

March 27, 2022

**The Gospel of Luke**  
**XVI. The Lord of the Sabbath**  
**Luke 6:1-16**

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I came across this quote some years back – it’s one that I return to from time to time. It’s from a sermon by Edmund Steimle, a Lutheran pastor and seminary professor from the middle part of the last century – the sermon is entitled, “When Religion Is a Burden”:

*If your religion has become a burden to you, take it down and have a good long look – at the center of it. Because that is where the trouble lies. For religion is very much like falling in love. If you fall in love at the edges, with money or good looks, or out of a sense of responsibility, your marriage is headed straight for trouble . . . Fall in love with a person at the center, and the edges will pretty much take care of themselves. So with religion. Let the edges of it – duty, or creeds, or a church with its ceremonies and organizational machinery – elbow God out of the center of it and it is no better than [a wooden idol, an] intolerable burden to be hoisted and hauled. And heaven knows we’ve got enough burdens in life without piling religion on top of them! But fall in love with God at the center, and the edges of life, with the duties, the creeds, the ceremonies, and the machinery will pretty much take care of themselves.<sup>1</sup>*

“Take a look at the center of it . . . fall in love with God at the center.” In a nutshell, that’s what I think our two Sabbath scenes are about this morning. What Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath, is trying to teach the Pharisees, and trying also to teach us: keep your faith focused on the center.

For the center of true religion is neither the commandments nor the creed, neither the observances nor even the obedience. At the center of true religion is God Himself – His love for us, answered by our love for Him. And around that center, very closely encircling, are those whom, like us, God has gathered to Himself through His love – His love for us awakening in us a desire and a capacity to love one another in God’s name and for God’s sake. This is the heart of true religion – relationships, not rules. Just as Jesus so plainly told us – that the center of it all is that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength; and, also, that we love our neighbor as ourselves.<sup>2</sup> That is the center.

But it is so easy to lose sight of this. So easy to substitute lesser things for these greatest things. To turn our religion into a series of moral rules to be followed, essential doctrines to be believed, rituals to be observed. All of which, of course, have their place. But their place is not at the center. At the center, always, is Jesus. And that is what the Pharisees had lost sight of – and what we must never lose sight of. The Pharisees had so lost hold of the center of their faith that they couldn't even recognize Him when He came and stood before them.

And that's what our two Sabbath scenes are about. Mind you, it is very tempting for the preacher, including this preacher, to want to take these two Sabbath scenes and turn them into lecture about how important it is to come to church on the Sabbath, every Sabbath – a temptation which has only grown now that Covid has so disrupted our regular patterns of worship attendance. But that would be to make the same mistake as the Pharisees – losing the forest for the trees, losing the center for the periphery. It is important, vitally important, that we are in worship every Sunday – Jesus expects no less of us. But these Sabbath scenes aren't about the keeping of the Sabbath. They are about what is central in religion – the Lord of the Sabbath.

Sabbath scene number one. Jesus and His disciples are walking through a grainfield on the Sabbath day, plucking and eating grain as they go. The Pharisees see them doing this and immediately accuse them of violating the rules of the Sabbath. According to these rules (man-made, by the way), harvesting grain on the Sabbath constitutes work, and we are commanded by God not to work on the Sabbath. Jesus answers their accusation in what is, on the surface, a somewhat curious way. He references an Old Testament story about David, when David and his men were fleeing the murderous jealousy of King Saul and, famished, entered the Tabernacle and ate of the sacred bread on the altar, which was forbidden for them to eat.<sup>3</sup> It sounds like Jesus is making a simple argument about the rules of the Sabbath – simply that there is Old Testament precedence for occasionally, under the right sort of circumstances, breaking the rules.

But that's not what Jesus is doing. In fact, His argument has nothing to do with the rules of the Sabbath whatsoever. For that matter, David's story has nothing to do with the Sabbath – it is not said in that story anywhere that David did this on a Sabbath day. So, Jesus' argument actually has nothing to do with the rules regarding His disciples eating grain on the Sabbath. Rather it has to do, entirely, with the identity of the One who is the Lord of the Sabbath. That's what the disciples are getting right, even as they munch on that Sabbath grain – and that's what the Pharisees are getting completely wrong.

Here's what Jesus is actually saying to the Pharisees. David, at that point in his life, had already been anointed by the prophet Samuel as the next king over Israel. But King Saul was still on the throne, and Saul had sworn to kill David. Fleeing from Saul, and famished from the flight, David and his men eat of the Bread of the Presence. But then comes the key statement in Jesus' argument: *“The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.”* Not, *“Since David did it, we can do it.”* But rather, *“The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.”*

In other words, Jesus is not using David as an argument for breaking the rules of the Sabbath, Jesus is using David's story as a parallel to His own story. Jesus, at this point in His ministry, has already been named by the Father as the Messiah, as God's promised King to rule over His people forever – the very One the Pharisees claim to be awaiting. But Jesus, like David,

has not yet ascended to His throne. In fact, like David, He is facing strong opposition to His rule. Which means, Pharisees, Jesus is saying, that the critical issue here, the central religious matter here, is not this petty business of grain eaten on the Sabbath, but whether or not you recognize your King, who it is standing right in front of you – the Lord of the Sabbath!

You Pharisees, He is saying, are so concerned about enforcing the details of the Sabbath rules that you are completely missing the whole point of the Sabbath – which is to bow down before the One to be worshipped on the Sabbath. The Lord of the Sabbath, the very God you seek to honor through your Sabbath rules and regulations, is standing right in front of you, speaking to you. And you do not see Him. You do not know Him. You are too busy missing the forest for the trees. Missing right relationship with the Messiah by your petty passion for right Sabbath practices. Missing the heart of your religion because of your obsession over the peripheries. *“The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath”* – and He’s right here, right now, in your midst!

That’s the argument Jesus is making to the Pharisees by citing David’s story. And they don’t see it. They don’t see Him. They are so busy being “religious” around the edges of creeds and doctrines, laws and practices, that they don’t see and recognize the One who is what their religion is all about – *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.”* Not rules, but relationship. Not Sabbath, but the Savior we worship on the Sabbath. Not moral lines drawn in stone, but love abounding in our hearts for the One who is and is forever to be our King. The Pharisees are a study in completely missing the point.

What about us? Is Jesus, knowing Jesus and loving Jesus and being in active, daily relationship with Jesus what our religion is all about? Is He at the center of it all – not stuff about Jesus, beliefs and moral principles, but Jesus Himself? And not just at the center of our religion, but at the very center of our very existence? Or are we, too, in danger of missing the point?

John Donne, the sixteenth century English poet and pastor, once wrote, *“I neglect God for the noise of a fly, the rattling of a coach, the creaking of a door.”*<sup>4</sup> Peter Marty, a present-day Lutheran pastor and editor of the Christian Century magazine, states that we could update his language – but we pretty well already get his point: we continually let other things get in the way of God, push God from out of the center. *“God becomes irrelevant to the organization of our day,”* writes Marty. *“We shutter our eyes to the very One who would love to partner with us in so many interesting ways.”* And then he continues:

*Great wells of ink have been spilled over the centuries by people pondering the absence of God. Generation upon generation of people have wondered why God is not exactly in the place they would wish for God to be when they are in crisis. They may not inquire much about the presence or existence of God when the wheels of life are turning smoothly, but when things go awry, the Lord often catches the most heat. I have begun to wonder why we do not ask more questions about our absence from God instead of God’s absence from us. Why should God be the only required to make a command performance and show up according to our*

*desires? Our absenteeism from the Lord is more than a little conspicuous.*<sup>5</sup>

“*The Son of man is lord of the Sabbath.*” Meaning, for the Pharisees and for us, that Jesus – relationship with Jesus, not merely words and thoughts about Jesus, but Jesus Himself – is to be at the center of our religion. Relationship, not rules. Loving God, not merely the things we believe and do with regard to God.

Sabbath scene number two. Jesus and His disciples, with the Pharisees watching His every move, enter a synagogue on another Sabbath day. There, in the synagogue, is a man with a withered hand. Jesus can read the thoughts of those Pharisees – will He or won’t He violate the Sabbath rules by healing this man? Jesus calls the man to come stand beside Him in the center of the room. And then He addresses the Pharisees: “*I ask you, is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?*” What He is really asking them is whether or not they really believe their Sabbath rules take precedence even over the well-being of their brother standing before them – whether their rules regarding right Sabbath observance outweigh even the need of a fellow human being. Jesus is asking them, in effect and once again, whether they really believe that rules are more important than relationships – whether avoiding work on the Sabbath is more important than the responsibility, the possibility of acting in love toward one who is our neighbor. “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*”

The Pharisees answer Him, tell Him all He needs to know, by their silence. They have failed to recognize Him as their Lord of the Sabbath, and now they fail to recognize this man as the neighbor they have been commanded to love. Once again, they have missed the forest for the trees, missed the center of religion for the periphery, missed the glory and goodness of self-giving, other-serving for a self-serving piety and other-ignoring morality. In response to their silence, Jesus looks them in the eyes, one by one says our text. What must have been written upon His face? Anger, maybe? Disappointment, almost certainly. In any case, Jesus tells the man to stretch out his hand – and, as he does so, his hand is restored, on the Sabbath. Because “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*”

Henri Nouwen, the Catholic priest and author, whose words and insights have blessed so many, tells this story in one of his books:

*One day a young fugitive, trying to hide himself from the enemy, entered a small village. The people were kind to him and offered him a place to stay. But when the soldiers who sought the fugitive asked where he was hiding, everyone became very fearful. The soldiers threatened to burn the village and kill every man in it unless the young man were handed over to them before dawn. The people went to the minister and asked him what to do. The minister, torn between handing over the boy to the enemy or having his people killed, withdrew to his room and read his Bible, hoping to find an answer before dawn. After many hours, in the early morning his eyes fell on these words: “It is better that one man dies than that the whole people be lost.”*

*Then the minister closed the Bible, called the soldiers and told them where the boy was hidden. And after the soldiers led the fugitive away to be killed, there was a feast in the village because the minister had saved the lives of the people. But the minister did not celebrate. Overcome with a deep sadness, he remained in his room. That night an angel came to him, and asked, "What have you done?" He said: "I handed over the fugitive to the enemy." Then the angel said: "But don't you know that you have handed over the Messiah?" "How could I know?" the minister replied anxiously. Then the angel said: "If, instead of reading your Bible, you had visited the young man just once and looked into his eyes, you would have known."<sup>6</sup>*

*"You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But the Pharisees, who had refused to recognize Him as the Lord of the Sabbath, refuse also to recognize Him in the eyes of their neighbor, that man with the withered hand. "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me."<sup>7</sup>*

*"The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath." The Pharisees are so busy protecting their precious religious rules that they have lost hold of what is central in their religion: loving relationship with the Lord their God, loving relationship with their neighbor. Relationships, not rules. Just as pastor Steimle said: "If your religion has become a burden for you, take it down and have a good long look – at the center of it. Because that is where the trouble lies. [True] religion is very much like falling in love."*

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund A. Steimle, Are You Looking for God? (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), p. 64.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 12:29-31.

<sup>3</sup> See I Samuel 21:1-6

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Peter W. Marty, The Anatomy of Grace (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 2008), p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> Marty, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, The Wounded Healer (New York: Doubleday, 1972), pp. 25-26.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 25:40.