

# Scripture and the Sabbath...

## *... Law or Love?*

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*A sermon given on the First Sunday after Trinity, 2nd June 2024 – by the Curate, the Revd Charlie Shefford, in Beverley Minster.*

*Deuteronomy 5:12–15; Mark 2:23—3:6*

There is a prevalent view today among people outside the church, but many inside the church too, that scripture is just a long list of things that you're not allowed to do - a rule book. Very often, conversations I have about faith and scripture will revolve around questions like, 'Why does the Bible say you can't do that? Or why does the Bible say you can't do this?' And there's this view of scripture as a rule book that Jesus tells us to avoid in today's gospel. He gives us an alternative view, which is characterised not by a long list of rules, but by God's character, his love for us. And this is told to us through the various conflicts between Jesus and the Pharisees, seemingly over the meaning and purpose of the Sabbath, the day of rest and worship of God. But it quickly becomes apparent that the heart of this conflict is about the interpretation and application of scripture.

The Old Testament has lots of different prescriptions and prohibitions when it comes to activities on the Sabbath: no trading; no harvesting; no gathering food. But what all these prohibitions add up to is the underlying principle that the Sabbath is a day of rest, not of labour.

In both instances of conflict in our story today, in the grain field as the disciples are plucking heads of grain, and in the synagogue when Jesus heals a man with the withered hand, the Pharisees take the strict and literal interpretation of what the scriptures say about the Sabbath: the scriptures say 'no harvesting crops on the Sabbath' - so even plucking heads of grain is unlawful; the scriptures say 'no labouring on the Sabbath' - healing someone is an act of labour; so no healing on the Sabbath. Importantly, the Pharisees had one exception to this: if someone's life is at risk, then it is permissible to heal them in order to save their life.

Jesus pushes back against these interpretations, not by focusing on the small, specific parts of scripture the Pharisees are referencing and then putting forward his own interpretation - that would be to play the Pharisees at their own game. But instead he expands outward, looking at the whole of scripture, at God's purpose in gifting humanity the Sabbath, and in God's purpose for humanity as a whole. Instead of following the antithesis of the Pharisees between what is allowed and is not allowed on the Sabbath, and trying to argue that perhaps maybe a bit more could be allowed. Jesus instead draws an antithesis between doing good and doing evil. In

doing so, he broadens the Pharisees' own stated rule that healing was permissible in matters of life and death.

And he expands this into a principle. Is it lawful to do good or to harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill? The true distinction is between attitudes which either save life or kill, which are life-giving or life-denying. Jesus refuses to get drawn into the Pharisees' narrow interpretation of scripture, refusing to draw a distinction between saving life in the narrowest sense and the offer of full life, which was the foundation of his earthly ministry and which he continues to offer to those who follow him today. He asks, 'Why did God give us scripture? What did the scriptures reveal about the character of God? And what does the character of God reveal to us about his purposes for humanity?' Jesus delves into the scriptures in a way the Pharisees' hardness of hearts blinds them to. Through his words and actions, Jesus reveals that God didn't gift us scripture so that we could use it to attack one another, so that we could use it to judge and berate; so that our whole lives, even our time of rest, would be full of guilt and anxiety, constantly worried that we might be doing something to offend God. To delay the healing of the man by one day would be to not only misunderstand scripture, but to misunderstand God.

You could say the scriptures were made for humankind, not humankind for the scriptures. God gave us scripture so that we may glorify Him and benefit humankind in love and service. By their application of scripture, by their attitude, the Pharisees continually destroy life rather than save it. By neglecting opportunities to do good, they do harm.

As I said at the beginning, scripture is not just a long list of things that you're not allowed to do. It is a story of God's love for humanity, a love so great that He gave his only son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. To be enlivened by and to walk in the Spirit is to want and will the good, to want to support and serve others. It is therefore the Pharisees who are the sabbath-breakers. In the name of piety, they become insensitive, both to the purposes of God and to the sufferings of people.

This culminates in the ultimate irony, the final verse, following Jesus's healing of the man - the Pharisees conspire how to kill Jesus. While Jesus saves life on the Sabbath, they plot to kill. And this dichotomy between Jesus and the Pharisees isn't as simple as saying Jesus has the nice, easy, liberal view, and the Pharisees have the harsh, conservative view. This dichotomy is too narrow. In his letter to the Romans (13:8-10), Paul writes, *'For the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The Commandments, "you shall not commit adultery," "you shall not murder," "you shall not steal," "you shall not covet," and any other commandment are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbour. Therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.'*

Scripture is not a list of prohibitions, but the revelation of God's love. It is a means to inspire acts of love and service, to learn how you can bring life, love, and healing to those around you. God didn't give us scripture so that we would have a long list of worries, so we would be anxious, so that we would feel coerced. God gave us scripture in order that by reading and hearing his word, we would know the character of God, know that we are loved by God, and through that love, we would go out into the world with an attitude that affirms life and do good, that we would love our neighbour as ourselves.

# Reading Texts

## Deuteronomy 5:12-15

<sup>12</sup> Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. <sup>13</sup> For six days you shall labour and do all your work. <sup>14</sup> But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. <sup>15</sup> Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

## Mark 2:23-3:6

<sup>23</sup> One sabbath he was going through the cornfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. <sup>24</sup> The Pharisees said to him, 'Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?' <sup>25</sup> And he said to them, 'Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? <sup>26</sup> He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.' <sup>27</sup> Then he said to them, 'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; <sup>28</sup> so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.' <sup>3:1</sup> Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. <sup>2</sup> They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. <sup>3</sup> And he said to the man who had the withered hand, 'Come forward.' <sup>4</sup> Then he said to them, 'Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?' But they were silent. <sup>5</sup> He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. <sup>6</sup> The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.