



Luke 6:1-5, 6-11

“What Matters Most?”

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“Following Christ from City Center”

LUKE 6:1-5, 6-11 "WHAT MATTERS MOST?"

//Mk. 2:23-3:6, Mt. 12:1-14

VB1') 6:1-5 SABBATH CONTROVERSY: HUMAN NEED = HUNGER.

Section 5:17-6:19

Judicial Form: Violation + Charge + Refutation + Conclusion

a) vv.1-2 Setting And Question.

Sabbath (3x): + Command, Ex. 20:8-11; 31:14-15; 35:2; Deut. 5:12-15

Dependent/Forage, 8:1-3, Travel To Next *Divine Appointment*

1 It happened on a **sabbath**, while he was going through the grainfields,

Edge, Four forms of Sabbath work:

2 his disciples plucked and ate some heads of grain,

Work = 1) walking, 2) reaping, 3) threshing, 4) preparing

3 rubbing them in their hands.

Josephus *Ag. Ap.* 2:27, Ex. 34:21, Dt. 23:25 But No Harvesting

Not Working v. Holy By Bringing The Kingdom Of God

b) v.2 Pharisees' Question What Is Lawful?

Pirke Aboth 1.1 = Hedge Around Sabbath

Analogy, How Does Jesus Relate To Key Tradition/Practices

2 But some of the Pharisees said,

Warning, God's Religious Police: Pharisees

"Why are you (pl.) doing what is not lawful to do on the **sabbath**?"

m. Hag. 1.8, m. 'Abot., m. Sabb. 7.2

Ex. 34:21, Defensive Piety v. Paganism, God's Wrath, Dt. 28:15-68

b) vv.3-5 Jesus Counter-Question Response: Scripture, Mission, Son of Man.

Concedes Violation Of Oral Torah, Biblical Precedent + Authority Statement

3 And Jesus answered,

Urgent Mission! Feeling Saul's Wrath, I Sam. 21:1-7, 22:9-10

"Have you not read what David did when he was hungry,

1:32, Dig! "Have you not read..."

he and those who were with him:

Likely The Sabbath: Bread Just Changed, Sanctuary At Nob

4 how he entered the house of God,

David Was Chosen To Be King, Priest Ahimelech

and took and ate the bread of the Presence which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat,

12 Loaves

and also gave it to those with him?"

//5:34, 22:19, David's Greater Freedom; I Take Less, Lev. 24:1-9

They Miss His Identity! Kingdom Need/Mission Triumph Over Law/ Custom

a') v.5 Lord of the Sabbath.

He, Not Sabbath Commandments, Rules His Disciples

Sabbath Fulfilled In Missions, Sets Aside Stricter Regulations

5 Then he said to them, "The Son of man is Lord of the **sabbath**."

//5:24, New Wine, Christology, Astounding Claim

As God's Spokesman

VB1') 6:6-11 SABBATH CONTROVERSY: HUMAN NEED = HEALING.

2nd Panel Begins

Sabbath (3x)

a) vv.6-7 Two Problems: Withered Hand, Hostile Pharisees and Scribes.

Rejoice, Refocus

Sabbath = Kind Gift Of God, Freedom/Rest

6 On another **sabbath**, when he had entered the synagogue and taught,

4:15-16, 31, 44, 5:3, 17, Typical Behavior

a man was there whose right hand was withered.

Serious But Not Life-Threatening: Could Wait

Ps. 137:5, Zech. 11:17, Punishment From God? 1 Kgs. 13:4-6

7 And the scribes and the Pharisees watched him, to see whether he would heal on the **sabbath**,

A Form Of Work

so that they might find an accusation against him.

Ex. 31:14 Death, They Have No Power To Heal, Only Death

Legalism Is Always A Threat To Love: External

b) v.8 Jesus Speaks To The Man With The Withered Hand.

God Is Concerned About Bodily Life

8 But he knew their thoughts,

Prophet, Spirit's Gift: Word Of Knowledge, 2:35, 5:22, 7:39

and he said to the man who had the withered hand,

Emphasizes Man's Obedience

"Come and stand here." And he rose and stood there.

Gifts: Teaching, Word Of Knowledge, Prayer Of Command

c) vv.9-10a Jesus Questions and Stares-Down Opponents.

m. Yomah 8.6

Something New From God Has Broken Into The Present!

9 And Jesus said to them, "I ask you,

Shift To Moral Discourse, Jesus Is Just Not Afraid

is it lawful on the **sabbath** to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?"

Choice

10 And he looked around at them all,

The Refusal To Do Good Is Violent, Stared Them Down

Drops Mark's Anger, Not Just Refrain From Work But Do Good Work

b') v.10b Jesus Speaks to the Man with the Withered Hand.

Jesus Does Not Wait On Sabbath To Pass, Here To Free Captives! 4:16-30

and said to him, "Stretch out your hand."

//5:23-24, Prayer of Command + Man's Obedience!

With A Word = No Work! Showdown: Who Does God Back With Miracles?

a') vv.10c-11 Two Responses: Healing and Hostility.

Jesus Brings Life, They Plot Death

Tradition He Was A Stonemason, Ps. 37:30-33

1 And he did so, and his hand was restored.

Not Magic/Sorcery, 5:17, "Power of the Lord was with him to heal."

Ex. 31:14, Time To Replace Leaders Of Israel With The Twelve

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

Demonic, Turning Point

"Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction" (Blaise Pascal).

A Brief Treatment Of Luke 6:1-5, 6-11

In these two controversies Luke follows his source (Mk. 2:23-3:6) with minor variations. *Sabbath* is used three times in each story (vv.1, 3, 5; vv.6, 7a, 9b). Jesus is challenging religious practice on one of the key identity markers of Judaism for the sake of his mission. He both clarifies his identity (v.5) and reveals the hearts of his opponents (v.11). Jesus is new wine; they are the old. As before (5:30) Jesus opponents are *the Pharisees and their scribes* (v.7). They were an influential lay movement committed to the renewal of Israel by keeping the holiness code to priestly standards. If all Israel obeyed, blessing would be restored, and the pagan Romans would rule no more. To interpret the written they developed an oral Torah, a complex of traditions on the details of obedience. To Scriptural teaching on the sabbath they added thirty-nine classes of forbidden work (*m. Sabb. 7.2*) They were serious, and Jesus would not conform!

The controversy on plucking grain is a 4:2 concentric pattern (a-b-b'-a') with a question (v.2) and answer (vv.3-5) at the center and *sabbath* (v.1 // v.5) as the inclusion. The rhetoric is judicial and the literary form has four parts: 1) Violation (v.1), 2) Charge (v.2), 3) Refutation (vv.3-5), 4) Conclusion or verdict (v.5). Reading both the surface structure and the literary form aids a close reading of the text and demonstrates the density and sophistication of these brief nuggets of early tradition.

Jesus behavior is again typical, "It happened on a sabbath." A clue is then given, "while he was going through the grainfields." He and his team have a divine appointment that requires sabbath travel and no time to pack a meal. Scripture allowed gleaning (Ex. 34:21), but in doing so they violate four prohibitions of oral Torah (walking, reaping, threshing, preparing). While it is unlikely the religious police accompanied them, the question is appropriate, "Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath?" The question could have been asked later. Remember that these stories are highly condensed and stylized for memory. What Jesus violates is not Scripture itself but the protective ring of Pharisaic tradition. The story Jesus invokes in his reply is 1 Sam. 21:1-17 where David and his men - in fleeing from Saul - eat *the bread of the presence* reserved for priests. It is a boundary violation concerning food. Jesus opening words, "Have you never read?" are a dig, the equivalent of *Don't you know your Bible?* The analogy is complex. Jesus in effects says, "I have Biblical precedent; David has companions and so do I; both groups are hungry; both of us are on mission; his need to preserve his troops and mine to get to the next preaching point trump even good regulations." But his final authority is his own identity, "The Son of man is Lord of the sabbath." While he speaks of himself in the third person, the intent is clear, "I have the right to say what happens on the Sabbath, and my mission is primary. The sabbath is a gift of God, and on this day we are on a mission that requires travel and a snack! Why don't you join us?"

Luke's introductory phrase *on another sabbath* is again typical. The surface structure is a 5:1 concentric pattern (a-b-c-b'-a') with Jesus' counter-question at the center. On either side (b/b') he gives commands to the man with the withered hand (*Come and stand // Stretch out your hand*). In the frames (a // a') are the problem and cure. The form is a healing story. Teaching in the synagogue on the sabbath is the kind of thing Jesus regularly did. Present was a man with a withered right hand and a hostile band of leaders. That Jesus healed is not at issue; the question is *Why can't he wait until tomorrow?* As a prophet Jesus knows their thoughts. Through the immediate guidance of the Spirit he also knows what to do next, i.e. call the man forward. He then clarifies the issue, *What's the sabbath all about?* His gaze is probing. A second command, "Stretch out your hand," demonstrates his trust in the revelation he receives. God backs the command, and the hand is healed, but not the religious leaders. They are now blinded with rage and conspire to do Jesus in. Who is withered now? Jesus reveals God and the human heart!

WHAT MATTERS MOST?

“The Son of man is Lord of the sabbath.”

Jesus’ astonishing sense of authority in partnership and identity with Israel’s God.

LUKE 6 : 5

Years ago the Grosset & Dunlap publishing company brought together twenty-eight educators and historians. Their task was to agree on the hundred most significant events of history, then rank them; ties were permitted.

After months of debate, the panel reported. The discovery of America and the opening up to Europe of a vast new world were the most significant event. Second was the invention of movable type by Gutenberg with the mass production of books that followed. Eleven events tied for third, five events for fourth; they were the writing of the U.S. Constitution, the development of ether for surgical anesthesia, the development of the x-ray to see inside the body, the invention of the airplane, and the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus tied for fourth with fourteen events ahead of him.¹

Fourth place? Fourteen ahead of him? Dr. James Allen Francis and I have a different opinion, and since his are the more eloquent words I quote them from his 1923 sermon *Arise, Sir Knight*. The section I quote has come to have a title of its own: *One Solitary Life*. You’ve heard it before:

“Here is a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another village. He worked in a carpenter shop until he was thirty. Then for three years he was an itinerant preacher. He never owned a home. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family. He never went to college.... He never traveled two hundred miles from the place He was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness.

¹ Edited from PreachingToday.com search under Mt. 6:1-11.

He had no credentials but Himself.

While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied Him. He was turned over to His enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed upon a cross between two thieves. While he was dying his executioners gambled for the only piece of property he had on earth, his coat. When he was dead, he was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

Nineteen long centuries have come and gone, and today he is a centerpiece of the human race and leader of the column of progress. I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that were ever built; all the parliaments that ever sat and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as has that *one solitary life*.²

That's more than a statement of faith; it's a valid historical assessment of the impact of Jesus, whether or not you believe he is God in the flesh come to earth for our healing and salvation and finally the remaking of the whole of creation after the model of his unique resurrection from the dead.

One solitary life, lived out for three years in public before twelve official eyewitnesses who guaranteed the validity of the story with multiple testimony for which many of them died.³ One life, three years, twelve witnesses and *four gospels* because no one telling of the story was sufficient to cover the nuance and depth of who he was. One solitary life, three action packed years, twelve daily witnesses, four complementary biographical portraits, and *one faith*, faith that this Jesus is our window into the outer workings and inner life of the mysterious Tripersonal God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unified communion of self-giving love into whose fellowship we are all invited through Jesus.⁴ In him, as nowhere else, we see who God is, and it is a spectacular thing to behold. In following him we are brought back

² Located at http://www.anointedlinks.com/one_solitary_life.html.

³ On the quality control of this method, see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

⁴ Gerald O'Collins, S.J., *The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), particularly Chapter 2, "The History of Jesus and Its Trinitarian Face," 35-49.

into communion with the one who made us and offers us a share of the divine purpose for the world. Jesus is the model and the means and the path of transformation. What happened in Jesus is a display window into the kingdom of God that stands at the end of history and of which we have previews and glimpses in the present. In Jesus, the Son who was sent by the Father and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we see all the God that can be poured into the limits of human flesh. Not just a prophet or teacher but one who is the unique personal agent of the one God of Israel.

This is one of the key differences between classic Christianity and classic Islam.⁵ The Koran speaks of Jesus in several places as a prophet, one who speaks for God, so there is some common material on which to build. Muslims also believe Jesus was virgin born, another point of contact.⁶ But their Scriptures do not teach that Jesus died on a cross. Drawing from an early Christian error or heresy that crept into Arabia, they teach that he was replaced by another who died in his place.⁷ Thus, no death and no death for sin. And if there is no cross, then there is no resurrection. The fullness of his identity is not validated by God, so Jesus is just one more messenger paving the way for the final personal messenger, Mohammed, and the final written revelation, the Koran. Not God in flesh, not the Savior, not the crucified and risen Lord, not the culmination of divine revelation. A noble man to be sure with a special mother, but not who the church claims him to be.⁸ For all our concern about dialog and harmonious relationships, it's important to be clear about our very different readings of divine revelation that are in the end incompatible. For Christians Jesus is God the Son, so his identity is God's identity and his actions and words are God's actions and words. Here we cannot compromise! And we are right to call for parity. If mosques can be built all over Europe and America, why not churches all over Turkey and Saudi Arabia and Iran? What do they fear from us?

⁵ For a basic article, see C. Moucarry, "Islam," in W.C. Campbell Jack, et. al., *The New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics* (Downer's Grove, ILL: 2006), 358-364.

⁶ C. Medearis, *Muslims, Christians, and Jews* (Minneapolis, MN; Bethany House, 2008), Chapter 3, "Islam's Holy Book: What The Koran Says About Jesus," 65-85.

⁷ On the docetic and gnostic strains of Christianity present in the Arabian peninsula, see Alister McGrath, *Heresies* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2009), 223-229.

⁸ Summarized from Michelle Vu, "Christian Convert: 10 Things Everyone Needs to Know About Islam," www.christianpost.com, Wed. Nov. 29, 2006.

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Jesus did not just emerge out of the human soup with the rest of us; he rather comes into human history as a new fact, as a new kind of human being. Fully human, yet without sin; his heart was not oriented away from God. He shares our flesh but not our moral disease; evil never penetrated his personality and disordered his desires. And while it strains the meaning of the term, we must use *God* language to capture the meaning of what he said and did, how he acted, who he understood himself to be and what is the meaning of his resurrection. Because of who we confess him to be, Christians read the gospel accounts with loving reverence and with real intellectual and spiritual curiosity. This is the one we worship; this is the one on whom we bet our futures. This is the one who walks with us in this life and awaits us just the other side of death. This is our Savior. We gladly bring to bear all the tools of scholarship and historical understanding, but careful study is not enough. We believe that the same Spirit that illumined Jesus illumines us in the reading and preaching of his story so that we may *see more* of who he is and *believe more* of what he said and *act more in line* with his agenda in our day. So every gospel story deserves careful inspection, and this morning we give close attention to two paragraphs from Luke 6.⁹

Jesus is controversial and will not be tamed. He's a wild man. He evokes hatred from the most sincere religious leaders who don't like him drawing outside their box; he claims the right to reinterpret the most sacred symbols of Judaism; he is so brim full of the Spirit and love of God that withered hands unfold at his command. Imagine what that looked like. He put a man back in working order; he gave him an experience of how much God cares for us and our bodies without asking for a detailed catalog of his sins. Jesus did not heal everyone in Israel; he did heal *all who came to him*. You had to be in his presence, or else have someone make an appeal for you in his presence since at least some of his healings were at a distance.¹⁰

There came a time, perhaps in the first or second decade of the second century, eighty years or so after the fact, when the last person Jesus healed died. But they died with the memory of what happened to them in his presence, and it gave hope that what he said about eternal life was true as well. This is why religious experiences of the powerful love of God are so important. We cannot manufacture them because that's magic. It's not about the right words or the right technique or the right frame of mind. We can, however, dispose ourselves towards such encounters in worship

⁹ // Mark 2:23-3:6, Matthew 12:1-14.

¹⁰ John 4:42-54, Luke 7:1-10, Mark 7:24-30.

and in prayer and in sacraments and in study and in service just in case God wants to visit us with some unusual grace! In a healthy church there are always people having encounters it takes Jesus to explain.¹¹ And the reason more people don't share them publicly is because they don't want to be thought crazy. There's more going on in the church than you know, or that I know!

TURNING TO THE TEXT

vv.1-5 Sabbath Controversy Over Work And Mission.

In an old *Reader's Digest* Bob Newhart tells of a job he had before comedy:

"I took a job as an accountant in Chicago. As your basic bookkeeper, my duties included managing the petty cash. Salesmen turned in receipts. I'd give them cash and put the receipts in the drawer. At the end of the day, I'd reconcile the petty-cash with the receipts. It was always close, but never balanced. At five, when everybody was leaving, I'd be tearing my hair out because cash was short by \$1.48. Around 8 p.m., I'd find the discrepancy.

I followed this routine for a couple weeks. One day, I pulled the amount I was short from my pocket - \$1.67, put it in the drawer, and called it a day. Not long after, the petty cash drawer was over by \$2.11. So I took \$2.11 out of petty cash and pocketed that. I was hardly stealing. Inevitably, in the next couple of days I'd be under, and back the money would go.

Mr. Hutchinson discovered my shortcut. 'George,' he lectured me, using my given name, 'these are not sound accounting principles.'

'You know, Mr. Hutchinson, I don't think I'm cut out for accounting. Why would you pay me \$6.00 an hour to spend four hours finding \$1.40?'"¹²

Thank God for accountants, but when the accounting mentality invades the life of faith and its practices, the effects are not good. Things get petty in a hurry.

¹¹ For an exciting report from a Vineyard pastor, see Robby Dawkins, *Do What Jesus Did* (Minneapolis, MN: Chosen, 2013).

¹² Edited from "Finding My Funny Bone," *Reader's Digest* (Sept. 2006), 93-94.

It's hard for us to understand the immense value of the Sabbath for Jews in a pagan world. How we treat the flag and how the Brits treat the queen is how Jews felt about Sabbath. It was an emblem of their history with God. A day without work for a nation of slaves, a day to rest and honor God, a day different from all others and preview of the life to come. Alone of all the nations, they were called once each week to enter this holy sanctuary within time and honor the God who rescued them from Egypt and gave them his love and his laws. Unless there was a day to stop and remember, the stories of who they and their God were would be lost.

For most, Sabbath was a delight and a joy.¹³ Animals rested, slaves rested, Gentiles in their midst rested. But for those with the mentality of religious accountants - the party of the Pharisees - this was not enough. They had to ask, What does it mean to work? What kinds of work are allowed, not allowed? What are the sanctions if you cross a boundary? So around the gift of the Sabbath was built a protective fence of regulations that were passed on orally like unwritten case law: you can only walk so many steps; you cannot reap or sow; you can only offer medical help if the situation is life-threatening. After all, they thought, our people need such boundaries and case studies if they are to remain faithful, and we will police their practices. The legal mentality took over, and in a sense it was inevitable because people always ask questions about boundaries. How far can I go without a violation? Underneath was the hope that if all the people kept all the law, God would respond by restoring the nation and kicking out the pagans. What was intended as a gift became a task to impress God into doing something, and that's not good theology.

So one Sabbath, when Jesus and his band of brothers were on the way to the

¹³ For a review of first century observance, see Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 2006), 30-33. For a Protestant defense of Sabbath keeping, see Mark Buchanan, *The Rest Of God: Restoring Your Soul By Restoring Sabbath* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2006); Marva Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989). On time compression, fatigue, and possible responses, see Richard Swenson, *The Overload Syndrome* (Colorado Springs: NAVPRESS, 1998); Gary R. Collins, *Breathless* (Wheaton, ILL: Tyndale, 1998); Matthew Sleeth, M.D., *24/6: A Prescription for a Healthier, Happier Life* (Carol Stream, ILL: Tyndale, 2012). An excellent article is R. Paul Stephen's "Sabbath," in *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity* (Downer's Grove, ILL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 862-869.

next kingdom appointment, there had not been time to eat.¹⁴ No one had any food, and an army does not march far on an empty belly, even a spiritual army, so the disciples stopped along the path and plucked some ripe, golden heads of wheat and rubbed loose the kernels in their hands as a snack, much as you might eat some peanuts for a lift between meals. The ripeness of the grain tells us it was late spring, just before harvest. Minor gleaning was allowed in the Old Testament and was not considered stealing but a form of charity as long as you did not use a scythe, only your hands. Their offenses against prevailing Sabbath traditions were four: unnecessary travel, reaping, threshing, and preparing food.¹⁵ On went the blue light of the religious police; a verbal citation was issued, and since Jesus was in charge, they spoke to him. Verse 2, “Why are you (and your followers) doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath?” Jesus and his students were violating customary religious rules, disrespecting God’s day and setting a bad example for the people.

Jesus’ defense of his practice is rather sophisticated; it tells us how serious he was about Scripture, and how much he wanted to convert these hardheads to his kingdom agenda. Jesus had a way of turning every debate into an altar call. He began, as well-trained rabbis did, with a story, in this case from the I Samuel. It seems the soon-to-be-King-David was fleeing from the anger of King Saul. He and his band of ruffians were famished, so they went into the holy shrine and ate the twelve loaves that were part of worship and reserved for the priests alone. Jesus parallels his actions to the great king. “In an emergency I’m only doing what David did. He acted in freedom, and I have even greater freedom.”

Talk about an in-your-face challenge, for him to claim that his mission is greater than the sabbath, that the needs of the people at the other end of his journey warrant his behavior. And then the ultimate offense when Jesus said of himself, “The Son of man is *Lord* of the sabbath.” *Lord* is the Old Testament name for God who first gave the sabbath. The humble Jesus speaks of himself this way as if it’s the most natural thing in the world. Getting the kingdom and its great benefits out to the next audience matters more than keeping the Sabbath as read through the fog of their accumulated tradition. It’s a day to bring joy, not worry about regulations.

On most Saturdays Jesus kept the Sabbath and maybe even most of the

¹⁴ Note 4:42 for a general summary of Jesus’ travel and ministry in various cities.

¹⁵ Darrell Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994), 523.

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Pharisees' traditions, but this Sabbath it was necessary to go where the Father said go, and there were hungry bellies to feed along the way. The person of Jesus and the mission of the kingdom of God trump all other concerns. He is the new center around which everything is to be organized; all else is negotiable. Traditions and rituals and are inevitable, and in their place helpful as holy habits. But keeping the main thing the main thing is always a challenge. Sin always distorts; it puts secondary things first and first things last. What matters more? That all the grammar in the bulletin is correct, or that the people worship God? That all the little rules and traditions are kept, or that people experience God's love and acceptance? Your answer will identify you as a Pharisee or a disciple. Imagine the spiritual blindness of issuing Jesus a sabbath citation! Do they know who they're dealing with? Apparently not. But Jesus made it clear that in him they meet *the Lord of the sabbath* they were so eager to please, and then a decision had to be made, either for or against him.

In an interview with a long-time friend, Bono of the Irish band U2 responded to the sometimes-stained reputation of the church throughout history:

“Religion,” he said, “can be the enemy of God. It's often what happens when God, like Elvis, has left the building. A list of instructions where there was once conviction; dogma where once people just did it; a congregation led by a man where once they were led by the Holy Spirit. Discipline replacing discipleship.”¹⁶

Dangerous words, rock-n-roll theology, but not far off the mark. So please avoid the accountant mentality. Give up being the spiritual police. Don't try to control other people. Nurture the virtue of mercy. Keep first things first, and for us that always means the person of Jesus and his mission. All else is negotiable. Yes, it's a dangerous way to live, but then, who is more dangerous than Jesus, God's wild and free personal ambassador? In his presence we recover the rest and joy of what sabbath was meant to be. Life restored. Life enhanced. Life fully alive.

vv. 6-11 Sabbath Controversy Over Healing.

It's in the next story that we find out the kind of event that happened wherever Jesus and his band showed up. According to Luke, he did just about the same thing everywhere he went: teach the immediate presence of God's kingdom, heal the sick,

¹⁶ PreachingToday.com search under Lk. 6:1-11.

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cast out devils,¹⁷ and - where necessary- confront hostile religious leaders who saw him as dangerous and unpredictable, and in this they were right.

It was another sabbath. In the congregation is a man who can't work. His right hand is as good a dead, withered and drawn. Later church tradition said he'd once been a stone mason.¹⁸ Most people likely thought he'd done some great sin involving his right hand and that God withered it as a public judgment. The one-on-one correlation of misery with misbehavior is often wrong and always cruel.

_____ One of the main characters in the movie *Seabiscuit* is a broken-down, unemployed cowboy named Tom Smith. Millionaire Charles Howard has a campfire interview with Smith; he asks why he bothered rescuing an old, lame horse that was sentenced to death because of a broken leg.

Tom replies, "You don't throw a whole life away just 'cause it's banged up a bit." Every horse is good for something, Tom claims.

Together they purchase Seabiscuit, a horse whose shortcomings and temperament make it an unlikely prospect for success. Tom's method of training is tailored toward curing the horse of its inner demons, a byproduct of the neglect shown by the previous owners.

Tom hires a second-rate jockey named *Red* Pollard. At 5'7", Red is too tall to be anything but bush-league and a bad match for an undersized horse. But Tom notices an almost mystical connection between Red and Seabiscuit. But Red has another problem. He's blind in one eye and conceals the handicap fearing track officials would not let him race.

During a race at Santa Anita, Red's blind spot lets a competing horse overtake Seabiscuit, costing them the victory.

Tom is outraged. He presses Red to explain how this happened. In a burst of emotion, Red shouts, "Because I'm blind!"

Stung by the betrayal, Tom urges Mr. Howard to fire Red. Mr. Howard requests that Red remain. Dumbfounded, Tom demands a reason. Mr. Howard states, "You don't throw away a whole life just because it's banged up a bit."¹⁹

¹⁷ See Luke 5:16-17 for a summary, 13:32-33 for Jesus' testimony, Acts 10:38 for Peter's digest.

¹⁸ The Gospel of the Nazareans.

¹⁹ Idem.

Luke 6:1-5, 6-11 13

A broken-down cowboy, an abused horse, and a half-blind jockey, a bunch of misfits, losers and has-beens. Is that how the man with the withered right hand felt? The message of Jesus and of his church is that you don't throw away a whole life just because it's banged up a bit! Jesus and his bunch are in that particular synagogue at just the right time so a man with a withered hand can be restored. It's a divine appointment. Something big is about to happen!

I frankly wonder if the man with the withered hand was a *plant*? I speculate this was the case, because immediately after the man is introduced we are informed that the religious police "watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal on the sabbath, so they might find an accusation against him." They were ready. Their concern, interestingly enough, presumes both Jesus' ability to heal and their acknowledgment of the same. The question is not *if* he heals but *when* he ought to.²⁰ Is Jesus a sabbath-breaker? Couldn't he just wait till tomorrow to help this man since it was not life threatening?²¹ Jesus' answer is, "No. The Father and the Spirit and I want him healed today. Why should such a gift have to wait?"

I never tire of thinking about how Jesus did what he did, and the best answer is that he obeyed the will of his Father in the power of the Holy Spirit.²² Though only Jesus and the results were visible, it was always a fully Trinitarian reality with two of the active parties invisible. That Jesus *knew their thoughts* is an indicator he has just received revelation from the Spirit who indwelt him, what Paul later called *the word of knowledge*.²³ In this gift you know something not by observation or deduction but by direct communication from God in an idea or strong intuition.²⁴ Jesus also knew what was the next thing to do: call the man up front. Their plant would now become his audio-visual aid of God's mercy. They are after him, but now

²⁰ Cf. Lk. 13:13.

²¹ On Jesus' boldness, see Francis McNutt, *The Nearly Perfect Crime: How The Church Almost Killed The Ministry Of Healing* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen, 2005), 46-52.

²² John 5:19-30. Jesus spoke what he heard and did what he saw as a mimic. Over him the heavens remained open for a flow of divine revelation.

²³ 1 Corinthians 12:8.

²⁴ For an accessible treatment of gifts, see Gary Best, *Naturally Supernatural: Joining God In His Work* (Cape Town, SA: Vineyard International Publishing, 2005).

he is after them. Verse 9 and 10 are a probing question and an even more probing stare. “I ask you, is it lawful on the sabbath to do good for to do harm, to save life or to destroy it? And he looked around at them all.” What would it mean for Jesus to stare you down in the power of love. I think they shook inwardly and diverted their guilty eyes. For Jesus to wait another day would be, in his own words, to do violence to an already disabled man. Can’t they see that to withhold the good when you have power to deliver it is to increase human suffering, and that’s not who God is. Mercy in the face of misery outweighs every other consideration. The Sabbath that is about rest is also about love, and with Jesus love has the power to make a difference.

Jesus has now exposed his opponents, but there’s still a man who can’t work, a man who’s lost his place in life. The way the healing happens is clever, so like God. Jesus does no work. He does not use his hand; he does not touch the man or apply medicine. He speaks a word of command, and God the Holy Spirit is the only one who works, and that invisibly. Whether Jesus saw the limb made whole in his mind’s eye or responded to a verbal prompt or emotional flood of compassion is beside the point. He knew a minute ahead of time what would happen. Jesus looked at the man in front of them all and said, “Stretch out your hand. Do what you cannot do.” “And he did so,” notes Dr. Luke, “and his hand *was* restored.” Note that the verb is passive voice, *was restored*, which indicates divine action.

Sometimes when I pray with people I’ll stop and ask, “Is there anything you can do now you could not do before?” Any less pain? Any more freedom of movement? Any sensations of heat or energy? Has God brought anything to mind?”²⁵ And if there is, I keep praying, asking for more of whatever God seems to be doing. If not, we wrap up and schedule another session, much like physical therapy. Prayer with people is inevitably and unavoidably experiential and experimental and most-often partial.²⁶ Recovering this lost ministry in the church is a challenging task.

In this case it was a miracle of re-creation, God supplying divine energy for a rapid regrowth of what was atrophied. The one who made DNA turned it on from

²⁵ A list of suggestions from Randy Clark, *The Essential Guide to Healing* (Grand Rapids, MI: Chosen, 2011), 234-238.

²⁶ I have written a summary paper on the *Five Step Healing Model* that is available by request to PThrailkil@aol.com.

the inside and with the blueprint of the man's genetic code it was rapidly rebuilt before their eyes.²⁷ Have I ever seen such? Not yet, but I hope to. Am I skeptical? No, I've heard and read too many reliable reports for that. If in our world this happened once, it can happen again, and has. I am willing to let Jesus be my teacher for what is possible in this world. Science deals in probabilities based on observation and makes predictions, and for what it does we are grateful. Jesus, however, deals in creative possibilities drawing on the invisible resources of the kingdom of God. This healing is not based on the manipulation of the present energies of this world seen as a closed system of cause and effect but on the injection into an open system of the energies of God's creative love, the most potent force available.

Was Jesus mocking the man or offering him the best deal of his life? "Stretch out your hand." Only way to find out was to test it, to try to do what he could not do. I suspect there was cracking and a popping as frozen joints were pried loose like a bolt rusted tight. An invisible orthopedist puts things back in place in short order. It was an awesome thing to behold as a paralyzed limb was raised from death to life, a foretaste of ultimate resurrection. Amos Wells wrote a poem about this moment:

"Praise God! Praise God! Give me my tools again!
Oh! Let me grasp a hammer and a saw!
Bring me a nail, and any piece of wood,
Come, see me shut my hand and open it,
And watch my nimble fingers twirl a ring.
How good are solids!-oak, and stone, and iron,
And rough and smooth and straight and curved and round!
Here, Rachel: for these long and weary years
My hand has ached to smooth your shining hair
And touch your dimpled cheek. Come, wife, and see
I am a man again, a man for work,
a man for earning bread and clothes and home-
a man no more a bandaged cumberer.
And did you hear them muttering at him?
And did you see them looking sour at me?
They'll cast me from the synagogue, perchance:
But let them: I've a hand, a hand, a hand!

²⁷ See Dr. Chester Tolson and Dr. Harold Koenig on the healing ministry of Jesus in *The Healing Power of Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 25-28.

and, ah, dear wife, to think he goes about
so quietly, and does such things as this,
Making poor half men whole...."²⁸

But while our friend is being healing of paralysis of the hand, a polio of the soul is withering the deeper muscles of compassion in the Pharisaic heart. To resist the grace of God is not to stay the same but to be hardened another degree. For these men it was near the end of grace; their response was not joy at the healing, rather, they went out and conspired how to do him in. Verse 11, "But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus." Religious men who became pawns of the Evil One. It frightens me to think of it. Better to put out the light than open your eyes. Better to cap the well than take a drink yourself. Better to deny healing to others than admit you need it yourself. Better, I say, to admit that God is backing his program and not your own. The shadow of the cross is already seen falling back across the Galilean ministry. All because Jesus messed with their notion of what ought and ought not to happen in church on the day of worship. Their God was in a box; Jesus blew the box open. Jesus was a sabbath keeper, but for him the determinative reference was not past precedent but the living presence of God's kingdom and all its wondrous possibilities for human thriving this side of the end. Apart from Jesus and his continuous corrective influence, religion is deadly: Jewish, Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, whatever. Religious leaders need continual correction, me included, me especially.

CONCLUSION

Remember the sabbath day, the day of the Lord Jesus and his resurrection. Stop forgetting and remember it as the gift it is. Mark it on your calendar. Plan it as a day of delight in God, and plan other things around it. And when we've done that, we have a chance to fulfill the second part which is to keep it holy. But do it as Jesus did, full of freedom and the joy of service, even with an expectation of a divine encounter. My hunch is that's where the blessing is, and that's where I want to be. I hunger for the manifest presence and power of Jesus to be restored in the church.

²⁸ William Barclay, *And He Had Compassion* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1982), 95.
