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Every once in a while, I hear about a law that makes me scratch my head and wonder why it exists, such as a law in California that says if a frog dies during a frog-jumping contest, it cannot be eaten and must be destroyed. That might be due to an annual frog-jumping contest at a local county fair, possibly to protect frog-leg gourmet seekers from eating diseased frogs.

Colorado says you must get a permit to change the weather. That may sound ridiculous until we realize that “Colorado ski resorts pay private companies to burn silver iodide on the slopes. The material carries into the clouds and stimulates precipitation, which creates a fresh sheet of powder for skiers.”¹ I guess that prevents people from turning the snow on and off based on their personal preferences for weather.

If you don’t like looking at your neighbor’s clothes drying outside, you won’t be able to outlaw them in Vermont, which has a law against outlawing clotheslines or solar collectors since they are considered renewable energy resources.

Many states have struggled with laws regarding activities on Sunday, the so-called Blue Laws that

Plucking Grain
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have prohibited everything from opening a store to selling alcohol or cars on the Sabbath. While many of these laws no longer exist, the original intent was to encourage people to attend worship instead of doing other activities.

But what if you worship on a day other than Sunday? The Supreme Court faced the case of a Jewish store owner who wanted to open on Sunday since his Sabbath was on Saturday. And what about Muslims who gather for worship on Friday? All three religions value the Sabbath, worship, and rest, but we go about it in different ways.

God offers us the gift of Sabbath, a Hebrew word that means “to cease or stop.” Those who ignore rest and find themselves exhausted from going 24/7 may eventually discovered the value of Sabbath, of stopping, of resting. We all need a time to rest, to relax, to unwind from the stresses of the week. But like any good idea, some have taken it to the extreme, as Jesus discovered while walking through a wheat field.

Imagine you were with him, feeling hungry, wondering when you might stop and eat. Suddenly you noticed a few disciples plucking a few grains of wheat, rubbing them together, and eating the grain.

Luke 6:1-11

You decide to help yourself, knowing it was the custom to let hungry travelers pick grains from the field. “This is tasty stuff,” someone says, while someone else replies, “That’s not a good idea. We’re not supposed to harvest on the Sabbath.”

“You call this harvesting? I didn’t bring my sickle to cut down the grain. It’s just a few grains—enough to get a small taste, to ease my hunger pains.”

What do you do? Avoid plucking the grain and go hungry, or keep picking and possibly break the Sabbath law?

Some religious leaders noticed the disciples plucking grain, and they were quick to make a judgment, “Hey, your followers are picking grains of wheat. Harvesting grain is a form of work. They’re breaking the Sabbath law. What are we going to do with them? They’re troublemakers!”

Jesus offered a brief history lesson as he asked, “Remember King David and his companions and the time they ate the holy bread from the temple—the bread that only the priests were to eat? Ease up, guys. Show some flexibility. Don’t let the Sabbath law get in the way of living and helping. Besides, I

have authority over the Sabbath. Feeding the hungry is important, even on the Sabbath.”

A week or so later the religious leaders caught Jesus once again when someone with an injured hand came to him for healing. The religious leaders were ready to catch Jesus again, strengthening their case against him, finding him violating the Sabbath law. When Jesus noticed what they were up to, he asked, “What kind of action suits the Sabbath best? Doing good or doing evil? Helping people or leaving them helpless?”²

Well, of course it’s a good idea to help someone on the Sabbath; who could argue against that? So, Jesus offered healing, even on the Sabbath, and the leaders were furious he had outsmarted them once again!

Let’s be careful here and not use this passage as an excuse to not show up for worship. Jesus wasn’t speaking against the Sabbath, for he knew the value of worshiping God. In the Gospel stories, we read of him repeatedly getting away from the crowds for rest and prayer. But he also knew the value of being flexible, making exceptions to help someone in need. Life often involves balancing good things, such as worshiping God, resting to care for oneself, and helping others.

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How strictly to follow the Sabbath teaching was central to one family's conversation when their teenage son missed church one Sunday after receiving his driver's license. He had said earlier in the morning that he wanted to drive himself to church instead of going with the rest of the family. His parents agreed, warning him not to get distracted and not show up.

As Mom and Dad sat in worship, they looked around, searching for their son. They hoped he was sitting in the balcony with the other youth, but after worship, they didn't see him sitting there either.

When they arrived home, their son was nowhere to be found. When he pulled up in the car in the middle of the afternoon, Dad was waiting at the door, with a look of frustration on his face.

"Where have you been, young man? We warned you to not miss church."

"I stopped at McDonalds for a bit to eat, and then..."

"We've told you over and over again that driving involves responsibility, and that church is a priority for our family."

"But Dad, I was talking..."

"Talking to one of your friend's doesn't count as an excuse. We'll have to consider how long to ground you from the car."

"It wasn't one of my friends. There was a guy and his little boy standing outside the restaurant asking everyone for food, so I offered to get them breakfast. I asked him when they last ate, and he told me about how he lost his job and their apartment and how they've been living out of their car. After we ate, I took him to the church, and we've been with the pastor trying to find them a place to stay. I'm sorry I missed church, but I still feel I was serving God."

Sometimes plucking grains of wheat on the Sabbath day can be an act of worship when helping others.

¹ Melia Robinson and Erin McDowell Jun 23, 2020, www.businessinsider.com/weird-state-laws-across-america-2018-1

² The Message Bible, Luke 6:9.