

# Luke 6:2

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And certain of the Pharisees said unto them, Why do ye that which is not lawful to do on the sabbath days?

## Analysis

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**And certain of the Pharisees said unto them, Why do ye that which is not lawful to do on the sabbath days?** The Pharisees immediately challenge the disciples' actions. **Certain of the Pharisees** (τινες δὲ τῶν Φαρισαίων, tines de tōn Pharisaiōn)—not all Pharisees but some, likely those following Jesus to monitor His teaching and behavior. The Pharisees (Φαρισαῖοι, Pharisaioi, from Hebrew פְּרָשִׁים, perushim, "separated ones") were a religious party emphasizing strict Torah observance and oral tradition. They considered themselves guardians of Jewish piety and law.

Their question is direct: **Why do ye that which is not lawful to do on the sabbath days?** (Τί ποιεῖτε ὃ οὐκ ἔξεστιν τοῖς σάββασιν, Ti poieite ho ouk exestin tois sabbasin). The phrase ouk exestin (οὐκ ἔξεστιν) means "not lawful, not permitted." They accuse the disciples of breaking Sabbath law. Yet their charge is disingenuous—the disciples violated Pharisaic tradition, not biblical law. Deuteronomy 23:25 explicitly permitted eating grain by hand from another's field. The Pharisees equated their traditions with divine law, a pattern Jesus repeatedly condemned (Matthew 15:3-9).

The question reveals Pharisaic priorities: external compliance with detailed regulations over heart devotion, ritual over relationship, tradition over truth. They were more concerned with technicalities than with hungry disciples' need. Jesus will expose this misplaced priority by appealing to Scripture (David eating showbread) and asserting His authority as Lord of the Sabbath. The Pharisees'

question inadvertently sets up Jesus's most explicit Sabbath teaching: the Sabbath was made for humanity's benefit, not humanity for the Sabbath's sake (Mark 2:27). God's law serves human flourishing; religious tradition that hinders human welfare misses God's intent.

## Historical Context

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The Pharisees emerged during the intertestamental period (between Malachi and Matthew), developing as a response to Hellenistic influence and perceived laxity among Jews. They emphasized Torah study, oral tradition, synagogue worship, and separating from ritual impurity. By Jesus's time, they numbered about 6,000 but wielded disproportionate influence through teaching in synagogues and interpreting law.

Pharisaic Sabbath tradition was extensive. The Mishnah (compiled AD 200 but reflecting earlier oral tradition) devotes an entire tractate (Shabbat) to Sabbath law, detailing 39 primary categories of forbidden work (avot melakhah) and countless secondary prohibitions (toledot). These included: sowing, plowing, reaping, binding sheaves, threshing, winnowing, selecting, grinding, sifting, kneading, and baking—all agricultural activities applied to the disciples' grain-rubbing. Pharisaic logic: if reaping a whole field is forbidden, so is plucking individual stalks; if threshing a harvest is forbidden, so is rubbing kernels.

This hyper-detailed approach created what Jesus called 'heavy burdens' (Matthew 23:4) and 'fences around the law'—additional rules to prevent even approaching a violation. While motivated by piety, it transformed Sabbath from delight (Isaiah 58:13) to drudgery. Jesus's Sabbath healings and this grain incident challenged this system fundamentally. Paul later wrote that Christ freed believers from bondage to law (Galatians 5:1), though Christians remain obligated to love (Galatians 5:14). The Sabbath controversy illustrates the perpetual tension between legalism and grace, external rules and internal transformation.

## Related Passages

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**Romans 10:9** — Confession and belief for salvation

**Ephesians 2:8** — Salvation by grace through faith

**Revelation 20:12** — Judgment according to deeds

**Romans 2:1** — Judging others

## Study Questions

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1. How do religious leaders today sometimes confuse their traditions with God's commands, and what are the consequences?
2. Why is the question 'Is this lawful?' insufficient without also asking 'Is this loving?' and 'Does this serve human flourishing'?
3. How should Christians respond when confronted with accusations of violating religious traditions that aren't biblical commands?

## Interlinear Text

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τινὲς	δὲ	τῶν	Φαρισαίων	εἰπον	αὐτοῖς,	Tί	ποιεῖν
certain	And	G3588	of the Pharisees	said	unto them	Why	do ye
G5100	G1161		G5330	G2036	G846	G5101	G4160
ὅ	οὐκ	ἔξεστιν	ποιεῖν	ἐν	τοῖς	σάββασιν	
that which	not	is	do ye	on	G3588	the sabbath days	
G3739	G3756	G1832	G4160	G1722		G4521	

## Additional Cross-References

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**Matthew 12:2** (Word): But when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto him, Behold, thy disciples do that which is not lawful to do upon the sabbath day.

**John 5:16** (Parallel theme): And therefore did the Jews persecute Jesus, and sought to slay him, because he had done these things on the sabbath day.