

## ***Freedom from Oppressive Religion***

**Luke 6:1-11**

**Rick Peterson**

“Jesus is Lord” is the oldest of the ancient Christian creeds. These three words turned an empire upside down as untold numbers of Christians were martyred rather than declare Caesar as Lord. And it remains, that in declaring, “Jesus is Lord,” that we too overcome the religious schemes of men, today. This is important to you because religious moralism would elevate theological systems and traditions to a place of lordship in your life. And wherever this occurs, the gentle voice of the Good Shepherd is replaced by the authoritarian, and thus destructive, voice of the religious spirit of this world. This is happening, right now, within churches near you—perhaps, even in your own church.

In today’s text, this oppressive religious spirit arises against the disciples, and against a man with a withered hand, and in both cases, Jesus steps forward in rebuke of this evil influence. In today’s lesson, we discover Jesus is our Champion against oppressive religion; He alone is Lord over all, and not the religious rules of men.

### **Law and Fences**

The Pharisees and teachers of the law were a well-intended group of men who sought only to ensure righteousness in Israel. But it was not just the Pharisees; most Jews had what Paul later called “a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (Romans 10: 2-4). The greatest enemy of true righteousness is not unrighteousness, but false, man-made righteousness, however well intended.

The good intentions of religious people are often the devil’s most effective weapon against the truth found in Christ. We learned during the wilderness temptations of Jesus that the devil is very religious, and he even quotes Scripture. The devil is the author of all false religion, and this includes that which masks as Christianity.

When the hungry disciples plucked the heads of grain and ate them as they walked through the grain fields, they were doing that which the law allowed (see Deuteronomy 23:24). So what was the problem? The problem was not with the law, but with the Pharisaic practice of placing fences around the law. This practice was a well-intended effort to ensure the law was not violated. By adding greater restrictions than the law itself, these men hoped to ensure

against trespassing the law. For instance, in our day, if the highway speed limit is 70 miles per hour, the modern Pharisee would say anyone seeking to be righteous should drive no faster than 60 so as to ensure one does not break the legal limit. Driving 61 would then become a violation of the law for them.

In the disciple's case, the law said one was free to eat one's fill of grain while walking through a neighbor's field, but not to fill one's pockets or a bag. Simple. Practical. Just. But the Pharisees taught that the manner which one rubbed the grain in order to make it edible could be construed as threshing, and thus work, which would violate the seventh-day Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11). The Pharisees then were elevating their strict, "letter-al" interpretation of the law as having the same authority as the law itself. Their interpretation was law. And this then became the basis of their accusation, "Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?" That is to say, why were the disciples doing that which is not lawful by strict Pharisaic standards?

In our day, we have many who teach that Sunday is the Sabbath, and in their theological system, any form of work, and many forms of leisure, are prohibited. These people are referred to as Sabbatarians. And their zeal for their "law" is as great as any ancient Pharisee.

The problem is, first, the Old Covenant Sabbath was observed on the seventh day of the week, Saturday, and not Sunday. Second, there is no demand for a Sabbath observance in the New Testament. None. The New Covenant does not demand an external, weekly Sabbath. But modern Sabbatarians do not view the New Covenant as altogether new. They view the New Covenant as a mere administration of their man-made, Super-covenant called, "The Covenant of Grace." This Covenant of Grace was invented by Reformed theologians during the sixteenth century Reformation era as part of a "Covenant Theology" developed to legitimize infant baptism in the state-church. In Covenant theology, both the Old and New Covenants are equal administrations of this overarching, theologically contrived, Covenant of Grace, so-called.

This novel theology, was invented primarily by the Swiss reformer, Ulrich Zwingli, to maintain the state-church practice of infant baptism. Zwingli had once preached against infant baptism, but later succumbed to pressure from the local civil magistrate to reinstate infant baptism for the purposes of civil registry and taxation. Score one for the schemes of men. So, Zwingli, and others after him, developed a theological system which became known as Covenant (Reformed) theology to justify the practice of infant or "Covenant child" baptism. The Sabbath was also moved to Sunday, and all the restrictions of the Old Covenant were applied to ensure its observance. This is how well-intended men elevate their own systems and traditions to the same level of authority (or greater) than Scripture itself. In our day, millions labor under the burden of the Sunday Sabbath, and other aspects of Covenant theology, such as tithing, an elevated clergy, wine only in communion, etc., all the while believing they are obeying a biblical precept, and of course, sinning if they do not so observe.

Here is the greatest problem with this theological system:

*Jesus was not a Sabbatarian.*

Yet, each week, people attend Presbyterian, Reformed Baptist, and Independent reformed churches in observance of the Sunday Sabbath. Many must attend morning *and* evening Sunday services as prescribed by their Sabbatarian, Reformed pastors. Congregants are told not to work. They are often forbidden to participate in family events or sports. I once heard a famous Reformed pastor rail against his congregation for writing letters to distant family members on the “Sabbath.” These people put up with this because they are told this is required by Christ, but that, dear friends, is an unmitigated lie. Jesus has no part of it. Indeed, Jesus came to free souls from it.

### **Jesus is Lord, not the Sabbath**

The Spirit-anointed ministry of the Messiah was a mission to liberate the poor, the captive, the oppressed, and to heal the broken-hearted, and restore sight to the blind. And this meant the necessary liberation from man-made religion, the source of the problem. This is one of the best kept secrets in western Christianity precisely because most of western Christianity has degenerated into an empty, shallow, oppressive religion with a hollowed-out gospel. There is no good news in it, because Jesus is not in it. Oh, all the terminologies and symbols of Christianity are in place, and men place heavy burdens upon Christian’s shoulders in Christ’s name, but Jesus Himself is not there.

In response to the accusation of the Pharisees against His disciples, the Lord Jesus responded with a story of David. “Have you not even read this?” Jesus asks. He does that often in the gospel narratives. He often asks the religious elite, “Have you not read?” If they had read the Scripture with humility of mind and heart, they would have known the folly of their religious system and repented. But as it was, these men merely used Scripture as a means to justify their system. This same thing occurs today. Creeds and confessions are elevated to the same place of authority as Scripture, and the souls of believers are taken captive. The Pharisees placed their system as a template over Scripture to justify their predetermined conclusions, and their heirs continue this practice today.

### **No Three-Part Law**

The story of David and his hungry men is drawn from what Covenant theologians today would call the “ceremonial law.” Covenant theology, following the Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas, divides the Old Covenant law into three parts: civil, ceremonial, and moral. Aquinas, and Protestant Reformed theologians after him, taught that the civil and ceremonial law was abolished in the New Covenant, but the moral law, represented by the Ten Commandments, remained in force.

Listen closely please, what the Covenant theologians did is cut out a piece of the new garment (the New Covenant) in a vain attempt to patch the old garment (Old Covenant), just as Jesus warned against in His parable (Luke 5:36-39). The result is a torn and useless version of the New Covenant, and an equally useless patch job on the Old Covenant, and with it, a useless religion; a religion with a coven-not instead of a covenant.

There is only one thing worse than not ever hearing the gospel, and that is, to hear and then distort the gospel to fit your own religious scheme. It is upon the latter that the judgment of God will be most severe (James 3:1). All Christians would do well to flee from those who practice such distortion.

Jesus' story is not derived from the "ceremonial" law. It is derived simply from the law, period. And Jesus uses the Davidic story to counter the Pharisees, not in their use of the moral law, but simply to counter their use of the law, period. In other words, Jesus did not make any distinction in the law as civil, ceremonial, or moral. It was just law. And the Pharisees were using the Sabbath law as vehicle of oppression instead of what it was intended to be; that is, a means of protecting against human harm and exploitation, and to set the people of God apart from the slavish, seven-day work week of the pagan nations. In other words, Jesus is rebuking the Pharisee's use of the law as a dehumanizing weapon just as the pagans used their own religion to dehumanize. The Pharisees, with all their separatist ideals, were in effect, no better than pagans in practice.

Jesus then makes the pronouncement, "The Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath." As the Son of Man, Jesus has come to restore human dignity, especially in response to the evil use of religion. It is Jesus who is Lord of the disciples, not the Sabbath. "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath," said Jesus in Mark's record (Mark 2:27). Where the religious spirit of this present evil age is at work, religion becomes accusatory, "Why are you doing this or that?" And religion becomes a grievous burden (Matthew 23:4); and when the religious spirit is at work, religious practice also tests God by adding to or taking away from that which God alone has the authority to require (Acts 15:10). This struggle has occurred throughout church history. But here is a simple way to discern and avoid toxic theology:

*The best measure of theology is whether or not it points you to Christ. If it points you to anything or anyone other than Christ, then flee from it. If its focus is on national Israel, then flee. If its focus is on the law, then flee from it. If its focus is material prosperity, then flee from it. If its focus is on accruing personal merit through sacraments and good works, then flee. If its focus is on entertainment and inspiration, then flee. These are Christian in name only.*

### **Minister of life vs. Ministers of Death**

Paul referred to he and his associates as "ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit, for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (II Corinthians 3:6). Paul was a minister of life; his opponents were ministers of death. Everywhere Paul went he preached the kingdom of God as a minister of the New Covenant of the Spirit. The kingdom of God and the New Covenant of the Spirit stand at the core of what Paul referred to as "the whole counsel of

God” (Acts 20:25-27). And mark it down: anything less than the whole counsel of God becomes a killer religion taught by perverse men and women to draw away disciples after themselves (20:28-29). These teachers arise from both within and without the church, but they come, nonetheless. You may think I am being a little dramatic here. But let me point out, Paul saw this killer religion coming, and he went about Ephesus, sometimes from house to house, warning everyone, and with tears, to watch for such teachers and guard the flock of God from them (20:30-31). Paul took the whole counsel of God very seriously, and so should we.

### **A Communion of Madness**

Finally, in today’s text we have a second encounter with the Pharisees regarding the Sabbath. This encounter involved a man with a withered hand, probably some form of muscular atrophy. It was *not* an emergency; not a life-threatening condition. In emergency cases, the rabbis allowed for healing on the Sabbath. But the Pharisees watched to see if Jesus would heal on the Sabbath, or simply wait until sunset to heal the man. To wait would have avoided controversy, and the man would still have been healed. So the issue here is less about Jesus healing the man, as it is about when. So the Pharisees watch. And, still being the Sabbath, Jesus asked the ailing man to stand in the midst of the gathering. And Jesus asks a question that has echoed down through the ages, “I will ask you one thing: Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy?” Notice the answer they give Jesus. Silence.

If one is a Sabbatarian, one can only respond with a qualified answer: “Well, yes, but . . .” or “It depends on what you mean by ‘good,’ or by ‘save.’” A Sabbatarian simply cannot answer with a clear, “To do good, and save life!” There is just too much at stake for the devoted Sabbatarian. If you believe keeping a Sabbath will result in God’s approval, you’d better not risk it; let people suffer; let the sick stay sick; let the hungry stay hungry; let the lonely stay lonely; let the oppressed remain in bondage for another day. It’s only 24 hours. That’s the reasoning of a mind drunk on old wine.

In response to His question, Jesus was given silence. In Mark’s account, Jesus looked around at them in anger, “being grieved by the hardness of their hearts” (Mark 3:4). There is a righteous anger that serves to expose injustice and to motivate one to separate from it. In this case, Jesus is angry. Not just disappointed. But angry. These are not rank pagans who have never tasted the goodness of the Lord. These are people who claim to represent the one and only true God, and to be His own people. And yet, they cannot answer whether it is lawful to do good or evil on the Sabbath! The implication here is to not do good *is* to do evil. To not save life *is* to destroy it. Silence in the face of human suffering is evil, and Jesus responds to this evil with righteous anger. And by the way, so should we. The next time you hear or see someone laboring under religious oppression, I hope you feel some just anger. And I hope to you act to relieve it.

Jesus then commands the man, “Stretch out your hand.” This is a Royal command by the King to a suffering subject of His realm. The man obeys, and with that obedience, receives

healing. The man did not say, “Oh, no, no, we must wait until sunset.” Neither did the man ask permission of the Pharisees. Instead, the man obeyed Jesus as the supreme authority in the synagogue, and He was healed. This event, therefore, not only describes the healing of a man with a withered hand, but the healing of a soul previously withered by toxic religion. The only way out of toxic religion is to recognize Jesus as the supreme authority in the church, as well as all of heaven and earth (Matthew 28:18). Jesus alone can free you from toxic religion. But one cannot serve two Lords. You cannot serve the schemes of men and Jesus, too.

Now, the Authorized Version (KJV) renders the response of the Pharisees as follows: “And they were filled with madness; and communed one with another what they might do to Jesus.” This religious sect, as well-intended as it was, was a communion of madness. The time has come to stop making nice with the religious spirit of this present evil age. The time has come to stop seeking fellowship around a hollowed-out gospel in order to preserve the appearance of unity. The time has come to call out religious oppression for what it is: evil. The time has come to name the schemes of oppressive, unbiblical theological systems for what they are—madness; a form of madness that would destroy Jesus. What fellowship can we possibly find with those who coddle a system of theology that deflects one’s attention away from the Lord of the Sabbath, and back upon the law?

Man-made religion is indeed, an opioid. In the present medical crisis in America involving prescription pain killers, the addiction numbers are small compared to the numbers of Americans suffering from religious addiction. And like all addiction, religious addiction brings on madness, and will eventually kill its victims.

The solution for the present crisis in western evangelicalism is the same as it was for the disciples as they faced the shaming religious system from which Jesus called them out, and for the man with the withered hand that day in the synagogue: Leave the system, obey the voice of the Lord Jesus Christ, alone, and rejoice in your liberation. **AMEN.**

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