

# Luke 6:1-5

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/luke/luke-6/luke-61-5/>

*Luke narrates the first of two confrontations between Jesus and the Pharisees. Who is in charge of the Sabbath: Jesus or the Pharisees?*

The parallel Gospel accounts for this event are Matthew 12:1-8 and Mark 2:23-28.

After *the Pharisees* and their heart issues are revealed in Chapter 5, Luke continues with the theme of their disputes with *Jesus* in Chapter 6. This time, *the Pharisees* decide to engage *Jesus* over issues of conduct *on the Sabbath*:

*Now it happened that He was passing through some grainfields on a Sabbath; and His disciples were picking the heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands, and eating the grain (v 1).*

Luke begins with the phrase *now it happened* to show that what follows occurred during the same overall time-frame of the previous events (Luke 5). Luke is keen to point out that the particular day of the week that this interaction happened on was *the Sabbath*. This is important because *the Sabbath* was a holy day for the Jews that was set apart by *God*. *The Sabbath* occurred at the end of the week. It began at sundown of the sixth day and lasted until the sunset, 24 hours later. *The Sabbath* was a day of rest. Its observance was commanded by *God* and handed down through Moses in the Ten Commandments. *The Sabbath* is mentioned many times in the Old Testament. It is the fourth of the Ten Commandments. The original command to honor *the Sabbath* is found in Exodus:

“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. 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 day; for that reason the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”  
(Exodus 20:8-11)

Of all the Jewish practices, the weekly observance of *the Sabbath* was perhaps their most distinctive, since it occurred weekly, and included all classes of Jews. All their work was done during the first six days of the week, but *on the Sabbath* all work activity ceased in order to give space to rest, which was an integral part of worshipping *God* in their deliberate rest. Its rhythms served as a constant reminder to all Jews that *God* is the Creator, and they were *God's* people.

One day, *Jesus* went through *the grain fields on the Sabbath* with *His disciples*. In the context of Luke, this takes place before *Jesus* chooses *His* twelve *disciples* in Luke 6:13-16. Which *disciples* could these be? It likely refers to the four fishermen called in Luke 5:1-11 (Simon, Andrew, James, John), along with the Levi the tax collector (Luke 5:27) and any others who were following Him at that time. Luke seems to be using the term “disciple” in its general sense

representing those who follow a rabbi, or teacher, rather than “the twelve” (John 6:60-67). In any event, *Jesus’s disciples* became hungry while they walked through the fields. They began to pick the heads of *grain* and *eat* them.

*But some of the Pharisees said, “Why do you do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?”* (v 2).

When *the Pharisees* saw that *His disciples* were doing this, they accused *Jesus*. This indicates that *the Pharisees* were tracking *Jesus*, following along with Him, even as *Jesus’s disciples* followed. They said to Him, “*Why do you do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?*” It appears from the tone of the interchange that follows that *the Pharisees’s* purpose in following *Jesus* was not to learn from Him and *His* ways. Rather, it seems *the Pharisees* had adopted a goal to undermine *Jesus*, and *His* teaching.

The main tact of *the Pharisees’s* accusation against *Jesus* at this point seems to be to attack *His* credibility. Their argument was because *His disciples* violated their *Sabbath* customs (with *Jesus’s* approval no less) that this exposed that *He* was either a fraud or at least a shabby Rabbi. The accusation was serious; keeping *the Sabbath* was a vital issue, and is treated in the Old Testament as a non-negotiable. One of the offenses *God* cited against Judah that led to their exile to Babylon was their neglect of *the Sabbath* (Jeremiah 17:19-27).

*The Pharisees* not only accused *Jesus* of breaking the law. They were also offended by Him. They were not offended that *Jesus’s disciples* broke *God’s* law on *the Sabbath* (they hadn’t). *The Pharisees* were offended because *Jesus’s disciples* violated their laws concerning *the Sabbath* (they had). But beneath *the Pharisees’s* offense was the dangerously mistaken assumption that their rules were *God’s* laws. *The Pharisees* had perilously put themselves in the place of *God*.

How did this come to be?

In a word, gradually. After the Jews’ returned from the Babylonian exile, they had a renewed veneration for *God’s* law (Nehemiah 8:8). Among the commands and customs the Jews observed more seriously was *the Sabbath*, and Nehemiah played an important role in restoring this observance (Nehemiah 12:15-22). But whereas Nehemiah merely reinstated the observance of the law of *God*, others later added man-made edicts. In the centuries that followed, religious regulations multiplied.

*The Pharisees* were at the forefront of advancing these regulations. Their rationale for the new observances were likely put in place as an extra hedge to protect Jews from even approaching a transgression. This would be understandable, given the drastic price the Jews had paid for their lack of observance of *the Sabbath*, among other offenses (1 Chronicles 9:1).

As is often the case, over time the rules became a source of power for the institution, and the original intent became secondary. Following the rules became more important than the Law it was meant to support. It grew into a kind of legislation that superseded the law of Moses. So, in a great irony, it led to another form of breaking *the Sabbath* law, one that *Jesus* will point out. It is a common occurrence that institutions are formed as a means of protection, but they end up

being more concerned with perpetuating their own power and influence. This certainly seemed to be the case with *the Pharisees*.

In the third century A.D., many reforms that had developed after the Babylonian Exile were codified in the Jewish Mishnah, which reduced the oral tradition to writing. But the oral tradition already had a powerful influence during *Jesus's* lifetime and was commonly referred to as “the tradition of the elders” (Matthew 15:2). Even if these traditions began with *God-honoring* intentions, in practice their rules had replaced and effectively nullified the heart of *God's* original commandments (Matthew 15:6). Their focus had shifted from following *God* to retaining and advancing their own importance, prestige, and power.

Perceiving *the Pharisees'* accusation and offense, *Jesus* brilliantly ignores their loaded question and reframes the issue with a question of *His* own,

*And Jesus answering them 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 any to eat except the priests alone, and gave it to his companions?”* (v 3-4).

*The Pharisees* take offense and make the accusation that *Jesus's disciples* do what is not lawful on a *Sabbath*. *Jesus* responds with a story and a claim. *He* asks *them* a rhetorical question that begins with an interesting phrase, *have you not even read what David did...?* Of course, *the Pharisees*, whose expertise was the scriptures, had *read what David did when he was hungry*.

When *David* and *his loyal companions* were fleeing from Saul, they came to Abimelech, the priest, for assistance. They were starving. Abimelech had no ordinary *bread* to give them, but he did have some *consecrated bread*. This *bread* was *not lawful for him to eat* nor for those with *him*, but for *the priests alone*. But Abimelech offered them the holy *bread* to *David and his companions* so long as they had abstained from sexual relations. *David and his companions* had abstained from sex, and so the priest *gave* them the holy *bread* to *eat*. This story is found in 1 Samuel 21:1-6.

Scripture does not condemn *David*, nor Abimelech for this action. Normally this would not have been allowed, but the exception was granted because of who *David* was (the anointed King of Israel) and the desperate situation that *he* was in as *he* pursued *his* calling righteously. By citing this example, *Jesus* shows *the Pharisees* how the law makes room for grace.

*God's* law is intended as a benefit, not a burden. Even though it is absolute, there is a hierarchy, and loving and caring for people will always come above mere compliance. As the Messiah, *Jesus* too is an anointed King. *He* too is following *His* calling in righteousness. *He* too is granted an exception to *the Pharisees'* *Sabbath* customs. It is worth noting that the people are just plucking *and eating the grain*, they are not executing a commercial harvest. This has a corollary with the story of *David*, in that subsistence is in view; people need to *eat*.

It is interesting to note that in Matthew's parallel gospel account, *Jesus* continues and uses a second line of argument with *the Pharisees* from the Mosaic Law, and even quotes from the Old Testament book of Hosea (Matthew 12:5-7).

Why does Luke's Gospel not include this exchange?

It is possibly because of the difference in Matthew and Luke's stated purpose in writing their accounts and who their intended audiences are. Matthew would include these statements from *Jesus* because it speaks to his Jewish audience who would be more familiar with the Law and the Old Testament. Matthew's purpose is to reveal *Jesus* as the promised Messiah and coming King. Matthew 12:6 speaks to this claim when *Jesus* says to *the Pharisees*, "But I say to you that something greater than the temple is here."

*Jesus* is claiming to be something greater than the earthly meeting place with *God*. *He* is the looked-for Messiah, Immanuel, "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). Luke, on the other hand, is writing to a Greek Gentile audience who would not have been as familiar with the intricacies of Jewish laws regarding priestly conduct in the temple *on the Sabbath* or Old Testament minor prophets. Luke instead speaks to the actions of *David*, a historical figure that might be better understood by his Greek audience.

*And He was saying to them, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" (v 5).*

*Jesus* ends *His* rebuttal with a divine claim: *the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath*. *God* established *the Sabbath* and is the only rightful *Lord of the Sabbath*. *The Son of Man* is a veiled but definite Messianic term ([see commentary for Matthew 9:6](#)). It was *Jesus's* most frequent term to describe Himself. When *Jesus* said that *the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath* *He* was declaring, "I am *God* and I decide *what is lawful* to do *on the Sabbath*—not you!"

This will not satisfy *the Pharisees* as we will see in the commentary for the coming verses.

## **Biblical Text**

**<sup>1</sup> Now it happened that He was passing through some grainfields on a Sabbath; and His disciples were picking the heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands, and eating the grain. <sup>2</sup> But some of the Pharisees said, "Why do you do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" <sup>3</sup> And Jesus answering them said, "Have you not even read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him, <sup>4</sup> how he entered the house of God, and took and ate the consecrated bread which is not lawful for any to eat except the priests alone, and gave it to his companions?" <sup>5</sup> And He was saying to them, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."**