

Luke 6:4

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

How he went into the house of God, and did take and eat the shewbread, and gave also to them that were with him; which it is not lawful to eat but for the priests alone?

Analysis

How he went into the house of God, and did take and eat the shewbread, and gave also to them that were with him; which it is not lawful to eat but for the priests alone? Jesus continues recounting David's actions. **He went into the house of God** (εἰσῆλθεν εἰς τὸν οἶκον τοῦ Θεοῦ, eisēlthen eis ton oikon tou theou)—the oikos tou theou (οἶκον τοῦ Θεοῦ, "house of God") refers to the tabernacle at Nob, the temporary location of worship before Solomon's Temple. David's entering the sacred space itself was significant—laymen didn't casually enter the tabernacle's holy areas.

And did take and eat the shewbread (τοὺς ἄρτους τῆς προθέσεως ἔλαβεν καὶ ἔφαγεν, tous artous tēs prothēseōs elaben kai ephagen). The artoi tēs prothēseōs (ἄρτοι τῆς προθέσεως, "bread of the Presence" or "showbread") were the twelve consecrated loaves placed before the Lord's presence weekly (Exodus 25:30, Leviticus 24:5-9). The verbs lambanō (λαμβάνω, "take") and esthiō (έσθιω, "eat") indicate deliberate action, not accidental violation. David knowingly took sacred bread and ate it.

More than that, **gave also to them that were with him** (καὶ ἔδωκεν καὶ τοῖς μετ' αὐτοῦ, kai edōken kai tois met' autou)—David shared the bread with his companions, multiplying the violation. The restriction is clear: **which it is not lawful to eat but for the priests alone** (οὓς οὐκ ἔξεστιν φαγεῖν εἰ μὴ μόνους τοὺς ιερεῖς, hous ouk exestin phagein ei mē monous tous hiereis). Leviticus 24:9

specified: 'And it shall be Aaron's and his sons'; and they shall eat it in the holy place: for it is most holy.' The showbread was exclusively for priests, consumed in the sanctuary. David, from Judah's tribe, was not a priest; his men likewise. Their eating violated ceremonial law.

Yet Jesus presents this not as sin but as precedent. David's hunger and flight from Saul justified the violation. The priest Ahimelech facilitated it without divine condemnation. Jesus's point: ritual law serves human welfare, not vice versa. When ceremonial regulations conflict with genuine human need, mercy triumphs over sacrifice (Hosea 6:6, Matthew 9:13). The Pharisees' Sabbath restrictions were starving hungry men—precisely the misapplication of law David's example refutes.

Historical Context

The showbread (Hebrew **הַפָּנִים מִן הַלְּבָנָה**, lechem haPanim; Greek ἄρτοι τῆς προθέσεως, artoi tēs prothēseōs) consisted of twelve loaves, one for each tribe of Israel, arranged in two rows on the golden table in the Holy Place of the tabernacle (later the Temple). Fresh bread was placed there every Sabbath, and the old bread was eaten by priests (Leviticus 24:5-9). The bread symbolized Israel's dependence on God's provision and continual presence before Him.

David's eating the showbread (1 Samuel 21:1-6) occurred during his flight from Saul, approximately 1020 BC. David came to Nob where Ahimelech the priest served. David deceived Ahimelech, claiming to be on the king's business, hiding his fugitive status. Ahimelech gave David the holy bread, which 'was taken from before the LORD, to put hot bread in the day when it was taken away' (1 Samuel 21:6)—it was the old bread, just replaced, still warm from being in God's presence. Later, Saul massacred the priests of Nob for helping David (1 Samuel 22:9-19), though Scripture never condemns Ahimelech for giving David the bread. Rather, David is portrayed as innocent, and Saul as unjustly murderous.

Rabbinic interpretation struggled with this incident. How could David and Ahimelech violate Torah without sin? The Talmud developed the principle that saving life (pikuach nefesh) overrides most commandments—only idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder cannot be set aside to preserve life. Jesus invokes this

principle broadly: human welfare justifies setting aside ceremonial restrictions. This became foundational for Christian ethics: love for God and neighbor fulfills the law (Matthew 22:37-40); ceremonial regulations are fulfilled in Christ and no longer binding (Romans 14:1-23, Colossians 2:16-17).

Related Passages

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Study Questions

1. What does David's eating the showbread teach about the relationship between ceremonial law and human necessity?
2. How does this incident illustrate the principle that 'mercy triumphs over sacrifice' (Hosea 6:6, James 2:13)?
3. In what ways might Christians today impose ceremonial restrictions that prioritize tradition over genuine human need?

Interlinear Text

ώς	εἰσῆλθεν	εἰς	τὸν	οἶκον	τοῦ	θεοῦ	καὶ	τοὺς
How	he went	into	G3588	the house	G3588	of God	also	G3588
G5613	G1525	G1519		G3624		G2316	G2532	
ἄρτους	τῆς	προθέσεως	ἔλαβεν	καὶ	φαγεῖν	καὶ		
the shewbread	G3588	G4286	did take	also	eat	also		
G740			G2983	G2532	G5315	G2532		
ἔδωκεν	καὶ	τοῖς	μετ'	αὐτοῦ	οὓς	οὐκ		
gave	also	G3588	to them that were with	him	which	not		
G1325	G2532		G3326	G846	G3739	G3756		
ἔξεστιν	φαγεῖν	εἰ	μὴ	μόνους	τοὺς	ἱερεῖς		
it is	eat	G1487	G3361	alone	G3588	the priests		
G1832	G5315			G3441		G2409		

