



THE GOSPEL OF
Luke

SESSION OBJECTIVE: LUKE 6:1-11

To understand how Jesus sets the highest priority on preserving and enriching human life.

Inception

In 2010, Christopher Nolan's science fiction action film *Inception* was released. Starring Leonardo DiCaprio, Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Tom Hardy, and Marion Cotillard, the movie follows a professional thief who usually *steals* information from individuals by infiltrating their subconscious state, but has been hired to implant an idea instead. This implantation of a new idea in the mind of another person is known as "inception" (a word that means "beginning or starting point"). The thief and his crew use experimental dream-sharing technology to move three levels down into the subconscious of an individual in order to perform the task. That means that while in the first dream, they move into a "dream within a dream" and then into a "dream within a dream within a dream."

Studying Scripture requires multiple levels of investigation as well. It requires us to have a "Bible study within a Bible study within a Bible study." In John 6:1-11, we learn that Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath. When questioned by the Pharisees regarding His actions on the Sabbath, He appeals to a story about King David. That forces us as the reader to investigate that passage as well, so we understand the context. However, the passage regarding King David references a priestly law laid out in both Exodus and Leviticus, and so we are forced again to go another layer down in the Scripture to understand the passage about King David, in order to understand our passage concerning Jesus. It's a layered approach that allows us to more clearly understand the inception point of Jesus' example.

The Multi-Layered Sabbath Story

Verse 1 begins with “On a Sabbath, while He was going through the grain fields, His disciples plucked and ate some heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands.” The story begins on a Sabbath day wherein the Pharisees had implemented strict, additional laws regarding what a man could and could not lawfully do. In verse 2 they remark, “Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?” Verse 2 indicates that it was “some of” the Pharisees, which may have been to intentionally separate the bad Pharisees from the good. Stein remarks, “(Luke) knew of some good (Luke 13:31; Acts 5:34-39) and even Christian Pharisees (Acts 15:5).”¹ Jesus answers in an unusual manner. Jesus often responds by appealing to His divine authority, but here He follows the rabbinic pattern of appealing to Scripture. Below is a breakdown of the multi-layers.

LAYER ONE

Verses 3 through 5 read: “And Jesus answered them, ‘Have you not 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 bread of the Presence, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those with him?’ And he said to them, ‘The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.’” Jesus appeals to the example of David, which is also intentional. Jesus brings fulfillment to the prophecies concerning David, as Luke mentioned in Luke 1:31-33: “And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (see also Matt. 1:1). Jesus’ choice to appeal to David’s example as an argument against the Pharisees was both effective for answering their question in the moment, and also for the larger Messianic question at hand. To understand the reference that Jesus mentions, let’s go to the text.

LAYER TWO

Jesus appeals to 1 Samuel 21:1-6. In the story, David is a fugitive, running from King Saul who seeks to murder him. Verse 1 says, “David came to Nob to Abimelech the priest.” Abimelech knew that David was a commander of the royal bodyguard (1 Sam. 22:14), and so it was troubling to him to see David alone. David’s answer to Abimelech at first seems dishonest: “The king has charged me with a matter and said to me, ‘Let no one know anything of the matter about which I send you, and with which I have charged you.’” If David is referring to King Saul, this is a dishonest answer. However, if David is referring to King Yahweh, it is not untrue at all, and David regularly referred to God as “King” (Ps. 5:2; 20:9; 24:7-10; 29:10; 68:24). David then requests “five loaves of bread, or whatever is here,” so he and his men can eat. The problem, however, is that only bread that has been consecrated for the Sabbath is there, or “bread of the Presence” (1 Sam. 1:4; 6). However, Abimelech gives the bread based on the fact that David and his men were pure, having “kept themselves from women” (1 Sam. 21:4-5). Still, the law prescribes that the bread was to be for the priests only, in order to keep them sustained while they ministered on the Sabbath. In order to understand the significance of this “holy bread,” we must examine Exodus 25:23-30 and Leviticus 24:5-9.

LAYER THREE

Abimelech references the “bread of the Presence” in 1 Samuel 21:6 which comes from an Old Testament law regarding bread for the priests on the Sabbath. In Exodus 25:23-30, specific instructions are given to build a table that was to sit in the Tabernacle of God and hold the offerings to God. The “bread of the Presence” was placed there. After the bread had sat for long enough to become cool it was replaced with fresher, warmer bread. We later learn that it was specifically the Kohathites that were responsible for the bread (1 Chr. 9:32).

¹ Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen and David S. Dockery, vol. 24 of The New American Commentary. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 187.

There were to be 12 loaves in total, representing the 12 Tribes of Israel (Lev. 24:5; 8). The bread removed was to be given only to the priests for consumption since it was consecrated (Lev. 24:9). This is key, because it means that regular people were typically forbidden from having it.

LAYER TWO

With that understanding in mind, how was it that David was able to eat the bread of the Presence given to him by Abimelech? Old Testament scholar Robert Bergen offers an interesting answer: “Yet specific Torah laws might be set aside if higher-level considerations warranted, especially the preservation of life.”² In other words, if keeping the law regarding the bread of the Presence violated the higher-prioritized law of valuing and protecting human life, the lesser law could be set aside for that specific occasion. This is an important principle to understand. Not all laws are created equal. It seems that God values human life more than anything else, which makes sense given that humans are made in His Image (Gen. 1:26-27; 9:6).

LAYER ONE

We come back to our primary passage involving Jesus, His disciples, and the Pharisees, and the question of whether or not it was lawful for His disciples to pick grain and eat it on the Sabbath. Jesus’ example of David’s breaking the Torah in order to feed his men sets a precedent for the value of human life. While David’s story doesn’t necessarily fall on a Sabbath, that doesn’t matter; the point is made. Jesus’ disciples were hungry and needed to eat, and regardless of whether or not it was the Sabbath or a lesser Torah law that stood in their way, the higher priority of human life prevails. More than that, Jesus is the royal Messianic king, and has authority over the Sabbath: “And He said to them, ‘The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath’” (Lk. 6:5).

Another Sabbath Example

Verses 6 through 11 tell the story of “another Sabbath” when Jesus “entered the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was withered” (Lk. 6:6). The Pharisees began to “watch him, to see whether he would heal on the Sabbath” (Lk. 6:7). The word here for watch is παρατηρέω (paratēreō), and it means “to watch scrupulously.” They were intent to catch Jesus doing something that they could hold over Him. Jesus, however, “knew their thoughts, and he said to the man with the withered hand, ‘Come and stand here’” (Lk. 6:8). That Jesus is able to discern the thoughts of the Pharisees fulfills what Simeon previously said regarding Jesus when He was still a baby in Luke 2:34-35: “Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed — and a sword will pierce even your own soul — *to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.*” Jesus promptly restored the man’s hand after asking the question: “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it” (Lk. 6:9). Again, the theme of the preservation of human life as the highest priority resonates in Jesus’ teaching. It is always a good thing to seek for the preservation of life.

What About Now?

The takeaways for this passage are numerous. Anytime a Christian is positioned to defend a choice to protect life, they need not come up with excuses or explanations. Simply put, the protection of life is a supreme governing law on creation. Humanity is created in the *Imago Dei* (the image of God) and thus to stand in the way of protecting human life is an attack on God Himself. Even if it means breaking a lesser law, the preservation of life should always come first.

² Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen and Kenneth A. Mathews, vol. 7 of The New American Commentary. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 222.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Luke 6:1. On what day does this story begin? Why is that significant? What are Jesus and His disciples doing?

2. Read Luke 6:2. How do some of the Pharisees respond to His disciples? What do they say?

Day Two

1. Read Luke 6:3-4. What story does Jesus reference here? Read 1 Samuel 21:1-6. What is the bread of the Presence? Why was David allowed to eat it though he wasn't a priest?

2. Read Luke 6:5. What does Jesus say in this verse? What is the significance of His words?

Day Three

1. Read Luke 6:6-7. On what day does this story begin? Where did Jesus go and what did He do there? Who else was there? What were some of the Pharisees doing while Jesus was teaching? Why?

2. Read Luke 6:8. How did Jesus know what they were doing? What did He do in response to this?

Day Four

1. Read Luke 6:9-10. What did Jesus say regarding the Sabbath?

2. Read Luke 6:11. How did the Pharisees respond to Jesus' actions?

Week 20 Discussion: Life Matters

In Luke 6:1-11, Jesus lays out the value of life such that protecting or preserving life even on the Sabbath (or even at the expense of breaking the Torah) is permissible because life is the highest value. Talk as a group about how this applies to your actions today. How can you better vouch for life?

1. Icebreaker: Does the preservation of life matter to you? Why or why not?
2. What are some ways Christians might violate God's law in order to follow the higher law for life?
3. What are practical ways for protecting life aside from abortion?
4. How do you reconcile being a Christian and not vouching for all life?
5. Is being pro-life a political position, or a spiritual position? Why?
6. How can the church further reinforce the value of life from "womb to tomb?"

Takeaways:

1. Jesus allows for his disciples to eat on the Sabbath, and He also heals on the Sabbath.
2. Jesus appeals to a story about David to affirm that the value of life is greater than the observance of the Sabbath.