

THE SABBATH: A DAY CREATED FOR HUMANKIND
(Luke 6:1-11)

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INTRODUCTION

ORIENTATION AND CONTEXTSignificance of Text

In his book *A Day Apart*, journalist Christopher D. Ringwald records the following observations he had of a modern Jewish family, the Kligermans: “Becky tells me that the joy of the Sabbath infects even the children. ‘Every day this week Adena asked me, ‘Is it Shabbat yet? Is it Shabbat?’ They get to spend that day with their family and friends. They know they have both parents for 25 hours. I hope they realize it’s not TV or video games and tapes that make life valuable but people’” (58).

The reaction to Sabbath observation shown by the Kligermans illustrates well the function that Sabbath was to have in the lives of the Hebrew people. Mark records Jesus saying that “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). Just as God labored six days in creation and took the seventh day off, so too were His followers to observe a day of rest. Ringwald writes, “Some nonreligious people also value a day of rest as a hedge against the pace and demands of modern life” (11). By taking a day off from the regular rigors of life, people can be refreshed, renewed, and rejuvenated in anticipation of beginning another week. Thus, the Sabbath was established to benefit humankind, not to be a burden to it.

Unfortunately, by the time of Jesus, the leaders of the established religious institutions among the Jews had perverted the original intentions of Sabbath observation. Rev. J. Willcock writes, “The vast number of rules and the hair-splitting casuistry associated by the Jews with Sabbath observance are well known: they made life almost intolerable” (162). What had been intended as a source of rest and comfort when instituted had been transformed into a system of repression and slavery.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (Matthew 5:17-18). Walter Bowie writes, “[Jesus] was no scorner of the Sabbath, but . . ., on the contrary, held it dear” (111). Having grown up in the Jewish culture of First Century Palestine, Jesus’ whole life had been rooted in the practices of Judaism. Thus, Sabbath observation would have been extremely important to Him. However, the Gospel accounts show us that He recognized something the religious leaders failed to grasp: the Law was established for the benefit of humankind, not humankind for the Law.

Being a Jew who was passionate about observing the Law, Jesus regularly followed the Sabbath rituals of Judaism. This can be seen in Luke’s account of His return to Nazareth after His wilderness temptation: “He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read” (Luke 4:16). However, recognizing that Sabbath observation had been transformed into a repressive ritual, Jesus was not afraid to challenge the religious authorities when a greater good could be illustrated. This is what can be seen in the sixth chapter of Luke. First, Jesus defends His disciples as they were being accused of being Sabbath breakers in their attempt to quell their hunger. Second, Jesus performs an act of healing on a crippled man on the Sabbath. Through both of these examples, Jesus defies the first century Sabbath guidelines in His teaching of the intent behind Sabbath observation.

Historical and Social Setting

The Gospel of Luke is the first of two volumes, the second of which is The Acts of the Apostles. The connection between these two volumes can be seen in the introductory verses of each. “I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed” (Luke 1:3-4). “In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven . . .” (Acts 1:1-2). These two volumes were originally circulated together, but sometime during the end of the first century or beginning of the second century, the first volume began to be associated with the other three Gospels instead of with the second volume (Longenecker 2007).

The author of Luke and Acts is traditionally believed to be Luke. This tradition can be traced back to at least the second century church father Irenaeus. Luke is referenced three times in the New Testament: Colossians 4:14, 2 Timothy 4:11, and Philemon 24. Through these references, we learn that Luke was a physician and a companion of Paul. Acts is believed to have been written by one of Paul’s companions because there are several passages in Acts that use the first person plural “we” instead of the third person singular “he” (16:9-18, 20:5-21:18, and 27:1-28-16). Also, of all the companions of Paul mentioned in the New Testament, only Titus and Luke are not referred to by name in Acts. This implies that the “we” passages include at least Paul and whichever of these two is the author. In his commentary on Acts, Ralph Earle writes, “When it comes to a choice between these two we can let the unanimous tradition of the Early Church settle the matter in favor of Luke” (*Acts* 250).

Luke gives us the purpose of his two volumes at the very beginning of his Gospel: “to write an orderly account [of the events that have been fulfilled among us] for you, most excellent

Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed” (Luke 1:3-4). He acknowledges that others have done this as well (Luke 1:1), which could be a reference to the other Gospels. Unlike the life of Jesus, though, Acts is the only source of information that we have on the activities of the early church, with the exception of some passing comments in Paul’s Epistles (Longenecker 207).

The immediate recipient of both Luke and Acts is named Theophilus. The introductory verses of these two books are the only two places where this individual’s name is found. In Luke, his name is preceded by “most excellent”, which was a title most often used for individuals of high social status. Theophilus means “friend of God”. In regard to this name and the readers of Luke and Acts, Marion Lloyd Soards, contributor to the study notes in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* writes, “While the address may be to a particular person, the symbolic sense of the name may designate any ideal Christian, as it has been understood since the earliest interpretations of Luke’s Gospel” (95).

As is typical in modern biblical criticism, there is considerable disagreement about when Luke was composed. Among those who believe that Luke was the authentic author, the standard dates given are either around A.D. 64 or anywhere between A.D. 80 and 95. The majority of modern scholars choose this later range of dates. Their rationale is based upon the belief that Luke was composed using the Gospel of Mark and the theoretical collection of first century material known as “Q” (Soards 94). These individuals hold to a later dating of Mark, therefore Luke would have been composed at a later date as well. Another reason that some place Luke later is their doubts of Jesus’ prophetic ability. In Luke 19:43-44, Jesus predicts the destruction of Jerusalem, which took place in A.D. 70. Some who hold to a composition of Luke after this time believe that Luke wasn’t writing about one of Jesus’ prophecies but rather writing about

what he knew had already happened. Those who hold to the earlier date of Luke do so because Acts, its sequel, ends with Paul living and preaching in peace in Rome. In A.D. 65, the Roman Emperor Nero began his terrible persecutions of the church (Longenecker 236-237). If Luke did not write his volumes until sometime after A.D. 80, why would he have made no mention in his second volume of these persecutions, the martyrdom of Paul and Peter, and the destruction of Jerusalem?

Nowhere in Luke 6:1-11 is a specific indication given of the location of the events. The first setting is in the grainfields and the second is in a synagogue, but no reference is made to the geographical location of either of these. The only specific regions mentioned in text preceding this passage are found in Luke 5:17: "One day as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law, who had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem, were sitting there." This verse just indicates where the audience was from, though. The location of the event could have reasonably been anywhere in Palestine. Matthew's parallel account of this passage from Luke indicates that the events possibly took place in Galilee. He writes, "After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee" (Matthew 11:1). The passage of the Sabbath events in Matthew, though, gives no indication of their exact location, either. Since much of the ministry of Jesus recorded in the Synoptic Gospels takes place in Galilee, it is probably safe to assume that these events did so as well.

Galilee was a region located in northern Palestine. When Israel was originally established, the tribes of Naphtali, Asher, Issachar, and Zebulun settled in this region. Under King Solomon's reign, some of the territory was surrendered to the king of Tyre. During the period of the Divided Kingdom, most of Galilee was conquered and came under Assyrian rule.

Jews resettled the region after the Maccabean revolt in 164 B.C. Nazareth, the town in which Jesus grew up, was located in Galilee, as was Capernaum, the town He made his home as an adult (Meyers 359-360).

Literary Context

The Gospel of Luke is an historical narrative that records the events of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ from before His birth to His ascension following His resurrection. According to Craig Blomberg, “Luke alternates between large blocks of Markan and non-Markan material” (140). This narrative of Jesus’ life contains both accounts of His actions and His teachings. It contains material that parallels material found in both Mark and Matthew, but it also contains material that is unique to this book (Blomberg 86-87).

Luke 1:1 through 4:13 provides an introduction to Jesus’ ministry. In these chapters and verses, an account is given of the historical setting that He came into, His birth, His childhood, and His preparation for ministry, including His baptism and His wilderness temptation. Luke 4:14 through 9:50 records Jesus’ ministry throughout Galilee. Luke 9:51 through 18:34 tells of Jesus’ continued ministry as He began His journey to Jerusalem. The rest of Luke, 18:35 through 24:53, gives an account of the Judean stage of His ministry, including His crucifixion and resurrection.

The text that will be the focus of this paper is Luke 6:1-11. This passage begins with Jesus and His disciples passing through grainfields on the Sabbath, with the disciples picking heads of grain and eating the kernels. It concludes with the Pharisees being outraged at what they perceived as being Jesus’ disrespect for the Sabbath. Located immediately before this passage is a discourse in which Jesus is questioned about why His disciples do not fast like the

disciples of John and of the Pharisees. The text following this passage gives us Luke's account of Jesus' selection of the twelve primary disciples.

PRESENTATION OF TEXT

Scripture Passage

Luke 6:1 One 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."
⁶ On 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. (NRSV)

Text Critical Notes

In the New Revised Standard Version's account of this passage, "Sabbath" in Luke 6:1 is footnoted with the following text: "Other ancient authorities read *On the second first Sabbath.*"

The parallel passages in the other Synoptic Gospels have some noteworthy differences. Mark 2:26, when speaking of David and his companions, says, "He entered the house of God,

when Abiathar was high priest . . .” After the account of David and the consecrated bread, Matthew includes, “Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and yet are guiltless? I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless” (Matthew 12:5-7). Prior to the statement regarding the Son of Man, Mark includes, “Then he said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath’” (Mark 2:27). When the question is raised on the lawfulness of healing on the Sabbath, Matthew adds the following: “He said to them, ‘Suppose one of you had only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath’” (Matthew 12:11-12).

Outline of Passage

- I. Harvesting On The Sabbath
 - A. Jesus’ disciples pick the grain on the Sabbath
 - B. The Pharisees express concerns regarding Sabbath violations
 - C. Jesus gives justification for His disciples’ actions
- II. Healing On The Sabbath
 - A. Jesus teaches in the synagogue
 - B. Jesus heals the withered hand
 - C. The Pharisees begin to plot against Jesus

HARVESTING ON THE SABBATH

According to author James Porter, “The word *Sabbath* means *cessation*. God commanded His people to do their work the first six days of the week. The seventh day is a

Sabbath (cessation) of solemn rest” (260). The concept of the Sabbath entered Hebrew theology through the Ten Commandments.

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping 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, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (Exodus 20:8-11)

Severe penalties were to be paid for breaking the Sabbath: “For six days, work is to be done, but the seventh day shall be your holy day, a Sabbath of rest to the LORD. Whoever does any work on it must be put to death. Do not light a fire in any of your dwellings on the Sabbath day” (Exodus 35:2-3). The Sabbath “began at sunset on Friday and ended at sunset on Saturday” (Baab 40).

The original Old Testament prohibition of work on the Sabbath was fairly general. However, by the time of Jesus it “had been supplemented in rabbinical tradition by a list of thirty-nine ‘major occupations’ that were proscribed” (Gilmour 111). An example of the legalism that invaded Sabbath observation can be seen in here:

A Jew must not carry on the Sabbath even so much as a pocket handkerchief, except within the walls of his city. If there are no walls, it follows, according to their perverse logic, that he must not carry at all. To avoid this difficulty here in Safed, they resort to what they call the Eruv. Poles are set up at the ends of the streets, and strings stretched from one to the other. These strings represent a wall,

and a conscientious Jew may carry his handkerchief anywhere within these stings (Horowitz, par. 4).

The thirty-nine areas that included specific Sabbath regulations included carrying, burning, extinguishing, finishing, writing, erasing, cooking, washing, sewing, tearing, knotting, untying, and more (“The Thirty-Nine Categories of Sabbath Work”, par. 3).

This legalistic view of the Sabbath provides the background for Jesus’ actions and the Pharisees’ resulting anger in Luke 6. The regulations that had been developed were simply unrealistic. As Jesus drew near His Passion some time later, He would say, “[The teachers of the law and the Pharisees] tie up heavy loads and put them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them” (Matthew 23:4). In writing of his own frustrations as he attempted to keep the Law, Paul writes, “We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. . . . I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing” (Romans 7:14, 18-19).

As is noted in a footnote to “Sabbath” in Luke 6:1, the specific Sabbath in which Jesus and His disciples walked through the grainfields was the second first Sabbath according to some ancient authorities. According to S. MacLean Gilmour, “Perhaps Luke had in mind the second Sabbath in such a series [of post-Passover Sabbaths]. . . . The story, if it is primitive, affords the incidental information that Jesus’ ministry extended over a period that included at least two Passovers” (110-111). Willcock states that “one of the many suggestions as to the phrase is that it means ‘the first Sabbath of the second month’” (158). Both Gilmour and Willcock argue that the difficulty of understanding this phrase supports the idea that it is authentically part of Luke’s

original Gospel. Willcock writes, “It is easy to account for its omission in some MSS., but not easy to account for its insertion in others if it were not in the original text” (158).

Regardless of which specific Sabbath Jesus and His disciples walked through the grainfields on, the disciples did what the Pharisees viewed as clearly being “work”, thus violating the Sabbath commandment. E.J. Tinsley writes, “The Law forbade work on the Sabbath, and Jewish interpretation had analyzed in very great detail exactly what constituted ‘work’. ‘Reaping’ was included in the list, and this is what the Pharisees are referring to here” (64). Earle records that “Plummer comments: ‘According to Rabbinical notions, [rubbing] was reaping, thrashing, winnowing, and preparing food all at once’—all of which were forbidden on the Sabbath” (*Word Meanings* 60).

Sharon Ringe gives a different view of the disciples’ actions. She writes, “The issue is not clear cut, for while agricultural labor (such as actually harvesting the grain by cutting it with a sickle) would clearly be prohibited, Deut 23:25 appears to permit precisely the sort of gleaning by hand that the disciples have been doing” (par. 11). The text of that passage reads as follows: “If you enter your neighbor’s grainfield, you may pick kernels with your hands, but you must not put a sickle to his standing grain” (Deuteronomy 23:25). Gilmour acknowledges this passage, but he sees no exemption to the Sabbath principle here. He writes, “To pluck heads of grain in a neighbor’s field was not considered an act of theft (Deut. 23:25), but to do so on the Sabbath was a form of ‘harvesting,’ and was declared to be a breach of the law” (111).

Regardless as to whether or not any exemption existed under the Law, thus justifying the disciples’ actions, the Pharisees clearly saw it as a Sabbath violation. These Pharisees were some of the most prominent religious leaders of the time. They were one of four sects of Judaism that is known to have existed in First Century Palestine. Unlike the Sadducees, who

arose out of the priestly order and temple cult, the Pharisees arose from the laity and were associated with the synagogues. According to Alex Varughese, “Pharisees observed and taught strict obedience to both the written Law and the oral Law” (74-75). Thus, they grew quite concerned when they saw Jesus’ disciples engaging in what they perceived to be violations of the Sabbath.

Being concerned about the disciples’ actions, the Pharisees approached their leader, Jesus, and inquired as to why these actions took place. Jesus refers them to an Old Testament passage that they would have been quite familiar with as justification of what the disciples had done. The passage in question tells of when David, while on the run from King Saul, requested bread for his companions from Ahimelech the priest. (Interestingly, Mark misidentifies the priest as Abiathar in his account. Matthew and Luke both omit the priest’s name, thus correcting Mark’s error.) Ahimelech responded, “I don’t have any ordinary bread on hand; however, there is some consecrated bread here—provided the men have kept themselves from women” (1 Samuel 21:4). David assured him that they had, so the priest gave him the bread. Though David’s assurances satisfied Ahimelech’s concerns, his and his companions’ consumption of the consecrated bread was still a violation of the Levitical code, as can be seen here: “[The bread] belongs to Aaron and his sons, who are to eat it in a holy place . . .” (Leviticus 24:9). According to Jesus’ reasoning, just as this bread was not originally intended for David and his companions, yet they were justified in eating it in their moment of desperation, so too were the disciples justified in doing “work” in order to eat on the Sabbath, though their work may have ordinarily been prohibited on that day.

Jesus’ statement to the Pharisees that “the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath” (Luke 6:5) undoubtedly disturbed them greatly. His frequent usage of the phrase “the Son of Man” in

regards to Himself probably was not a Messianic self-proclamation. Rather, it was simply a statement that He was, indeed, human. Though there is some evidence that some Intertestamental ideas began associating the title “son of man” with a messianic figure, Reginald Fuller writes, “Jesus must have used ‘Son of man’ merely as a self-designation, perhaps as a self-effacing way of referring to himself simply as a human being” (1053). For Jesus to tell the Pharisees that a mere human was Lord of this extremely important day in Judaism must have been a radical and troubling idea for them. Mark includes a sentence in his Gospel, though, that helps provide some context on what the proper role of Sabbath observation is: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

HEALING ON THE SABBATH

Luke’s account of Jesus’ healing of the shriveled hand takes place on a different Sabbath than the one in which Jesus and His disciples pass through the grainfields. In both Matthew and Mark, however, these events seem to take place on the same Sabbath. Regardless of whether or not these two events took place on the same or different Sabbaths, though, the Pharisees were undoubtedly put on their guard against Jesus because of what He told them regarding the Sabbath, and they were looking for reasons to accuse Him of directly violating the Law.

Luke records that Jesus “went into the synagogue and was teaching” (Luke 6:6). This was a regular Sabbath activity of Jesus’, as can be seen here: “He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read” (Luke 4:16). In writing of Jesus’ Sabbath activities, Willcock says, “How did our Lord spend *His* Sabbaths? In regular attendance at the synagogue services, public preaching, private ministrations of mercy to the sick and suffering. How different the Sabbaths

of the Pharisees! They had added to the fourth commandment many childish and burdensome rules” (162).

The synagogues that Jesus spent time in on the Sabbath were centers of worship for Jews in the first century. During the Exilic Period, when the Jews were separated from their homeland and their temple, they developed the synagogues as locations of religious education, prayer, and worship. Even after the return to Judea and the rebuilding of the temple, synagogues continued to play an important role in the lives of Jews. They provided a location for religious gatherings away from Jerusalem for the Jews who lived both in other locations in Palestine and also in different locations throughout the Roman Empire (Varughese 26, 71).

The Pharisees, having already grown skeptical of Jesus’ orthodoxy, watched Him closely to see if He, Himself, would violate the Sabbath. Jesus did not disappoint. William Barclay writes, “In this incident Jesus openly broke the law. To heal was to work and work was prohibited on the Sabbath day” (72). The Pharisees observed Him healing on the Sabbath, thus fulfilling their desire to make an accusation against Him. Having been satisfied in their desire, “they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus” (Luke 6:11).

Through His violation of the letter of the Law, Jesus taught an important lesson about the intent of the Law. Knowing the intent of the Pharisees, Jesus called the man with the withered hand forward. He asked them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?” (Luke 6:9). The intent of the Law, and Sabbath observation as a part of the Law, was to do good and benefit the populace. The religious leaders, though, had turned it into a device that instead did harm to the populace. Though all “work” was prohibited on the Sabbath, strictly speaking, doing good towards others sometimes required “work” to take place. The plot

against Jesus at the end of this passage “underlines the contrast between the positive action for good counseled by Jesus’ actions and words, and the consequences of his opponents’ focus on the specifics instead of the purpose of Sabbath observance. Their death plot is not an activity appropriate for the Sabbath, of all days!” (Ringe, par. 8).

In regards to healing, there were some justifiable reasons to violate the Sabbath in the eyes of the Pharisees. Barclay writes, “If there was any danger of life, steps might be taken to help a sufferer. For instance, it was always legal to treat diseases of the eye or throat” (72). However, this man’s life was not in danger. Ringe writes, “Jesus’ action could easily have waited until after sunset, when the Sabbath was over. The Gospel writers are thus really arguing that healing or wholeness of life carries the same urgency as the literal preservation of life” (par. 9). This concept goes beyond the rigid observation of the Law as practiced by the Pharisees and portrays the fulfillment of the Law that Jesus declared He had brought (Matthew 5:17). The Sabbath was to be observed, but greater good sometimes took place when the specifics of Sabbath observation were set aside to help bring about wholeness of life.

CONCLUSION

SUMMATION

Jesus was reprimanded by the Pharisees for allowing His followers to violate the Sabbath. This was done, in their eyes, when He and His disciples passed through grainfields on the Sabbath, and His disciples plucked grain and ate it to satisfy their hunger. Barclay writes, “Four of the forbidden kinds of work [on the Sabbath] were reaping, threshing, winnowing, and preparing food; and technically the disciples had broken every one of them” (69). In defense of His disciples, though, Jesus appeals to the story of David and his companions eating the consecrated bread. Just as the needs of David superseded the letter of the Law concerning the

consecrated bread, so too did the needs of the disciples supersede the letter of the Law concerning Sabbath observation.

The Pharisees, having been put on their guard against Jesus and his “loose” interpretation of the Law, watched Him closely as He entered the synagogue. They sought justification to accuse Him of Sabbath breaking. Aware of their intent, He proceeded to heal the man with the withered hand. He used His “work” of healing on the Sabbath as a teaching moment for the Pharisees. It is better to do good than to not do good on the Sabbath. Thus, healing those in need, an act of good, is perfectly justifiable on the Sabbath. The Pharisees refused to be taught by Jesus’ compassionate act, though, and they began to plot against Him.

Though Luke does not include it, Mark’s statement that “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27) is a good thesis for this whole passage. What good is accomplished by making the disciples suffer hunger pains on the Sabbath by refusing to permit them to pick grain? What good is accomplished by making the crippled man suffer yet another day of his disability by refusing to heal him? If the Sabbath is a day that is truly given to humankind to rest from regular work and worship God, is it not better for any good that can be accomplished to be accomplished on that day? Ringe writes, “Sabbath is linked to good news to the poor and to the wholeness and integrity of life” (par. 17). If this is the case, then steps must be taken on the Sabbath to bring this good news and wholeness of life. Thus, in fulfilling the greater purposes of the Sabbath, there are some kinds of “work” that are appropriate and necessary on that day.

APPLICATION

The Kligermans are a family that became Jewish upon marriage. Tom was raised in that faith, but he was not very orthodox. Becky was a convert. One of the primary changes to their

lives as they began observing Jewish customs was the Sabbath observations. Writing of this family, Ringwald says, “The children adjust and enjoy the day. They grow up learning that come sunset Friday, the television goes off, the parents are home, demands are few, and life is full of slower, simpler pleasures like reading and talking. Shabbat has survived because it is a gift. But only by participating do you receive” (33).

The Sabbath was created for humankind. Within Christianity, our Sabbath, the first day of the week, is the day in which we remember and celebrate Christ’s conquering of death and sin in His resurrection. The Sabbath is a day that should be honored, remembered, celebrated, and kept holy. This is not to bind us to some repressive ritual, though. Rather, it is to benefit us and set us free from the rigors of our day to day life. Wayne Muller writes, “Beyond the legalism is an idea that by saying no to making some things happen, deep permission arises for other things to happen. When we cease our daily labor, other things—love, friendship, prayer, touch, singing, rest—can be born in the space created by our rest” (29-30). The principle of Sabbath observation, then, is not as much a principle of abstaining from activities as it is a principle of building relationships with both God and others.

“The Covenant of Christian Character” of The Church of the Nazarene states that the members of that church “shall evidence their commitment to God by avoiding evil of every kind, including profaning of the Lord’s Day by participation in unnecessary secular activities, thereby indulging in practices that deny its sanctity” (par. 27.2.2). This principle established by The Church of the Nazarene is a good principle to follow. It is not a legalistic list of practices that must be avoided as was established by the Pharisees. Rather, it is a reminder to the members that God has called us to observe a Sabbath day. In observing such a day, we should refrain from the regular activities that we partake in. Instead, we should devote ourselves to establishing and

furthering our relationship with God. Through the practice of the various spiritual disciplines, such relationships can grow and deepen. We must not rigidly cut ourselves off from doing good, though. As Jesus stated, “Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath” (Matthew 12:12).

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