

Lord of the Boundaries

Luke 6:1-11

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ March 4, 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

¹One sabbath while Jesus was going through the grainfields, his disciples plucked some heads of grain, rubbed them in their hands, and ate them.

²But some of the Pharisees said, “Why are you doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?” ³Jesus answered, “Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? ⁴He 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?” ⁵Then he said to them, “The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath.”

⁶On another sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. ⁷The scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would cure on the sabbath, so that they might find an accusation against him. ⁸Even 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. ⁹Then 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?” ¹⁰After looking around at all of them, he said to him, “Stretch out your hand.” He did so, and his hand was restored. ¹¹But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus. (Luke 6:1-11, NRSV)

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My boys and I regularly golf over at Bing Maloney where portions of the course there are lined with blackberry bushes. By mid-summer they are always full of ripe fruit and as we walk along the course we regularly stop and help ourselves. By the time I reach the last hole my hands are stained with berry juice. Technically, they are not our blackberries because they are on golf course property. But nobody cares if we eat them. I'm sure we're not the only ones doing it.

Something similar was happening when Jesus and his disciples strolled through the fields one Saturday and plucked the heads of grain for a little snack. Scripture specifically allowed for this very activity.¹ So the problem wasn't *what* they were doing, but *when* they

were doing it. No picking blackberries on the sabbath! Everybody knows that.

Now, the practice of honoring the sabbath day was clearly established in scripture. In the creation accounts from Genesis, God himself takes a day to rest after six days of creating the world and does so to establish a pattern in creation that every seventh day should be a sacred day when people, made in God's image, should also take a rest from their work.² Later when God gave the Israelites the 10 Commandments, the fourth on the list specifically instructed God's people to remember the Sabbath.³ These people had just spent 400 years in slavery in Egypt without a day off, generations taught to believe that their value as slaves was determined by what they could accomplish. Slaves don't get to rest. God now wanted to change that way of thinking. Our value as human beings does not come from our work, from what we can accomplish, produce or earn, but comes from the fact that we are made in the very image of a God who loves us no matter what we accomplish, produce or earn. A day to stop working every seven days helps us not forget this essential truth.

You see, the commandment to take a sabbath, like all God's commands, was rooted in love. When a good parent tells her small child that he needs to take a nap, or that he is not allowed to cross the street on his own, or that he must eat his vegetables, these rules are rooted in love, in a mother's desire to see the best for her child, even though that child may dislike such rules. It's no different with our Father in Heaven. Every rule, commandment, or boundary God gives us is a gift from a good Father who loves us unconditionally and, in divine wisdom, absolutely knows what is best for us. We may push back against God's law, but we do so at our own peril. The sabbath commandment itself is still God's good gift to his people today even though there are many of us who disregard it and work regularly seven days a week. And again, we disregard the sabbath at our own peril. But that's a sermon for another day.

The practice of sabbath in ancient Israel raised lots of questions over time. What exactly constituted work? For instance, if you hooked up your ox to plow your

¹ Deuteronomy 23:25 states, “If you go into your neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor's standing grain.”

² Genesis 2:1-3

³ Exodus 20:8-11

field that was clearly work, but what about if you fed your ox? Was that work? The Old Testament gave some guidance along these lines, but left most of these questions unanswered. So over time traditions arose which provided precedent and interpretation for the people. The Mishnah is an ancient foundational text of Jewish literature which was first an oral tradition before it was eventually written down. A whole section of the Mishnah in those days was dedicated to interpreting what was and what was not allowed on the sabbath. Specifically, there were thirty-nine activities, a list that came to be known as “the forty save one”, which were expressly prohibited. That list included reaping, threshing, winnowing and preparing food, rules we’ll come back to in a moment because they are relevant to our story this morning.

Part of what was going on in those days is that Israel, at least the religious leadership in Israel, was trying to draw clear boundaries between themselves as the chosen people of God and everybody else. And if you’re going to draw a boundary between who is in and who is out you need some boundary markers, some highly visible, though relatively superficial practices or symbols, that clearly distinguish the insiders from the outsiders.

This is common, by the way. All sorts of groups even today set up boundaries markers like vocabulary, dress, or style to set themselves apart from others and create unity among themselves. Hippies, business people, gangs, the affluent, hipsters, religious groups, even sports fanatics regularly create clear boundary markers to establish group identity, who is in and who is out. I recently bought a sweatshirt because I liked the design and thought it was comfortable. When I brought it home my kids immediately informed me that it was a skater brand and that not only was I not a skater I was too old to be wearing their clothing out in public! Their reaction made me want to wear it all the time, which I do.

Ancient Israel had established three main boundary markers. One, male Jews should be circumcised, setting them apart from Gentiles. Two, dietary laws were critical. What you ate and who you ate with marked you as one of God’s favored people. And finally, sabbath became a chief badge of identity for those who were inside God’s family. God’s people rest properly every seventh day. The rest of the world keeps on working. It’s no coincidence, by the way, that many of the conflicts the religious leaders had with Jesus, and later with the apostles and the early church, were around issues of circumcision, dietary laws and sabbath. Christ and his followers were constantly pushing against these boundaries and their exclusive intentions.

And this is the point where it would be wise for us to consider how the church in our day has established its own set of boundary markers. What are the practices or symbols we have set up to establish who is in and who is out? A good way to spot these markers is to ask this question: Are there certain superficial practices like vocabulary, dress or style we have adopted which would make some people feel unwelcome in this or any other church because they don’t talk the “right” way, dress the “right” way, or carry on the “right way”? Furthermore, are there churches where to prove your “insider” status you are expected to vote a certain way, or worship a certain way, or raise your kids in a certain way, or participate in a certain way? Or maybe the boundaries are even more impassable, where people with certain moral failures, certain ethnic backgrounds, certain levels of knowledge and education, or certain past associations prevent them from ever fully belonging to the community?

Christian author Steven Moseley says this about such boundaries, “Tragically, conventional religious goodness manages to be both intimidating and unchallenging at the same time.”⁴ You see, when the church sets up boundaries of any kind we make the Christian faith intimidating to others who perceive that the bar is set too high. Those who do try to get over it often end up weary with guilt for all the ways they continually fall short. Such boundaries also make the Christian faith seem unchallenging as a watching world sees all these Christians trying so hard to keep up the external boundaries but never really experiencing true internal transformation that sets people free. In the words of Mark Twain, when Christians become “good people in the worst sense of the word”, who is going to be captivated by that? Nobody!

So along comes Jesus and his disciples one Saturday strolling through the grainfields plucking heads of grain. Looks an awful lot like reaping, don’t you think? Then they rub the grain in their hands. Almost as if they are threshing. They throw the husks away. That’s winnowing, right? And all for what? To eat. They are preparing food! It’s a quadruple violation. Four breaches of the sabbath law all in one mouthful. And the Pharisees, who evidently were out on sabbath patrol, see it all happen in broad daylight and watch in astonishment as Jesus does nothing to stop it.

Who does this guy think he is? Remember, Jesus has no recognized religious authority to do these things. He’s got no public office, no formal training, no anointing as a priest, no membership card to any

⁴ Cited by John Ortberg in *The Life You’ve Always Wanted* (Zondervan, 1997), 38.

religious leadership coalition. He's just a carpenter from the sticks who somehow thinks he has the authority to teach fellow Jews to disregard the very boundaries that set us apart as God's chosen people. **"Why are you doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?"** they ask.

"Have you not read [the scriptures]..." Jesus asks. Of course they have read the scriptures. Everybody knows the Pharisees have *memorized* the scriptures. But that's not what Jesus means. You've read them, but you fail to understand them. Or maybe you choose not to understand them. And so he reminds them what David did that day in the sanctuary. He and his men were hungry and there was no bread to be found? So out of options, he entered the sanctuary and, with the blessing of the priest on duty, ate the sacred bread which, by biblical law, had been set aside for the priests alone to eat because it symbolized God's presence in fellowship with his people.⁵

That law was a good law, given in love. God wanted his people to see the bread and remember that he was with them always. But then a day came when the bread could be used to ease the hunger of God's people, specifically David and his men. What should be done? Which took precedent, religious ritual or human need? The answer was easy. In fact, to maintain the ritual, which was established out of love, but in doing so to act unlovingly by refusing to meet a human need, would have been the height of hypocrisy. Imagine somebody here on a Sunday morning has a heart attack during the final hymn but we choose to finish the hymn before we call for help because it would be inappropriate and disrespectful to interrupt a song lovingly dedicated to God. Can you imagine? No! Human need always trumps religious ritual.

Well, the Pharisees have no response. What could they say? On top of it all, David was the anointed King of Israel at the time when he took the bread and who is going to argue with King David? So then Jesus hits them with this, **"The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath."** It's a drop-the-mic moment.

To begin with, Jesus is making a staggering claim here. Remember, the sabbath was a divine institution. It was God's idea, God's commandment, God's initiative. Therefore, the only person who can mess with the sabbath is God. Jesus is messing with the sabbath and justifying it all by declaring here that he, the Son of Man, has the authority to do so because he actually is God.

But on top of that, what Jesus is really claiming here goes far beyond the sabbath. He is not just lord of the Sabbath but lord of the boundaries. And in this action, and in many others like it all through the Gospels, from the friends he chose, to the parties he attended, to the people he touched, to the places he went, to the forgiveness he extended, to the laws he reinterpreted, Jesus made clear that the only boundary which was, from that time forward, going to mark people as God's people was love. God loves you no matter who you are, no matter what you look like, no matter what you've done, no matter where you've been, no matter how you spend your sabbath. If you then receive that love and love him and others in response, then you belong to his family. In John 14:23 Jesus put it this way, **"Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them."**⁶ At another point Jesus said – and we have some of these words chiseled on the side of our building – **"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this [love, that is] everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."**⁷ What sort of mark will distinguish you as one of God's people? Love. That's it. You have come to know God's love in such a way that you cannot help love God in return and love those around you who God also loves.

Luke, like any good teacher or preacher, wants to make sure we don't miss this point so he follows this story up with the next story about the man with the withered hand. He's going to use this second story to ram the point home. To set the context, it's at least a week later because it's now another sabbath day. And once again, the Pharisees are out on sabbath patrol. This time, however, it's a sting operation. They are actually spying on Jesus. Waiting. Watching. Talking to one another through microphones hidden in the sleeves of their robes. They know Jesus is a troublemaker who just can't help himself. As he moves toward the bait all eyes are on him.

The bait is a man there with a withered hand. We don't know the details of his condition but can imagine he suffers from some sort of muscular atrophy. In other words, the diagnosis is not critical, and that's important to note because sabbath ritual tradition stated that healing was not allowed on the sabbath unless somebody's life was immanently threatened. The Mishnah was clear, "Whenever there is doubt as to

⁶ NRSV

⁷ John 13:34-35, NRSV. Emphasis mine.

⁵ See I Samuel 21:1-6

whether life is in danger this overrides the Sabbath.”⁸ Well, since this man will clearly be alive tomorrow when the sabbath is over, somebody can heal him then if they choose to.

Well, Jesus knew what the religious leaders were thinking. Do you like that about Jesus, by the way, that he always knows what we are thinking? He does. He did. And so it is with great intentionality that Jesus calls the man to come up in front of him where everybody present can have a clear view of what is about to happen. The man obeys and stands before Jesus. As he did, the place must have been dead silent. Everybody knew that Jesus was about to take aim at another boundary.

But instead of speaking to the man, he asks a question to the group, a question probably directed at the Pharisees but said aloud for the benefit of everybody. **“I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy?”** Do you hear the question beneath the question? This isn’t about sabbath. This is about boundaries. What really are the distinctions between those who are inside God’s family and those who outside God’s family? Is ritual the boundary, ritual and all these other superficial markers we like to use to set ourselves apart? Or is it love? Because if the sabbath commandment itself is rooted in love, God’s love for people, how can we ever justify keeping it in ways that then fail to show love to those same people? Love is always the higher law, the heart of the law. It’s why when they asked Jesus what were the most important of all God’s commands he said that the whole law could be summed up in just two commandments: Love God with all yourself and love your neighbor as you love yourself.⁹ Nothing else matters. Do these two things and everything else falls into place.

Here is what you must understand, if you don’t already. Jesus destroys all the boundaries we like to set up to appease our insecurity and pride. Can we not understand that the way people dress or talk doesn’t put them outside God’s love? Your past doesn’t exclude you, no matter what your past includes. You may not know a thing about the Bible, not have a religious bone in your body, not have even cared about God for most of your life. So what? None of those things keeps you from God. Do you know why? The only thing that keeps us from God and God’s favor is sin and the physical and spiritual death that results from sin. But Jesus, God’s Son, loved us enough to become one of us,

and give his life on the cross for us, and then rise from the dead for us, so that sin could be eternally forgiven and death forever vanquished.

This is the extent of the love God has for every person you will ever meet. Therefore, because of Christ and his work, there is no boundary standing between God and anybody. Anybody! The way is clear by grace for all to come into the fullness of life that God wants for us all. It’s no longer about position, who is in and who is out, who is near and who is far. Now it’s about direction. Have you come to believe in faith the good news of the Gospel to the extent that God’s love has begun to draw you closer? If so, the love and grace of Christ will begin to transform you and you will begin to love in response, to love both God and others. Love will mark you, more and more so as you grow closer and closer to Christ. Now it’s not about who is in and who is out, but about who is moving closer and closer and who is moving further and further away.

In some of the most famous words of scripture ever written the apostle Paul made it crystal clear that love is the only marker left. He wrote in I Corinthians 13,

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.¹⁰

So the question stands. What are the boundaries? What marks people as God’s people? Is it ritual or love? That’s what he’s asking the Pharisees and, by extension, us as well.

And how do they respond? Crickets. What are they going to say? There is no good answer to Jesus’ question, at least no good answer that will allow them to keep thinking of themselves exclusively as insiders. And Luke tells us that Jesus milks the silence, looking around at each one of them, moving from face to face as eyes, once fixed on him waiting to snare him, now likely turn away and look elsewhere. Jesus knows what they are thinking. Same thing as before. Who does this man think he is? He’s got no right to do or say these things which threaten the very foundations of all that we believe.

⁸ Yoma 8:6. Read full citation at

https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Yoma.8.6?lang=bi

⁹ See Matthew 22:36-40

¹⁰ I Corinthians 13:1-3, NRSV

Who is this man? Jesus is going to leave no doubt for those who are willing to see the truth. **“Stretch out your hand,”** he says to the man. And the man, once again doing exactly what Jesus told him to do, stretches out his hand and as he does so his crippled hand is shown to be whole and healthy. Notice, Jesus doesn’t *do* a thing. Right? No medical procedure. No treatment. He doesn’t even touch the man. And yet there he is healed, right in broad daylight for everybody to see. Who is this man? This is the Son of God, the Savior and Lover of the World, come to smash all the boundaries that keep people from God. He is Lord of the Sabbath, Lord of Israel, Lord of the church, Lord of the Bible, Lord of tradition, Lord of all creation, Lord of the boundaries, come to make the way clear for anyone and everyone to receive the grace and life which he has made available for all.

How tragic it is that the response of the Pharisees that day to all this was absolute fury. They were so mad, in fact, that they began to conspire how they could get rid of Jesus. Though it’s understandable, I suppose. If your whole identity as one of God’s chosen and favored people is founded in the establishment of some boundary or another that marks you as one of the insiders and then somebody comes along and messes with that boundary, you’d be furious too. Which ought to give us pause and make us pay very close attention to those times, especially in and around the church, we find ourselves becoming uncharacteristically angry about something somebody had done or said. Maybe somebody is messing with some boundary or another that we have tried to set up to bolster our status as one of the insiders.

May love be the only mark that sets us apart, a love that flows through our lives but which originates in a source beyond us, in the One who crossed the boundary from heaven to earth, from glory to shame, from riches to poverty, from life to death, so that no such boundary could ever separate us from him ever again. Praise be to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, Lord of the Boundaries.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. What is a rule did your family have which, as a kid, you thought was a stupid rule? How do you feel now about that rule?

2. Read Luke 6:1-11 again. Pay attention to what stands out to you.
3. What’s the big deal here? The disciples are just snacking on grain. What is it about all this that makes the Pharisees so upset?
4. When it comes to the man with the crippled hand, why couldn’t Jesus just wait until the next day to heal him? Same result without upsetting everybody.
5. What ‘boundary markers’ do you recognize that Christians today set up to distinguish between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ when it comes to God?
6. Have you ever felt like an outsider with God because of some boundary which was set up? What was that like?
7. When Jesus says that love is the only mark that ultimately distinguishes his followers from others (see John 13:15), what does he mean? Is love a boundary marker?
8. How do you sense that this scripture and this message are being used by God to change you in some way? What change is needed?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

How do you spot a Christian in a crowd of people?
How can we tell who is following Jesus and who is not following Jesus?