

Introductory

This text has parallels in Matthew (12: 1-8) and in Luke (6: 1-5), and as far as those things go, the wordings in all three synoptics are very similar. None of those readings are found in the TLH one-year series. This text is appointed to be read in the LW three-year lectionary on Pentecost 2B. The Mark and Luke texts are not appointed to be read on any Sunday in either LW or LSB.

For vocabulary words this week, make the distinction between Sabbath and Sabaoth. The latter is used to refer to the God Who fights for us. The former is Saturday, which is on the calendar the seventh day of the week. For distinctions, make the distinction between OT ceremonial, moral, civil Laws, and explain why we don't offer sacrifices on the altar and do drive cars to church.

At the beginning of this chapter, we are told that Jesus has returned to Capernaum and is in a house, and that the house was crowded, and that Jesus healed the paralytic. Then (13) He went out by the sea and taught, and then He called Matthew. Right after that, we find others fasting, but the disciples of Jesus are not, and He is asked about it, and He tells everybody why they don't fast.

There are always things that we need to explain in order to clarify and help the hearers understand the text. One of the things this Sunday is the import and meaning of Sabbath for the Jews in the time of Jesus, and it retains that importance for many today. The other thing is how much different eating was then from now. For us, food is readily available in abundance. For them, not so much.

We have freezers, grocery stores, and restaurants galore, and we eat like clockwork at 7:00, 12:00 and 5:00. They often ate when food was available, and then until it was gone, like if an animal was being slaughtered for food. They ate fruits and vegetables when they were in season. They ate a lot more bread made from cereal grains than we do. Preservation of food was sketchy at best.

Textual Notes

23. Still in and around Capernaum, “Καὶ ἐγένετο αὐτὸν ἐν τοῖς σάββασιν παραπορεύεσθαι διὰ τῶν σπορίμων – and He came to be on the Sabbath passing through the sown fields.” The language used states that they were not searching out a field from which to consume, but that they – we would say they happened upon a field. Likely they left the road and entered the field for a purpose.

The sixth day, Saturday, is the day when God rested from His work of Creation. OT Israel was commanded in the Third Commandment not to work on that day. The Hebrew word “שָׁבָת” means “day of rest,” and it was supposed to be just that. What exactly did that mean? The OT – particularly Leviticus and Deuteronomy – go into some detail as to what exactly that means.

OT scholars have been going into further detail about sabbath and other laws for quite some time, and they still do. The original rationale and mandate for the Sabbath rest is explained at the giving of the Ten Commandments. The Third Commandment as given in Exodus (20: 8-11) reads,

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. [9](#)Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, [10](#)but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. [11](#)For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

What exactly does that mean? The Wik article on “Shabbat” lists 39 specific categories of work forbidden on The Sabbath, and it summarizes what Talmud has to say about them.

Chapter 7 lists the 39 principal categories of [creative activity](#) (*melakha*) forbidden on the Sabbath, seven related to agriculture, four to the preparation of food, thirteen to clothes making, seven to butchering and tanning, two to writing and erasing, two to building and demolishing, two to lighting and extinguishing fires, one to giving the finishing touch to something, and one to carrying an object from the public to the private domain and vice versa; it and also discusses the sin-offering to be sacrificed in the Temple for the inadvertent violation of the Sabbath and the minimal quantities which incur the obligation to do so

The problem of work and rest on the sabbath gets thornier with technology, and you have to think the Rabbis have a hard time keeping up. Can you open up the refrigerator on the sabbath? Some say you can’t, because you open that door, that refrigerator has to work, while others say that if the motor has switched on, it’s okay to open the door because the refrigerator is already working.

There are separate articles at WIK for “Driving on Shabbat” and “Electricity on Shabbat.” Does using electricity come under the prohibition to “lighting and extinguishing fires?” When you start the car, don’t you light a spark? Isn’t the entire operation of an internal combustion engine a matter of the spark plugs lighting many little fires to cause gas and air to explode and power the car?

My brother David the Pastor once took a trip to Israel. He tells about the elevators in the lobby at the hotel in Tel Aviv. The Kosher elevator did not work on the sabbath, but the other one – for

Gentiles like us – ran 24/7. To us these things – and by the time of the Talmud there was a lot – seem silly, but the reason for it is that they are trying to obey the commandment; a noble task.

So Jesus and His lot are traversing planted fields, it's the sabbath, “καὶ οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ ἤρξαντο ὁδὸν ποιεῖν τίλλοντες τοὺς στάχους – and His disciples began their way, plucking the heads of grain.” It does not say that they were eating what they were plucking, but that would be the reason why one would do that, wouldn't it? Later on (25), hunger is clearly the reason for the plucking.

I'm talking to people who plant mostly corn – a grass – some beans, and the occasional various other grasses, so they will know all about plucking. Jesus lived in a highly agricultural society, and He speaks the language of the farm as a matter of course. It's why pastors ought to learn that language, even if you're in the city. It's why I need to learn about things like sheep and vineyards.

I grew up in the family grain business, so I am fluent in the dialect I call “American Farm.” Soybeans are legumes, and things like corn, rice, barley, oats, rye and wheat are grasses. Corn and beans did not come to the Middle East until much later, and rice needs a lot of water, so they grew a lot of wheat, barley, oats, and rye, any of which fit the description of what is going on here.

When the farmer hears that the disciples of Jesus were “plucking” somebody else's crop, they are going to be on the side of the Pharisees, but for a different reason. City people have been known to come out into the country and engage in what the farmer would call “stealing” from his crop. But according to the laws of that day, these disciples were doing something completely legal.

The law that made the plucking seen here legal is found in Deuteronomy (23: 24, 25),

24“If you go into your neighbor's vineyard, you may eat your fill of grapes, as many as you wish, but you shall not put any in your bag. 25If you go into your neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor's standing grain.

There are caveats to what at first glance may indeed look like stealing. We see that you can eat your fill of grapes, but you can't bring a bucket to take some home. Whatever the grain crop, you can pluck (and thresh) with your hand, but you can't harvest the entire plant – and take it home. This made food available to hungry people, but only enough for one meal, and then you got hungry.

By the time you got hungry, you have probably moved on to another location. In this way the burden for feeding the hungry is spread among many fields and vineyards. The other thing is that you can't take the grapes home to make wine – the beverage of celebration – and you can't take the grain home to make bread – the carbs that serve as fuel for the human body from day to day.

One more thing; I can eat grapes neat, and I actually do that all the time. But a person would have to be pretty hungry to eat raw grain. Out of boredom, when I used to haul grain, I would suck on a kernel of corn or a bean. After a while, the hull would separate, and if you've ever chewed field corn or a soybean – it's not at all tasty, but if you were hungry enough, certainly you would eat it.

I read the story of Shackleton's journey, and when they ran out of food – I cannot imagine ever eating what they ate. But if you are hungry enough, and you have to eat to live... Same with Louis Zamperini, the subject of Laura Hillenbrand's *Unbroken*. I actually know somebody who is descended from the Donner Party, who ate what was available and had a pass named after them.

Other OT Law, most clearly found in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, included the practice of gleaning. The farmers were to leave corners of their fields standing, to be “plucked” by hungry people, and if some of the crop fell onto the ground, they were not to pick it up for the same reason. Ruth is probably the most famous gleaner in the OT, and perhaps the most well-known of all time.

<https://www.theologyofwork.org/old-testament/leviticus-andwork/holiness-leviticus-1727/gleaning-leviticus-19910>

24. So the problem was not with the plucking, but not on Saturday. Never on Saturday. Never? It was the Pharisees who questioned Jesus about the questionable practices of His disciples “Ἰδε τί ποιοῦσιν τοῖς σάββασιν ὃ οὐκ ἔξεστιν – look, why do they do on the sabbath which is not lawful?” This may well be one of those cases where the Pharisees took OT law and added to it.

The kind of activity described here has the disciples walking through one of those grass crops, before or after harvest has been done, plucking standing heads, not heads on the ground. Go ahead and explain to your hearer about the stalk and the head in the grasses, how those cereal grains as well as corn have that long vertical thing topped by a head containing groups of useful things.

The stalks are generally not useful, except to be plowed back into the land or used for bedding. When the plant has matured, and is ready for harvest, it will “head out.” The disciples were plucking heads from ripe, standing plants, and they were “rubbing;” individual grains between their fingers, separating the meat from the hull (wheat from chaff) and eating the “meat.”

25. As is the case at other times as well – the biblical reasons for divorce, for example – Jesus chooses to not participate in what was an ongoing discussion of just what constituted work on the Sabbath. He simply quotes from the Bible, and that's that, and there is no give and take, no discussion, and I wonder if it bugged the Pharisees as much as it bugs people when I do that.

He said to them, “Οὐδέποτε ἀνέγνωτε τί ἐποίησεν Δαυεὶδ, ὅτε χρεῖαν ἔσχεν καὶ ἐπείνασεν αὐτὸς καὶ οἱ μετ' αὐτοῦ -did you never read what David did when he had need, and he hungered, and those with him?” The incident referred to by Jesus is found in 1 Samuel 21: 1-8. David is on the run from Saul, he and his men need fuel to keep going, and they ate the Bread of Presence.

Often called Showbread, instructions for its use (from Exodus 25) are both specific and detailed,

23“You shall make a table of acacia wood, two cubits long and one cubit wide and one and a half cubits high. 24“You shall overlay it with pure gold and make a gold border around it. 25“You shall make for it a rim of a handbreadth around *it*; and you shall make a gold border for the rim around it. 26“You shall make four gold rings for it and put rings on the four corners which are on its four feet. 27“The rings shall be close to the rim as holders for the poles to carry the table. 28“You shall make the poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold, so that with them the table may be carried. 29“You shall make its dishes and its pans and its jars and its bowls with which to pour drink offerings; you shall make them of pure gold. 30“You shall set the bread of the Presence on the table before Me at all times.

You can call it showbread, but better and more accurately we should refer to it as the “Bread of the Presence” because it’s supposed to always be there – present. In fact, Exodus (25:30) calls it that, and says that “you shall set the bread of the Presence on the table before me always.” The bread was to be unleavened, and it was to be replaced on every Sabbath Day with fresh bread.

That bread was only supposed to be eaten by the Priests, and yet they allowed David and his men to eat it. The point, of course, is that there is OT precedent for departing from ceremonial law in a pinch. He tweaks the learned theologians with the rhetorical question “Οὐδέποτε ἀνέγνωτε τί ἐποίησεν Δαυεὶδ – did you never read what David did,” a question expecting an affirmative answer;

Of course they had read all about David. They knew about David like they knew about the back of their collective hand. Or to put it in another way; Jesus says to them, “yes, of course, I see what they are doing, and no, they aren’t doing anything wrong.” While they are technically working on the Sabbath, they are not breaking the law, but are acting completely within the bounds of the law.

26. Strictly speaking, for the Priest to do what he did, it is true, “οὐκ ἔξεστιν φαγεῖν – it is not lawful to eat,” but he made an exception in this point of ceremonial law. We’re not talking about the Ten or even about civil law, nor are we talking about a practice whereby the showbread will begin to be given to any homeless person who walks in hungry. It’s just good pastoral practice.

In case you missed it, He is talking to them about that time “ὅτε χρεῖαν ἔσχεν καὶ ἐπείνασεν αὐτὸς καὶ οἱ μετ’ αὐτοῦ - when He had need and he and those with Him were hungry.” It might be well to review David and the showbread for your hearers. Some of them may be familiar, but I suspect it will be completely new material for many. But don’t spend a lot of time on OT ceremonial law.

WIK has a lot more information on that and other OT ceremonial law, and we could easily find ourselves in a TMI situation in talking about it, and TMI gets boring fast. The point is that the

priests were allowed to eat the bread that had been there for a week, but David and his men were hungry, so the Priest went ahead and gave the bread to them, and presumably put out a fresh loaf.

27. He concludes with “Τὸ σάββατον διὰ τὸν ἄνθρωπον ἐγένετο, καὶ οὐχ ὁ ἄνθρωπος διὰ τὸ σάββατον – the sabbath on account of man was made, not man on account of the sabbath.” On a very basic level, man was created first, and the sabbath came later. On a more basic level, the sabbath was created by God so that we would have a day of rest, like God had a day of rest.

As a practical matter, all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. If that in fact be the case, then Americans are the most dull of all boys. The Europeans criticize our work ethic. But if I don't get my two days off, I get a little bit grumpy, and if I work too much, I start doing stupid things, like forgetting things. When I drove truck, you could push through, but I can't always do that now.

The cure is a day or two off, and my regular day off is Friday and Saturday. In the beginning, as a fresh seminary graduate, I worked all day and six nights a week. You can do that by visiting members in their homes and talking for an hour or two each. As time went on, we got it down to three evenings max, and now one or two, and amazingly, I still have gotten to know my people!

I will probably note this week that the OT ceremonial laws are not in play for us as law. People will and people do work on Sunday, and farmers will miss church, especially during planting and harvest, and most of the stores will be open and people will work instead of going to church even if they are not nurses and nursing home employees. And the tournaments grow for our youths.

But the Third still does apply to Christians, and we remember the sabbath, Luther says, like this; “We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it,” and the best way to do that is by going to church on Sunday. And going to church other days as well is a good thing, except we don't have church other days.

The problem for those people at that time was that the tail was wagging the dog. In their zeal to observe the sabbath day in all its correctness, they had forgotten about basic things; like human life. People need to eat, and they get hungry on the sabbath as well as on other days and if you have to work to save the life of even an animal, you should work to do that even on the sabbath.

We observed that tail on our COVID trip in 2020. We went to the Grand Canyon and did the *National Lampoon's Vacation* – actually, we spent a morning there. Stopped on night in Kanab, Utah, looking for some supper, and it was Sunday. Went from eating place to eating place, they were all shut down, even Pizza Hut – yes, we were *that* desperate, ended up at the grocery store.

We selected two of the Stouffers frozen meals with the most tasty-looking photos on the box and took them to checkout. My wife mentioned to the checker that it's hard to find food in this town. The checker replied that “this town is very religious,” and my wife answered, “we're religious too, but you still have to eat.” It was the perfect line, delivered flawlessly, to that religious Mormon.

28. And in conclusion, “ὥστε κύριός ἐστιν ὁ Υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ τοῦ σαββάτου – so then, the Son of Man is Lord even of the sabbath.” The “Son of Man” is messianic. Here Jesus – having said what He just said about man and the sabbath, now says that He is the One who actually created the sabbath, and so actually can do pretty much whatever He pleases on it, even pluck grain.

Ellicott puts it like this,

The words contain the ground for the authoritative judgment of the previous verse. They assert that this also came within the limits of His jurisdiction as the Messiah, just as the power to forgive sins had been claimed by Him under the same title. In both instances, however, the choice of the title is significant. What is done is done by Him as the representative of humanity, acting, as it were, in its name, and claiming for it as such what He thus seems at first to claim for Himself as a special and absolute prerogative.

The writer to the Hebrews – whoever that is – spends the entirety of the fourth chapter of that epistle talking about the sabbath rest. That rest is clearly a thing to be highly desired and sought after, and not everybody made it into Canaan, and not everybody makes it into heaven, the eternal sabbath rest. That writer concludes that Jesus is our sabbath rest; He is the way to that eternal rest.

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