

Luke 6:1-19: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Luke chapter 6 verses 1 to 19. And he said to them, The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.

On another Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was withered. And the scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would heal on the Sabbath, so that they might find a reason to accuse him.

But he knew their thoughts, and he said to the man with the withered hand, Come and stand here. And he rose and stood there. And Jesus said to them, I ask you, is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm?

To save life, or to destroy it? And after looking around at them all, he said to him, Stretch out your hand. And he did so, and his hand was restored. But they were filled with fury, and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.

In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples, and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles, Simon, whom he named Peter, and Andrew his brother, and James and John, and Philip and Bartholomew, and Matthew and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon who was called the Zealot, and Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

[1 : 42] And he came down with them, and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples, and a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem, and the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon, who came to hear him, and to be healed of their diseases.

And those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all the crowd sought to touch him, for power came out from him, and healed them all. Luke chapter 6 begins with a couple of controversies concerning the Sabbath.

The disciples were permitted by the law to eat of the grain as they passed through a field. This was a form of gleaning, so they weren't stealing. The issue, however, was that they were doing so on the Sabbath, and that what they were doing counted to some of the Pharisees as work.

Jesus' disciples are challenged by the Pharisees for their behaviour, and Jesus gives a response. In his response, Jesus focuses upon the example of David. In 1 Samuel chapter 21, verses 1 to 6, David and his hungry men were permitted to eat of the showbread, which was usually restricted to the priests.

Ahimelech the priest, rather than strictly applying the law, recognised that this was an exceptional case, and it was legitimate to give the bread to David. In that instance, the hunger of David and his men took precedence.

[2 : 55] Jesus, of course, is a greater David. He has the prerogative to determine in this instance. His men are like David's men. They're on a mission for God. As those committed to a divine ministry, it takes priority, and it is not a violation of the Sabbath.

This is something that Jesus fleshes out more in the parallel passage in Matthew chapter 12. The work of the priests is not counted as Sabbath-breaking work because it is in service of the temple. But, as Jesus argues, there is something greater than the temple here.

Jesus himself. The Sabbath was meant to give rest to man, not to subject man to bondage. And the Son of Man is the Lord of the Sabbath. He is the one who gives the true rest that the Sabbath bears witness to.

In Jesus' response to the challenge to the actions of the disciples in the grain fields, he makes an analogy with David and his followers. On one level, this might be seen as an example of hunger taking priority over the law of the temple.

But it seems to be something more than that. He's aligning himself with David. David's eating of the showbread in 1 Samuel chapter 21 does not seem to have been an instance of great hunger and needing bread as an emergency.

[4 : 05] It's not described in that way. Rather, there seems to be something about David himself and the mission that he's on that gives some warrant for the exception. And Jesus, it seems to me, is making a similar claim about himself and his disciples.

This, I believe, becomes more apparent in Jesus' final claim. The Son of Man is the Lord of the Sabbath. He presents himself as the eschatological Son of Man again, as the Lord of the Sabbath as such.

As the Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus is the one bringing in the great Sabbath. His whole ministry began with a statement concerning the Jubilee, the year of the Lord's favour. He's the one who's bringing rest and deliverance and all these other things that belong to the reality of the Sabbath. His entire movement is a Sabbath-bringing movement. And so it is not inappropriate for his servants and followers to enjoy exceptional prerogatives on the Sabbath day. We should also here recall that this comes after Jesus' teaching concerning the old wineskins and the new wine.

Jesus' ministry exceeds the old structures as it fulfills them. Jesus then heals a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. It's on another Sabbath. This is a different day, but it's connecting the two stories together, so that we recognise there's a Sabbath theme going through this part of the chapter.

[5 : 20] Although the man isn't in urgent need, Jesus gives rest on the Sabbath, which fulfills the intent and the commandment of the Sabbath. And he poses a question to the people who would challenge him in a very stark way.

To do good or to do harm? Now it would seem that this man does not urgently need to be healed. He could hang around for a few days and then be healed later on. Jesus is presenting such healing not just as permissible, but as something that is part of the meaning and the purpose of the Sabbath itself.

Sabbath keeping is about giving life and healing. It's not designed just to be a means of laying heavy burdens upon people. Perhaps in this story we're also supposed to see something of the healing and restoration of Jeroboam's hand in 1 Kings chapter 13 being alluded to.

The account of the choice of the twelve that follows begins with Jesus going up on the mountain and praying all night. Luke is the only gospel that recalls the prayer of Jesus prior to the choice of the disciples.

And perhaps in the situation on the mountain we should recall some of the events of Exodus. Not just the choice of the elders, but also the way there were different groups of people that had different degrees of access to the mountain.

[6 : 31] The choice of twelve seems to be naturally connected with the patriarchs and Israel. They aren't just the number twelve by accident. Indeed, they are commonly called the twelve from that point onwards.

And when Judas betrayed Christ and was dropped from their number, they had to choose a replacement to keep the number. The twelve are listed beginning with Simon and Andrew and James and John. And Simon and Andrew, brothers.

James and John are brothers. But Simon, James and John are the three core disciples. Elsewhere we often see these disciples listed in their order of priority. So Simon, James and John.

And then Andrew comes next because of his association with Simon. But here his association with Simon as his brother leads him to be second in the list. Simon, in each of these lists, is the first.

He is the primary disciple. He's the one who speaks for the others. He's the one who leads the others. He's the one who represents the others. Here we're told that he was named Peter by Jesus.

[7 : 30] And just a chapter earlier, when he was called, he's called Simon Peter for the first time after he responds with a sense of fear and awe to the manifestation of the authority of Jesus' word in the miraculous catch of fish.

This, I would suggest, is an important signal that Luke is giving his readers that at this point, Peter is assuming something of his new identity that Jesus is going to give him as the first of the apostles. The order of the disciples is fairly consistent across the Gospels with some variations. The ordering of Andrew or the ordering of Judas, who's also called Thaddeus, that varies. But everything else is pretty much the same.

