

Jesus: Lawmaker and lawbreaker

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To be a faithful Jewish man or woman in the first century (at least according to the religious leaders), there were a few of things that you needed to do. You needed to practice the ritual of circumcision in your family. You needed to obey the dietary laws found in the Torah, and you had to keep the Sabbath Day holy. And if there was a pet command of the scribes and religious leaders, it was probably the Sabbath. Circumcision? Shoot, that's a one and done deal. Circumcision was so automatic that the Jewish people did that without thinking about it... it's just what you did for a baby, kind of like getting a baby's footprint she's born. The dietary laws were not one and done; they were something that was practiced on a daily basis, but there was a private aspect to observing this law. It was hard to see and know if people were actually obeying the dietary requirements of the law. The Sabbath was the one command that was regular and pretty easy to observe. It tested the true mettle and faithfulness of a Jewish person. And the Pharisees, the scribes and religious leaders were the Sabbath police, making sure everybody did what they were supposed to do. No work. No planting or harvesting. Only leisurely Sunday walks; no business travel with a solid pace. All non-urgent medical care had to wait for another day. And if you became a little relaxed in those rules, the Pharisees would get you back in line.

You were a "good, religious person" if the form of your life, the structure of your religious practice aligned with the Sabbath police. Now, let me say this: there were very good reasons to care very deeply about obeying God's commands about circumcision, the dietary and Sabbath laws among many others. Let me take you back in time. The year is 458 BC. You and your family have lived in Babylon for... well, your whole life. But you're not Babylonian; you're an Israelite. Over 70 years ago, your grandparents were forced to live in this foreign land with foreign cultural values and beliefs. That's all you know; you've been a prisoner of war your whole life. An exile who's lived in a foreign land.

But now, Ezra, this godly leader, is bringing you home for the first time. And as you return to the Promised Land your heart sinks; you wonder, "This is the land flowing with milk and honey? This is our glorious homeland?" The fields are overrun by weeds; the towns are sad shells of what they used to be with burned and toppled houses. Reconstruction has begun in your capital city, but nobody feels safe there either. So you ask Ezra, "How did this happen? Why did God send us away? How come the land is full of weeds? Why did so many die in war and so many more get driven from our home? And where was God?" And Ezra tells you, "God didn't abandon us; we abandoned him. We ignored his words; our forefathers worshipped other gods. The rich oppressed the poor; the priests refused to tell the people the true words of God; adultery was common and we didn't keep God's Sabbaths." And then Ezra says with piercing clarity, "If we only would have obeyed God. If we only would have kept his commandments. God told us everything we needed to do; if only we would have taken God's law more seriously."

So, let me ask you: would you try to keep the Sabbath? You better believe it, right? So, it's not that these religious leaders were wrong in trying to make sure that this new and improving Israel would keep God's commands; they were wrong in elevating the form, valuing the structure of religious life rather than elevating, glorifying and valuing the God their religion was pointing to. They took the rules more seriously than they took their own devotion to God himself.

And once again, just like last week's message, just like the passage before in Luke 5, we see the Pharisees worrying about the form of religion rather than the object of religion, God himself. Let's see how it works this week (READ Luke 6:1-11).

Many times, the subtitles added by the publishing companies of our Bibles help us see the structure of a text (just like chapter numbers or verse numbers), but not always; remember, none of those things were a part of the original text. In vs. 6 when Luke says, "On another Sabbath," he clearly is showing how these two episodes go together (that's where the subtitle here is a little unhelpful; it looks like a new section when it's not). Both times we have challenges to Jesus and both times they are related to the Sabbath.

The heart of the issue has to do with authority. Who gets to decide what the law is teaching? Who gets the final say in what a law means? In this first episode, the Pharisees again criticize the disciples of Jesus for doing something unlawful. It's not clear that they actually were. In the OT, the Torah makes a distinction between plucking grain or produce in a field and harvesting it - Luke says the disciples were plucking grain. Harvesting grain is work; plucking grain is not, the argument goes. So, it's not clear that the disciples actually broke the law. But, to a hypersensitive religious authority, they got too close to the line.

But Jesus doesn't argue that with them. He doesn't defend his disciples against their accusation. He takes a different tactic. He brings up this story from the OT about David. King David did not have a peaceful and glorious coronation to the throne of Israel. Instead, he was on the run for many years as King Saul, jealous for his throne, was trying to hunt David down and kill him. So, David would hide from place to place with his renegade militia. One time, David stops in Nob while he's on the run famished from his journey. David asked Ahimelech the priest for some food and water. Ahimelech says, "We have no common bread, only that which is holy," which Jesus rightly calls in Luke 6 the Bread of the Presence. That holy bread was ceremonial and only suitable for the priest. What does a guy do? Ahimelech, the priest, gave David and his men the bread and David took it and ate even though it was reserved only for the priests.

It seems like they broke the law of the Lord. Jesus flat out says it, right? Jesus says in vs. 4 that they did that "which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those with him." We've got this dilemma then. It seems that we've got this law that's good and right; it serves a good purpose of worship to God. Yet, there's this situation that requires urgent action to take care of people in need. Do you break the law?

What would you do? I know some of you are rule followers. I'm glad you are. For the most part, you've lived fruitful, productive lives. My dad was a rule follower. He didn't take a lot of risks in life; he was a pretty conservative man in that way. Sure, rule followers miss out on some opportunities because they are so committed to the rules, but that's ok... it wasn't worth the risk. Others of you are risk takers; by that I don't mean dare-devils or thrill-seekers. I mean you're not afraid to break a rule, to stretch beyond the status quo. It's served you well. You've enjoyed some benefits that many others haven't enjoyed because they weren't willing to take the risk. You've also paid the price for a few mistakes along the way. But, you say, that's ok because you felt it was worth the risk.

Some of you would take the Bread of the Presence and have fed David; others of you wouldn't have because you are a rule follower. Jesus doesn't fit into one of our camps. He doesn't identify with the rule followers or the risk takers. Instead, he says, "I'm the law giver and I get to decide what's lawful or not." Look at the big idea of Jesus' words in vs. 5, "And he said to them, 'The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.'"

Woah! That might be the most radical thing Jesus has said to this point; that's equal with Jesus claiming to be the Son of Man, the divine Messiah prophesied in Daniel. Lord of the Sabbath! That's Jesus saying, "I'm the boss of what happens on the Sabbath. I'm the one who decides what's lawful and not lawful."

That's a lot of power, isn't it? The one who gets to decide what's lawful. The Supreme Court has been in the news a lot this summer. What's their job? To decide what's lawful. Some of you might think they are doing a great job; others of you may not (that's not the point right now). Here's the point: that's a lot of power. And Jesus is claiming that power for himself.

Immediately, the text jumps to the next episode. Jesus is about to assert his authoritative power. Here's the scene. We're in a synagogue, which was a place of religious teaching and worship. It was different from the temple, which was the place of residence for God's presence with the people in Jerusalem. Vs. 7 says the religious leaders were there with a purpose in mind. It says they were watching him seeing if he would heal (Jesus is known for that, you might remember) on the Sabbath and if so they could accuse him. They weren't too impressed.

Jesus is an instigator in this story, isn't he? The man with the withered hand didn't ask Jesus to heal him; there was no pressure from anybody else. Jesus is the one who scans the audience; he's the one who knows the thoughts of the scribes and he's the one who puts his healing power on display. Consider what Jesus could have done. Jesus could have waited the next day to heal the man. Jesus could have pulled the man aside; he could have went around the corner, healed the man in private so as not to upset anybody. What does Jesus do? Look at vs. 8-10 (READ).

Notice Jesus' question: what's lawful? or what does the law require? He's going back and talking about what he said before: I'm lord of the Sabbath, meaning I decide what is lawful.

But now he's asking everyone else. Where do you stand? Is it lawful to do good or evil on the Sabbath?

What do we call the desire and the act of doing good to others? What is it that compels a person to act in the best interest of another person? We call that love, don't we? Love isn't a warm, fuzzy feeling. Love isn't thinking of doing something nice, but then getting distracted. Love is wanting to do someone good and then actually doing it. And what is Jesus implicitly saying with this rhetorical question to the masses? That's what the Sabbath is for. The Sabbath is for doing good; the Sabbath is showing and acting in loving ways to your neighbor. And here's what Jesus is getting at: that's what the Sabbath is for... love.

Being corrected is hard. It's humbling. That's what Jesus is doing with the scribes. He correcting them. As he clarifies his lordship over the Sabbath and explains that the laws that govern the Sabbath are expressions of love for God and neighbor, the scribes and Pharisees have a couple of options. They can stand corrected in humility and the repent. They can acknowledge Jesus' lordship; they can admit they were missing the heart of the Sabbath law of love. And in so doing, they would be aligning themselves with Jesus and God the Father.

They don't pick that option. Instead, in pride they dug their heels into the ground. Look at vs. 11, "But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus." Their patience has run out with Jesus. Jesus has corrected the Pharisees time and again. First, with Levi, Jesus said that repenters are the one's God forgives and accepts. Next, he rebukes these religious leaders for picking religious piety and form over him. Finally, they reject Jesus' lordship over the Sabbath and rather than agreeing with him that the Sabbath is indeed made to express the love of God, they hate Jesus more for saying so.

This is what Jesus' ministry looks like, friends. This is what we are signing up for when we follow Jesus. We agree with Jesus that we, too, will accept repenters like he accepts repenters no matter what they look like, sound like or smell like. We don't approve of people because of their external appearance or performance. Also, like Jesus, we won't value religious form, structure and methods more than a devotion and love of Christ. We will only teach and promote religious activities like Bible reading, prayer, church involvement, giving, serving, you name it in a way that highlights and showcases the glory of Jesus Christ not my glory for doing such a great job of following the rules. Faith is about him. Finally, true religion is based on Jesus' authority (meaning, Jesus always has and always will define what his way and kingdom is like). We do what he says; we rejoice in what he rejoices in. What Jesus says is good we will say is good and what Jesus says is harmful and evil we will agree with him and call the same things harmful and evil. But this true religion that's based on Jesus' authority and lordship has a result and that result is the good of others. Jesus' law is love and because of that we will work for the good of others. Sometimes, people will be really glad we're working for their good. Other times, they may not. But what people think isn't our top concern; what Jesus thinks will be our top concern.

What's one area, friends, you'd like prayer for? What's one area we've talked about in this section in Luke where you're thinking, "I want to be more like Jesus?" Is it accepting and loving repenters? Is it not being so wrapped up in your religious methods and missing Jesus? Or maybe it's struggling to trust in the lordship of Jesus; you think you know better than him? Spend a minute now and just ask God for mercy and then I'll close.

Questions for the week

- What might be some differences between following laws versus following the law giver?
- If God's laws are meant to encourage love for others, how might that help you understand, interpret and apply God's law in your life?
- How important is to define love correctly if that's what motivates our actions and helps us discern God's law? What might happen if we define love wrongly?