would have had toward this man with the withered hand. It's visible and obvious to everyone that this man has a debilitating condition, but that's not life-threatening. At least that's what they're thinking. And so if Jesus heals this man today, we're going to get him on charges of working 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.

Jesus knew what they were thinking. This is something that we see about Jesus in all of the gospel accounts. And it's not just that he has a very sharp intuition or keen powers of deduction. Jesus possesses knowledge of precisely what people are thinking. He demonstrates it time and time again.

He knows what's in the hearts of people, their very thoughts. And he often responds to what they are thinking. And amazingly, he's always right. He has this knowledge because of who he is. This is divine knowledge. So he knew what they were thinking. And he said to the man with the shriveled

hand, get up and stand in front of everyone. And so he got up and stood there.

[12:06] Jesus knows they're going to try to charge him with working on the Sabbath if he heals the man. And so what does Jesus do? He's going to heal the man. He's not afraid of the Pharisees or the teachers of the law one bit.

Neither is he worried about being guilty of breaking the Sabbath. Just a few verses back, what did Jesus say to them? He said, In other words, I'm in charge of the Sabbath.

I know what's right and what's wrong when it comes to the Sabbath. It's my commandment. He's not intimidated one bit by the Pharisees. He calls the man to get up and stand in front of everyone so that everyone can see what he's about to do.

Now at this point, we do well to take a peek at Matthew's account. We're looking at Luke's account, but let's just flip over to Matthew's account. Chapter 12, verse 10.

It would seem that in this moment as this man stands in front of everyone before Jesus says or does anything, the Pharisees open their mouth and challenge Jesus.

[13:20] They asked him, Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath? And this is not a wondering. This is a rhetorical question. It's a trap.

Of course, if Jesus says, Yes, it's lawful to heal on the Sabbath, then he'll be contradicting the authority and laws of countless Jewish rabbis, both past and present, as well as the current law of the land, and he will be liable to judgment.

As I said earlier, for the Pharisees, this is already an established law. Only in cases of life and death can medical work be done on the Sabbath. They're ready to put Jesus on trial here and haul him before the court, before the judge.

And so if he answers, Yes, it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath. There could be consequences. On the other hand, if he answers, No, it's not lawful.

You're right. This can wait until tomorrow. Well, then he's basically affirming that the Pharisees are right. Their interpretation, their application of all these rules and regulations is right.

[14:33] This would really undermine Jesus' credibility when you think about it, because can we trust his teaching if he almost accidentally broke the Sabbath law?

He should have known if he really is the Messiah. So how does Jesus respond to this trap? We'll stick with Matthew's account for just a moment longer.

Jesus said to them, If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out?

How much more valuable is a person than a sheep?

Therefore, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. So Jesus argues from the lesser to the greater, from the less important to the more important.

[15:42] Nobody there, if one of their animals had broken loose from the pen and fallen into a pit, none of them would have said, Oh man, well, I guess we'll just have to leave it there until tomorrow because today's the Sabbath day.

If God really wants us to have him, then that'll still be there alive tomorrow. We have to honor him first, right? We'll come back at sundown. None of them would have done that.

Just leaving that poor animal to suffer bleeding away helplessly till the next day. Everybody knew that the right thing to do was to help the poor animal out of the pit even if it was the Sabbath day.

Well, that's different. They might have been thinking. That's not the same. Of course, we would grab it and lift it out because that would be cruel if we didn't. It is lawful to do acts of mercy on the Sabbath.

And Jesus basically says, so you would help an animal on the Sabbath day if it's afflicted, but you wouldn't help a human being on the Sabbath day who's afflicted.

[17:01] you don't think I should heal this man right now? Do you really think I should wait till tomorrow? How much more valuable is a person, a human being, than a sheep?

It's an amazing response of Jesus with just a few words. He exposes the heartless hypocrisy and lack of compassion that the Pharisees and the teachers of the law have.

He says, you care more about animals than you do about people. You care more about law keeping and rules and regulations and religious observances than people.

All right, back to Luke. chapter 6, verse 9. 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? Jesus piles on this challenge question of his own and it's a doozy.

[18 : 21] Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath? Because that's what I'm about to do. in healing this man. Or is it lawful to do evil on the Sabbath?

Now, there's two possible ways to understand the second part of Jesus' question. Everybody agrees that doing good, saving life, that that relates to Jesus healing the man.

Right here and right now. But what's not clear is exactly what Jesus is contrasting that with. one possibility and this is what I grew up thinking was that Jesus is saying to not heal this man right here and now when it's in my power to do it would be evil.

just like it would be heartless and cruel to leave the sheep in the pit until tomorrow. To leave this man in his affliction a day longer for no good reason would be cruel and heartless.

Now, there's a couple difficulties with this way of looking at it. one of them is that when we get to that second question to save life or to destroy it it almost doesn't make sense because it's not a matter of life and death.

[19 : 40] One explanation given by some is that Jesus is purposely exaggerating going to the extreme save life or destroy it in order to make the point that it's that if it's lawful to save life then it's lawful to do any lesser act of the same character.

whether healing or helping someone who's hurt or afflicted and in the same way if it's not lawful to do evil on the Sabbath neither is it lawful to do any lesser sort of evil on the Sabbath.

Like even something as simple as just passing by a person who's in need when it's in our power to help and there's no good reason to pass them by. Another difficulty with this interpretation though is how do we apply this?

Is Jesus really saying that whenever we see a need we do evil when we don't stop to meet it? I got thinking about this how many pleas for help from charities have I ignored in emails or in the mail? how many broken down cars on the side of the road have we driven by without at least stopping to ask and see if they need assistance? Is Jesus really saying that every time we fail to stop and help we do evil?

[21 : 03] We destroy life? On the other hand there is the parable of the Good Samaritan. In that parable Jesus seems to be exposing and condemning the Levite and the priest for just walking on by the wounded man who is in need on the side of the road.

He seems to be suggesting they were somehow obligated by their faith in God and their love for God to stop in that moment and help. So that's one interpretation that Jesus' questions here are about whether he should heal or delay healing until tomorrow.

Of course if he would heal him then it would be that that would be the good that would be saving life or if he delays it till tomorrow that would be to do evil or to destroy it. But there's another way to understand what Jesus might be saying with these questions.

Could it be that it's not about healing him now or waiting till tomorrow? Could it be that Jesus is actually contrasting what he's doing right now with what the Pharisees are doing right now?

Like is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good? Because that's what I'm here to do. That's what I'm about to do for this man.

[22 : 25] Or I could ask you a question. Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do evil? Because that's what you Pharisees and teachers of the law are doing right now.

it's kind of a painfully obvious question to ask isn't it? I mean why even ask it? Is it lawful to do evil on the Sabbath?

Of course not. Who would answer yes to that? Well then why are you Pharisees looking for a way to bring a charge against me? What's your motive in that?

could it be that the question of Jesus is simply intended to expose what the Pharisees and the teachers of the law are up to? And this kind of makes sense of that second question to save life or to destroy it.

What do the Pharisees and teachers of the law hope will come of this? What's their goal? Well truly they're looking for a way to destroy Jesus. That's not an exaggeration.

[23 : 37] When Mark wrote his account of this he actually used a synonym. Of course Jesus probably said it in Hebrew or Aramaic but then Mark wrote it down as to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill.

To kill. And then Mark sums it up at the end by saying this. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

And so that's the other interpretation that Jesus questions are not about healing now versus delaying healing till tomorrow but rather about doing good, saving life which is what Jesus is here to do on the Sabbath versus doing evil and plotting to kill, to destroy life which is what the Pharisees and teachers of the law are doing on the Sabbath.

Well in this moment Jesus asks these two questions and what's the response of the Pharisees? It says in verse 9, Jesus looked around at them all.

It's like he was giving them a chance to answer. What's the answer? Which is lawful? To do good or to do evil?

[25 : 04] Mark tells us that in this moment the Pharisees remained silent. They didn't say a word. And Mark is the only one who tells us just a little of what Jesus was thinking and feeling in this moment.

Jesus looked around at them in anger and deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts. Deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts.

Jesus was angry with a righteous and holy anger in this moment. He was deeply distressed at the stubbornness in their hearts.

the answer to the question is obvious. Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil? Jesus tells them straight up the answer.

In Matthew's gospel we read that he said it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. And yet they remained silent. They didn't say a word.

[26 : 13] Of course Jesus kind of had them in a bit of a trap. with the question that he asked them. If they were to say yeah Jesus you're right that would be pretty humiliating to them.

It would show that Jesus was right about them. It would show that they really did lack compassion. It would show that they had been wrong about the Sabbath and they couldn't admit that.

They were the Pharisees. They were the teachers of the law. They were the experts. Or so they thought. And if the problem was that everybody was going to Jesus instead of to them well admitting that they were wrong and Jesus was right would probably just make it worse.

More people would keep going to Jesus instead of to them. And they knew they couldn't win this argument with Jesus either and just double down and say no you're wrong. That would only further expose them as the heartless legalistic hypocrites that they were.

Imagine this. What are they going to do? Are they going to escort the man with the withered hand out the door in front of everyone to prevent him from being healed? Because it's the Sabbath day?

[27 : 28] Well that wouldn't go over well with the people. And again same thing. People are going to start going to Jesus even more. He's the one who has compassion.

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.

In Matthew's gospel it says he stretched it out and it was completely restored just as sound as the other. What a sight that must have been.

And everybody there saw it. Including the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. We talked earlier about what kinds of things could cause this condition and how whatever the cause there was that effect of the muscles atrophying and weakening and the ligaments and tendons physically shortening and becoming stiff.

Jesus doesn't seem to lay a finger on the man. He simply says stretch out your hand. And as he does God's power flows through Jesus and a miracle takes place.

[28 : 45] The muscles, tendons, ligaments are completely instantly restored and unstiffened. His hand is strong enough that he can open and close it just the same as he can with the other one.

No physio needed. God's power of God. God's power of life at work. What a wonderful day for that poor man with the withered hand.

No doubt a day of great joy, probably a day that he would never forget. It was a day that he got his life back the way that it was before.

It doesn't talk about him jumping up and praising God here, but he probably was. Now what should the response of the Pharisees be that this healing has taken place?

Well, now is the time to finally admit you were right, Jesus. We were wrong. Clearly, if God's power to heal is unleashed through your words, then what you say about the Sabbath is right.

[29 : 56] We're off. We're wrong. But no. What's their response? Verse 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.

They were furious. Luke's being a little discreet here. Both Matthew and Mark, as I mentioned earlier, spell it out clearly.

The Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus. We want him dead. This reveals the ugliness and the phoniness of the religion of the Pharisees.

Did they really know God? Did they really love God? Did they really desire to honor God by obeying his commandments?

Was this really about what was truly good and right versus what was truly wrong and evil? One commentator that I read this week said it this way. It's kind of a scholarly academic quote, but it just stuck in my mind.

[31 : 12] He said, the religious mind is a curious thing. It is not necessarily interested in common morality. It's not interested so much in just generally what's right and what's wrong.

Still less is the religious mind interested in relieving human misery and affliction. It's interested in keeping rules, particularly the rules which spring from its own cherished interpretations of scripture or tradition.

And to these interpretations it will attribute the inflexible authority of God himself. Let God incarnate, that word incarnate means in flesh, let God in human flesh, that's Jesus, come down, let God incarnate contrary to its interpretations interpose with a miracle of divine goodness to relieve human misery.

That's the healing of this man. Then instead of revising its interpretations, the religious mind will plan to stop such miracles happening again.

In other words, we've become so committed to our rules and our cherished interpretations that God himself doing a miracle of mercy right in front of our eyes to show us the error of our ways is not enough to change our minds.

[32 : 47] We are so committed to our religion and rules that we must make sure miracles such as these do not happen again. We need to stop Jesus.

We have to take him out. Wow. What are we to take from all this? Well, if you missed my last two messages on the Sabbath, I'd encourage you to go to our church website and listen to them.

They talk more in depth about what the Sabbath had become in Jewish culture and in my last message I specifically answered the question of whether we as Christians should keep the Sabbath and if so, how.

So I'm not going to go back and preach that message again. But one thing I think we see clearly here is the compassionate heart of Jesus for us in contrast to the dark, ugly, cold, religious heart of the Pharisees.

And I think we're being called by God through these words, are we not? To examine ourselves, to see if there is any of that attitude that they had, that heart that they had in us.

[34 : 08] And I think we're being called to take notice of this wonderful Savior, Jesus, who is showing us the kind of relationship that God has always wanted with us.

Not this cold and dead, rule-keeping kind of relationship, but this living, compassionate, heart-engaged relationship where true love reigns supreme.

A number of the different people I read this week pointed back to what God said through Isaiah the prophet. And these are powerful words coming from hundreds of years before Jesus came to the people of Israel.

God speaks through Isaiah back then, and this is what God says to Israel. He says, the multitude of your sacrifices, what are they to me? Says the Lord.

I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams, and the fat of fattened animals. I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls, and lambs, and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts?

[35 : 25] Stop bringing meaningless offerings. Your incense is detestable to me. new moons, sabbaths, and convocations, I cannot bear your worthless assemblies.

Your new moon feasts, and your appointed festivals, I hate with all my being. They have become a burden to me. I am weary of bearing them.

When you spread out your hands in prayer, I hide my eyes from you. even when you offer many prayers, I am not listening. Why?

Your hands are full of blood. Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight. Stop doing wrong.

Learn to do right. Seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless. Plead the case of the widow.

[36 : 35] These are the words of God himself to Israel long ago. Wow. God does not want empty-hearted, hypocritical, religious behavior from anyone.

We have to remember that God in the Old Testament law, given through Moses, commanded that all of these things be done. That the Sabbath be kept, that sacrifices of these kinds be offered, that the people assemble for these regular festivals and feasts, that they pray.

God commanded those things, and yet God says, I hate all of these things that you're doing. I'm weary of them. They burden me.

Stop doing them. They are meaningless to me. They are worthless to me. Why? Because meanwhile, you're killing each other, living wicked lives, doing all kinds of evil deeds and perverting justice.

You're oppressing the weak. You're taking advantage of others. You're doing nothing to help the needy, the orphan, the widow.

[37 : 49] That's how you live, and then you come to my temple and do all these religious things. You observe the Sabbaths and you offer sacrifices. That kind of obedience, if you can even call it that, doesn't do anything for me.

Your religiosity is just a show. Stop pretending to have a relationship with me when you don't.

These are sobering words.

God doesn't want us to pray and read our Bibles and go to church every week and give 10% of our income to the church as a sort of token of our religious affiliation with him.

Meanwhile, our hearts are far from him. This is what the Pharisees were doing. And Jesus saw right through it.

He knew what they were thinking. and he knows what we're thinking. He knows what's really in our hearts. If we think we can keep God happy by just doing enough of his stuff, going to church, reading our Bibles, praying, keeping the Sabbath, giving 10%, we're wrong.

[39 : 09] We can't fool God. No. God wants a real, vibrant, personal relationship with you.

He wants our hearts. He is full of compassion and love for us. He is the Jesus who stood up to the Pharisees and healed the man with the withered hand.

God. And that's why he has come to do good to us and to save us. He calls us to repent and believe in him.

He calls us to surrender our lives to him and own him as Lord. And he will not tolerate religious pretenders for very long. God will not The way the Pharisees and the teachers of the law abused the people under the guise of religious observance made Jesus very, very angry and upset. just like it did long ago in Israel's history when God said, your new moon feast and your appointed festivals, your Sabbaths and your convocations I hate with all my being.

[40 : 26] But what did God say right after that long ago through Isaiah? He denounced their worthless religiosity, he told them he hated it and then he said this, come now, let's settle the matter.

Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow. Though they are as red as crimson, they shall be like wool.

God is eager to wash us clean of our moral filth, our pride, our selfishness, our self-righteousness. He is eager to forgive.

That's why he sent Jesus. He came to be the sacrifice needed to secure the forgiveness of our sins, to save our lives, because we were utterly shriveled and withered by sin.

He came to restore us and give us life. So I want to end with this question. have you surrendered your whole heart and life to Jesus, this compassionate Savior?

[41 : 48] Or do you intend to go on pretending like the Pharisees while pushing Jesus away? Father in heaven, please do your good work in our hearts through your word.

I pray that we would not go untouched by these words, that we would be stirred to faith and to love for you, true love, true faith. we thank you that you are compassionate and merciful, an amazing,

beautiful, glorious God, and we love you.
I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.