

Luke 6:1 – 19 Being Other-Centered

Thinking in terms of what is best for others makes our thinking much clearer. Flaws in our plans are much easier to detect. Just think about all the times you could see the obvious flaws in the plans or actions of others, while they remained oblivious to the disaster quickly approaching.

In Luke 6, we have three scenes in which Jesus showed different character traits, but all of them stemmed from His world view of doing what is best for others. And when I say, “Doing what is best for others,” that does not mean doing what they want, but what is best as you see it, based on the wisdom that God has promised to the faithful if they will but ask (James 1:5 – 8).

So, let’s get right into it, Luke 6. Jesus displayed His consistency, of how to see the logic of the situation, how to make His principles come out as actions. And, by the way, the parallels to this are in Matthew 12:1 – 8 and Mark 2:23 – 28, where you will find more details, but the same points.

Now it happened on the second Sabbath after the first, that He went through the grainfields. And His disciples plucked the heads of grain and ate them, rubbing them in their hands. And some of the Pharisees said to them, “Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?” But Jesus answering them said, “Have you not even read this, what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him, how he went into the house of God, took and ate the showbread, and also gave some to those with him, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat?” And He said to them, “The Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath.”

First, a little cultural background. What the disciples were doing was called gleaning. According to Deuteronomy 23:24 – 25, the corners of fields were reserved for the poor; certainly Jesus and His disciples qualified. So, nothing illegal was going on. But that was not the point Jesus made. He could have gotten into a legalism argument about what was gleaning and if they qualified and if it could be done on the Sabbath, because, in the Pharisees’ minds, plucking the grains and rubbing off the chaff was work, which was forbidden on the Sabbath. But Jesus took a different path to a much more useful conclusion. He talked about being consistent across all situations and not getting lost in the minutia of legal briefs.

The scene Jesus referenced in is 1 Samuel 21:1 – 6. David and friends were running from King Saul after David became convinced, and rightly so, that Saul had determined to kill him. In the story, David assured the High Priest that the men were “clean,” and that they were on a godly mission, so the bread was not being misused. But, Leviticus 24:5 – 9 specifies that only the High Priest and his family could eat that bread that had been removed from the table of showbread after sitting there for a week, coated with frankincense. God expressed no displeasure with either David or the High Priest at this misappropriation. This is not the setting aside of rules due to a “higher purpose,” but rather meeting a need while still respecting the rule. One extreme condition did not cause the rule to become obsolete. At the same time, rules were not to be suspended lightly. In the parallel passages, Jesus also pointed out that the Sabbath is the biggest day of the week for a priest, and he does significant labor, killing and butchering animals, yet no one calls it work and bans it because it was performed on the Sabbath.

Jesus’ rationale was, “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” In the parallel accounts, Jesus also said, “The Sabbath is made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” Jesus was not arguing for His authority to set aside rules, which He never did, but to reveal that the Pharisees’

understanding of the rule was out of line with the fundamental purpose of the Sabbath: a day off to relax, play with the kids, and think about God. The Law of Moses had no Saturday meetings. Synagogues were not invented until the Babylonian Captivity in the 500's BC, nearly a thousand years after the Law began. God made the Sabbath as a benefit for working people, not as a day of rule keeping, expense, and hardship.

Do we ever fall into that religiosity trap? Do the written or unspoken rules make our relaxation with God into an expensive chore? Rather than fighting with rules, we need to see that rules never seem to cover all the situations, so, at some point, become a problem – like insisting on attendance at church services that are held at specified times without considering that some people must work because they don't send hospital patients home for the weekends. There are people who cannot attend due to physical problems. We can go to them. Assembling is necessary for the comfort and growth of the faithful, but the time and place are not. Facilities are a major part of congregational overhead (along with paid staff). People are kept away by what they perceive as an expensive and generally very boring hour. We can do better. I'm sure you can think of many other ways in which we can improve on the assembly: the assembly was made for man, not man for the assembly.

Moving along in Luke 6, the next scene shows that love, doing what is best for another without regard to the effect on me, can bring negative consequences. (6 – 11)

Now it happened on another Sabbath, also, that He entered the synagogue and taught. And a man was there whose right hand was withered. So the scribes and Pharisees watched Him closely, whether He would heal on the Sabbath, that they might find an accusation against Him. But He knew their thoughts, and said to the man who had the withered hand, "Arise and stand here." And he arose and stood. Then Jesus said to them, "I will ask you one thing: Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy?" And when He had looked around at them all, He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he did so, and his hand was restored as whole as the other. But they were filled with rage, and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.

On four occasions recorded in the gospels, Jesus healed on the Sabbath and got a negative reaction from the religious leaders. Like in the previous scene, the religious teachers focused on how to obey the Law, but overlooked the overall purpose of the Sabbath, so made rules that prevented good. So, Jesus changed His strategy. Rather than focusing on being consistent, this time He focused on doing good. I suspect that He made this shift because some in the crowd were present at the previous event, in particular the rabbis who tended to follow Jesus around for the purpose of finding something with which to accuse Him.

Various rabbis had stricter or looser rules about doing something good on the Sabbath. All of the rabbis tended to allow actions that preserved possessions or livestock. Money bends rules. That was what was behind that question, "*Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy?*" He was calling to their remembrance the wide variety of opinions about what was permissible and what was not. Jesus was not going to be met with a united front of opposition, so His question just might get some of those rabbis, not just the ordinary folks, to think.

Jesus' point was, "If your concept of the Sabbath prevents you from doing good, there is something wrong with your concept." The fact that the scribes and Pharisees were enraged by

the fact that a man with a withered arm was restored to full functionality surely made at least a few people think that something is terribly wrong with the rules. The Mark account includes the description that Jesus was angry. Mark also includes that fact that the Pharisees were so enraged with this scene that they went out and joined forces with the Herodians. The Pharisees were super-conservative; the Herodians were willing to accept that the dynasty that began with Herod the Great, an Edomite, were the legitimate successors of the throne of David. Talk about strange bedfellows!

Unfortunately, the church has not escaped the legalistic mindset, despite scenes like this one in the gospels. Believe it or not, there are congregations who will not contribute money to orphans' homes because the faithful should be taking them in. But they don't do that, either.

Some groups accept clearly ungodly behavior for fear of being judgmental.

Many groups expect to attract outsiders to their facility rather than taking the gospel to the lost.

Many church meetings are shortened so as not to inconvenience people or be too demanding of their time.

Understanding the Scriptures has been labelled as too difficult or mysterious for the ordinary person, so the rules have become the domain of self-appointed leaders.

Instead of getting mired in the illogic of organized religion, be like Jesus and just do something good.

Moving along to the third section, I will save Jesus' sermon in verses 20 through 49 for next time. That lesson is very similar to the Sermon on the Mount, but from the description of the location, it was delivered in a different place, letting us know that Jesus used the same lesson on multiple occasions. Due to the difficulty and slowness of transportation, this was not a problem. Traveling just 20 miles would mean a whole new audience, except, of course, for the religious leaders who were wealthy and could afford to travel by carriage and show up at many of Jesus' lessons and cause trouble. So, here is the introduction to the Sermon on the Plain in which Jesus displays His dedication to godly service, rather than to leading a religion. (12 – 19)

Now it came to pass in those days that He went out to the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God. And when it was day, He called His disciples to Himself; and from them He chose twelve whom He also named apostles: Simon, whom He also named Peter, and Andrew his brother; James and John; Philip and Bartholomew; Matthew and Thomas; James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon called the Zealot; Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot who also became a traitor. And He came down with them and stood on a level place with a crowd of His disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem, and from the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon, who came to hear Him and be healed of their diseases, as well as those who were tormented with unclean spirits. And they were healed. And the whole multitude sought to touch Him, for power went out from Him and healed them all.

I think that Jesus displayed selflessness, love, in this scene in how He went about making Himself known. As I talked about last time, Jesus was proactive about gathering disciples. He did not wait for them to come to Him, He solicited those ordinary working people who appeared to have at least the beginnings of faith. He went to different locations in rural areas so that ordinary people could meet Him, rather than sticking to the metropolitan areas and the wealthier people who would have more influence to wield, and perhaps finance Him. He served those who took the time to come, rather than being served by them.

All that healing took time and was undoubtedly chaotic, not the well-manicured health care facilities to which we are accustomed. Certainly, a large proportion came just for the chance of being healed, or to help a friend or relative to be healed. That was OK with Jesus.

And I am not contrasting Jesus with modern televangelists. Rather, see the contrast between how Jesus operated versus how well-meaning missionaries do it. Maybe it was His wisdom or just His selflessness, but He managed to directly impact hundreds of thousands of people without modern technology, in just three years. Superior logistics can't do that; only love, selflessness, can.

Jesus knew that powerful opposition was forming, but He did not play it safe by sending His disciples out to deliver His messages in various places. Certainly, He was wisely cautious, staying away from Jerusalem except on holidays to not precipitate direct and perhaps violent confrontation. However, when the time came to pick up the role of Redeemer, He walked right into their midst without hesitation.

So, the big question is, "How can we be like Jesus?" We are not likely to be able to write sermons like His. We certainly can't raise the dead, instantly cure paralysis and impart coordination that normally would take years of physical therapy, or the other miracles Jesus did. What can untalented people like us do?

First, we can do a lot more than we think we can. The promises that go with the indwelling Spirit, who is given to all the faithful, does not include healing physical maladies, but they are nonetheless pretty amazing. All it takes is faith that the One who promised is faithful, things like overcoming ourselves, patience (always in short supply), understanding (ditto), wisdom, kindness, and such like. Plus, those character traits are promised to such a degree that the outsider can observe the change and completely bypass thinking you did it by superior self-control or some mystical Eastern religion; instead, the observer goes straight to realizing that the only way that could happen is if God did it. Sharon and I have known several people who changed so rapidly and to such a degree, that the outside world was astounded.

Another helpful, but really simple, ingredient is to know the facts. Jesus knew the facts, the reality, not the excuses that most people substitute for facts. Here's a small example. The Supreme Court decision involving prayer in public schools is generally quoted by imagination, not knowledge. Students have a protected right to pray in school. The Supreme Court decision was about not letting school officials use their position of authority to influence students with regard to religion. I like that limitation. So, the coach cannot lead a prayer before a game, but a player can. One of our grandsons was a part of the group that started the Fellowship of Christian Students at Fayette High School. They met before school. A teacher was present (as required by liability laws), but did not participate. Prayers were led. One student wanted to be President of the group, but lost the election. So, after they moved from the district, his parents sued the district on the basis of separation of church and state and that prayers were led. Our grandson was named in the suit, even though he was off at college by then. Not only did the courts dismiss the suit, the judge ordered the plaintiff to pay the legal costs incurred by the school district. Knowing the facts, not the commonly held misinformation, is a powerful thing. All we need is the confidence that God will come through with the truth.

For several generations, mission efforts have been hampered by atheist, Hindu, and Islamic governments. Those governments did not want Christianity tainting their populations with hope and joy. Seeing no other way, many missionaries turned to illegal methods to bring the gospel into such countries. They needed more faith.

For example, back before the internet, we knew four brothers who had, between them, memorized the New Testament. Just buy four plane tickets and a method of reproduction – typewriters or legal pads. Writing down the New Testament was not illegal, just importing it was.

In Cuba, Castro, in an attempt to prevent the Christian assembly, banned all meetings at which more than two family groups were in attendance. Most congregations went illegal and met anyway. Many were jailed. One group figured it out. Early Sunday morning, family 1 went to visit family 2. After an hour or so, family 2 went to visit family 3, and so on through the entire group. All they needed was someone good with logistics to set up the schedule. Who visited whom changed every week. The number of starting points in this maze of meetings changed as the total population of the faithful changed. Nothing illegal. They got the job done. I could regale you with many such stories, even some highly improbable outcomes in which we played a part.

In the description of this part of Jesus' touring of Galilee, we notice that people sometimes came from great distances. There was an attraction. Do churches today attract unbelievers to the remarkable changes being made in people? Or, do we have the reputation of being kind of boring? Do outsiders think they would just be wasting an hour or so? The modern church tends to use a vocabulary that makes no sense to the outsider. We have church-speak, our own special vocabulary. Or do we appeal to the outside world with words they understand? Like, "Do you want to overcome yourself?" "Do you want to plug into a family in which everyone cares about everyone else?" "Do you have a meaning and direction to life that makes sense?"

In that same description in Luke, not only did people come from considerable distances, Jesus also arranged His schedule to get in reasonably close proximity to them. Do we put ourselves out there, in uncomfortable places, to make the gospel available to those who are looking? The international rules of travel make reaching every individual impossible. Most governments just will not let you knock on every door. And, looking at it from the other direction, ordinary people in most of the world are not allowed to cross international boundaries for the purpose of finding the gospel. We need to meet them at least halfway. As Americans, we have a tremendous amount of leverage around the world. Foreign governments can restrict our movements on their soil somewhat, but they are afraid of losing connection with American economic prosperity to completely lock us out. The gospel and the seeker will meet if we will take advantage of weird opportunities.

In this section of Luke, Jesus illustrated how love, thinking in terms of what is best for others, clarifies and simplifies our outreach. As ordinary people, we can accomplish the impossible through the Spirit that was given to us.