

# The Son of Man Is Lord of the Sabbath

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## Introduction

### The Text

<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.”

<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. (Luke 6:1–11)

### Tired—Outside and In

A. Is anyone tired in this room this morning? Is anyone just exhausted?

1. You know I feel this way often. I’m the father of a 5 year old, 3 year old, and a newborn. I’m the only full-time pastor at this church. I’m tired. I fear my eyes tell the story all too eloquently.

B. But there can be another layer to this, right? Certainly we can be tired on a physical level due to the strenuous nature of our lives, maybe we’ve been struggling with insomnia, etc.

1. But then there’s this tiredness of soul, something inside, something that we feel because of what’s going on in here—the crushing burdens of the heart, the guilt and the shame, the weight of our legalism, the tangling of relationships, the endless efforts of people-pleasing, etc. We’re just tired of it!

- a. We might be getting eight hours of sleep a night but we still can’t shake the exhaustion that has us by the ankles.

C. If that’s where you’re at, with me, we need to hear this this morning: Jesus has come to give us rest, and, what’s more, He has the authority to do so.

## The Outline

- A. The thesis, the main point, of this sermon I would just lift straight out of v. 5: “The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.” He has all authority and He uses that authority to bless—particularly through the disposal of much needed rest (for both body and soul).
  - 1. This claim is made in vv. 1-5.
  - 2. This claim is manifested in vv. 6-11.
- B. There’s my thesis and my outline. Let’s go!

## (1) The Claim Made (vv. 1-5)

### Understanding the Sabbath

- A. Luke begins in v. 1 with the important contextual detail: “On the Sabbath . . .” Everything that goes down in vv. 1-5 is taking place on the Sabbath. And, of course, the second scene found in vv. 6-11, begins essentially the same way: “On another Sabbath . . .” (v. 6).
  - 1. So clearly Luke is wanting us to see something here about the Sabbath and its relationship to Jesus Christ.
- B. So before we can go any further, we must make sure we understand what the Sabbath even is.
  - 1. To help us here, let me quickly answer three questions: (1) What is the Sabbath?; (2) Why did God establish the Sabbath?; and (3) Where did Israel’s understanding and practice of the Sabbath go wrong?

### (1) What Is the Sabbath?

- A. “Sabbath” is a word transliterated from the Hebrew word shabbat—meaning “rest”. Technically speaking: “The term designates the seventh day of the Jewish week, a day marked by the cessation of work and by religious and ceremonial observances” (Westerholm, DJG).

### (2) Why Did God Establish the Sabbath?

- A. I might come quickly at an answer here by identifying three key words: (1) Reflection; (2) Remembrance; and (3) Refreshment.
- B. Reflection: In the first place, we see that God commands Israel to keep the Sabbath because it reflects His own activity in creation (Gen 2:3). Six days He worked and, on the seventh, He rested.
  - 1. Men and women, created in His image, were designed to live along the pattern laid out by the Divine and ultimately are to enter into His rest with Him. Israel was to reflect something of who God is and what He is like in their keeping of the Sabbath.
- C. Remembrance: Second, we see that it was established as a memory aid to help them remember God as their Creator and Redeemer.

1. When keeping the Sabbath is commanded in [Exo 20:8-11](#), the rationale given points back to God as Creator: “<sup>8</sup> Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. . . . <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” (vv. 8, 11).

a. In other words: “Keep the Sabbath as a way of remembering the One who made you.”

2. And then in [Deut 5:12-15](#), when the command is given again by Moses to Israel as they stood on the edge of the Promised Land, the rationale this time points them back to God as Redeemer: “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” (v. 15).

a. When Israel would close up shop and rest on the seventh day, it would be an opportunity for them to remember who their God is. “He’s made me, He’s redeemed me, He’s got me, I can stop, I can rest.”

i. We can almost be like kids again. My girls don’t wake up worried about whether food will be there for them at the breakfast table. It’s my job to worry about that. Their job is to worry about what toys they’ll play with, what books they’ll read, what movies they’ll watch. “My daddy’s got all that other stuff!”

(1) The Sabbath is a call for us to remember: “My Creator, my Redeemer, my Father’s got me. I can rest.”

D. Refreshment: Third, we see that the Sabbath was given to bring refreshment to God’s people and, really, to all of creation: “Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; that your ox and your donkey may have rest, and the son of your servant woman, and the alien, may be refreshed” ([Ex 23:12](#)).

1. “Refreshed” in the Hebrew [nafash] means: “to breathe freely”.

a. Have you ever packed up your car, driven out of the city and headed up to the mountains? What do you do when you get out of your car? You “breathe freely”. That’s what God designed the Sabbath to be in Israel!

E. In all of this, I suppose, if we had to give only one simple answer to the question—“Why did God establish the Sabbath in Israel?”—we could simply say: He established it for their good, to bless them.

### (3) Where Did Israel’s Understanding and Practice of the Sabbath Go Wrong?

A. Clearly the Sabbath as established by God is a beautiful thing, but it becomes in second temple Judaism, under influence of the Pharisees, a sort of monstrosity of rules and regulations—all these things appended to the Sabbath in such a way that its original beauty is almost indiscernible.

- B. Now, we are always so prone to demonize the Pharisees, but really we should, in many ways, sympathize with them—learn from their mistakes, yes, but sympathize with them. Let me explain.
- C. The Pharisees have legitimate reasons for their hyper-caution concerning Sabbath-breaking at this point in Israel’s history. After all, Israel’s breaking of the Sabbath is one of the key reasons God gave for sending Israel into exile generations before (2 Chr 36:20-21; Ezek 20:10-26).
  - 1. But then, when Israel returns to the land some 70 years later, they are still prone to the same kind of tendencies and temptations (Neh 13:15-18).
    - a. By the end of the OT and moving into time between the testaments, there were many in Israel giving way to the increasing pressures of Hellenization. Israelites were turning away from YHWH once again and giving their hearts to the false gods and customs of their pagan neighbors.
- D. The Pharisees arose in this period, between the testaments, as a counter movement calling Israel back to YHWH and His law. We might see them as heroes. They would not bend to the culture around them. They would not permit even a whiff of disobedience to the Law.
  - 1. So they created what has been called a fence around the law. “I don’t even want to get close to breaking it. So let’s identify activities that are on the periphery and not even do those.”
    - a. In the case of Sabbath, the whole issue turned on the definition of “work”. If keeping Sabbath is cessation from work, well, what is work? So they came up with 39 different categories of activities that constituted work.

## A Fourfold Violation!

- A. And in vv. 1-5 of our text, Jesus and His disciples are guilty of four of them! “On a Sabbath, while he was going through the grainfields, his disciples plucked and ate some heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands” (v. 1).
  - 1. One commentator notes: “The Pharisees would find in the plucking of the [heads of grain] a breach of the regulation which forbade reaping and in the rubbing [of them] in their hands [a breach of] that which prohibited threshing. Throwing away the husks probably represented winnowing, while eating showed that they had prepared food. Four distinct breaches of the sabbath in one mouthful!” (Morris, TNTC).
- B. How is Jesus going to get out of this? The Pharisees immediately object: “Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?” (v. 2).
  - 1. But Jesus doesn’t respond to their objection by defending His and His disciples’ actions as lawful. He doesn’t directly slam Pharisaic additions to Sabbath law as absurd. Instead, He: (1) reminds them of the Sabbath’s true aim; and (2) introduces them to the Sabbath’s true Author.

## (1) The Sabbath's True Aim

- A. He reminds them of the Sabbath's true aim, by recalling a story from the OT: “<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?” (vv. 3-4).
1. The story Jesus refers to is found in [1 Sam 21:1-6](#). At this point, David was running from Saul, and he and his men were hungry. When they came to the tabernacle, he asked one of the priests for food. But the priest had no food except for the bread of the Presence, which was kept in the Holy Place of the tabernacle and, according to [Lev 24:9](#), was only for the priests to eat.
    - a. But David took it, ate it, and gave it to his men—on the surface, an unlawful act!
- B. So what is Jesus getting at here? He's getting at the true aim of God's law, generally speaking.
1. Every law of God has been put in place to serve the cause of love and compassion. Therefore, when David and his men show up hungry, though the act of giving them the showbread is unlawful on the surface, because it is given in love and compassion for them it truly fulfills the law in its deepest design.
- C. This perhaps can be seen most clearly in the question that Jesus asks down in [v. 9](#).
1. The Pharisees had trouble not just with feeding hungry people on the Sabbath but with healing hurting people. They made exception for those cases of emergency, but, if it wasn't an emergency, to help a hurting person would be work in violation of the Sabbath.
    - a. So Jesus says to this brother with the withered right hand: “Come and stand here” ([v. 8](#)). And as he's standing there, Jesus turns to the Pharisees and asks: “[I]s it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?”
- D. His point is crystal clear. As Westerholm puts it: “[D]oing ‘good’ can never be wrong on the Sabbath” (DJG). That's the point of the Sabbath—to do good to men; to give refreshment to us.
1. As Jesus would say in Mark's account of this story: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” ([Mark 2:27](#)). Men weren't made to serve the Sabbath, the Sabbath was made to serve men.
  2. Or, as Jesus would say in Matthew's account of this story: “[I]f you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless” ([Matt 12:7](#)). “You get stuck on the letter of the law, on the sacrifices and the Sabbaths. But all of these are meant to get into your heart and make you merciful towards others as you see how your God has been merciful towards you!”
  3. As Jesus would say later in [Matt 22:37-40](#): “Love for God, and love for neighbor”—“On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” ([v. 40](#)). The law, the Sabbath, exists to serve the cause of love.

- E. “Therefore, how can feeding the hungry, or healing the crippled, be unlawful on the Sabbath?! What I am doing is the true aim of the Sabbath!” . . .

## (2) The Sabbath’s True Author

- A. “And just in case you want to question me on this...I am also the Sabbath’s true Author”: “And he said to them, ‘The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath’” (v. 5).
  - 1. We have ascended now to this staggering Christological claim. As “Lord”, we understand that He has all authority, power, sovereignty. As Lord “of the Sabbath”, we understand that He uses His great might to give rest and refreshment to His creatures.
- B. There is no God like ours! I don’t know where you’ve been trying to find rest, brothers and sisters, but only Jesus both desires to give it, and has the full authority and power to deliver it: “The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.”

## (2) The Claim Manifested (vv. 6-11)

- A. Because He knows the Pharisees will call “bluff” on this claim, the next scene in vv. 6-11 is given to us by Luke to show how Jesus irrefutably vindicates it. He not only makes the claim, He manifests it: “On another Sabbath . . . | right hand . . . withered . . . | ‘Stretch [it] out . . .’ | hand . . . restored.” Hallelujah, what a Savior!

## Conclusion

- A. As we draw things to a close, there is both a wonder and a warning for us in this text.

### (1) The Warning

- A. First, the warning. I mentioned earlier that we can sympathize with the Pharisees concern for Sabbath-breaking, but that we must learn from their deadly mistake.
  - 1. In all their concern for the letter of the law, they missed the spirit of it. They turned the law into a ladder up which they could climb to look down on others, totally missing that the law was meant to lead them in the ways of neighborly love.
- B. And we must know that we are prone to very same sort of thing! We too can walk in the way of the Pharisees:
  - 1. when we care more about laws than love;
  - 2. when we’re more passionate about keeping people out than inviting them in;
  - 3. when we get more excited about argument than agreement;
  - 4. when we are more aware of what’s wrong with a person than what’s right;
  - 5. when we start watching for people to make mistakes so that we can have the pleasure of correcting or accusing them: “[T]he 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” (v. 7).

C. But, as Paul would say in Eph 4:20: “[This] is not the way [we] learned Christ!”

## (2) The Wonder

- A. Now, for the wonder. When Jesus manifests His lordship over the Sabbath in the healing of this man’s hand, we His people celebrate, but the Pharisees are furious: “But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus” (v. 11).
- B. With this verse we are pointed forward to the ultimate way Christ will manifest His claim as Lord of the Sabbath. Namely, in His death and resurrection.
1. For the Pharisees will try to destroy Him. They kill Him on that cross, and then His body is laid in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea on what day, do you remember? “[T]he Sabbath” (Luke 23:54).
    - a. And as He lay in that tomb, one can imagine the Pharisees saying to themselves: “Finally, now at last He will cease working on the Sabbath. For He’s dead.”
- C. But little did they know, Christ saved His greatest work of compassion for this His last Sabbath on the earth.
1. For Jesus is not just feeding a few hungry disciples here. He’s not just healing one man’s withered hand here. With His body broken like bread He will feed the world! With His nail-pierced hands He will heal not just body but soul, and not just in part but in whole, and not just of one person but of all whom the Father has given Him!
    - a. And “after making purification for sins”, and rising up from the dead, the author of Hebrews writes: “He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (1:3). His work of redemption is finished and He has entered into His eternal Sabbath rest.
      - i. And it’s a rest we too can enter in Him by faith.
- D. Immediately preceding Matthew’s recording of the two Sabbath day stories in our text, he records Jesus crying out to any who would hear: “<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).
1. The Pharisees, in all their concern for rest, only heap work upon work, burden upon burden. The burden of religion without relationship, law without grace, duty without delight, godliness without God.
    - a. Some of us have been languishing under that weight. “I’ve got to try harder. I’ve got to clean myself up. Christianity just feels like a burden. I can’t keep up with all the rituals and rules.”

2. But Jesus is saying, "Enough! Come to Me! Come to Me! Come to Me! All who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. The Sabbath finds its fulfillment, and your body and soul find their rest, in Me."