

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, we know that You alone understand what is happening in the world, so we ask You to help us, Your people, as we face the future by speaking through your prophets. Tell us what we need to know about your world so that we can be true witnesses to You, the God of all history, who knows the past, the present and the future. We ask this through Your name, Lord Jesus Christ: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Think about the money you receive from different sources, and how you use it. Ask the Lord to show you how to use it for the best.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the courts of justice:** *Pray for judges and court officials who are responsible for the conduct of court proceedings*
- *Give thanks to God for your friends, and then pray for your enemies*
- *Pray about the television programmes you watch. Ask the Lord, whether you are right to watch as much as you do.*

Meditation

Time is a precious commodity;

 Built into creation for us by our Creator and God:

We give our time to You, Lord God;

 Time to think, to pray, to read and to do Your will:

We give our time to those we love;

 Time to share the precious gifts of love and commitment:

We give our time to neighbours and friends;

 Time to give and receive in care and friendship:

We give our time to daily work;

 Time to witness to our saviour in everything we do:

We give our time to our personal needs;

 Time to take Sabbath rest, according to Your Word:

Time is a precious gift of God;

 So let us use it to its fullest; it will not go on forever!

Bible passage – Luke 6:1-5

¹ On the second Sabbath of the Passover, when Jesus was going through the grain fields, His disciples plucked some heads of grain and ate them, after rubbing them in their hands. ² But some of the Pharisees said, 'Why are you doing what is not allowed on the Sabbath?' ³ Jesus said to them in reply, 'Have you not read what David did when he and those with him were hungry? ⁴ How he went into the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence and gave it to those with him, bread that should not be eaten by anyone except priests alone?' ⁵ Then He said to them, 'The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.'

Bible Study

Review

At the beginning of Luke 6, Jesus' mission gathers pace. In this story, Jesus confronts the Pharisees over some important social and religious laws, the laws of the Sabbath day. After challenging them, He did not allow them any time to respond, and He swept aside any potential criticism with this authoritative word; '*the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath*' (6:5). Together with Jesus' later reference to David (6:3), this was a challenge to the Pharisees' authority. They believed they held a monopoly on the interpretation of Scripture, and had stamped their authority on the Jewish people over many centuries. Laws about the Sabbath, derived from only a few scriptural texts, were essential to their authority, so Jesus acted unilaterally to claim back that authority for himself (6:5).

The Sabbath had started so peacefully. Jesus and the disciples were walking through grain fields, and the disciples were taking heads of grain and rubbing them in their hands to release the edible grain from the chaff (6:1). If we wonder whether this was allowed, then we should remember that Deuteronomy 23:25 gives this permission;

'if you go into your neighbour's standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbour's standing grain.'

The Pharisees, however, regarded any gathering of food on the Sabbath as forbidden. Of course, there is no such specific law within the Old Testament, but this was how the Pharisees interpreted the Sabbath rules about work and rest (e.g. Ex 23:12, Lev 16:13, 25:4f.).

Jesus dealt with the matter properly by going back to Scripture, and referred to an Old Testament story to prove them wrong. He quoted David's flight from Saul, when the young David had been banished from court because of the jealousy of King Saul. With only a few unnamed friends, David escaped from the court and came to the city of Nob. The tent of the Tabernacle was there, and in great need, David urged the priest Ahimelech to hand over the sacred 'Bread of the Presence', for him and his famished friends to eat. This bread was presented regularly in the sanctuary, and the law stated that it should normally be eaten only by priests (e.g. Lev 7:13,14 etc.) because they were 'holy'. Why then did David take the bread? He justified his actions by claiming that he was on a holy mission, ordained by God. So Ahimelech handed over the bread, and David survived a critical period of his life to become the Greatest king of Israel

The detail of all this is important. Jesus did not simply justify what the disciples did, He argued that both He and the disciples were on a holy mission appointed by God, knowing that the Pharisees would have taken great exception to this. They probably knew that the Sabbath laws did not forbid someone from eating on the Sabbath, for they were picking a fight with Jesus. However, they lost the argument because they stood on their authority, not on the detailed truth of God's Word.

Jesus won the argument, because of his authoritative interpretation of God's Word, and in itself, this is an important message for us. Certainly, we should know what God's law says about the Sabbath and everything mentioned in this story. More than that, we must now accept that Jesus is the standard by which we assess God's law. He is the one through whom we can discover the truth about the Sabbath and all other aspects of life; we look to Him for guidance.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- What does the phrase '*on the second Sabbath of the Passover*' mean (6:1)?
- What does the Old Testament say about the Sabbath, and what did the Pharisees say about it?
- Why does Jesus say '*the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath*' (6:5), and what does this mean?

Notes on the text and translation

Important words

V4 'Bread of the Presence'

The Greek expression 'artoi tes prothesis' translates as 'bread of loyalty', but it is a technical expression of Jews meaning the 'Bread of the Presence'. This is the special bread baked and placed daily on a table in the 'Holy Place' within the Tabernacle, and later, in the Temple. It was regarded as especially holy and was therefore to be eaten only by priests.

Significant phrases

V3 'when he and those with him were hungry ...'

Other translations:

'when he and his companions were hungry ...' (NIV)

'when he was hungry, he and those with him ...' (New American)

This is only a small point, but the translation I have given is fairly close to the text. The Greek does not include a word for 'companion', saying only 'those with him', so although companion is a relatively neutral modification of the text, I feel it is unnecessary and implies something about those with David that is not there in the Greek text.

Problems with the ancient Greek/Hebrew text

V1 'On the second Sabbath of the Passover ...'

Other translations:

'One Sabbath ...' (NIV)

'Now it happened on the second Sabbath after the first ...' (New Authorised Version)

As you can see, there is some confusion about the beginning of this story! Of the many ancient copies of the whole New Testament (called Uncials), there are four dated earlier than the fifth century AD. Of these, two begin this sentence 'One Sabbath ..', and two others, the oldest by a hundred years, add another Greek word after 'Sabbath'. The added word is peculiar and appears nowhere else in all Greek writing, and it is 'deuteroproto', meaning 'second-first'. This has been a puzzle for centuries!

Quite extraordinarily, scholars have omitted this word from the generally published Greek text of the New Testament, on the grounds that it is unexplainable, even though it is strongly supported by evidence of the oldest manuscripts. Elsewhere, scholars of the Greek text usually argue that the more incomprehensible some part of the text is, the more likely it is to be original, on the grounds that no one would invent it if it was not there already! I have decided to accept the word, along with the Authorised Version and the New Authorised Version, and I explain a possible meaning of it in the study, because it has a bearing on the whole story as told by Luke.

V4 'only the priests ...'

One of the ancient manuscripts has a peculiar change to the text here, moving verse 5 after verse 10 and adding another verse in its place. This reads *'on the same day, He saw a man working on the Sabbath and said to him, 'Man, if you know what you are doing, you are blessed; but if you do not know, you are accursed and a transgressor of the law.'* Like other translations, I have omitted this because it is only found in one manuscript, and should be regarded as something of an oddity.

Going Deeper

What does the phrase 'on the second Sabbath of the Passover' mean (6:1)?

Before reading this, please read the note above for verse 1 under the heading 'problems with the Greek/Hebrew text'. If we are willing to accept the oldest and most difficult evidence about what Luke wrote, then we must try and work out the probably meaning of the strange Greek word found here, which means literally 'second first'. The sentence is clearly about the Sabbath and the story is about eating plucked ears of corn and eating grain, and both of these give us some clues about where to go in Scripture to find an answer to this conundrum.

In Leviticus 23:6-14 Moses gives complex and rather unclear instructions about the celebration of the Passover feast, which are similar to instructions found elsewhere in Exodus 12:8 (and elsewhere). The overall picture given is that the festival of unleavened bread should last for a whole week, beginning on a Sabbath day (Saturday), and coming to an end with a feast seven days later (Friday), the day before the next, or second Sabbath day (Saturday). The Old Testament describes a number of festivals as like this, but the Passover festival is the first of the Jewish year and probably the most significant, given that it has come to be so closely associated with the identity of the Jewish people. With this in mind, it has been suggested that the term 'second-first' here in Luke 6:1 was a technical term for the second Sabbath of the first festival of the year. Moreover, in describing this exact Sabbath day, Leviticus 23:14 says this, *'you shall eat no bread*

or parched grain or fresh ears of corn until that very day ...' and this reminds us very closely of our passage today!

All in all, this suggests that the obscure Greek word in Luke 6:1 identifies the Sabbath day when Jesus and His disciples walked through the fields as the Sabbath immediately after the Passover and at the end of the week-long festival of 'Unleavened Bread', of which the Passover is a part. It was the one Sabbath day with a clear instruction in the Law allowing the eating of fresh ears of corn!

This interpretation is open to many criticisms, but it does point us towards the idea that Jesus was indeed taking on the Pharisees in a battle about their knowledge of Scripture. Jesus did not pursue this line of attack on the Pharisees and preferred to justify the disciples' actions on the basis of the story about David, but it is possible He left this hint for future generations to discover!

What does the Old Testament say about the Sabbath, and what did the Pharisees say about it?

This story is the first of a number in Luke that mention the Sabbath day, and it is good for us to be clear about what the Bible says about the Sabbath, and what the Pharisees said about it. In this way, we will not come unstuck in our understanding of these texts simply because we have made suppositions about the Sabbath that are factually incorrect.

The Sabbath was instituted by God immediately after He finished Creation (Genesis 2:1-3), and this command is therefore one of the first commands given to people by God, coming after the commands to 'be fruitful and multiply' (Gen 1:28) and 'have dominion' (1:28). We must note that God defines the Sabbath as a day of blessing through rest, on one day in seven (Gen 2:1-3). Nothing more is said about the Sabbath day from that point until the giving of the Ten Commandments, where the fourth commandment requires people to do as God does, and rest on one day in seven. The commandment says that resting is a blessing and one that is essential for all people, but it does not say that people should worship God on that day, or make any stipulations about what should or should not be done. In most of the rest of the 'Law' (the first five books of the Bible), the Sabbath is mentioned as a day appropriate for rest (see Leviticus 16:31) and for certain festival celebrations of one kind or another, when certain acts of sacrificial worship were to be carried out (see Leviticus 23:3f. 25:2f, Numbers 28:9f. etc). Apart from saying that no work should be done, little else is said.

It is against this backdrop that the Pharisees developed a large body of work, specifying what constituted 'work' on a Sabbath day. The Jewish people were characterised by the Sabbath, and so these detailed rules were of fundamental importance to them. In Jesus' day, various written works were used by scribes and other scholars, called the 'Mishnah', and roughly a quarter of this was about the Sabbath. It was hard for scholars to keep up with the vast range of laws that had been developed about the Sabbath, but they pursued the matter with extraordinary zeal, limiting what could be done to the bare essentials of life.

It is important for us to know this for several reasons. Firstly, we should be aware of what the Bible does and does not say about the Sabbath, for in truth, God says one thing about this day, and one thing alone. He instructs us to rest and do no work. Secondly, we must appreciate that Jesus did not fight against Scripture when he fought the Pharisees on this point, he fought legalism and bad interpretation. Thirdly, He probably knew the Scriptures far better than His opponents, who in their religious zeal, had lost sight of the true Word of God.

Why does Jesus say 'the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath' (6:5), and what does this mean?

The phrase 'the Son of Man' has long been argued over by scholars. This is because in Greek, it is just another way of referring to people, and it is virtually equivalent to saying 'man', or 'people'. This is not a matter of debate, there are hundreds of examples of the Greek use of this phrase in various literature, which mean just this. It is not unlike the way people today use the expression 'son of a ...' to make either a pleasant or rude comment about someone. For this reason, some scholars prefer to translate our passage 'Man is lord of the Sabbath'. However, there is also evidence that the expression 'Son of Man' was a phrase used by people when speaking about themselves, and this is equally well attested in literature, meaning that the last verse in our passage could be translated as Jesus saying, 'I am Lord of the Sabbath'! So, are either of these right, or is there any good reason to keep with the idea that 'Son of Man' is more than this, perhaps a 'title' used by Jesus about Himself, which makes the claim that He is the Messiah?

The key to this is found in Daniel 7:13, where the expression is used to refer to one who come 'on the clouds of heaven' and was presented to the 'Ancient One'. Although there are many features to the interpretation of this text, it has for centuries been accepted as a messianic prophecy speaking about God's sending of His servant to bring His Kingdom in this world. The prophecy of Daniel is remarkable because it indicates this servant of God is human, but the imagery present Him as divine, and the paradox is true of Jesus, as He is portrayed in Luke's Gospel.

In recent years there has been intense interest in this phrase and some scholars have felt that its use as a reference to the Messiah has been overplayed. However, it is virtually impossible to argue that the term 'the Son of Man' is not used by Jesus about Himself, or that it can refer to the Messiah. Whether Jesus wanted people to see this as a personal claim to be the Messiah is uncertain, because of His known tendency to want people to come to this conclusion for themselves rather than be told it. However, for those who accept Jesus as Messiah, it seems to me that there is no reason why we should not read it in this way.

Application

Each one of us should bear in mind the authority of Jesus. If we have given our lives to Him, then we must accept that he has the authority to tell us what is wrong in our lives, just as He longs to help us in all we do. We have something of a cheek to accept His comfort, salvation and sustenance if we will cannot accept His authority and judgement about what may be wrong in our lives! Moreover, the only way we can be sure that we know His judgement is to check out with Scripture the particular things we seek to know. Too many people say too much about morality, and although we should weigh this up because God can indeed speak to us through others, it is surely right for us to decide for ourselves about God's judgements according to what is revealed to us in the Bible.

I find that this passage brings us back repeatedly to the authority of God's Word both in Jesus and in the Bible. The one and the other are complementary, and we can hardly journey very far in the spiritual life without making sure that we explore the Bible regularly and with care. Too often, people presume to know what the Bible says without making sure that they understand it clearly, and the results can be devastating. I have met people who have heard a sermon on some important matter (such as the Sabbath), then in the belief that the preacher they heard is right, have lived their lives accordingly. They remain unaware that the sermon they heard was well intentioned but less than a full expression of God's Word on the subject, and have never explored the matter for themselves. Surely if we are God's people, then we will want to do this before committing to some course of action.

Lastly, this Scripture should encourage us to believe that Jesus has given us the authority to speak for Him. If we are willing to hear Him and perceive what God would say to this world, then together with Jesus in this passage, we can challenge the 'status quo' of religious rules and attitudes we believe to be less than a worthy representation of God's Word today. This may be difficult ground on which to walk, but Jesus surely asks us to be ready to do this. If we constantly hedge around the moral issues with which we are all faced today, then we dilute the Gospel and fail to present God's righteous Word. Jesus came as the Messiah to be utterly faithful to God's eternal truth and His plan of salvation; and this is now our calling.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does God require of us on the Sabbath day, and should we attempt to assess what is rest and what is work to be avoided?
2. What can we learn from this story about Jesus' attitude to the law and to the Pharisees?
3. Discuss in your group the meaning of Jesus powerful statement, '*The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.*' (6:5).

Topics covered by this text

- *How to handle God's Laws in practice*
- *The Sabbath*
- *The authority of Jesus*

Personal comments by author

I have written about this passage twice before, in my work on Matthew and Mark. However, as I wrote this study, I felt no need to go back over what I had written before. Although there is some obvious overlap with the other studies, I found different themes arising from this text, and this is how it should be. I had not

previously thought that Jesus intention was to take on the Pharisees in this way, and challenge their presumptions about Scripture. This holds significant lessons for us today.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Write down your own ideas about how to observe the Sabbath. Having done this, explore some of the Scriptural texts about the Sabbath mentioned in this study (or in any other study material you possess like a Bible dictionary) and see whether your own thoughts reflect what Scripture actually says.*
- *Look up the word 'Sabbath' on the internet, perhaps on 'Wikipedia' (www.wikipedia.com) and find out what other people or religions think about the 'Sabbath'. Compare these with what the Bible says, and then reconsider your own views!*

Final Prayer

Lord God Almighty, You have given Your people laws by which to live. We have not always understood these well, and we have sometimes made up laws and pretended they are Your imposition on us. Forgive us for getting this all wrong, and help us to see the gracious way to try to help us live our lives for the best. Lord God, give us a pure understanding of Your world and Your Law; AMEN
