“THE SON OF MAN IS LORD OF THE SABBATH”

Luke 6:1-11 (Matthew 12:9-14 and Mark 2:23-28)

From our lesson last time we noted that “Son of Man” was a term that Jesus used frequently for Himself (some 80 times in the N.T.). It comes from Daniel 7:13 and there Daniel uses “son of man” as a Messianic reference. So Jesus applies this to Himself for that reason – by using it He is in essence claiming to be the Messiah of Daniel 7. Jesus is fulfilling all the things that the O.T. said that the Messiah would do. But also I believe Jesus used Son of Man because He identifies with humanity – the very people He came to save. Jesus was really the Son of man because He was human. And Jesus was also the Son of God. He calls God His Father more than 50 times in the Gospels and the voice of God identified Jesus as His “beloved Son” twice. But Jesus very rarely used that term Son of God for Himself (John 10:36 and 11:4). Most of the time the term Son of God is applied to Jesus it is used by others – by the various apostles and N.T. writers, the angels in Luke 1, as well as by the demons and Satan.

As for Jesus’ claim to be Lord of the Sabbath, what’s that all about? Well, we’re going to learn more about that as we go through this passage.

The setting for this morning’s lesson: Jesus is somewhere in Galilee. He has just called His 12 disciples. He’s out and about healing people. He’s teaching in the various synagogues. The people are coming from all over to hear Jesus teach and to be healed. It is one year into His ministry and His popularity is soaring. But not everyone likes Jesus. Already the religious leaders – at least the ones in Jerusalem – want to kill Jesus. We know this from John Chapter 5. On an earlier visit to Jerusalem for one of the feasts Jesus healed a man who had been lame for 38 years. He did this on the Sabbath. The Jewish leaders took offense and confronted Jesus about it. They didn’t like His answer and in John 5:18 it says, “This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him [Jesus], because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.”

So before we even come to our passage here in Luke 6 there is animosity between the Jewish leaders and Jesus. One of their main issues is Jesus’ apparent disdain for the Sabbath – at least as they view it.

READ Luke 6:1-5

V 1 What the disciples do is permitted according to Deut 23:25. But the Pharisees issue is not so much what they are doing but when they are doing it. They did this on the Sabbath.

V 2 What do the Pharisees mean by saying, “unlawful to do on the Sabbath”? What does the Law of Moses say about Sabbath restrictions? God gives this instruction to Israel in Exodus 20:8-11: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” So, according to Exodus 20 the Sabbath is to be kept holy, a day of rest from your labors. OK, so where then in the O.T. does it say that you cannot pluck grain on the Sabbath? It doesn’t. This was one of hundreds of rules in the Sabbath system that had been set up over time by Jewish rabbis. It came about by their effort to define for Israel what “work” is and is not. These rules had become ridiculously strict and oppressive. *[Give examples]*

Based upon God’s word, the O.T. scriptures, the disciples are not doing anything wrong at all. However they are violating the man-made rules set up by Jewish rabbis and now being enforced by the Pharisees. How does Jesus respond? “Oh, we’re so sorry. We didn’t mean to offend you. We won’t let it happen again.” Is that what Jesus said? No. Instead, v 3-4, He gives them a Bible lesson taken from the life of David. You remember the story from 1 Samuel 21. This is before David becomes king. He’s being chased by King Saul who’s trying to kill David. David and some of his men arrive at the tabernacle which is stationed at Nob, just outside Jerusalem. They’re hungry. They ask the priest there for some food. The priest tells David that the only bread they have is the holy bread that is laid out on the table of showbread inside the tabernacle. This bread symbolized God’s presence. It is changed out every week. Only the priests are allowed to eat it. But instead of turning David and his men away hungry the priest shows compassion to them. He gives them 5 loaves of bread to eat.

The point of this story is to show what is important to God – mercy and compassion. These override religious ritual. “If David was allowed to violate a divine law to fulfill the law of mercy; then certainly Jesus and His disciples could violate a human law to fulfill the true law of mercy.” And this is Jesus’ point to the Pharisees.

Micah 6:6-8: “With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” The bottom line is that all of our religious practices, important as they might seem, don’t matter at all to God if our heart isn’t right.

But Jesus doesn’t just leave it there. He looks them square in the eyes and says, “The Son of Man [speaking of Himself] is lord of the Sabbath.” In other words, “Guys, you aren’t in charge of the Sabbath (though you may think you are). I’m in charge. I am the Lord of the Sabbath. I don’t care what your religious system says. You’re not in charge. Here Jesus defies the works-based ceremonial religious system of His day.

But the Pharisees aren’t done hounding Jesus. Luke gives us another encounter with Jesus about the Sabbath and that begins in v 6…

READ Luke 6:6-11

On another Sabbath Jesus is teaching in a synagogue somewhere in Galilee. The scribes and Pharisees are there. They are scrutinizing Jesus. They’re watching Him carefully. In particular they’re waiting to see if Jesus will heal on the Sabbath. The question is NOT can Jesus heal? They all know that He can. The question is will He heal? V 7 says “so that they might find a reason to accuse Him.” These guys just don’t give up, do they? Earlier I read to you what Exodus 20 says regarding observing the Sabbath. Was there any prohibition mentioned there about healing someone on the Sabbath? No. Again, that’s not in the Bible. It’s a man-made rule. You weren’t allowed to doctor anyone, heal anyone, bandage up anybody’s wounds, etc – that would be work – unless, of course, it was a life-threatening situation. Then you could do it. So according to their rules it would be unlawful to heal this man since his life was not in danger. The scribes and Pharisees are hoping to catch Jesus in an “unlawful” act.

V 8 Jesus knows their thoughts. He’s God. He knows exactly what they’re up to. So He stops teaching for a moment and calls to the man with the withered hand (probably atrophied, no longer usable, shriveled up). He says to the man, “Come and stand here.” The man walks over and stands by Jesus. Now Jesus turns His attention to the scribes and Pharisees. He asks them a question, which I’ll ask you: “Does the law permit good deeds on the Sabbath, or is it a day for doing evil? Is this a day to save life or to destroy it?” (NLT) So tell me, what is the right answer to this question? Is it a day for doing good or doing evil?

What does the Bible say? In Isaiah 1:11-17 God is speaking to Israel thru the prophet Isaiah: “What to Me is the multitude of your sacrifices? I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats… Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations, I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.”

The right answer to Jesus’ question, then, is to do good. This is what God desires from us no matter what day of the week it is.

Here’s the problem. If they answer correctly and say “do good” then they are in essence giving their stamp of approval for Jesus to heal the man. They can’t do that. But if they answer “do evil” then they will expose themselves as having evil hearts. So they just sit there in silence.

V 10, “After looking around at them all…” No doubt Jesus is waiting for them to answer. When they don’t answer Him He says to the man with the withered hand, “Stretch out your hand.” What work does Jesus do? Does He touch the man or put salve on the man’s hand? Does He even speak a word to the man’s hand? No. The Bible simply says, “the man’s hand was restored.” Again, clearly, this is a God thing. The creative power of God is put on display for all in the synagogue to see on this day.

I find it interesting that all throughout Jesus’ ministry the religious leaders keep asking Jesus for a sign. Well here they get one. And yet, there is no apparent belief on their part, is there? There’s no rejoicing or giving glory to God. Instead what is their reaction? V 11, “They were filled with fury.” They become extremely angry with Jesus. In Matthew’s account it says that “the Pharisees went out and conspired against [Jesus], how to destroy Him.” They wanted Jesus dead. And we know that eventually they were successful and had Jesus killed.

Jesus came proclaiming the truth, the good news from God. And He proved time after time by His many signs and miracles who He was – the Son of God. But the Pharisees keep right on defending their own human traditions and promoting their false religious system. Jesus tells them in John 8:47 and He wasn’t mincing any words when He said this: “The reason why you do not hear them (the reason you don’t believe what I tell you) is that you are not of God.” Jesus told it like it was and they didn’t like it one bit.

Jesus never completely gives up on the scribes and Pharisees. He is trying to save them. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, which includes these guys (even if they didn’t see themselves as lost). So when we get to the end of a passage like this one and see the negative reaction they have to Jesus we might think, “Well, Jesus, nice try. But these guys are just too far gone. They’re never going to believe you and be saved.”

Let me close on a positive note. Acts Chapter 15 tells the story of the Jerusalem Council. That is where the early church leaders met to settle the issue of whether Gentiles would be required to keep the Jewish law and traditions. In that council you had representatives from various groups of Christians. Right in the middle of this story there’s a verse that says, “But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said – ‘they need to keep the Law of Moses’” (Acts 15:5). Here’s the point – some Pharisees DID eventually believe in Jesus even if their doctrine may have been a little off. One of the Pharisees who got saved was a man named Saul, later known as the Apostle Paul, writer of 13 N.T. letters.

We see the Pharisees in Luke 6 as hostile to Jesus. We know they were instrumental in Jesus’ eventual crucifixion. Then we see a group of Pharisees later in Acts who believe in Jesus. That’s divine GRACE. While the Pharisees did not exhibit any grace and compassion themselves in Jesus’ day, God shows them grace and many are later saved. So then, never say never. Even the hardest of hearts can be reached by the penetrating power of the Holy Spirit. He saves you right where you are. And then after you are saved He can begin to work on your theology. That is the good news I want to leave us with this morning. Praise God for His grace and love to us – sinners just as undeserving as any of those Pharisees!