

“Why are you doing what is unlawful on the sabbath?” (Lk 6:2). The Pharisees direct a question at Jesus because they find fault with his disciples for rubbing their hands together as they walk through a field and pick grain to eat. There is no question of theft. The Book of Deuteronomy allows for this: “When you go through your neighbor’s grainfield, you may pluck some of the ears with your hand” (Deut 23:26). However, as strict observers of the law, the Pharisees found fault with the work that was done. Imagine that you go to the refrigerator, open it and take out a jar of jam and spread it on some bread. As you open the jar, someone complains that you are breaking the sabbath because it takes work to open the jar not to mention the opening of the refrigerator or the spreading of the jam.

“The Pharisees’ zeal for sabbath observance was motivated by the belief that disobedience would lead to disaster for the whole nation. Indeed, as punishment for disobedience, Israel had gone into exile and Jerusalem had been destroyed... In Jesus’ time, the effects of exile still continued, since Israel’s tribes were scattered and the land was controlled by a Gentile oppressor.”ⁱ The Pharisees thought they were doing the right thing by challenging anyone who did the slightest bit of work. They hoped to hasten the restoration of Israel’s sovereignty. In their zealous observance of the minute letter of the law, they failed to recognize that the time of restoration was at hand with the coming of Jesus, the promised Messiah.

Jesus comes to his disciples’ defense by referring to the time when David went into the house of God on the sabbath and asked for five loaves of bread (1 Sam 21:2–7). The priest questioned him, found that David and his men were not doing anything wrong, and then offered him the only thing he had to feed them. The priest had five fresh loaves that were set out for religious purposes as he replaced the older loaves that were no longer needed. David was perfectly justified in taking these loaves for the needs of his men. “The comparison suggests that if David ate the priests’ bread on the sabbath, so can Jesus, the son of David, do what he is doing on the sabbath.”ⁱⁱ

There is another line of reasoning that can also be used since there is an objection to work. The temple service involves work in the changing of the old bread for the fresh showbread on the sabbath (Lv 24:8). “The argument is that the law itself requires work that breaks the sabbath rest, because of the higher duty of temple service. If temple duties outweigh the sabbath law, how much more does the presence of Jesus, with his proclamation of the kingdom (something greater than the temple), justify the conduct of his disciples” (Note to Mt 12:5-6).

Jesus concludes his defense by explaining, “The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath” (Lk 6:5). Jesus is highlighting his divine authority. “Who but God alone has authority over the sabbath?”ⁱⁱⁱ

“Why are you doing what is unlawful on the sabbath?” The question of the Pharisee’s so inappropriate for Jesus is still a question that is worth asking of ourselves. Do you follow the law of God by avoiding unnecessary work? Do you truly rest on Sundays offering praise and thanksgiving to God? And what of the other days of the week? Do you avoid sin, or do you choose to make your own laws to justify your actions which reflect neither love of God nor love of your neighbor?

ⁱ Gadenz, Pablo T.. The Gospel of Luke (Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture) (pp. 122-123).

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.