Good morning, Moon Valley!

Today we continue a sermon series titled, “So You Can Know For Sure.” It is a study through the Gospel of Luke. The text we are studying today is ▶ Luke 6:1-11.

From this text, we are going to learn how legalism is lethal. The legalism I’m talking about involves rigid religious rule-following as a means of trying to impress God and others. Legalism reduces spirituality to a checklist of do’s and don’ts. The life of a religious legalist is about checking all the boxes. Piety is based on performance.

Legalistic groups have a feel to them. Humility, compassion, and grace are generally absent. In their place is an imaginary scorecard for acceptability and belonging. Different groups have different scorecards. But they all have them. The line items on the scorecard may or may not be related to Scripture. And the line items related to Scripture may or may not be properly interpreted and applied.

Over the years, I myself have received many demerits on other people’s scorecards, and in one way or another, they let me know I’m not measuring up, usually on their way out.

- I don’t hold a printed Bible while I preach; which is shamefully disrespectful of the word of God.
- I do not have altar calls like Billy Graham, so I must not be preaching the gospel right.
- I do not pass the plate, so I am enabling people to shirk their biblical responsibility to give.
- I am not political enough; therefore, I have abdicated my role as salt and light in the world.
- I don’t make a habit of railing against on those in the LGBTQ community, which puts me on the liberal suspect list.

- I don't preach every single Sunday, I take breaks, which is just plain lazy.
- I don't make my wife do enough in the church; she should be leading the women's ministry and playing piano and otherwise having a higher profile.
- I emphasize grace too much, which gives people a license to sin.
- I allow the use of fancy, colored lights in the church, which is worldly.

Legalistic groups are also big on keeping up appearances. You don't want to share deep inner struggles, you don't want to ask hard questions, you don't want to confess doubts, you don't want to open up about who you really are or what your life is really like because you don't want to risk getting a bad scorecard that puts you out of the group.

Such legalism is lethal in the sense that it puts us at odds with, and cuts us off from, the life-giving person and work of Jesus. It kills joy and grace and relationships.

In our text for today, legalism is represented by some Jewish religious leaders known as Pharisees. As a group, Pharisees were distinguished by strict adherence to the Torah, the first five books in the Hebrew Scriptures, which contain the laws given by God through Moses to the people of Israel. Pharisees were equally devoted to rigid compliance with oral traditions, which spelled out detailed rules for everyday life. These oral traditions were known as the oral Torah, which was elevated by the Pharisees to the same authoritative status as the written Torah.

As a group, Pharisees generally separated themselves from other people they considered impure or lax in complying with the written and oral Torah. In fact, the name Pharisees means separated ones.

In our text, the Pharisees interact with Jesus in a way that shows us the ▶ big idea of this sermon, which is: Legalism is lethal; Jesus is life-giving. That is the takeaway I want you to remember: Legalism is lethal; Jesus is life-giving.

Framed in this way, the better choice is obvious. Choose Jesus. But one of the reasons legalism is lethal is that it can blind us to the life Jesus brings. We all have the potential to be legalistic in one way or another, but it's hard to see it in ourselves because it masquerades as righteousness. Let's see how this plays out in our text. ▶ Luke 6:1 says,

> ESV Luke 6:1 On a Sabbath, while he [Jesus] was going through the grainfields, his disciples plucked and ate some heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands.

Eating a small amount of grain from someone else's field was perfectly acceptable. In fact, it was expressly permitted in ▶ Deuteronomy 23:25, where it says,

> ESV Deuteronomy 23:25 If you go into your neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, . . .

But Jesus and his disciples did this on the Sabbath, which was considered a problem by the Pharisees. ▶ Luke 6:2 records,

> ESV Luke 6:2 But some of the Pharisees said, "Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?"

The charge that Jesus and his disciples are doing something unlawful is based on ▶ Exodus 20:8-10. It's one of the Ten Commandments. It says,

> ESV Exodus 20:8 “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 . . .”

The Sabbath is on the seventh day of the week. By Jewish reckoning, the seventh day is Saturday. More specifically, Jews observe the Sabbath from sunset on Friday until darkness falls on Saturday.

The term, “Sabbath” is an English transliteration of the Hebrew term, *Shabbat*. The verbal root of this word means to desist, to cease, to come to an end, or to put a stop to something.[1] So, literally, the Sabbath or *Shabbat* is a day of stopping. And the thing to be stopped on the Sabbath is work.

But what kind of work?

Scripture does not spell it out in great detail. Elsewhere in the Bible, we see a few types of work cited as examples of work prohibited. “No fire was to be kindled, no food prepared, no journey undertaken, no buying or selling permitted, and no burden to be borne. . . . (Ex. 31:12-17; 35:3; 16:22-26; Neh. 10:31; 13:15-21; Lev. 25:4; 2 Chron. 36:21).”[2]

Over the years, oral traditions relating to Judaism in general and *Shabbat* in particular were passed from one generation to another. These oral traditions were not given by God, and they go beyond Scripture. They were finally written down around 200 AD.[3] This written record of the oral traditions of Judaism is called the Mishnah. In the Mishnah, there are 39 categories of work forbidden during *Shabbat* (Mishnah *Shabbat*, 7:2). The following categories of things are prohibited: sowing, plowing, reaping, binding sheaves, threshing, winnowing, selecting, grinding, sifting, kneading, baking, shearing wool, washing wool, beating wool, dyeing wool,

[1] Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament.
[2] Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 4, 105.
[3] Falcon & Blatner, *Judaism for Dummies*, 159.

spinning, weaving, making two loops, weaving two threads, separating two threads, tying, untying, sewing two stitches, tearing, trapping, slaughtering, flaying, salting meat, curing hide, scraping hide, cutting up hide, writing two letters, erasing two letters, building, tearing down a building, extinguishing a fire, kindling a fire, hitting with a hammer, and transporting an object in the public domain.

To this day, orthodox Jews take *Shabbat* very seriously. One modern Jewish source says, "*Shabbat* is the most important ritual observance in Judaism. It is the only ritual observance instituted in the Ten Commandments. It is also the most important special day, even more important than *Yom Kippur*.[4]

This provides the backdrop for the Pharisees charging that Jesus and his disciples have done what is unlawful on the Sabbath. The Pharisees conclude that plucking some heads of grain, rubbing them together, and eating them is a violation of Sabbath law. It is a form of reaping, threshing, winnowing, and preparing food.

Whether or not this is truly a violation of God's law written in Scripture is dubious. It is hard to describe what Jesus and his disciples did as work or even food preparation.

But Jesus does not argue the lawfulness of his actions. He has a bigger point to make about what the Pharisees are missing. ▶ Verses 3 and 4 continue.

> ESV Luke 6:3 And Jesus answered them, "Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him:"

[4] www.us-israel.org/jsource/Judaism/shabbat.html, The American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise

▶ ESV Luke 6:4 “how he entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those with him?”

Jesus is referring to the story recorded in 1 Samuel 21:1-6 that occurred a thousand years earlier, where David unlawfully ate some holy bread to satisfy his hunger and that of his men. No doubt, the Pharisees know David and this story very well.

David is viewed by the Pharisees as a national hero. God made a promise to David. It is called the Davidic Covenant. David was then the king of Israel. The promise is recorded in 2 Samuel 7:16. God promised that David’s lineage and his throne would continue forever.

Related to this promise of David’s lineage and throne came a corresponding promise through the prophet Isaiah around 700 B.C. The promise is recorded in Isaiah 9:6-7. It was the promise of a Messiah who would come to occupy the throne of David and reign forever as a blessing to all peoples.

As a national hero through whom the Messiah would come, David was given a pass for unlawfully eating the holy bread in the circumstance to which Jesus refers.

In mentioning the story of David, Jesus accomplishes several things.

First, he handcuffs the Pharisees on the thinking that, if they want to throw him under the bus for being a lawbreaker, they’re going to have to throw their hero, David under the bus, too.

Second, he affirms the idea that human need takes priority over ceremonial law. In both cases, rules were bent to feed the hungry.

Third, Jesus is setting up the Pharisees for the mic drop that comes in ▶ verse 5.

> ESV Luke 6:5 And he said to them, "The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath."

"The Son of Man" is the title Jesus gives himself most frequently in the gospels. It is tied back to the very same title used in Daniel 7:13-14 for the Messiah. Jesus is claiming to be the Messiah, the one descended from David.

Also, the phrase "lord of the Sabbath" conveys Jesus' authority over Sabbath practices. In essence, Jesus is saying, "The Sabbath is mine to control because I myself established it. I have authority over the understanding and administration of it because I am God."

We are left to imagine how the Pharisees respond because the text does not say. My guess is that they are dumbfounded and angry, not only for being shut down, but also for the outrageousness of Jesus' claim.

Our text moves on to another Sabbath in which Pharisees are watching and waiting to get some dirt on Jesus. ▶ Verse 6 says,

> ESV Luke 6:6 On another Sabbath, he entered the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was withered.

The man's hand was probably paralyzed.[5] And this sets up a dramatic tension explained in ▶ verse 7.

[5] Bock, Darrell L., *Luke: 1:1–9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994), 528.

> ESV Luke 6:7 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.

The original Greek word translated “watched” means to keep under observation or watch closely with malicious intent.[6] The scribes and Pharisees are just waiting to pounce if and when Jesus heals the man on the Sabbath.

Perhaps some of the Pharisees were the same ones who charged Jesus with breaking the law for eating the grain on the Sabbath. If so, I can imagine them thinking to themselves, “Jesus may have handcuffed us last time with the whole David argument, but we will get him this time.”

From the Pharisees point of view, medical work was not to be done on the Sabbath, unless it was an urgent or life-threatening situation.[7] And they did not consider a withered hand to be urgent or life-threatening; it could wait another day. So, if Jesus does healing work for the man with the withered hand on this Sabbath day, they’ve got him dead to rights.

But Jesus knows exactly what they are up to and orchestrates another lesson. ▶ Verse 8 says,

> ESV Luke 6:8 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.

Jesus’ knowledge of the Pharisee’s thoughts is more than just intuition; it is the supernatural knowledge of God. Based on that knowledge, Jesus

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[6] Friberg.
[7] Bock, Darrell L., *Luke: 1:1–9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994), 528.

does not deal with the disabled man secretly; instead, he calls him front and center. ▶ Verse 9 continues,

> ESV Luke 6:9 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?"

This question contrasts what Jesus wants to do with what the Pharisees want to do.

Jesus wants to "do good." The original Greek verb is ἀγαθοποιέω (*ah-gaw-thaw-poi-EH-o*). It is to show goodwill toward someone, to do good to them, to benefit them.[8]

Jesus wants "to save life." The original Greek verb is σῴζω (*SODE-zo*). It is probably not used here in a specific, technical sense to describe salvation from hell. Rather, it is used to describe deliverance in a general sense, including rescue from harm and restoration to health.[9]

In sum, Jesus wants to bring life.

In contrast, the Pharisees want "to do harm" and "to destroy."

It is important to distinguish not only *what* they want to do, but also *who* they have in mind.

Jesus wants to bring life to the man with the withered hand. Jesus is focused on meeting the man's need.

In contrast, in this moment, the Pharisees are not concerned with the need of the man with the withered hand; they want to harm and destroy

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[8] Friberg.

[9] Bock, Darrell L., *Luke: 1:1–9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994), 529; Marshall, I. Howard, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 235; Friberg.

Jesus because he is challenging their legalistic way of life. And Jesus knows it.

So, Jesus' question to the Pharisees is essentially this: "I want to bring life to this man. You want to destroy me. Who is truly in the wrong here?"

▶ Verse 10 continues:

> ESV Luke 6:10 And after looking around at them all he said to him, "Stretch out your hand." And he did so, and his hand was restored.

This is yet another mic drop that confounds the Pharisees. Everybody sees the healing that took place. Everybody knows that Jesus is responsible. And this certainly corroborates his earlier claim to be the lord of the Sabbath.

Nevertheless, Jesus had not done the traditional work that would be classified as unlawful on the Sabbath because he hadn't moved a muscle. There was no physical exam. No application of medicine. No even a touch from Jesus. Just four words spoken: "Stretch out your hand."

How do you make stick the charge of doing work on the Sabbath when all Jesus did was utter four words?

The Pharisees are foiled again. And enraged. ▶ Verse 11 explains,

> ESV Luke 6:11 But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.

Legalists are generally angry people. If you conceptualize anger as a blocked goal, and the goal is to get people to follow your rules, anger is inevitable.

The original word for “fury” describes an irrational or foolish anger.[10] In our text, the anger of the Pharisees is foolish in that it blinds them to the reality of who Jesus is and the new life he offers. It completely overlooks the life brought to the man with the withered hand who is now healed. Instead of celebrating in love, they stew in fury.

Which brings us back to the ▶ big idea: Legalism is lethal; Jesus is life-giving.

This raises some questions.

For example, ▶ was it wrong for the Pharisees to want to keep the Sabbath?

After all, it is one of the Ten Commandments. It is within the Mosaic Law given by God to the people of Israel for them to obey. And the Pharisees are among those to whom the Law was given.

The problem with the Pharisees lies not in their desire to keep the Sabbath, but in their motivation for doing so and in elevating their own traditions to the authority of God’s word. The Pharisees were using God’s Sabbath rule and some others they made up as a scorecard for judging themselves good and others bad, while completely missing the spirit and purpose of God’s rule.

Jesus himself tells us that an overarching purpose of the Law was for people to love God and others. The Law was intended by God to be a vehicle for love. As recorded in ▶ Matthew 22:36, a lawyer approached Jesus and asked,

> ESV Matthew 22:36 “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?”

[10] Friberg.

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Jesus' answer comes in ▶ verses 37-40.

> ESV Matthew 22:37 And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."
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> ▶ ESV Matthew 22:38 "This is the great and first commandment."
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> ▶ ESV Matthew 22:39 "And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself."
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> ▶ ESV Matthew 22:40 "On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

Jesus is saying that the Law, including the command to keep the Sabbath, was given as a means of loving God and others. God gave the Sabbath as a loving gift to his people so that they could get some rest and refreshment and have an opportunity to lovingly focus on enjoying their relationship with God and others.

But the Pharisees twisted it into loveless legalism. The Lord himself put his finger on the problem through the prophet Isaiah, as recorded in ▶ Isaiah 29:13.

> NLT Isaiah 29:13 . . . "These people say they are mine. They honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. And their worship of me is nothing but man-made rules learned by rote."

This brings us right back to our ▶ big idea: Legalism is lethal; Jesus is life-giving.

Here's another question: ▶ Are we supposed to keep the Sabbath today?

I believe the Mosaic Law—all of it, including the Ten Commandments—has been done away by the death of Christ and does not apply to us today. The basic idea is conveyed in ▶ Ephesians 2:15, where the apostle Paul says,

> NIRV Ephesians 2:15 Through his body on the cross, Christ put an end to the law with all its commands and rules. . . .

Some people are unsettled by the idea that, technically speaking, the Ten Commandments don't apply to us today. But some of the principles conveyed by the Ten Commandments do apply when they are confirmed by the New Testament. In fact, nine of the original Ten Commandments are restated and, in some cases, expanded in the New Testament. So, for example, we are not to commit adultery, but not because one of the Ten Commandments says not to. It's because the New Testament says not to.

This is significant because keeping the Sabbath is the only one of the Ten Commandments not restated in the New Testament. Nowhere in all the New Testament does it say that we are to keep the Sabbath. And nowhere does it prohibit the breaking of the Sabbath.

This raises another question: ▶ Of what value, then, is the Old Testament command to keep the Sabbath? Are we to simply ignore it? The Bible says all Scripture was inspired by God and written for our instruction. Well, how does the command to keep the Sabbath instruct us if we're not obligated to keep it?

In situations like this, it's always good to ask the question: Is there a timeless principle here that applies to us today? As you might imagine, there is.

God has a rhythm for rest and reflection. I believe God has built into us regular need to rest and reflect in a special way. And we would do well to respect that rhythm. In fact, if we ignore that rhythm, it can drain us physically and spiritually.

Even in the New Testament, which tells us that the Sabbath has been done away, God's rhythm is still evident. Nowhere in the New Testament are we commanded to keep the Sabbath, but everywhere a rhythm is evident. And it's a new rhythm. It's new in the sense that it involves the first day of the week, not the seventh. Sunday, not Saturday. It's also new in the sense that it is modeled, not mandated. The late theologian, Lewis Sperry Chafer, observes this new rhythm.[11] He says,

- "On the first day of the week Christ arose from the dead."
- "On the first day of the week Christ met His disciples in the new power and fellowship of His resurrection-life."
- "On the first day of the week Christ symbolized the new resurrection-fellowship by breaking bread with His disciples."
- "On the first day of the week He gave them instructions in their new resurrection-ministry and life for Him."
- "On the first day of the week He commanded the disciples to preach the new message to all the world."
- "On the first day of the week He breathed on His disciples and imparted the Holy Spirit to them."

[11] Chafer, Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Vol 4, pp. 117-118.

- “On the first day of the week the Spirit descended to take up His . . . ministries in the world.”

- “On the first day of the week the Apostle Paul preached to the assembled believers at Troas.”

The early church recognized this new rhythm and this new day. We have evidence that it became known as the “Lord’s day.” The early church came to meet together regularly on the Lord’s day. Not because it was mandated. Not because it was part of the Mosaic Law. Not because Sunday had become some new Sabbath. But because they saw that God has a rhythm for rest and reflection.

Why the change in pattern from the seventh day in the Old Testament to the first day in the New Testament? For one thing, it presents a beautiful picture of grace.

You see, the old system of the law of Moses required a person to work six days that he might receive the blessing of God on the seventh day. The new system of the law of Christ begins on the first day with the unmerited, gracious blessing of God, and then we live the next six days in the power and blessing we received on the first.[12] This calls for an about-face in attitude. Instead of legalistically trying to earn God’s blessing and acceptance by living right, we live right because we already have God’s blessing and acceptance in Christ.

Which bring us back to our big idea: ▶ Legalism is lethal; Jesus is life-giving.

Let’s pray. Lord, guard us from legalism. Help us to focus on your life-giving grace that frees us to love others instead of judging them. Amen.

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[12] Chafer, 119.