

Luke 6:1-5

Sermon: **The teaching of Jesus vs. The teaching of Pharisees #5**

2024.

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SABBATH

1. As in the previous sermons, I believe Jesus continues to confront the Pharisees with the lie they believed—that their oral tradition represented the true and only interpretation of the Law of Moses. When Jesus said that new wine cannot be put into old wineskins, I believe that by “new” He meant the restoration of the true meaning of the Law of Moses, and by “old wineskins” He referred to the Pharisaic oral tradition, which up to that moment, in which they are speaking, had ruled for centuries as the most dominant movement within Jewish culture.

1.1. In the previous sermon, I spoke about the true meaning of fasting that is pleasing to God. Today, I will speak about the Sabbath. I will try to present the difference between the Pharisaic perspective and God’s perspective on the meaning of the Sabbath.

1.2. **(Luke 6:1–2)** “Now it happened that on a Sabbath, He was passing through some grainfields; and His disciples were picking the heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands, and eating them. But some of the Pharisees said: ‘Why are you doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?’”

1.3. As we read in the text, on the Sabbath (the day of rest), Jesus and His disciples were walking through the grainfields, and as they walked, the disciples plucked the heads of grain with their hands, rubbed them between their palms, and ate them. It is very likely that Jesus, by His own example, showed that what they were doing was right—that it was permissible to eat on the Sabbath.

1.3.1. In Deuteronomy 23:25–26, we read that Yahweh allowed the Israelites to eat from their neighbor’s vineyards and fields. They could eat as much as they wanted, but they were not allowed to take containers or baskets with the intent of gathering what they picked. Here we see that the Law of Moses permitted exactly what Jesus’ disciples were doing.

1.3.2. But this happened on the Sabbath. We see further in Luke 6:2 that the Pharisees rebuked and criticized Jesus and His disciples for picking grain on the Sabbath.

1.4. The question that arises is: where did the Pharisees come from? Did they intentionally decide to follow the man called Jesus in hopes of catching Him in a lie and destroying His ministry? Or were the Pharisees, in their desire to make the entire nation obey their oral law, stationed throughout villages, towns, and cities to warn anyone who violated their rules?

I believe the answer lies in both of these examples.

Through studying the Gospels, we gradually come to understand the heart of a Pharisee and see what values mattered most to them. In other words, they zealously and rigidly enforced their oral tradition and trained ordinary people to do the same. That this is true can be seen in the question they asked Jesus: *“Why are you doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?”*

1.4.1. Before we go further, to the point where Jesus answers their question, let us return to the Old Testament, where we find what is written about the Sabbath. I have found two places where God, through Moses, tells His chosen people what they must do on the Sabbath. Let us read both passages:

1.5. **(Exodus 20:8–10)** *“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. For six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord your God; on it you shall not do any work—you, or your son, or your daughter, your male slave, or your female slave, or your cattle, or your resident who stays with you.”*

1.6. **(Deuteronomy 5:12–13, 15)** *“Keep the Sabbath day to treat it as holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. For six days you shall labor and do all your work. And you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and that the Lord your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.”*

1.7. What does the Law of Moses actually say about the Sabbath? Were Jesus’ disciples allowed to eat grain on the Sabbath according to the Law of Moses? Were the Pharisees right in their accusations? These are the questions we will try to address in this sermon.

Of course, it is Jesus who will give us the answer. When we read Yahweh’s instructions to His chosen people, we come to the conclusion that God was not opposed to individuals being active on that day. However, the focus of their activity had to be different from that of the other days of the week.

A Jew worked for six days and did everything an ordinary person does during the week—he worked, fulfilled his duties as a father, husband, neighbor, friend, employer, worker... But on the Sabbath, God required His people to make that day special and dedicated to Yahweh.

On that day, every Jew was to remember what God had done and what He had promised to do for His people. Men, women, children, and their servants—all were to cease from their usual work for that day, so that the day might be devoted to the One who had performed wondrous signs among them—signs witnessed by the entire ancient world. To the One who, through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and now through Moses, had promised to make the Israelites a holy nation to whom all other nations would one day submit and look upon with awe. “I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”

2.2. That being said, Yahweh had no issue with an individual being active on that day, but his activity—as well as the activity of the entire community—had to demonstrate that the day was

consecrated to Yahweh. It was a day of rejoicing, of reading the Torah, of fellowship—a day when they reminded one another of the mighty deeds God had done among them.

It was a day when the worries of this life were set aside, and each Israelite remembered why he had been created—to reflect and proclaim the holiness and goodness of Yahweh in this world.

But if you sent your servant to continue working and earning for you while you yourself did not work, if you continued to concern yourself with worldly matters and pleasures, then you were engaging in actions that were forbidden and displeasing in the eyes of Yahweh, your God.

I believe this brief description of the Sabbath gives a clear picture of the heart and essence of its true meaning.

THE SABBATH IN THE TIME OF JESUS

3. In the time of Jesus, the meaning of the Sabbath had completely changed. Within the Pharisees' oral tradition, there were entire categories of rules, and within each category, numerous specific regulations dictated what could not be done on the Sabbath—there were hundreds of them. The question that arises is this: are these rules, recorded in the Pharisees' oral tradition, found anywhere in the books of the Old Testament or in the Law of Moses? No, they are not! In their zeal not to violate even a single letter of the Law of Moses, the Pharisees misinterpreted the Law itself and concluded that they needed to create their own laws to prevent individuals from breaking the Law of Moses.

That is why additional rules were established—to act as barriers, preventing anyone from violating God's Law. And if a person meticulously and rigorously kept all these added rules, he was considered to be in good standing with Yahweh.

3.1. "Not working" in their minds had a completely different meaning than it did in God's. They took "not working" literally, focusing their Sabbath on strictly following every rule written in their traditions. Because of that, the true essence and purpose of the Sabbath were the last things on their minds. In other words, their obsession with enforcing their man-made rules made them blind to the very holiness and goodness of Yahweh, their God. They had become servants to a new god—the Pharisaic law.

3.2. To show that this same mentality still exists today, let me tell you a short story. A dear brother in Christ of mine decided a few years ago to visit Jerusalem. On the Sabbath day, he was walking through the streets of the city when a Jewish man approached him and asked if he would come into his house and turn off the light in his refrigerator.

Why was my brother allowed to do that? Because, in the Jewish man's mind, my brother was a Gentile—and if a Gentile did it, that was acceptable. But if he, as a Jew, did the same thing, he would be violating the Law of Moses and the commandment in which God said that on the Sabbath, His chosen people must not work.

3.3. Can we see how bizarre, strange, and almost absurd that belief is? Some of the rules the Pharisees imposed upon themselves were meaningless and foolish, and this little episode with my brother and the Jewish man proves that. Let us return to the question: did the Law of Moses—did Yahweh—ever command His people to do such things? No! They completely missed the point of the Sabbath celebration.

SABBATH (REST, CESSATION)

4. Let us continue. The meaning of the word Sabbath is “rest” or “cessation.” Why did God choose that specific day for the Israelites to rest? Does the seventh day hold a special significance in God’s eyes, or could it have been any other day? Let me first note that in Israelite culture, the Sabbath day was the last day of the week—the seventh day.

4.1. Let us try to answer these questions. If you recall, I mentioned in earlier sermons that God first promised Abraham that He would make from him a great nation—a nation that would be God’s chosen and consecrated people. After Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, during Israel’s captivity in Egypt, Moses enters the scene. Through Moses, God delivers His people from Egyptian bondage, gives them the Law of Moses on Mount Sinai, and leads them toward the Promised Land.

In that event, we see God beginning to fulfill the promise He had given to Abraham long ago: *“I will make you into a great nation¹,”* and *“All the land which you see, I will give to you and to your descendants forever².”* With that in mind, Moses instructs them: *“For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and everything that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day³.”* What is Moses trying to tell the Israelites with that statement—“and He rested on the seventh day”? Why is the Sabbath day important? What I am about to say is my personal interpretation—nowhere in the Bible do we find a verse that explicitly says the Israelites were required to think of it this way—but through studying Scripture, we can see that the biblical authors understood this truth and taught their people in that spirit.

4.2. God is spirit—we all know that—and we know that He does not need rest. So why do we read the words “and He rested on the seventh day”? The biblical authors throughout Scripture speak of God’s *hesed*—His faithfulness or steadfastness. In other words, when God decides to accomplish something, no one and nothing can prevent Him from doing it. And finally, when God promises to do something, you, Israel, can be absolutely certain that He will fulfill it.

Moses understood this truth and said to the people: *“Just as God decided to create the world and everything in it, and then rested—why was He able to rest? Because He had finished what He intended to do!—so you, Israel, can be certain that God will fulfill all the promises He made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He will make you a great nation, He will sanctify you, and you will be a holy and God-fearing people who proclaim His goodness to the world. How can you be sure of that? Because of the hesed of God. He is the One who completes what He begins. Just as God rested on the seventh day after creating the world, so will He one day rest after fulfilling all the promises He made to your fathers.”*

— If we understand the Sabbath in this way, then we realize that the specific day of the week is not what matters, but rather the meaning for which that day exists. —

4.3. Likewise, we Christians who know the New Testament understand that God has added another promise—one that directly concerns us, the Gentiles. God promises that one day we will become glorious beings in whom there will no longer be a trace of evil. We will become morally perfect

¹ Genesis 12:2

² Genesis 13:15

³ Exodus 20:11

creatures who, in His future kingdom, will reflect and promote the righteousness and goodness of God. We, the Christians of today, just like the Israelites, can count on God's *hesed*. He will certainly fulfill the promises He has given us through His Son, Jesus Christ.

4.4. On the Sabbath, the Israelites were to faithfully remind themselves that this was indeed true—and to wait patiently, in joyful expectation, for the *hesed* of God to be fulfilled among them. Likewise, for us—as it was for Israel—whatever our “Sabbath day” may be, we must continually remind ourselves that what our Teacher, Jesus Christ, has promised will indeed come to pass: that one day we will become morally perfect human beings—the new Adam; we will, in that sense, be like the Son of God, Jesus Christ, blameless.

4.5. Notice how radically different the original perspective of the Law of Moses is from that of the Pharisees' oral tradition. Their focus was on enforcing rules as precisely as possible—rules that seemed to promise protection from breaking God's commandment: “Do not work on that day!” They believed those regulations tested one's faithfulness to God, and in doing so, they forgot what mattered most: “God has chosen us, He has promised to bless us. This day is a day of celebration; it is a day to love God and rejoice in the promises that will one day be fulfilled.”

THIS IS ABOUT THE WELL-BEING OF HUMAN LIFE

5. (Luke 6:3-4) “And Jesus answered them and said: ‘Have you not even read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him—how he entered the house of God and took and ate the consecrated bread, which is not lawful for anyone to eat except the priests alone, and gave it to his companions?’”

5.1. Let us recall, the Pharisees had asked Jesus: “*Why are you doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?*” Jesus replies with a counterquestion, directing them to reflect on a passage found in the Old Testament (the Torah). To understand what Jesus is referring to, let us turn together to (1 Samuel 21:2–5) “Then David came to Nob, to Ahimelech the priest; and Ahimelech was trembling when he met David and said to him: ‘Why are you alone and no one with you?’ And David said to Ahimelech the priest: ‘The king has commissioned me with a matter and has said to me: “Let no one know anything about the matter on which I am sending you and with which I have commissioned you.” And I have directed the young men to a certain place. Now then, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever can be found.’ The priest answered David and said: ‘There is no ordinary bread on hand, but there is consecrated bread; if only the young men have kept themselves from women.’”

5.2. Before we examine the text, let me give a brief introduction to explain why David did what he did. At that time, David had already been anointed by Yahweh to be the next king of Israel. King Saul was still reigning and was fully aware of this truth. Over time, Saul grew to hate David because of it and attempted several times to kill him.

In this particular account, we find a dialogue between David and Jonathan, Saul's son. Jonathan loved David as himself. David suspected that Saul was once again plotting in his heart to kill him, and he shared this suspicion with Jonathan. Jonathan agreed to test his father to see if David's fear was justified. He told David: “*The day after tomorrow, come to this place. I will go out and practice with my bow and arrows. If I say to my servant: ‘The arrow is farther away,’ you may safely return to my*

father's palace. But if I say to my servant: 'The arrow is closer,' then know that my father intends to kill you." When that day came, Jonathan said: *"The arrow is closer!"* and David understood that he must flee.

5.3. So we see that David, along with his companions, came to Nob, to the priest Ahimelech, and asked him for food for himself and his men. Ahimelech replied that he had no ordinary bread, only that which had been consecrated to Yahweh. Why was the bread consecrated to Yahweh? According to the ceremonial instructions of Moses⁴, the priest was required each week to bake twelve loaves of bread, which were to remain before Yahweh for seven days as a sign of dedication. After seven days, new loaves would be baked, and the old ones were to be eaten by the priests—only they were permitted to eat this bread; the rest of the people of Israel were not.

What we can observe from this text is that the priest Ahimelech, despite God's commandment, gave the consecrated bread to David and his companions. Why did he do this? Because Ahimelech understood that the moral laws of the Law of Moses were weightier than the ceremonial laws. He understood what was most important—to uphold and display the goodness of God.

5.4. On the other hand, David knew that the consecrated bread was forbidden for him and his men to eat, yet he did so anyway. He knew his God and understood that God would not condemn him for it. Why? Because he and his companions were starving and had nowhere else to go. The text shows us that David's men had kept themselves from women, demonstrating their devotion and reverence for Yahweh's commandments. Because of this, they were innocent in His eyes. They were hungry men who would have died of hunger had they not eaten. David knew that it was good and right in Yahweh's sight to ask the priest for bread. This was about the well-being of human life, which takes precedence over ceremonial law.

5.5. I believe that through this passage, Jesus is leading the Pharisees to recognize the true meaning of the Law of Moses. How does He do that? He draws an analogy from David's story and applies it to the situation He and His disciples are in. Jesus wants the Pharisees to understand, through the example of David, what matters most to God—is it the goodness we show toward others, or the strict observance of rules?

Jesus is trying to open the Pharisees' eyes and tell them: *"You yourselves can see that God did not punish David for what he did, and you can see in the text that God did not condemn the priest Ahimelech for giving the consecrated bread to David and his men. Despite the very rules that God Himself established in the Law of Moses, God regarded the actions of the priest Ahimelech and David as good and righteous. Why? Because what pleases God most is when we, as human beings, reflect His goodness and mercy. And if that conflicts with His ceremonial commandments, He has no issue with it—for He Himself delights more in goodness and mercy (moral law) than in sacrifice (ceremonial law) prescribed through the Law of Moses."*

GOD'S GOODNESS IS GREATER THAN THE TEMPLE

6. While the Gospel of Luke gives us a brief account of Jesus' response to the Pharisees, in the Gospel of Matthew 12:1–7 His answer is much longer and more detailed. In verse six, Jesus says to them: *"But I say to you that something greater than the temple is here."*

⁴ Leviticus 24:5-9

In the past, while studying the Gospels, I used to believe that Jesus was saying He, as the Messiah—the future King of Israel—had the right to disregard the commandments of Moses. Likewise, David, as the anointed future king of Israel in his time, had certain privileges that ordinary people did not have because of his calling. In other words, I once thought Jesus was essentially saying: *“I, as the coming Messiah, the Son of God, the Son of Man, am greater than the Temple; I have the authority to set aside the commandments of Moses when I choose to.”*

6.1. The first thing we must understand is that Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees. When He speaks of the Temple, He is referring to the ceremonial laws—and they understood that clearly. When we connect this with the idea I have presented in this sermon—that God’s goodness is more important than His ceremonial laws—and when we consider the context of David’s story, we can see that this is true. My personal view of this passage has since changed: Jesus is not saying that He Himself is greater than the Temple or the Law of Moses. Rather, I believe Jesus is saying that God’s goodness (the moral law of Moses) is greater than the Temple (the ceremonial law of Moses), which God Himself had established. In other words, God’s goodness is more valuable and more significant to God Himself than all the religious practices and rituals combined.

6.2. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus continues to confront the Pharisees in their false beliefs. In verse seven, He says to them: *“If you had known what this means: ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice’⁵, you would not have condemned the innocent.”* By “the innocent,” I believe Jesus is referring to His disciples.

The Hebrew word for *mercy* is „*hesed*“, and *hesed* carries a much broader meaning than the English word “mercy.” As I mentioned earlier (§4.2.), *hesed* describes God’s faithfulness and steadfastness. But when the biblical writers say that God desires *hesed* more than sacrifice, what do they mean? I believe they are saying that what matters most to God is the orientation of the heart of His chosen people: *“God is seeking hesed from you, Israel. If your heart is set on promoting the moral commandments of the Law of Moses—if Yahweh is the center of your life—it will be visible outwardly. Your inner devotion to manifest God’s goodness will show itself in the decisions you make. God desires that you, like Him, be faithful and steadfast to the covenant promises your fathers made at Mount Sinai when they pledged to love Yahweh with all their heart, with all their soul, with all their mind, and with all their strength! That is what you must understand, Israel!”*

6.3. And how does Jesus know that His disciples are innocent? He knows because He sees that their actions reflect the goodness of God in their lives. The words “I commit myself to love Yahweh with all my heart and with all my soul” are engraved upon their hearts. Their outward fruits—their deeds—prove this. That is why they stand innocent before God.

IS IT LAWFUL TO DO GOOD OR EVIL ON THE SABBATH?

7. All right, let us return to (Luke 6:5) “And He was saying to them: **‘The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.’**”

7.1. At the end of Jesus’ reply, He goes even deeper into exposing the Pharisees’ false beliefs and tells them: *“The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”* What does He mean by this statement? I believe it

⁵ Hosea 6:6

means this: all of God's promises—everything He declared would come to pass—are intimately tied to the coming of the Messiah. Every blessing that the people of Israel were to experience—to become a holy nation, vast in number, politically and economically strong—depended entirely on the arrival of the Messiah foretold by the prophets.

The Messiah is the central figure in the story God, the Author, has chosen to tell. Everything was created for Him—just as the biblical writers affirm.

7.1.1. Because of all that has been said above, Jesus is telling the Pharisees: *"In the same way, the Sabbath you observe would never have existed if God had not first determined for whom the Sabbath was made. Therefore, the Messiah is Lord of the Sabbath. And you, Pharisees, know that throughout all Galilee I proclaim that I am the Messiah."*

In other words, Jesus is indirectly declaring that He is the Son of Man, that He is the Messiah they have been waiting for, and that He Himself is the very reason the Sabbath exists at all.

7.1.2. We can only imagine how that truth must have sounded in the ears of the Pharisees. From the following passages, we can conclude that the Pharisees gradually began to harbor personal hatred toward the man called Jesus. Ultimately, they had no issue with the idea that the Messiah would come—but to believe that a common man from Nazareth was the Son of God, the promised Messiah—that they could not, or rather, would not believe.

7.2. Now, as we move toward the conclusion, let us remember: in the Law of Moses there are Moral Commandments and Ceremonial Commandments. The Moral Commandments include "You shall not steal," "You shall not murder," "You shall not bear false witness," "You shall not commit adultery," and so on. The Ceremonial Commandments include "Keep the Sabbath day holy," "Offer a sacrifice upon the altar," "Perform purification rites," "Circumcise the male child," and similar laws.

What we must understand is this: the Ceremonial Commandments, in God's eyes, were the outward expression of the inner reality—the worship of the Moral Commandments written on the heart of every Israelite. That was their purpose.

If we see things this way, as God intended when He gave the Law of Moses to Israel, we understand that the Moral Commandments always take precedence over the Ceremonial Commandments.

7.3. There are times—both in the life of ancient Israel and in our own lives today—when our ceremonial practices may come into conflict with the Moral laws of God. When that happens, we must discern what to do next. How can we know what is right? The Israelites were meant to understand then what we must also understand today: a universal truth that has remained unchanged since the creation of the world—above all else, our highest calling as human beings is to display and reflect God's goodness in our lives.

That is the most important truth! How many times did Jesus ask the Pharisees in the Gospels: *"Is it lawful to do good or to do evil on the Sabbath?"* Jesus understood that the Law of Moses—indeed, God Himself—first and foremost calls us to live out His Moral Commandments. And when they come into conflict with our Ceremonial ones, it is right to give priority to the Moral.

In other words: we must be willing to break our ceremonial rules if they stand in direct opposition to the goodness of God!

WHOM DO WE WANT TO SERVE?

8. The reality that shaped the lives of the Pharisees is very much alive in the Church even today—and has been for thousands of years. How many individuals have suffered because of rules imposed by their religious denomination? How many women throughout history have endured physical abuse from their husbands but were forbidden to leave them, even though they surely wanted to? Why were they not allowed to leave? Because the Church told them that if they did, they would be violating the holiest of God's sacraments—marriage!—and that if they did so, they would burn in hell forever.

Throughout history, churches have waged wars against one another because of their man-made laws; they have persecuted and killed each other, convinced that their own ceremonial rituals were the only ones truly ordained by God. One could fill hundreds of pages with examples of strange, harmful, and absurd rules the Church has written through the centuries—rules that stand in direct conflict with the goodness of God.

8.1. Before we finish this sermon, I want to share a story that may help us understand everything we've discussed today. It's the story of a woman—a widow with two young children. She had been faithful to God since her youth, loved His Moral Commandments, attended church regularly, and sincerely tried to observe every Ceremonial rite her church prescribed.

After her husband's death, her financial situation became desperate—she and her children had nothing to eat. She decided to take a job so she could buy bread and feed her children. Her job, however, required her to work on Sundays. On Easter Sunday, she could not attend worship or mass, and because of that, some in her church began to criticize her: *"How can she work on such a holy day? What kind of believer is she?"* Not too long ago, that same woman might even have been persecuted by her own religious community.

8.2. Let each of us answer this question for ourselves: Did that woman, through her decision, reflect the goodness of God—or did she violate His Law?

Throughout our lives, we will often have to decide whom we want to serve: God's goodness, or the rules our Church has imposed on us.

In other words, we must learn to recognize when the rules of our denomination stand in opposition to God's goodness—and then decide whom we truly want to serve: the living God, or the false god we, like the Pharisees, have fashioned according to our own liking.