

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM WITH LIVING A 'RELIGIOUS' LIFE?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

Nine years ago my friend Ed Woodhall and I had the privilege of traveling with his daughter Becky and my son Ron to Israel. It was one of those times in parenting when we knew we were with the right people, at the right time, in the right place. We arrived in Jerusalem on a Friday night, checked into our hotel, and then went out to have a nice dinner at a local Jewish restaurant outside the walls of the old city. Once seated, we saw among the people there several Jewish rabbis in the corner, as well as one rabbi who was standing and bowed in prayer at his table. It was delightful to encounter this new and different culture, and as we ate our meal we anticipated the adventure that was before us in the next 10 days of travel.

Midway through our meal, the waiter came to the table and asked for our "tickets." We did not understand until he explained that we had arrived in Jerusalem at the beginning of the Jewish Sabbath (sunset Friday until sunset Saturday). In order to eat in a Jewish restaurant on a Friday evening "meal tickets" had to be purchased there prior to the beginning of Sabbath. Otherwise, the exchange of a Jewish shekel between the waiter and us would be defined as "work," making us "Sabbath breakers." As new arrivals we had no meal tickets, and our predicament caused quite a stir since we had practically finished our meals. The waiter looked around to see where the rabbis were sitting, and then said to Ed in a nervous whisper, "When you finish the meal, meet me back in the kitchen."

Ed and I quickly finished and met the owner in the kitchen where he anxiously told us the price of the meal and encouraged us to pay him quickly in shekels before someone saw us "working." It was an amazing moment! We had been caught in the Jewish religious system of legalism, a form of religion that has kept God's people under bondage for thousands of years to the letter of the law. According to the Jewish interpretation of work we had actually worked on the Sabbath by passing shekels from one hand to another.

Unfortunately, religious legalism has crept into Christianity since the beginning of the church, holding many Christians in spiritual bondage. Even as Christians, our flesh desires to maintain control of our life, and tries to live up to the letter of the law in our own strength. Thus, when we read the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount, we think we can live the life that is described. This, however, is "religious Christianity," a form of religion without the presence of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. It is a counterfeit.

In contrast to this religious legalism, we have been called by our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ to entrust our lives to him so that his Spirit might empower us to live under his law of love. If we are to have a relationship with him, we must be men and women who are receptive to the Spirit of God, for he says he will "put my law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jeremiah 31:33). Thus we will find ourselves desiring to live our lives by the spirit of the law rather than the letter. We will be living in such a way that the Holy Spirit is our power, strength, and motivation to please our Lord. Although there is a law, we will not try to keep it, but will let Christ live it through us. The tension of living a religious life resting in our flesh and living a life resting in the person, power, and presence of Jesus Christ will be clearly seen in Luke 6:1-11.

The question we will address is "What are the problems with living a 'religious' life?"

I. It keeps you hungry, Luke 6:1-5

Now it came about that on a certain Sabbath He was passing through some grainfields; and his disciples were picking and eating the heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands. But

some of the Pharisees said, "Why do you do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" 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?" And He was saying to them, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

In our study of the life and ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ we find the theme of Luke's gospel is found in Jesus' words: "I have not come to call righteous men but sinners to repent" (Luke 5:32). Luke 6 brings us to Jesus' eighteenth month of public ministry, starting in the southern desert of Judea, to Jerusalem, and then moving up into the villages of Galilee. Using "A Harmony of the Gospels," a resource which lines up the stories of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, we see that this particular story is found in the first three gospels, but not in John. A harmony supplies missing information from Luke about the episodes that occur in Judea and Jerusalem during this time (see Matt.12:1-14; Mark 2:23-38).

According to the Gospel of John, Jesus went up to Jerusalem (Luke 5 and 6) to attend either the Feast of Pentecost between May and June, or the Feast of Tabernacles, between September and October. During this time he healed a lame man sitting by the pool of Bethesda on the Sabbath. John 5 says, "And for this reason the Jews were persecuting Jesus because he was doing these things on the Sabbath. But He answered them [the Pharisees], 'My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working.' For this cause, therefore, the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God." At this point two capital offenses were leveled at Jesus. First, they said he was a "Sabbath breaker," which according to Exodus 31:15 was punishable by stoning. Secondly, he was a blasphemer because he was saying that he was equal with God, which is dealt with in Leviticus 24:11-16.

According to Matthew 12, we know that the context of Luke 6 is a time when the Lord and his disciples were ministering throughout Galilee. People were coming to know Jesus as Messiah, and the sick, disabled, and demon-possessed were being healed. Walking between villages, the hungry men came alongside a ripe field of grain. In any full ministry, it is easy to forget to eat, so Jesus and his followers took the opportunity to do what the Law allowed them to do: "When you enter your neighbor's vineyard, then you may eat grapes until you are fully satisfied, but you shall not put any in your basket. When you enter your neighbor's standing grain, then you may pluck the heads with your hand, but you shall not wield a sickle in your neighbor's standing grain." Here within the law was God's mercy, love, and provision extended to the traveler. It was a demonstration that when God is your provider, there is always ample provision for both farmer and traveler.

But some of the Pharisees said, "Why do you do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" The opportunity arose for the Pharisees to accuse Jesus of law breaking. The Sabbath (meaning "rest") was the Hebrew day of rest that began every Friday at sunset and concluded at sunset on Saturday. The biblical reasons are given to us before the law and then as part of the Mosaic Law. Genesis 2:1-3 says: "And by the seventh day God completed His work which He had done; and He rested on the seventh day. God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made." Further, the fourth commandment of the Ten Commandments says, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8). This observance was partly to be a witness to the surrounding nations that the Israelites had entered a covenant with the one and only living God who could provide all their needs, even if they took a day off. The Sabbath day for the Jew was a day of joy, rest, worship, spiritual instruction, and community. The focus was to be on the Lord and not on self-interest (Isaiah 58:13-14).

Finally, as the second generation of Jews were about to enter the Promised Land Moses gave them new insight into the reason for the Sabbath. It was not only a day of rest and a time to focus on God in the community, but it was also a time to remember that the Lord was their Redeemer. Israel had been "a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm. Thus take time to be grateful to the Lord as you are able to rest from your work in Egypt" (Deuteronomy 5:12-15). For 400 years, the people had not had a day off from their labor. The Sabbath was to be a memorial to God's redemption.

This was the basis of the Pharisees' accusation. As they knew the truth about the Sabbath, they also knew the law as recorded in Exodus 31:13-15: "You shall surely observe my Sabbaths; for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the Lord who sanctifies you. Therefore you are to observe the Sabbath, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death for whoever does any work on it, that person shall be cut off from among the people. For six days work may be done, but on the seventh day there is a Sabbath of complete rest, holy to the Lord; whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall surely be put to death."

In the early history of Israel the Sabbath was designed by God so his people would experience rest, resulting in a deep inner joy. It was a foretaste of that spiritual resting from all work to which the people of God would one day attain in Christ. For several years I sat under the preaching of Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse of the Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. Knowing that there were people in the audience who were not believers, he would often close his sermons by saying in his great, booming voice, "Dear God, may all who don't know you as Lord and Savior have no rest until they rest in thee!" That's what God wants for us.

In Jesus' day, however, the Sabbath observance had become largely external and formal, and there was more concern for the letter of the law than the needs of humanity. Although Jesus upheld the authority and validity of the law of Moses, his emphasis was not on its external observance but on a spontaneous performance of the will of God which formed the basis of the law (Matt. 5:21-48). Unfortunately, his clashes came with the Pharisees who had added a list of some 39 principle works to the law which were forbidden on the Sabbath, including ordinary household chores and the healing of the sick. You could not carry a pallet, even if you had just been healed by Jesus and he asked you to pick up your pallet and walk (John 5). Rubbing grain between one's hands was considered work. According to rabbinic tradition, "picking" and "rubbing" were tantamount to reaping, threshing, winnowing and preparing food, and thus a capital offense punishable by stoning. Thus, the Sabbath had become a burden and a tension, creating fear in the people's hearts. The religious person never knew when someone would interpret what he was doing as work, and thus put him under judgment.

In defense of his actions on the Sabbath, Jesus answered the Pharisees with Exhibit A, David's actions in I Samuel 21. His motive was to point out that their charges were based on a faulty interpretation of the Old Testament, for the scriptures themselves allowed exceptions to the law under certain circumstances. When David was fleeing from King Saul who wanted to kill him, he arrived at the City of Nob with some of his faithful men. Entering the tabernacle alone, he told Ahimelech, the High Priest, that he was in the service of the king and needed bread for he and his men. Ahimelech knew that David was God's true anointed. The only bread on hand was the 12 loaves of bread placed before the presence of the Lord on a table within the Holy Place. This "shew bread" symbolized the constant fellowship that the people of Israel had with their God as well as the reality that God was their source of food, fellowship, and life. Each Sabbath, the 12 old loaves were replaced with fresh loaves, and eaten only by the priest. This was to teach Israel the holiness of God as well as the sanctity of those whom he chose to minister to him. However, Ahimelech looked ahead to the day when David would take his rightful place as king of Israel, and deemed it was right to feed God's anointed and his men so they would be physically able to accomplish the mission on which God had sent them.

A religious law was set aside in this circumstance because no moral law was broken. The proof that this exception was acceptable to the Lord was seen in the reality that God did not rebuke the high priest or his anointed. Likewise, Jesus was God's anointed, out of the seed of David, going about his Father's business so much so that he and his men became hungry and took advantage of the law and walked into a wheat field to feed themselves on the Sabbath. According to the Pharisees, all would have been well except it was the Sabbath.

Jesus then proceeded to instruct the teachers of Israel in the proper interpretation of the Sabbath by making two statements in response to their one question: "Why do you do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" First, he said, "The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). The Sabbath was designed for man so that he could rest from his labors as God had rested from his. As the book of Hebrews reminds us, "There remains for us a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for the one who has entered his rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from his. Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest" (Hebrews 4:9-11). The writer of Hebrews is correctly pleading that God's people not enter into a day of rest but a life of rest in the person, power, and presence of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the New Testament the Sabbath is not a

day to be observed, but typical of the present rest into which the believer enters when he also ceases from his own works and trusts Christ (Heb. 4:4, Col. 2:16). The rest of God is the goal which the whole creation is destined to reach. The Lord God created the Sabbath as a gift for men to honor him and rest from their labors, not as a burden of oppression to drive them to their knees in fear.

The second thing Jesus said to the Pharisees was, "The Son of Man is Lord over the Sabbath" (Luke 6:5). Our Lord is not only the Messiah who is over the Sabbath, but he has the authority to challenge and rid it of its terrible burdens and countless traditions. Like David, the human needs of Jesus and his men took precedence over the law. Hunger is a basic need that must be met if people are to remain healthy enough to serve God the Father. The Sabbath was given as a time set aside from the labor of self-interest so that man could worship the one and only living God who would provide even when he did not work. Therefore, it is a time to spend in thankful worship for all that God has given. It was to be a time of reflection, worship, joy, and rest symbolizing the deeper spiritual rest of trusting the Lord for everything in our lives in any given moment, hour, day, week, month, or year.

My wife Anne Marie and I grew up in "religious" Christianity. From our childhood we were heavily influenced by a counterfeit Christianity that majored on keeping the law, the traditions, customs, and myths in our own strength. This legalism required great effort on our part which resulted in bitter and joyless lives from the many failures we experienced. This counterfeit Christianity eliminated the reality of the presence and comfort of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It did not inform us of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit who is willing and able to give us the ability to enjoy the freedom in Christ and the desire to keep the law of God that had been written on our hearts by the Spirit. For a time we were yoked to this phony Christianity that was built on the foundation of teaching people in our community what Christians should not do, rather than the freedom one has in Christ to be like Christ. For example, a woman could wear rouge and perfume, but no lipstick; you could square dance, but not slow dance; you could milk cows on Sunday, but could not wash your car; you could watch TV, but not go to the movies. I was 15 before I saw my first movie, "The Yearling," with Gregory Peck. I hitchhiked alone into another town eight miles away, and without telling anyone, I decided to "break the law" by going to a movie. I went into the theater with fear and trembling, looking behind me as I walked in and found a seat in the back row. I was so scared that I paid no attention to the plot and could not remember what it was about.

This religious system was designed to keep us pure from the world system. Outwardly we would conform, but inwardly we were rebelling down to the tips of our toes. It also left us starving for a true relationship with a loving and caring God, the one revealed in the scriptures but ignored in our religion. What we were involved in was a Christianity without Christ.

II. It keeps you handicapped, Luke 6:6-11

And it came about on another Sabbath, that He entered the synagogue and was teaching; and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. And the scribes and the Pharisees were watching Him closely, to see if He healed on the Sabbath, in order that they might find reason to accuse him. But He knew what they were thinking, and He said to the man with the withered hand, "Rise and come forward!" And he rose and came forward. And Jesus said to them, "I ask you, is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good, or to do harm, to save a 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 themselves were filled with rage, and discussed together what they might do to Jesus.

Our Lord and his disciples moved from the wheat fields of Galilee to the Sabbath services in a synagogue in a small Galilean village. As we saw in Luke 4, the services had a pre-arranged order in which there was the prayer that included the Shema, "the Lord our God is one;" the reading of the law; the reading from the prophets; and finally, an exposition of that reading by a visiting or local teacher. At this time, Jesus was once again invited to teach. The murderous Pharisees were not listening to him, however, because they realized that a man with a withered right hand sat in the audience that day. To the Jewish mind, the right hand was a symbol of power and strength. It was used consistently to bring blessing, and it had authority. A father blessed his son by placing his right hand on his hand, like passing the mantle. Since this man's right hand was withered he never had been able to experience the joy that was symbolized in its use. Thus, he was not only physically, but

psychologically handicapped.

The Pharisees knew that Jesus had a compassionate heart and if he saw the man's hand he would probably heal him. Thus they could have a case to accuse him of Sabbath-breaking among all the witnesses. According to Matthew 12:10, the Pharisees saw the man, "And they questioned Him saying, 'Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?' in order that they might accuse Him. But He knew what they were thinking and He said to the man with the withered hand, 'Rise and come forward!' And he rose and came forward."

The tension was high in the synagogue. It was the Sabbath, the room was filled with the faithful Jews, our Lord, his disciples, and the Pharisees. The man with the withered hand had come to worship like everyone else, but then Jesus' attention was drawn to his hand by the Pharisees' question. Prompted by the Holy Spirit, the Lord cried out, "Rise and come forward." The man responded by coming forward to stand in the middle of the synagogue between Jesus and the Pharisees.

As I have said, in the "Harmony of the Gospels" we can see that this story is told in Matthew 12:9-14, Mark 3:1-6, as well as in Luke 6. The three gospels together can give us greater insight into the event. The Pharisees asked Jesus one question: "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" In turn, Jesus responded by asking them three questions. In his book, "According to Luke," David Gooding says these three questions were all based on the issue of "the authority of morality. Any interpretation of the sabbath law that conflicted with basic morality must be wrong, for it would involve slander on the very character of God who ordained the Sabbath. To forbid the healing of a man's hand would be to do him an injury."

According to Matthew, Jesus asked, "What man shall there be among you, who shall have one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will he not take hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep?" Mark 3:4 records Jesus' other question: "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save a life or to kill?" Jesus knew that the Pharisees wanted to kill him, and were waiting for the right opportunity.

The response of the Pharisees was that "they kept silent." The Lord responded to their silence: "After looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, He said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand' (Mark 3:5). 'And he stretched it out, and it was restored to normal, like the other' (Matt. 12:13).

"But the Pharisees went out and counseled together against Him as to how they might destroy Him (Matt. 12:14). . . . and immediately began taking counsel with the Herodians against Him as to how they might destroy Him" (Mark 3:6). The Herodians were political and spiritual enemies of the Pharisees. So desperate were the Pharisees to accuse Jesus that they resorted to an alliance with their enemies to kill him. "They themselves were filled with rage [mindless folly] and discussed together what they might do to Jesus" (Luke 6:11).

It is obvious that the self-righteous Pharisees' hearts were so hardened and filled by rage it caused them to be blinded to the miracle of the man's healing. That which was once useless now was made whole, filled with power and strength. The more important issue is that these Pharisees were so filled with "mindless folly" that they could not see the long awaited Messiah in their midst. They were focused on keeping the letter of the law so that they missed the Author of the law standing before them, filled with justice and mercy. They were void of power to keep the true law which Jesus would have been willing to put in their hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit. As a result they remained blind, dumb, deaf, crippled, hungry, spiritually handicapped, and without wholeness, peace, or joy. What a tragic state! Unwilling to listen to the Lord's true interpretation of the law, they would rather have upheld the traditions of the law and let the man suffer with his handicap.

When I stand before the body to preach from the word of God I know that I am supported by a group of about 150 people who are involved and praying for the service. Besides the people who serve as counselors, ushers, musicians, and greeters, there is also a team who work on the order and timing of the worship service. In one particular service two years ago we were about seven minutes behind the schedule by the time I got to preach. I wondered anxiously what I should cut out of the message I had worked on all week. About three sentences into the introduction, a young man named Don, who had attended our Careers Alive group, stood up and began addressing me. He wanted to know why some of the Careers people were so hypocritical. I remember

the tension in my spirit as my thoughts raced: "Don, not now. We don't do this. Don, I asked you to call me during the week. We have our program, our unspoken rules, everything is to be done in decency and order." Yet he went on and on. Fortunately, the Lord changed my heart back where it should be, to that of a shepherd. He filled my heart with compassion and allowed me to respond to a very sick young man. I told him I did not know the answer to his question, but I would see him as soon as the service was over and arrange a time to talk about the immediate problem. He thanked me and sat down.

After the service we arranged to meet the following Tuesday. He was hospitalized later that week, and the doctors discovered he had a brain tumor. Many of us visited him, prayed with him and for him, but within a few weeks he went home to be with the Lord. I am so grateful that I was made willing by the Holy Spirit to put aside my false view of our Sunday morning traditions, customs, and programs and set free to minister to a man who was under severe physical and mental pressure. It was a joy to be part of a greater team of Career men and women who ministered to his needs for the few weeks he had remaining on this earth.

That was the real sermon for me that day. I had held a legalistic position towards Sunday that it was a day that we had to follow a certain set of rules. If I had continued in that thinking, a wonderful healing opportunity would have been missed. I am so glad the Great Shepherd got hold of my heart.

What is the problem with living a "religious life?" The problem is that it does not produce anything but death. Living out a religious lifestyle is nothing more than our flesh trying to live according to the letter of the law in our own strength; that effort kills the joy of living for ourselves and those around us. It also keeps us spiritually and emotionally hungry and handicapped, resulting eventually in a hardness of heart towards those who are hungry or have "withered hands."

In contrast, our Lord has called us to allow him to live his life in and through us by the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of our heavenly Father. We are not called to put aside a "Sabbath day" but to understand the deeper spiritual meaning of a "Sabbath life," turning to our Lord moment by moment and resting in him for all that Christ requires of us in any given day. "There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest" (Heb. 4:9-11).

Thank God that he sent his Son to free us from our flesh and its desire to live a legalistic religious life according to the letter of the law. He has given us the power through Jesus to live a life that will please him. We want to be men and women who are thankful for a God who has set us free to have a Sabbath rest and Sabbath life, constantly relying on him every moment. If you are caught in a religion that has you living in your own strength and power, stop it! All it will produce is death; it is unacceptable activity in the sight of God. When you read the Sermon on the Mount, fall to your knees and say, "I can't do it!" The Lord will respond, "That is wonderful! That is what I wanted to hear." When you cry out that the Ten Commandments are too hard to keep, he will say, "You are right. I never asked you to do it. I will keep them through you." Stop living a counterfeit Christianity and allow him to teach you about his Sabbath rest; not a day but a lifestyle of resting in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

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