

KEEP FOCUSED ON WHAT'S FIRST

Eleventh in a series by Dr. Rick Perrin on *Lessons for Life* from Luke 6:1-11

“Jesus said to them, ‘I ask you, is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good, or to do harm, to save a life, or to destroy it?’” Luke 6:9

Tomorrow night is end of March Madness, and America will crown the national college basketball champions. This was the first time that the final four teams each were number one seeds. Those four teams—Kansas, Memphis, North Carolina, and UCLA started the season aiming for the last game and the glory that goes with it.

Maybe you saw the story in Friday’s newspaper about North Carolina coach Roy Williams. He took the Tar Heels to the championship in 2005, but never allowed himself to savor the victory. Just hours after winning it all, he was visiting high school star Ty Lawson, trying to recruit him to North Carolina. Because, if you’ve won it once, that’s not enough. You want to win it again. So, going into the final four, led by Lawson, North Carolina was 36 and 2 with a winning streak of fifteen games and unbeaten in 22 games away from Chapel Hill. They hadn’t lost since Lawson got back into the lineup after injuring an ankle. This is a coach and a team that focused on finishing first. But last night it all ended.

The lesson to focus on what’s first is something Jesus teaches us as well. But for Jesus, what’s first isn’t basketball. Turn with me to Luke 6:1-11 where we’ll examine two incidents where Jesus ran into conflict with the Pharisees over the proper way to observe the Sabbath.

The Sabbath Day. The fourth of the Ten Commandments, given in Exodus 20 and repeated in Deuteronomy 5, instructs us, *“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.”* The word *holy* means *to set apart*. The Sabbath day is to be a special day, God says. It was rooted in the Creation. We are told that God “rested” on the seventh day after he finished his work of creating the world and all that’s in it. When God “rested” it doesn’t mean that God was tired and needed to take a break. And it doesn’t mean that on the seventh day he did nothing. God neither needs rest nor does he stop his work of governing what he’s made. When it says God “rested” the Bible simply means that God had completed his work of creation.

God has built into human beings, and indeed, into the very essence of the world, a seven-day cycle. So God wants us to take a break, to catch our breath, so to speak, so that we can start out again, refreshed, at the beginning of the next week. If you and I ignore that cycle we soon begin to wear out. We grow tired and tense. So God says, “I want you to stop your normal activities for twenty-four hours. Don’t do your usual kind of work.” But don’t do nothing. Instead, use the Sabbath day as a time to honor and acknowledge God and to get your priorities into proper order. The Sabbath day is for our benefit. It is designed to help us keep our focus on what should be first, so that we don’t get sidetracked and settle for what’s in second place. Jesus, after his resurrection changed the Sabbath to the first day of the week—Sunday--and the Bible calls it not the

Sabbath, but the Lord's Day. But these incidents are before that. Both Jesus and the Pharisees took the Sabbath day seriously and that was the source of their conflict.

The first conflict is found in verses 1-5. Luke tells us in verse 1 that on one particular Sabbath day Jesus and his disciples were walking along a road where ripe grain was growing on either side. The disciples felt a bit hungry, so as they walked they broke off some heads of grain, rolled them in their hands to knock off the husks, and then popped the kernels into their mouths. Verse 2 says that some Pharisees observed this and they challenged Jesus. "*Why do you do what is not lawful on the Sabbath?*" What the disciples were doing was perfectly permissible according to the Bible. In Deuteronomy 23:25 Moses said, "*When you enter your neighbor's standing grain, then you may pluck the heads with your hand, but you shall not wield a sickle in your neighbor's standing grain.*" In other words, if you're hungry it's OK to break off a few heads of grain and have yourself a snack. But you must not wade into the field with the intention of harvesting the grain. That would be stealing. The Pharisees knew this, so eating a few kernels of wheat was not the issue. The question they were raising was, is plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath day considered work, which would be a violation of the fourth commandment. The Pharisees said, "You bet it's work!"

Years ago a family who had been members of a very conservative church joined our congregation. One of the reasons they left their former church had to do with Sabbath day observance. They told me, "On Sunday afternoons we sometimes turned on the TV to watch a football game. If the telephone rang during the game, we had to turn off the TV because if the caller was from our church, they would criticize us for breaking the Sabbath." Friends, in Pittsburgh normal people don't turn off the Steelers—at least as long as they're winning! We moved to another church and one day a church member came to see me to express his concern because one of the officers in our church had his timer set so that his sprinkler came on to water his lawn on Sunday. That was work, he said. That's what these sticky Pharisees were complaining to Jesus about.

Notice Jesus' response in verses 3-4. Jesus reminded the Pharisees about the account in I Samuel 21, about how when David was fleeing for his life from Saul, he went to the Tabernacle and asked the priest for help. He was on a special mission, he said, and had not had time to gather provisions for his trip. Did the priests there have any bread he could take with him? The only bread they had on hand were the holy loaves that had been placed before the Ark of the Covenant, which were supposed to be eaten only by the priests. But the chief priest said to David, "You need food. Take this bread with you." The priest said it was OK for David to eat that bread. David says it was OK. And God, before whose altar the bread had been offered, said it was OK. So it must have been an OK thing to do. The question, then, that Jesus raised with the Pharisees about what was permitted to do on the Sabbath day was this: Who decides what's OK to do on the Sabbath—the religious leaders and the Pharisees, or Jesus?

Look at verse 5. "*He was saying to them, 'The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.'*" Jesus decides! It's his day. He's the boss of the Sabbath. He sets the rules. Here's the issue then: Whose rules apply? Whose authority regulates the Sabbath? The

Pharisees focused on themselves. “We decide,” they said. Jesus said, “No, I decide.” Here is the application. What is the purpose of the Sabbath day? It’s to please the Lord of the Sabbath. If you or I impose our rules on others, our focus is on us. If you or I say the Sabbath is just another day and I can do what I please with it—work, pursue leisure activities, go shopping, attend sporting events, whatever-- the focus of the day is on ourselves. The Sabbath day’s purpose is to please the Lord of the Sabbath. The priority must be on worship and prayer and learning about our great God. It’s a day to be dedicated to doing the things of God we might not have time for on other days, or spending time in fellowship with other believers that we might not have time for on week days. If we allow other things to crowd out our time to please Christ, then the focus is off him. The focus should be on what--or who—must be first.

Christy Matthewson was one of the greatest major league baseball pitchers ever. He was one of the five original players elected to baseball’s hall of fame. Matty won 373 games over seventeen seasons with a 2.13 earned run average and 73 shutouts. Matty’s best pitch was what today we call the screwball. He threw so many that his right arm was permanently twisted inside out. The high point of his career came in the 1905 World Series which he won for the New York Giants by pitching three complete game shutouts in six days. Poet Ogden Nash wrote in his poem, *Lineup for Yesterday*, “*M is for Matty who carried a charm in the form of an extra brain in his arm.*” Christy Matthewson was a committed Christian who refused to pitch on the Lord’s Day. Admittedly, that was another age with different standards. Matthewson never imposed his beliefs on anyone else. He just quietly kept his focus on what’s first.

The second incident is found in verses 6-11. Luke tells us in verse 6 that it was another Sabbath day and Jesus was in a synagogue teaching. In the congregation was a man whose right arm was withered. Verse 7 says the scribes and Pharisees present were watching him closely “*to see if He healed on the Sabbath.*” Jesus knew there was an unspoken challenge in the room, so he called the man forward. You can picture the man standing there, every eye is upon him. It is very quiet and very tense. And Jesus puts the question in verse 9, “*I ask you, is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good, or to do harm, to save a life, or to destroy it?*” I knew a man who had two withered arms. Lowell Coss never threw a baseball. His hands were curled inward so that everything he used his hands to do was a difficult and trying process. Lowell was a godly servant of Christ. He was faithful in prayer and worship. Year after year the congregation elected him as a deacon. There wasn’t a person in the church who, if he could, wouldn’t have done anything in his power to heal Lowell’s hands in an instant. Jesus knew this man who stood before him. At least he knew his heart. And Jesus was moved with compassion for him. A. J. Jacobs is an agnostic Jew who wrote a book called, *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man’s Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible*. The book describes Jacobs’ year-long attempt to obey everything the Bible commands. The experience doesn’t seem to have changed him much, but he did draw this conclusion after day 91. It’s important not to be “*so caught up in the regulations that you forget about the big things, like compassion and respect for life.*”

Jesus looked from person to person in the synagogue that day, waiting for the implication of his question to sink in. The Sabbath day is a day for doing what is good, for saving lives and healing them. That includes work for some—doctors and nurses, and those who run the hospitals; police officers and firefighters and members of the military. And in a culture that eats so many of its meals out, it includes those who cook and render service. And in a complex society like ours, it includes those who do the essential things to keep the world operating. And the Sabbath day is a day for showing mercy—for visiting the sick and sharing the gospel, helping those in need and doing acts of compassion; for repairing the house of a poor person or paying bills for a widow or cleaning the home of someone who is ill. After worship, of course. A century or more ago one out of every four members of the First Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh made their way into the working class sections of the city and gathered children and sometimes adults together in various locations and taught them to read and write and do math. These people—and often it was children—labored in the steel mills six days a week from sun up to sun down. There was no time for kids to go to school. And these folk had no churches. So members of First Church taught them to read using the Bible as a textbook. These days, Perimeter Presbyterian Church in Atlanta has organized teams of people who do acts of service after church on Sundays. Those who are on the teams going out on that particular Lord’s day eat a meal at the church and then board a bus which takes them to the site of that day’s project. People work through the afternoon and then the bus brings them back to the church. So Jesus commanded the man with the withered arm, “*Stretch out your hand!*” (v 10) And the man began to push his hand out, and it went farther, and then farther still, and suddenly his arm was healed! What a wonderful, fantastic act of mercy!

The scribes and Pharisees objected to this. In verse 10 Luke says Jesus stood there looking at them. Mark tells us his account of this incident that Jesus looked around at them, “*with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart.*” Why did they object? How could they possibly justify opposition to this compassionate display of God’s grace? Luke tells us their motivation in verse 7. They wanted to find a reason to accuse Jesus. In other words, they were looking for an excuse to criticize him. In verse 11 we see them act out their hatred. “*They themselves were filled with rage, and discussed together what they might do to Jesus.*” Matthew says it was worse than that. They began plotting how they could “*destroy Him.*” (Matthew 12:13) Isn’t interesting how if your focus is on the wrong things, you can justify to yourself the most perverted beliefs or evil actions.

Conclusion. We draw from these two confrontations between Jesus and the Pharisees one overriding conclusion. We had better keep our focus on what’s first. So what is first? Let me suggest three things. First, the number one thing we need to keep our focus on is Jesus Christ himself. It was Amber Birdsall’s seventh birthday. Amber lives in Sanford, Michigan. Her dad had been deployed by the army for the last ten months at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. When she woke up that fine, birthday morning she discovered a huge package wrapped in bright pink paper with her name on it. She knew what was inside it—a pair of bicycles! So she tore the paper off and opened the box. But it wasn’t bikes inside. It was her daddy! Amber said, “*This is way better than bikes.*” You come to worship on the Lord’s Day and you look for Christian fellowship, and

music that stirs your heart, and a sermon that opens for you the word of God. But what you find is Jesus—and that's way better! Jesus can heal your soul. He leads you to the Father. And if you place your faith in him for salvation, he gives you eternal life. Yes, Jesus is first. Keep your focus on him.

The second thing we need to keep our focus on is doing good. Life isn't about us. It's about showing mercy and compassion, about serving others in order to make this world a better place, to relieve suffering and to bring glory to the Lord of Creation. It's interesting to take a look at how much Americans give away to charity out of their annual income. The working poor do the best. They give on average between four and five percent of their incomes to charity. The wealthy give between three and four percent. The middle class lags far behind both groups. Between 2000 and 2004 Barack and Michele Obama gave less than one percent of their income to charity. With Senator Obama's rising political ambitions and the book royalties that made them rich, the percentage they gave away jumped to five percent in 2005 and six percent in 2006. Another wealthy political couple who reported an annual income in 2006 of 8.8 million dollars, mostly from book royalties and investment income, were Dick and Lynne Cheney. Care to guess how much they gave away to charity? It was really stingy. Only 6.9 million dollars or seventy-eight percent of their income. This is not a pitch for money. I merely wish to encourage you to focus your life on doing good.

Then third, we should focus our lives on our families. Barb and I took a couple of days of R&R last week and went to Disney World. We hadn't been there in close to twenty-five years. When the fourth and fifth grade girls in Barb's Sunday School class heard what we were going to do, they said, "We don't want to be rude, but aren't you and Dr. Perrin a little old to be going to Disney World? Isn't that for kids?" They were, of course, quite right. As we walked through the theme park I kept having flashbacks of three little blond-headed boys racing from one ride to another, mostly *Pirates of the Caribbean*. We saw lots of parents with their children there, but as I reflected about our own experience years ago, I realized that family is not about one or two grand vacations. It's about a daily focus on loving your kids, spending time with them, teaching them the things of God, bringing them to church and Sunday School so they learn to focus on the Lord of the Sabbath; and taking them with you to do acts of mercy so they learn to do good in the world. You don't teach those things in a week each year or by a couple of major events. It comes when you make your family more important than yourself.

It's quite a lesson Jesus taught along the road between the wheat fields and in the synagogue on the Sabbath day. If you take his lesson to heart, not everybody will approve of what you do. But keep your focus on what's first. That's how you win at life.

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