

Healing on the Sabbath
Luke 6:1-16
Exodus 16:9-12; 22-30

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Luke 6:1-16

One Sabbath while Jesus was going through the cornfields, his disciples plucked some heads of grain, rubbed them in their hands, and ate them. But some of the Pharisees said, 'Why are you doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?' Jesus answered, 'Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and gave some to his companions?' Then he said to them, 'The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.'

On another Sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. The scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would cure on the Sabbath, so that they might find an accusation against him. Even though he knew what they were thinking, he said to the man who had the withered hand, 'Come and stand here.' He got up and stood there. Then Jesus said to them, 'I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?' After looking around at all of them, he said to him, 'Stretch out your hand.' He did so, and his hand was restored. But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.

Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

Exodus 16:9-12; 22-30

Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.'" And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud. The Lord spoke to Moses and said, "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'"

On the sixth day they gathered twice as much food, two omers apiece. When all the leaders of the congregation came and told Moses, he said to them, "This is what the Lord has commanded: 'Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord; bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil, and all that is left over put aside to be kept until morning.'" So they put it aside until morning, as Moses commanded them; and it did not become foul, and there were no worms in it. Moses said, "Eat it today, for today is a Sabbath to the Lord; today you will not find it in the field. Six days you shall gather it; but on the seventh day, which is a Sabbath, there will be none." On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather, and they found none. The Lord said to Moses, "How long will you refuse to keep my commandments

and instructions? See! The Lord has given you the Sabbath, therefore on the sixth day he gives you food for two days; each of you stay where you are; do not leave your place on the seventh day.” So the people rested on the seventh day.

Have you ever had one of those times when you just completely missed the point? I know I have.

Whether:

- you added bacon to the veggie burger you served your child’s new vegetarian significant other, or
- you saved ten percent on something you didn’t need because you bought twice as much, or
- you argued about a glass being half-full or half-empty when the water pitcher was sitting next to the glass,

you missed the point.

The Pharisees in today’s story missed the point.

You’d never guess this from reading only the Gospels, but the Pharisees were actually good people. They believed that all the Jewish people would be better off if they obeyed God’s Law. They studied the Law in detail, because you can’t obey the whole Law, they believed, without understanding every word that the Law says. They brought the study of the Law and the Jewish religion out of the Temple into the lives of everyday people. When the Roman Empire destroyed the Temple in 70 A.D., it was the Pharisees who picked themselves up, dusted themselves off, and became the founders of what today we would call modern, synagogue-based Judaism. The Pharisees dined with

Jesus and even warned him about Herod, but they did not do so well with understanding Jesus.¹

In our Gospel story today, some Pharisees saw Jesus' disciples doing what was considered "work" on the Sabbath. They were picking grain and rubbing it between their hands to get the husks off. This may not sound to us today like such a big deal, because our culture works entirely too much on the Sabbath, but this was a violation of the Law. Keeping the Sabbath day holy is in the Top Ten, you know, the Ten Commandments that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai.

Jesus makes reference to a story about David taking God's bread when he was running for his life from King Saul. You can find that story in First Samuel.² In that case, the Law yielded to the more important point, saving life.

Then, on another Sabbath, Jesus heals the withered hand of a man in the synagogue. This time the Pharisees are watching, to see if he will do work again on the Sabbath.

Jesus asks the Pharisees, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?" This is a rhetorical question; they know the answer. It is forbidden to do evil, but legal to do good. And Jesus heals the man's hand.

The Pharisees see Jesus working on the Sabbath, and they are filled with fury at his breaking the Law. Remember, it is not their Law, it is God's Law, and it is worthy of respect, because it comes from God. Jesus never says that the Law should be ignored

¹ Luke 7:36-50, 11:37-54, 14:1-24, 13:31.

² 1 Samuel 21:1-6, to be specific.

or set aside; Jesus says specifically that he comes to fulfill the Law,³ but that's not what it looks like to the Pharisees.

Jesus fulfills the Law, because he understands the purpose of the Law, where the Pharisees understand only the Law.

God gave the people of Israel the Law, with Ten big Commandments and six-hundred-and-thirteen separate commandments regulating their behavior. We know this, because a Pharisee counted them, and generations of Pharisees debated about what constituted a separate commandment and what was merely elaboration on an earlier commandment.

Six hundred and thirteen commandments is a lot. Some of them are incredibly specific, about how types of fabric may be woven together or about how meat may be cooked.⁴

Why did God give the people so many commandments?

Well, think about when you were a little kid, or, more recently, perhaps, when you were raising little kids. There were a lot of rules, weren't there? Some of them got quite specific, because of situations that arose. I only learned as an adult that the reason we all held hands during the prayer before meals when I was growing up was to prevent someone who shall remain nameless from grabbing food while everyone else's eyes were closed.

³ Matthew 5:17

⁴ Leviticus 19:19, Exodus 23:19, respectively.

The reason that little kids need so many rules is that they are not very good at seeing connections and basic principles, so they don't generalize well from one situation to the next. Waiting your turn for the bathroom is not necessarily, in their minds, even connected to not hitting their brother.

So we make rules for kids to allow them to build up the right habits, and let them figure out the principles behind the rules. We wait our turn because it's fair, and we're fair to the other girls and boys because they are God's children, too, just as much as we are, and we should love all of God's children. We don't hit other children because they are God's children, too, just as much as we are.

You see how that works? As kids grow up, they don't need as many rules unless and until they are in new situations. Curfew, for example, usually only becomes an issue when kids can go elsewhere in the evening, and it goes back to the parents being responsible for the kids, and the kids recognizing that. That goes back to honoring your father and mother, which goes back to loving the people who raise you. I did not try to explain all this to the kids in the Children's Sermon, because they're not thinking about the world that way yet. Give them some time, and let the rules help them develop good habits in the meantime.

God tried giving God's people just one rule, in the Garden of Eden. You remember. That didn't work so well.

Then God gave God's people Ten Commandments, and that was not enough. They were breaking the first one with the Golden Calf before Moses even delivered the stone tablets.

So God gave God's people six hundred and thirteen separate commandments, to get them into the right habits. The Law is, ultimately, a teaching tool.

The principles that these commandments all go back to are incredibly simple. It's putting them into action that gets complex. When a Pharisee asked Jesus what the most important commandments were, he responded with a two-part answer that should be very familiar to us all.

He said that, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."⁵ In other words, everything that God has commanded us to do or not do comes from these two basic principles.

The Law comes from two relationships, which we can see in the cross. Just as Jesus fulfilled his relationship with God (**hands over head**) and with humanity (**hands outstretched**) when he died on the cross and was resurrected, we, too, are called to love God (**hands over head**) and our neighbors (**hands outstretched**).

If you really love God with all of your heart, soul, and mind, then you will keep the Sabbath day. After God created the entire universe, starting from nothing, God rested, and God commanded that we rest every seventh day. Even science has proven that we human beings do better when we take time for worship, for prayer, and for appreciation of all the blessings that God has given us. So resting on the Sabbath is, at the same time, showing respect to God, and taking the best possible care of yourself.

And the Sabbath is just one example.

⁵ Matthew 22:34-40.

We don't have to memorize hundreds of specific commandments, if we truly love God and love our neighbors – it will come naturally. But the commandments paint a picture of what those relationships of love look like in action.

If we love our neighbor, we will help him or her when they need help, even on the Sabbath, or even when that help might seem to break another part of the Law. That relationship will be more important to us than the text of the Law, which is, ultimately, a teaching tool.

For Jesus, the relationships are always primary. The Law is a teaching tool, to be followed right up to the point that it breaks those critical relationships. The Law is important, but it is the relationships that are worth living for, and worth dying for.

If we are going to follow Jesus, then we need to follow him in this, too. Even when He leads to the foot of the Cross.

AMEN.