

The Radical Rabbi Who Broke the Rules

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Prayer of Illumination

Startle us, O God, with your truth
and open our hearts and our minds to your wondrous love.
Speak your word to us;
silence in us any voice but your own
and be with us now as we turn our attention,
our minds and our hearts, to you,
in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Scripture: Luke 6:1-11 (NRSV)

One sabbath while Jesus was going through the grainfields, his disciples plucked some heads of grain, rubbed them in their hands, and ate them. But some of the Pharisees said, "Why are you doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" Jesus answered, "Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and gave some to his companions?" Then he said to them, "The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath."

On another sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. The scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would

cure on the sabbath, so that they might find an accusation against him. Even though he knew what they were thinking, he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come and stand here." He got up and stood there. Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?"

After looking around at all of them, he said to him, "Stretch out your hand." 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.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON — The Radical Rabbi Who Broke the Rules

In the very funny and surprisingly poignant book *"The Year of Living Biblically,"* author A.J. Jacobs goes on a 365-day quest to follow the Bible as literally as possible. Raised in a non-religious Jewish home, he decided the best way to learn about faith was to dive in head-first for an immersive spiritual experience. AJ vowed to follow all 10 Commandments. To love his neighbor. He threw himself into prayer. Not only that, he tended sheep and told the absolute truth in all situations—much to his wife's chagrin. He didn't shave his beard for a year. Jacobs went further—he sought to follow to a tee the hundreds of rules found in the Scriptures: like avoiding clothes made of mixed fibers or stoning adulterers (*he threw pebbles instead*).

There was a scene in the book that made me smile— where Jacobs went on a quest to fulfill a little-known commandment in Scripture found in Deuteronomy 22:6.

*"If you by chance come upon a bird's nest...
you shall not take the mother with the young."*

To be properly done, it needed to be a kosher bird (a pigeon) that was wild (not domesticated), female (not male), sitting on her eggs in the nest. Scholars interpret the intent of the command to teach compassion towards animals.

AJ got some help from an observant Jew to fulfill this commandment. Two pigeon nests were set up on the man's third-floor apartment windowsill in Manhattan. AJ was contacted when the mother laid an egg. These were his instructions:

shoo the mother pigeon away,
pick up the egg,
hold it in the air,
say a prayer,
then either take the egg for eating later or
place the egg back in the nest.

AJ chose the latter, as do most. Fulfillment of this commandment could then be checked off the list. The only fee incurred was a \$100 donation to a charity of Jacob's choosing.

Through honest spiritual seeking and good humor, A.J. learned about the challenges and deeper reasons for faith in God. It wasn't about the rules, but relationships.

But we human beings love rules. We're drawn to them because they give us certainty, clarity, and control. We can call the shots. We need rules for society to function smoothly—

- traffic rules,
- rules in games,
- laws of the land that are just.

Today we hear a lot about the precautions and protocols of social distancing, hand-washing, masks. These rules can feel tedious, but they're important because they make a difference helping public health and saving lives in the midst of the pandemic.

We all need healthy boundaries adults, and children alike—as long as these laws and guidelines serve the purpose of protecting life and preventing harm. But part of maturity and growth also involves moving past the rules—where you stop living by the rules, and you start loving by the heart.

Jesus had a real problem with people who rigidly lived by the rules and human traditions. Time and again throughout the gospels, we see Jesus in conflict with unbending rule keepers. And they didn't like Jesus either:

"Who does he think he is, anyway?"

Jesus refused to play by the human rules of religion. The Pharisees were concerned with rule-keeping. Jesus was concerned with helping hurting people. Jesus doesn't want to lead us from the outside, but from the inside—from the heart.



The Greek Orthodox Church can help us with this—a predominant image they have of Christ is *"Christ Pantocrator"* which means *"Ruler of All."*

Jesus himself is the embodiment of the Golden Rule. He's the living, breathing royal law of love. But the Pharisees' nit-picking and majoring on the minors, missed the spirit of the law: that the sabbath's purpose is to nourish and heal human beings.

Jesus broke the rules... *to bless you*. This is important. Jesus didn't break the rules to:

*be a rebel,
be bad to the bone,
create problems,
or to flout authority.*

Jesus pushed the envelope for a purpose: to teach us the significance of the sabbath.

By healing on the sabbath Jesus revealed he's the Lord of the sabbath. Jesus is here to heal and bring restoration, salvation, and freedom—to body, mind, and soul—to our relationships—with God, others, and ourselves—not six days a week, but seven days a week. There's no law against that.

As Leonard Sweet puts it:

"The bad habits of Jesus show us the way to live right in a world gone wrong."

Jesus broke the sabbath rules for the right reason. If the rules kept him from doing anything kind, loving, or supportive of life—he broke them.

Our Lord Jesus was free to break the law when the law was breaking the backs and breaking the spirits of the people. Jesus had the authority and the keys to give his people liberty and spiritual jubilee, so that they might serve the living God unhindered.

The Apostle Paul talks about this in Galatians 5:

*For freedom Christ has set us free.
Stand firm, therefore,
and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*

Jesus wasn't rejecting the sabbath—rather he was revising what it meant to observe it, showing us how to really honor, observe, and enjoy the purpose of the sabbath. Jesus re-oriented the sabbath around himself and his work. Plus, Jesus is the one who created the rules in the first place.

And who better knows God's intent in Scripture than Jesus?

The two scenes in our Scripture reading reveal the increasing opposition Jesus was facing from the religious elite.

In the first scene in the cornfields, there's not a problem with what Jesus' disciples are doing. The problem is when they are doing it. The Pharisees were looking for problems, and they found them. They got Jesus' disciples on a technicality. According to the law of Moses, you were not supposed to:

reap, thresh, winnow, or prepare food on the sabbath—the day of rest.

It was a gotcha moment. The disciples were harvesting—by plucking grain. They were threshing—by rubbing the grain on their hands. They were winnowing—by flinging the husks. And they were preparing food—by eating. Busted. Caught red-handed.

Jesus said, “Not so fast.” You got it all wrong. Human need repeals ritual law. The sabbath is made for humans. Humans are not made for the sabbath.

In their legalism, the Pharisees missed the weightier matters of the law—like mercy and justice. They got tripped up in the trivialities and minutiae of the law.

Jesus gave an example from Scripture, 1 Samuel 21. King David and his rag tag followers were hungry. Because of his authority and his need, David ate the bread of the Presence in the temple that only the priests were permitted to eat.

Like David, Jesus was anointed as Israel’s king. Like David, Jesus is on the move with his rag tag group of followers who were hungry. If the law unnecessarily starved them, it was not binding.

The message for us: Human need takes precedence over rules and regulations.

Laws that harm and hurt, are to be not obeyed, repealed, or broken. Jesus knew when to follow the rules, and when to break them. We can trust King Jesus’ interpretation and application of Scripture.

It’s possible to read the Scriptures from cover to cover. We can quote verses and know the Bible like the back of our hand, and still miss the purpose, intent, and significance of it. Jesus is telling us you have to come to Scripture with an open mind—don’t already have your mind made up before reading. Don’t come to the Bible with your proof texts and ammunition to back up your pre-conceived ideas.

It’s easy to find our ideas in Scripture rather than have Scripture read us and correct, or form and reform, our ideas. We don’t say, “Listen Lord, your servant is speaking.” No, we say, “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.” We come to Scripture with an open mind and a needy heart. We don’t have all the answers. We’re humble and honest with ourselves. We need help and nourishment from Christ.

In our second scene, the Pharisees were watching to see if Jesus would heal on the sabbath so that they could accuse him and bring a charge against him. Jesus knew what was in their minds—he was not naïve. The rabbis had interpretations of Scripture, that people could receive medical help on the sabbath—*only if it was an emergency*—like an eye or throat problem.

So Jesus healing a man with a withered right arm wouldn’t be considered an emergency according to the accepted practices of the day. But Jesus didn’t care—he was here to heal in all situations. He wasn’t closed on Saturdays—like the Middle Eastern fast food chain Lamb-fil-A.

You see, the radical Rabbi confronted the religious elite head-on posing this question:

Is it permitted to DO GOOD or DO EVIL,
to SAVE LIFE or DESTROY LIFE on the sabbath?

Notice how Jesus didn't leave inaction as a third option? The religious elite didn't answer—only crickets could be heard.

Our Rabbi is saying something radical here—to refuse to do good is to harm others because their suffering remains because of inaction. Our neglect and silence harms others. It's the sin of omission. Love is a verb, an action. Jesus is saying that human regulations should not hinder or hamper us from helping the hurting.

Here's the kicker:

Jesus was doing good and healing on the sabbath.
The Pharisees were plotting evil to destroy Jesus on the sabbath.

They were the real sabbath-breakers, not Jesus. The Lord of the sabbath then exercised his God-given power and permission to heal on the Sabbath, saying to the man with the withered right hand:

Get Up.
Stand in the middle.
Stretch out your hand.

The man obeyed and he was healed—miraculously restored—on the sabbath. God gave his stamp of approval. The Pharisees were enraged—livid. Following the law was more important to them than following the Lord.

So what's our take-away for today?

Jesus doesn't want us to be legalists—he wants us to be lovers. He doesn't want us to be licentious or lawless either. Jesus has come to help us be—not haters, but healers.

We need to not stand silent against the human sin of prejudice. We're also not to be destructive, but constructive in bringing about change. Giving life, rather than destroying life. Healing, rather than dividing, On the sabbath or any day.

My white brothers and sisters, we need to look inside our hearts, to how we are complicit— explicitly and implicitly, individually and collectively, as a white people against people of color. We can bring life where there has been harm.

To do nothing, to be silent is not an option for us. This is a problem centuries in the making, a problem we were born into, a problem we're a part of, a problem we benefit from. It's time for us to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly not only with our God, but with our brothers and sisters of color.

It's always good to do good. If the laws tell you to do bad, don't do it. Don't be more loyal to a human system than you are to God Almighty. Don't forget that Jesus is not only Lord of the sabbath,

He's Lord of all,
Lord of your politics,
Lord of your philosophy,
Lord of the church.

Anything above Christ or untouched by Christ in our lives is an idol. Jesus is the one no human formulas or laws can confine or contain.

Immanuel, let's line up behind our Golden Ruler. Christ Pantocrator—The Ruler of All. The one who perfectly fulfilled the law, not by being legalistic, but by loving completely and courageously, to the end.

Amen.

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