

**Engage Bible Study: Luke 5:17-6:11 – The Controversy Begins**  
**October 31-November 2, 2011**

Last week Luke showed us the diversity of Jesus' ministry, and the power and authority of his word. Jesus not only taught, healed and exorcized demons, he did it all with his words and with power and authority. Jesus' words have the same kind of power that God's word has...and in fact a later Gospel writer, John, would even call Jesus "The Word"..."In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." And because of his ministry Jesus grew in popularity. People came from all over to see him, hear him, and experience him. The more he told demons and people to keep quiet about him, the more the word about him spread. And this popularity had at least three implications...two of which we learned about last week. **First**, this ministry would be draining. People would seek to pull Jesus in a thousand directions. Because Jesus was fully human he would need to regularly turn away to quiet places to be refreshed and seek God's strength and direction. And so do we! **Second**, Jesus would desire help. He didn't want to do this all on his own because he knew eventually he would need to give this ministry away to others, and so he called some disciples, some followers, to be trained to work alongside him.

But there is a **third** implication that we'll encounter today. Jesus' popularity would bring him into sharp conflict with the religious authorities of his day. Years ago I learned a leadership principle called "The Principle of the Whale" and it goes like this, "Those who float to the top get harpooned." The more Jesus floated to the top, the more popular he became, the more he drew the attention of the religious leadership who not only disagreed with Jesus' theology but felt threatened by his popularity.

**Jesus heals a paralytic (5:17-26)**

Today we're going to start with Luke 5:17-26 which continues the flow of Jesus' healing ministry, but also introduces us to this theme of conflict with the religious authorities. **[READ]**. In this passage Luke introduces us to two groups of religious leaders who will play a prominent role in the rest of this gospel: Pharisees and Scribes. Before we dive into this story we need to pause and understand who these people are.

In Palestine two main groups of religious leaders unofficially ran the religious affairs of the country: the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Rome officially ran everything but these leaders were given a certain amount of power to self-govern their own religious affairs. Of these two groups the Pharisees were by far the more influential. These highly respected leaders vowed to both teach and uphold the laws and traditions of Judaism. The ancient historian Josephus wrote that there were about six thousand Pharisees. The name "Pharisee" means "the separated ones" and while that name originally would have meant those who were called by God to serve a specific teaching role in the community many Pharisees had begun to see themselves not just separate from but better than, more righteous than, the people they were called to serve. In addition over the course of time the Pharisees began to emphasize the role of tradition over the Torah, their Scriptures. In other words their interpretation of the law became more important than the law itself and as time went on their interpretation took them further and further away from the original intention of the law. As we'll soon discover Jesus not only condemned the Pharisees for their arrogance and self-righteousness but also for their tendency to enforce traditions and letter of the law which obscured the spirit of the law.

The second group we meet today are the "teachers of the law" – also called "scribes" in the gospels. These individuals were legal experts and some of them were also Pharisees. They often handled correspondence for people or managed their financial accounts. By the time of Jesus, they had become a fairly powerful class of individuals.

Luke tells us that Pharisees and scribes from all over Galilee, Judea and Jerusalem had come to check Jesus out. Mark says that this healing happened in Capernaum, so you can see from this map, they came a long way to do so!

Yet again a large crowd had come to hear and see Jesus, so when a group of men came carrying a paralyzed friend on a stretcher to see Jesus they quickly became frustrated because they couldn't get to him. And so they did something extraordinary. They carried the guy up to the roof of the house that Jesus was teaching in and lowered him down through the tiles. But that's not what caused the stir. It's what Jesus said to the paralyzed man that stirred things up, "Your sins are forgiven." Why did he say that? Is it because the man's physical paralysis was caused by his sin? The bible seems to contradict itself when it comes to the connection between sin and sickness or tragedy. In some places there does seem to be a connection, and yet in other places that connection is denied. We could spend lots of time on this issue, and probably should someday, but that isn't Luke's point.

The fact that Jesus claimed to forgive this man's sin was, however, a real problem for the Pharisees and the Scribes. In their mind only God could forgive sins. But Jesus was claiming to have a power that only God could have and that was blasphemy. Jesus, however posed a riddle for them, "Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Stand up and walk?'" Well, on the one hand it's easier to say "your sins are forgiven" because you can't see the results. You can't prove it. But on the other hand it's easier to say "stand up and walk" because only God has the power and authority to forgive sins. And so, Jesus did both. He'd already proclaimed the man forgiven, and then he told the man to stand up and walk. And that's the primary point of Luke's story...not the connection of sin and sickness but the proclamation that Jesus has the power and authority not only to heal physical illness but also to forgive sins, further connecting Jesus with God. And while the Pharisees and scribes couldn't see that connection the healed and forgiven man could. He went home glorify – not Jesus but God! And the people were amazed, filled with awe, and they too praised God. Once again, the very people who should have recognized what God was up to, didn't. Should that make us wonder if God is up to something new today, but WE don't recognize it? If often wonder about that, and so I try to listen to what people outside the Church are saying about what they see, what they sense God is up to.

So Jesus is concerned with body, mind and spirit...the whole person...and has come to liberate humanity from whatever enslaves us, and the people thank God for this liberation and say, "We have seen strange (that is, unexpected) things today." And it's about to get stranger with the next story.

### **Jesus calls Levi (5:27-32)**

Let's read 5:27-32 [**READ**]. Sometime after healing the paralyzed man Jesus passed by Levi's tax booth. We've already discussed how tax collectors were despised by the Jews and were both societal and religious outcasts. We've also said over and over again how Jesus reaches out beyond the boundaries of society and so it's no surprise to us that Jesus called Levi to come and follow him.

The extent of Levi's wealth is seen in the fact that he threw Jesus a great banquet and naturally Levi invited his friends who happened to be other social and religious outcasts...tax collectors and other sinners. "Sinner" here doesn't just mean someone who does bad stuff. It was someone known to break the Mosaic Law in a way that excluded him or her from the synagogue. They were no longer welcome in the center of Jewish society. They were outcasts.

Jesus' acceptance of these outcasts was what offends the religious leaders. In Jesus' day, as is true in many places even today, to eat with someone was to show a level of acceptance of who they are and what they do. It demonstrates solidarity. The Pharisees were so concerned about their personal purity that they refused to eat with sinners for fear of giving the impression that they approved of their behavior. And so the Pharisees complained – not to Jesus but to Jesus' disciples. In a sense Luke was reflecting the accusation that the Church – Jesus' disciples – lived under in the first century, of affiliating with sinners. We know that was an issue from Paul's letters, and remember the Luke was written after Paul's letters.

But Jesus responded that he is like a doctor. He didn't come for healthy people, but for those who are sick. He didn't come to call the righteous, but to call sinners to repentance. Only those who know that their lives are out of alignment with God will respond to Jesus' call. Those who don't see their need for repentance indict themselves.

I want you to notice two things about this passage. **First**, notice what Levi did. He connected his friends with Jesus in a social setting where they would be comfortable, so that they, too, might come to know Jesus. That's what we're called to do, to connect our unbelieving friends with Jesus in a place like Echo Park Elementary or the Mission Outpost or some other way of serving where they can meet Jesus through the lives of others. **Second**, consider these three words: believe, behave & belong. Too often the Church has told "outsiders" subtly or not-so-subtly that they must first behave like us, and then confess that they believe like us and then we'll let them belong to us. But Jesus lived in just the opposite way. He invited people into his life first, and their association with Jesus changed them. They came to love him because they felt so loved, and that changed their hearts and therefore their behavior. Let's live Jesus' way!

### Questions about Fasting (5:33-39)

The conflict between the religious authorities and Jesus continues in 5:33-39 **[READ]**. Perhaps because they felt they had lost their previous argument with Jesus over whom he eats with these same religious leaders complained to Jesus that unlike John's disciples and their own, Jesus' disciples don't fast. Fasting was one of three central disciplines in Jewish life, along with prayer and alms. The Pharisees fasted twice weekly, and the fact that Jesus' disciples did not fast was, for them, a sign that they lacked virtue and piety. It gave the Pharisees a reason to write them off.

Jesus' response had nothing to do with whether fasting is a good thing or not, nor does Jesus try to explain when fasting is appropriate. The point here is that in Jesus a whole new era has come, and that changes everything. First Jesus responded with an image...a wedding. A wedding feast was a frequent OT metaphor for God's relationship with his people. Since Jesus, the groom, who was God in their midst, was present it would be inappropriate for his disciples to fast. Fasting was an expression of mourning or a plea for deliverance. Later in the Church it was seen as a way to draw closer to God...but God was present with them in that moment. That was cause for celebration! There would come a time for fasting when Jesus was crucified and after he ascended...but that time was not now.

Then Jesus turned to parables. These are the first parables Jesus uses in Luke's gospel but we'll talk more about parables another week. Each of the three parables here essentially reinforced the core point that Jesus was ushering in a new era that changed everything. The old way of doing things doesn't fit any more than a new piece of cloth fits as a patch on an old garment or an old wineskin is fit to store new wine. A new patch would shrink and make the tear worse, and new wine would continue to ferment and eventually burst an old wineskin. New wine and new cloths, like the new era, are ever-changing and never static. Jesus' final parable

about old wine is a poke in eye to the religious leaders. Drink too much old wine and you get tipsy enough that you lose your taste for new and better wine. In the same way the religious leaders have been “drinking” the old ways for so long that they’ve lost their ability to perceive that God was up to something new in Jesus, and they have no desire for the new thing that God was doing before their eyes.

So, Jesus healed diseases and forgives sins. He welcomed the sinner and the outcast and called them to repentance. His coming into the world changed all the old rules. It doesn’t invalidate them...the Church will still practice fasting...but it does change them. In these next two stories we’ll discover that it also changes the way God’s people think about the Sabbath, another boundary marker that defined God’s people.

### **Questions about the Sabbath (6:1-5)**

Let’s read 6:1-5 [READ]. The Torah taught that no work was to be done on the Sabbath. The people were to rest. But the religious leaders endlessly debated what constituted “work” on the Sabbath. Harvesting was always on that list. Farmers were not permitted to harvest grain on the Sabbath.

Jesus and his disciples were walking through a field as they traveled, and as they walked the disciples plucked some ripe heads of grain, rubbed them between their hands to separate the grain from the husk, and then ate it. They were hungry and this was a simple and common way to satisfy their hunger. Well, the Pharisees jumped on that like white on rice and accused the disciples of breaking the law. And technically they were breaking the law, at least the Pharisees’ interpretation of the law. But Jesus defended his disciples by pointing the Pharisees back to their own Scriptures. “Have you not read” is clearly a challenge to the Pharisees. Of course they had read this story about David in 1 Samuel (21:1-7, 22:8-9) but according to Jesus they had misunderstood it. In that story David and his men were starving and ate the sacred bread which was placed on the altar, consecrated to God, but the priests of that day didn’t condemn David and his men because their actions were appropriate. And so, if the Pharisees criticize Jesus’ disciples they are also criticizing David! Luke may also be implying that real human need supersedes rigid obedience to the law.

However, the real punch line of this story comes at the end...which is often the case. “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” In the context of this story Jesus is saying that he has the authority to determine what it means to obey the Sabbath. By recording this story Luke is also saying that the Church can and must interpret the Old Testament law in light of Jesus. Consider what that means! We don’t just read the OT law and obey it. We must hold it up to Jesus and pray that God will grant us the wisdom to determine what it means for our life today.

### **A Man with a Withered Hand (6:6-11)**

And just in case that wasn’t clear Luke recorded a second story about the Sabbath to flesh it out some more. Let’s close our study today with 6:6-11 [READ]. The tension rises between Jesus and the Pharisees. Now the religious leaders aren’t just watching Jesus; they are looking for a reason to accuse him. In this case they wanted to know if Jesus would break the Sabbath law by healing...something that was also prohibited by the letter of the law. But Jesus framed the issue this way, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?” Whereas the Pharisees had limited the Sabbath commandment to what you couldn’t do, Jesus reframed it by asking them to consider what they could do that would honor the intention of the commandment and breathe life into people. People and their real needs are far more important than dry, dead obedience to the law. And so, Jesus restored the man with the withered hand, because he had come

into this world to bring restoration. And the religious leaders were furious with Jesus for this healing. Why? However we explain their fury Luke has already begun to set the inevitability of the cross before us.

## **Conclusion**

Isn't it interesting how Jesus sought to move the Pharisees away from rigid obedience to the letter of the law and move them toward a flexible alignment of their lives with the spirit of the law and of God's movement in the world to bring about restoration and reconciliation? What I find both intriguing and disturbing is just how often the Church has sought to drag itself right back to a pharisaical mindset. Jesus never implies that we should ignore the law. That would lead to bondage and death. Instead Jesus invites us and challenges us to think deeply and carefully together what it means to align our life together with what God has done in Jesus and what God is doing in the world today. It's easier, it's more black and white, to simply insist that everyone simply do what the bible says, but Jesus doesn't encourage that at all. That would be an old wine skin. Instead Jesus challenges us to rely upon the Holy Spirit and one another to discern together how we are to live in light of scripture. We always look at the law in light of Jesus. Perhaps that thought frightens you because you're afraid that we might just get it wrong (as if we don't already!). But I think it frees us and empowers us to trust all the more in the One who promises to guide us, and when we blow it, to forgive us.