

## **“Lord of the Sabbath” (Luke 6:1–11)**

**September 16, 2018**

**Brian Watson**

How are you feeling today? Do you feel well rested? In general, does your life feel at rest, or do you feel anxious? Do you feel at peace or ill at ease in this world?

Today we’re picking up our sermon series in the Gospel of Luke, after taking a six-month break. If you weren’t here months ago, you can catch up on this series by visiting [wbcommunity.org/luke](http://wbcommunity.org/luke). This is a good time to get to know the true Jesus, the Jesus described in the Bible.

This is what we’ve seen so far in Luke’s Gospel. Luke is writing this biography of Jesus to provide an orderly account of the story of Jesus. He says his writing is based on what he has received from “eyewitnesses and ministers of the word” (Luke 1:2).<sup>1</sup> Luke is writing history, but it’s a theological history. He wants us to know what God has done in and through Jesus.

Luke tells us that Jesus had supernatural origins. His miraculous conception by a virgin was foretold by the angel Gabriel. Right at the beginning of this story, we’re told that Jesus is more than just a man. Gabriel tells Mary,

<sup>32</sup> He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, <sup>33</sup> and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:32–33).

Luke tells us that Jesus grew and he gives us a brief snapshot of Jesus at age 12. When he is fully grown, Jesus is baptized, an event that begins his public ministry. When he is baptized, the Holy Spirit comes upon him like a dove, and the voice of God the Father says, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22). There are echoes here of the beginning of the Bible. Just as the Holy Spirit hovered over the waters of creation, he hovers over these waters, where the Word of God is present. Just as God created a universe out of nothing, he has created a new man out of “nothing” (a virgin’s womb). Just as God pronounced a blessing over the first creation, calling it “very good,” God pronounces a blessing over this new creation. God has stepped into the universe that he has made and Jesus, the God-man, will fix what is broken in the first creation.

---

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

He does this in part by withstanding the devil's temptations. Luke tells us of Jesus' time in the wilderness, when Satan tempted him. Jesus stands up to Satan's attacks by quoting Scripture back to him. Jesus is the only one who doesn't give in to evil.

Then we see Jesus begin his public ministry. He does this by teaching and by healing. He teaches in a synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, telling those who are gathered that he fulfills the Old Testament. But he is not well received. We see that Jesus' teaching is divisive, and he gets run out of his hometown.

Jesus heals people who had various diseases and he heals people who were under the influence of unclean spirits, or demons. This shows that Jesus attacks the results of evil in the world and evil itself. According to the Bible, all bad things in the world are the result, directly or indirectly, of the presence of sin in the world. Angels and people have rebelled against God, and as a result, God has given the world over to things like diseases and death. But God hasn't given up on the world. Jesus' becoming a man is God's rescue mission to save a lost world. And Jesus' miracles indicate that he has the power to fix what is broken.

We also have seen Jesus call his first disciples and get into various controversies with some of the religious leaders in his day. These are usually the Pharisees, a sect of Judaism that was devoted to a strict interpretation of the law that God gave Israel in the Old Testament. Jesus hung out with people who were regarded as particularly sinful. This was controversial. But he called them to a new way of life, a better life. And Jesus even claims that he has the power to forgive sins.

Today, as we begin Luke 6, we see those controversies continue. We'll see two controversies over the Sabbath. Let's first read Luke 6:1-5:

<sup>1</sup> On a Sabbath, while he was going through the grainfields, his disciples plucked and ate some heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands. <sup>2</sup> But some of the Pharisees said, "Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?" <sup>3</sup> And Jesus answered them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: <sup>4</sup> 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?" <sup>5</sup> And he said to them, "The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath."

To understand what's happening here, we need to understand what the Bible says about the Sabbath. So, let's take a quick tour of what the Old Testament says about the Sabbath.

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). Then, we see God creates, or orders and arranges, his creation. Over six days, God establishes realms of sky and sea and land and he fills them. There are a lot of different views on whether those days are twenty-four periods or longer ages, or if the week is analogous, but not exactly equivalent, to our week. But we won’t get into that today. What we do want to see is that on the seventh day, God rests. This is Genesis 2:1–3:

<sup>1</sup> Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. <sup>2</sup> And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. <sup>3</sup> So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.

This doesn’t mean that God was really tired from those six days and need a break. It meant that his work of creating and arranging was done. God had established the world to be his temple, a theater for his glory, and he was done. He could now sit on his throne, as it were. The drama of the Bible’s big story could now begin.

This seventh day of rest established a pattern for Israel. In fact, God commands Israel to rest on every seventh day in honor of the pattern he established at creation. The Sabbath is so important that it is part of the Ten Commandments. This is the fourth commandment, found in Exodus 20:8–11:

<sup>8</sup> “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. <sup>9</sup> Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> 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.

The word “Sabbath” basically means rest. It was also a day of worship, a “holy convocation” (Lev. 23:3). Holy means “distinct, withheld from ordinary use, treated with special care,” the opposite of “profane” or “common.”<sup>2</sup> The seventh day was a “Sabbath to the LORD,” a day that belonged to God (Exod. 16:23, 25; 20:10; 31:15). The Israelites were supposed to take a

---

<sup>2</sup> Mark F. Rooker, *The Ten Commandments: Ethics for the Twenty-First Century*. New American Commentary in Bible and Theology, ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 87.

break from their regular work. This taught them to trust in God’s provision and to realize that they were not in control of time.

The Sabbath reminded the Israelites both of creation and salvation. Exodus 20 mentions creation. The Ten Commandments are also given in Deuteronomy 5. There, we are told another reason why Israel should observe the Sabbath: “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day” (Deut. 5:15). When God rescued the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, he created a new people, a people who could rest, instead of working as slaves. The Sabbath is the link between creation and salvation.

The Sabbath was so important that it was a sign of the covenant (Exod. 31:12–17; Ezek. 20:12), just as the rainbow was the sign of the covenant made with Noah (Gen. 9:12–17), and circumcision was the sign of the covenant made with Abraham (Gen. 17:11). We may not understand the word “covenant” very well, but it’s sort of like a treaty. It’s similar to a marriage contract. It’s something that binds two parties together and sets the terms for that relationship. In this case, the covenant was how God would relate to his people and how they would relate to him. It spelled out what was expected of God’s people. The Ten Commandments were like the founding principles of Israel, something similar to the Bill of Rights. But instead of rights, the Ten Commandments told Israel what God expected of them.

Observing the Sabbath was so important that the punishment for breaking it was death (Exod. 31:14–15; see the story in Num. 15:32–36). Breaking the Sabbath was associated with idolatry, the worship of false gods (Lev. 19:3–4; Ezek. 20:16–24). It seems that breaking the Sabbath was one of the reasons why Israel went into exile (2 Chron. 36:21; Jer. 17:19–27; 25:11–12; Ezek. 20:12–24). After Israel returned from exile, the Sabbath was one of the concerns of Nehemiah.<sup>3</sup>

By the time of Jesus’ first coming, Sabbath observation was one of three badges of Jewish national identity, along with circumcision and dietary laws.<sup>4</sup> Keeping the Sabbath had

---

<sup>3</sup> Nehemiah recalls the giving of the Sabbath in his prayer of confession (Neh. 9:14) and he states that no buying or selling should be done on the Sabbath (10:31). When he discovers that the Sabbath commandment was being broken, he confronted the leaders of the people and then made sure the gates of the city were shut on that holy day, so that no buying or selling of goods could be done (13:15–22). He likely did not want the people to be exiled again for their lack of observing this important commandment.

<sup>4</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 49.

become synonymous with Judaism. It set Jews apart from the people of other nations and religions. On the Sabbath day, Jews met in synagogues for prayer and Scripture readings. The Mishnah, a collection of Jewish laws that accumulated over time, forbade thirty-nine activities on the Sabbath day.<sup>5</sup>

So, that's a quick study of the Sabbath in the Old Testament.

Now, let's go back to Luke 6:1–5. Jesus and his disciples were going through a field on the Sabbath. They took some grain, rubbed it in their hands to separate the kernel of grain from the chaff, and ate. This is hardly work, but according to strict Jewish interpretations of the law, this violated the Sabbath. So, the Pharisees accuse Jesus and his disciples of doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath. This is a serious charge. Yet Jesus doesn't answer directly. As he often does, he asks a question. He reminds them of a story from the Old Testament (1 Sam. 21:1–6). The story was about David, the greatest king of Israel. Before David became king, was on the run from Saul, the first king of Israel, who was jealous of David and who wanted to kill him. David had to flee from Saul just to stay alive. At one point, David and his men were so hungry that they ate the bread of the Presence, which was bread that was in the tabernacle, the holy place where God dwelled among Israel. This bread was holy. It symbolized Israel eating in God's presence. It was bread that only priests were supposed to eat. Now, Jesus brings this up and challenges the Pharisees to say that David was wrong. The implication is that David didn't do wrong, and just as David didn't do anything wrong by eating that bread, because he was hungry, Jesus and his disciples didn't do anything wrong by eating some grain that they "worked" for on the Sabbath.

Jesus doesn't deny that there might have been some violation of the Sabbath, at least according to the way the Pharisees understood the law. Instead, he seems to say that when two principles clash, some things are more important than others. David and his men were starving. So, the priest decided it was okay to let them eat holy bread. It was more important to support these men than to uphold laws regarding the bread. Jesus and his disciples were traveling and need some sustenance. The grain was there for the plucking. In Mark's telling of this passage, Jesus says, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). The Sabbath was supposed to help people, not hurt them.

---

<sup>5</sup> Rooker, *The Ten Commandments*, 94–95.

The Sabbath was for the benefit of the Israelites. It told them to rest in God's provision, to trust in him. It wouldn't make sense for Sabbath observance to put them in harm's way. And there must have been some understanding of this. Sometimes, two laws clash, even two biblical laws. Israelite boys were supposed to be circumcised on the eighth day. If a boy was born on a Sabbath, he would have to be circumcised on the following Sabbath day. Either that doesn't count as work, or it does and you violate the Sabbath commandment, or you circumcise the boy on the seventh or ninth day, thus violating another commandment. Sometimes, laws must bend. What's important in those cases is upholding the spirit of the law.

Here's an example we can relate to: We know that lying is wrong. But what if you're living in Europe in the early 1940s, you're hiding Jewish people in your attic or your basement, and Nazis come to your door, asking if any Jews are there. What do you do? Do you lie and save lives, or do you tell the truth and let them be led to slaughter? I know what I would do.

Mature Christian thinking understands this. There are times when we feel like two moral principles are clashing against each other, and we have to find ways to accommodate the spirit of both of those principles. For example, we're called to welcome the sinner, but we have to have safeguards against the destructive power of sin. An abusive person can be forgiven and yet there can still be consequences for that person's behavior.

In this passage, however, Jesus does something besides suggesting that laws can bend. He says that he is the Lord of the Sabbath. "Lord" could be used to address people of authority, but it was also the way God's name, Yahweh, was translated from Hebrew into Greek. And Jesus says he is Lord of the Sabbath. That sounds like he's making a claim to be God. After all, the Sabbath was the "Sabbath to the LORD" (Exod. 16:23, 25; 20:10). Jesus is saying it's his. He owns the Sabbath. And if it's his, he can do what he wants with it. This should have given the Pharisees pause. Jesus is coming quite close to saying he's God.

Let's look at the next paragraph, Luke 6:6–11.

<sup>6</sup> On another Sabbath, he entered the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was withered. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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?" <sup>10</sup> And after looking around at them all he said to him, "Stretch out your hand." And he did so, and his hand was restored.

<sup>11</sup> But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.

It's another Sunday, not necessarily the very next one. The Gospel writers weren't terribly concerned about precise chronology. Luke (and Matthew in Matthew 12 and Mark in Mark 2) wants us to see the connections between these two Sabbaths. On this one, Jesus enters a synagogue and teaches. There happens to be a man with a withered hand there. His hand must have been crippled, his muscles atrophied. Perhaps he had suffered some kind of accident in the past, or perhaps he had a birth defect. The Pharisees and the scribes, the strict religious leaders of the day who were so concerned about how to follow the Old Testament law, carefully watched what Jesus would do. They were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus. They would have loved to have some dirt on him, to put him on trial and put an end to him.

Before I go on, notice the irony. This is a day of a rest, a day of worship. And what do the religious leaders do? They *work* at trying to capture Jesus in some violation. They aren't thinking about God; no, they are looking for a way to trip Jesus up. Who are the ones violating the Sabbath? And who is the one who is maintaining the spirit of the law?

Jesus asks the crippled man to come to him, and then he asks a rhetorical question: "I ask you, is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?" Who could argue with that? Later in Luke's Gospel, during another Sabbath controversy, Jesus will ask, "Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?" (Luke 14:5). Wouldn't you help a person or even an animal that was in trouble, even if it were on a Sabbath?

Confident that no one will argue against healing on the Sabbath, Jesus then asks the man to stretch out his hand. The man does, and when he does, his hand was healed. The man listens to Jesus' voice, does what Jesus tells him to do, and then finds healing. We could say the man had faith that Jesus could heal him, he responded, and Jesus healed him.

One thing we can learn from this episode is that the Sabbath was intended for the good of humanity. It is better to do good than to allow one to suffer.

But think about this: the man with the withered hand was not in dire need of healing. Jesus could have waited until after the Sabbath to heal him, but Jesus intentionally heals him on the Sabbath, even though this wasn't an emergency. In healing on the Sabbath, he was making a point. To understand the point, we need to think about the relationship between sin and Sabbath.

In the Gospels, healing is a physical symbol of the salvation that Jesus offers. All physical problems come from sin, whether directly or indirectly. The reason why anyone gets sick is because the world is tainted by sin, a powerful force of rebellion that entered into the world when the first human beings decided not to trust and obey God. Sin violated the first Sabbath.

Think back to the original Sabbath, the one in Genesis 2. There was nothing but peace and rest. The Sabbath that God commanded Israel to observe was a taste of that peace and rest. It was almost a way of recapturing the original harmony of the world before sin corrupted it. But the Sabbath also pointed to one who would come, a descendant of Eve, of Abraham, of Judah, and of David. It pointed to the Prince of Peace, the only one who can bring rest, the only one who can restore us to harmony with God.

The four Gospels that we have in the Bible have similar material, particularly Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In Matthew's Gospel, right before these two Sabbath controversies that we're reading about today, Jesus said,

<sup>28</sup> Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (Matt. 11:28–30).

The fact that this saying of Jesus comes right before his actions on the Sabbath shows us that Jesus is the true Sabbath. He fulfills the Sabbath. He is one who gives us rest.

But how does Jesus do that?

In the Gospel of Luke, there are seven different Sabbaths. There were two in chapter 4 (Luke 4:16, 31) and now we've seen two in chapter 6. One more appears in chapter 13 (Luke 13:10) and another one comes in chapter 14 (Luke 14:1). I suppose there's no accident that there are seven Sabbaths in Luke's Gospel. Seven is the number of completion or perfection, and the Sabbath is the seventh day of the week. The seventh Sabbath in Luke is the one when Jesus was in the tomb, after he died on the cross. He was killed on Friday, the sixth day of the week, shortly before the beginning of the Sabbath, which began on Friday at sundown. He rested in the tomb on the seventh day of the week, after he completed his work. Remember, on the cross Jesus said, "It is finished" (John 19:30). His work, at least in part, was to come and die for our sins. He completed that work in full when he died on the cross. There is nothing that you and I can do to pay for our sins. Our crimes against God are so great that only the death of the Son of God can



pay for our sins. And we can have our sins paid for if we simply trust in Jesus. He asks us to stretch out our arm to him and if we do that, trusting that he alone can make us right with God, we are healed. No amount of law-keeping makes anyone more righteous. We can't fix ourselves. The only way we can be healed is to rest from our striving to save ourselves and to let God save us. Only Jesus can remove our sin and make us right with God. Only Jesus can get us to heaven. Only Jesus can make us live with God forever.

After Jesus died on the sixth day and rested in the tomb on the Sabbath day, he rose from the grave on the eighth day. Or, we might say that he rose from the grave on the first day of a new week, a new era. For these reasons and others, I believe that Jesus fulfilled the Sabbath for us, just as he fulfilled the demands of the Old Testament law (Matt. 5:17; Rom. 10:4). In the book of Colossians, the apostle Paul writes,

<sup>16</sup> Therefore [because Jesus died for our sins and has given us new hearts—see Col. 2:6–15] let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. <sup>17</sup> These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ (Col. 2:16–17).

The Old Testament Sabbath was meant to point Israel to Jesus. It foreshadowed the rest that only he can give. But now that Jesus has come, we don't need to keep the Sabbath in the way that Israel did. To keep the Sabbath today is to stop striving to save yourself and to start resting in the give of salvation that Jesus has given you.

When Jesus rose from the grave, he was the first installment of a new creation. He established something new. His death inaugurated a new covenant. This new deal promises that God's people will be forgiven of sin, they will have his law written on their hearts by means of the Holy Spirit, and they will truly know him. Jesus' resurrection also promises new life. We don't feel completely at rest in this life. We struggle, and we die. But a day is coming when Jesus will return, when all who have trusted in him will be raised from the grave in bodies that can never die. At that time, God's people will live with God forever in a recreated, or renewed world. They will experience perfect rest.

Again, we can experience some of that rest now, but we also look forward to the ultimate rest that will come when Jesus returns to Earth, when he establishes a new creation. That's why the author of Hebrews says, "So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his" (Heb. 4:9–10). That means we rest from trying to earn our salvation. But we must also work. Jesus said that

God is always working (John 5:17). It's not as though God stopped working on the original seventh day. He always upholds the universe. If God didn't do that, things would cease to exist. So, even though we rest in one sense, we also continue to work. We don't work to earn something from God, but we work because we are thankful, because we love God and he has given us work to do. So, we work and rest, and we urge other people to find rest in Jesus.

The Sabbath is a reminder that each person is spiritually restless and that the only rest available to satisfy our souls is offered by Jesus, who beckons the weary to come to him. Augustine understood this reality when he prayed to the Lord, "You stir men to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."<sup>6</sup>

Nothing else in this world can give our restless souls rest. But in order to receive true rest, we must give up. We must stop working. We must trust that God will provide for us. We must realize that Jesus is our Boss, our Master, our King, and our Lord—the Lord of the Sabbath.

The religious leaders "were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus" (Luke 6:11). Matthew says, "the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him" (Matt. 12:14). How do you respond to Jesus? If you're not resting him, I urge you to do so now. If you don't truly know Jesus as your Lord, I would love to talk with you. But for now, let's pray.

---

<sup>6</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3.