

An Ox In The Ditch

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We've all heard the term "ox in the ditch." I grew up in the church and that's been used for a lot of excuses over the years; why people do things on the Sabbath day and all kinds of different reasons. During the liberal period of time I remember that there was one guy who went to a football game on Friday night. Why did you go? Well it was an ox in the ditch. One of his nephews was playing and it was important. That is the reason he went, the ox in the ditch. I don't know how many hundreds of tires have been changed on the Sabbath because there has been an ox in the ditch. It's just a phrase that we used quite often.

What's the proper application of this term ox in the ditch? I was doing a search on the internet as far as what ox in the ditch means and what it's been used as down through history. It was a very common phrase back in the 1800s. The United States especially and Canada were a lot more agrarian and so ox in the ditch would actually mean stuff to people at that point in time. Even to this day it's very popular in the United States, probably used a lot less in the northeast. It is used a lot less by the younger generation, because they don't have the agrarian background that the older people have.

I don't know of anybody else in the church that has actually had an ox in the ditch. I've had it three times where I have literally had to get an ox that was in the ditch out. What I am going to do today is use the example that is found in Luke and then tie it all together. When I am done speaking, hopefully everyone will have a little better understanding of what Christ meant by this term ox in the ditch.

I'll start with my first personal example. The timeline could have been close to twenty years ago. As most of those in this room know and some of those that listen in, my wife and I have a ranch and farm and we have some cows. They get pretty tame. Our first ox in the ditch was an old momma cow that we called Scratchy because she just loved to be scratched. You go up there and she would want to be scratched. We have our pasture up above on the hillside and there is some wet ground. There was a ditch that I had dug that was about six feet deep, two feet wide and the bottom was soft, but the sides were hard. There was good feed in there. Friday afternoon we always tried to check our cows, count them, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight and nine. Where's number ten? It can't be found, so we run around and Scratchy is in the bottom of this six foot ditch. With cows they are very heavy on their feet. She's on her belly and her legs are in the muck. She can't get out. I crawled down there in the ditch with her and took some flakes of hay and tried to pick up her leg. Well, she weighs around fifteen hundred pounds. Trying to pick up that heavy a cow was not working very well, but I could kind of get one of her legs up and then she would push forward and try to push down. It's just natural that cows have no strength horizontally. Their strength is vertical, so she pulled her leg back down and back in the muck. I tried doing something

like this for a half hour and it wasn't going to work. My wife is out there trying to help me. At this time of year the ground is frozen, so from the sides we can't get to her. I get a bar and break the dirt out beside her so we can basically get our hands down beside her. Basically what we did is take a big strap and put it around her chest and hooked it up to the backhoe and lifted her front legs up so we could put some straw underneath her. Then she could get her legs underneath her and she could go ahead and crawl out. If we didn't have the seventy horsepower backhoe that weighs six tons, there would be no way, because she weighed fifteen hundred pounds. I weighed a hundred and eighty pounds at the time. It would take a lot of leverage to get her out. That all went well. She got out and was very happy and so was her calf that hadn't had dinner that afternoon. Everybody won except for my wife and me. We had a strange way to start this, because we finished about ten o'clock at night Friday night. It was not your typical way of going into the Sabbath.

Our second example was when we were getting ready to go to church about three years later. We started counting cows and calves and were missing a cow and a calf. Okay. Where are they? I saw the cow that was up in some trees. Next to the trees there was another ditch about four feet deep and her little calf fell in the water and his head and shoulders are sticking out. He's in the mud and can't get out. He is really cold. His mom is sitting above him on the ditch bank bellowing. She is pretty upset because junior is not doing well. She can't go down there and get him out. I crawled down into the ditch. It's wet this time of year. It's cold and miserable. Of course my boots and pants and everything are wet standing in thirty-five degree water. I reached down and picked up the calf. I had to hold him just right as he weighed eighty pounds and crawl up on the ditch bank on my back and push myself out of the mud. Meanwhile I had mother cow behind me and calf is still bellowing. Mother cow is breathing fire. She thinks I am trying to kill her calf, because I'm holding her calf and it is going bah, bah, bah. This is not soothing to his mother. When I got him up by the tree and let him go, he started to move a little bit. She is still thinking that I am hurting her calf, so she takes me and pounds me up against a tree. Thankfully my wife had the dog with her, because she sicked the dog on the cow or I might not be here to talk about it. I would at least have a bunch of busted ribs and stuff, because a cow has no problems killing a coyote or any predator. Their head is hard. Since they weigh fifteen hundred pounds, just do the physics of it and it's not going to go well against a human being. I was beat up pretty good, but the cow and calf were okay. We went ahead and got dressed to go to church. They asked how our Sabbath morning went. Oh, it's just typical. A cow tried to kill me. How is your day going?

The third example I'll bring up was not on the Sabbath, but I think it's a little closer application to what Christ was referring to as far as the situation goes. We got a call from a close friend and neighbor. He said he needed our backhoe and some help. Okay, what do we have to do? It was probably in March and his cows were out on a hay field and were grazing the hay down before the spring breakup. Their water source had dried up and they got out of the fence because they were really thirsty and made a dashing dive run down to a creek. Before they got next to the water there was a bunch

of cattails and mud. The cows got through that. Just remember cows weigh fifteen hundred pounds, but their hooves are fairly small, so they got there and just sunk through it. You had these cows that basically were up to their shoulders and in a good sized bog. There was really no way that they could get out. You can't get hay to get underneath them or anything. What we did is have two young men in their early twenties go out into this basically on their stomach crawling across. They were just coated in mud and the temperature was close to freezing or maybe below freezing. They had a strap, dug underneath them with a shovel, stuck it under the cows, strapped it around and hooked a cable to them. With my backhoe we gently pulled them out. We ended killing one out of seven because it broke their back. Just think of the force like a cork in a wine bottle. A cork weighs nothing. Think of how much effort it takes to pull that out. It's kind of the same effect when you're pulling something out of the muck. We kept working on that for a long time, finished up about eleven o'clock at night. There were probably fifteen or twenty neighbors that showed up with lights, etc. It just takes a lot of people in a situation like this. One person getting the cows out doesn't work that way. There is a tremendous amount of effort involved.

Those are my three personal examples, kind of a background of what we're doing here. Let's try to get everything in context and find out why Christ used this term; what was going on. Start in Luke 13:22.

Luke 13:22. *And he went through the cities and villages, teaching, and journeying toward Jerusalem. (KJV)*

We know that Christ was out of Jerusalem, but heading towards Jerusalem. We've all read this, so I won't read about what he was actually saying and preaching. Continue in verses 31-32.

31) The same day there came certain of the Pharisees, saying unto him, Get thee out, and depart hence: for Herod will kill thee.

32) And he said unto them, Go ye, and tell that fox, Behold, I cast out devils, and I do cures to day and to morrow, and the third day I shall be perfected. (KJV)

We see what is going on at this point in time is that he is apparently in Jerusalem or very, very close to it. Continue in Luke 14:1.

Luke 14:1. *And it came to pass, as he went into the house of one of the chief Pharisees to eat bread on the sabbath day, that they watched him. (KJV)*

I did some research on what kind of a house we'd be dealing with. In my mind I was thinking of a house in the Bible that was a little cubicle, basically like a garage that we have nowadays. There would be a bunch of people in there. The homes of those that were in power, like the chief Pharisees, they were basically like a palace. I'll just read a quote that I found in the [Jerusalem Post](#). "What was the home like in Jesus' time that the chief of the Pharisees would live in? Most of Jerusalem's working people lived in

crowded, noisy precincts of the lower city. They were one and two story houses. They stood very close together. They were packed together tightly. In contrast the broad fashionable avenues of the upper city were laid out in an orderly grid pattern like the elegant cities of Greece and Rome. This part of Jerusalem was the home of the rich and powerful Jewish families and high ranking Roman officials.” This would be the type of home that Christ was going into at this time. “Comfortably removed from the rest of the population they lived in spacious marble mansions and palaces built around courtyards with elaborate gardens and pools.” Now turn to verse 7.

7) And he put forth a parable to those which were bidden, when he marked how they chose out the chief rooms; saying unto them, (KJV)

What I read into this is that this is that there's just not a small group of people. There are a bunch of people. If you looked at some of these mansions, they had multiple rooms for eating. They had the really high room, which would be a high dining room. That would seat like twenty to thirty people. Then they had their lower dining rooms which could seat twenty to thirty, maybe even fifty people. These were huge homes. They were built for entertaining, the high and mighty to hang around with other high and mighty and live the life. Continue in verse 12.

12) Then said he also to him that bade him, When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, neither thy kinsmen, nor thy rich neighbours; ... (KJV)

This was telling us what people were there. This was not a group of just your normal people. It was the high and mighty, the movers and shakers of the Jewish community at that time.

12b) ... lest they also bid thee again, and a recompence be made thee. (KJV)

I hope we have a pretty good picture of when Christ went into this big, beautiful mansion with the high and mighty of the Jewish hierarchy (we'll call it that). It is in Jerusalem. That gives you the idea. In this setting where Christ and at least some of His disciples were, because there were witnesses. There were the Pharisees, the experts of the religious law, the high and mighty of the Jews. I am guessing there were somewhere around fifty, maybe a hundred people. Continue in verses 2-5.

2) And, behold, there was a certain man before him which had the dropsy. (KJV)

Dropsy is retention of fluids in the leg or abdomen. It is caused either by liver failure, I believe, and also heart failure. Some of us have had relatives whose hearts were giving out. Remember how their legs and extremities all swelled up with water. That's what this gentleman had, a very severe case of dropsy. It was obvious that he would be a setup though. He was not one of the high and mighty. Remember in John 9:2 where the disciples asked who sinned. That's how the Jews were thinking at that time. If

somebody had a disease or something, they were evil. They had a sin. So, you are definitely not going to invite somebody who is a sinner to be amongst you high and mighty. To me it's obvious that they brought this man with dropsy in just to see what Christ would do. There was a reason why they were watching Him.

3) And Jesus answering spake unto the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath day?

4) And they held their peace. And he took him, and healed him, and let him go; (KJV)

I also would take from this that he was not basically one of the crowd that should be there or he would have wanted to stay. I am guessing that Christ was familiar with what would happen. In John 9 the Pharisees basically threw that guy that was blind out of the synagogue. Christ didn't want that to happen to this guy with dropsy, so he just kept him out of an uncomfortable situation.

5) And answered them, saying, which of you shall have an ass or an ox fallen into a pit, and will not straightway pull him out on the Sabbath day? (KJV)

In the King James Version the word translated by everyone else as son is translated as "ass". The Greek word used here is "huios" which means *descendant or son*. So unless your son is an ass, this word should be translated son or descendant. I think it's proper to say son falls into the pit. The word translated as "pit" is correct as it means *pit or well or cistern*. It is not a ditch. Ox in ditch sounds better, so I think that's why the saying goes this way. This word is translated as well in John 9 and pit in Revelation 9, the bottomless pit.

What would be involved in pulling an ox out of a pit or a cistern in Bible times? They didn't have a fifteen thousand pound backhoe to be able to get this ox out of their cistern. The ox cannot get out of the cistern and he's not happy in there. If you get in there with him, he's going to use you as a stepping stone. That's not going to turn out well. I'll vouch for that. God has instructions for us in Exodus 23:4-5. There are you and maybe your family of three or four. You aren't going to be able to get that ox out of the pit.

Exodus 23:4. *If thou meet thine enemy's ox or his ass going astray, thou shalt surely bring it back to him again.*

5) If thou see the ass of him that hateth thee lying under his burden, and wouldest forbear to help him, thou shalt surely help with him. (KJV)

God has instructed the people of all time. The Jews of Christ's time would have definitely known that instruction. Even if it's your enemy if they have an animal in distress, you are required to help them out. So, you are required to help your neighbor with his animals when it is needed.

How many people would it take to pull that animal out? We might have a clue here. I could find no example in the Bible of any animal being pulled from a pit, but there are two examples of people being retrieved from pits or cisterns. The first example is Joseph in Genesis 37. As far as we know that was a dry pit. It doesn't say how many individuals it took.

If we turn to Jeremiah 38:4-10, it gives us an example of how many individuals it took. The background of this was the Babylonians were about to take over Jerusalem. Jeremiah was prophesying as he was instructed by God. It was not going well amongst the hierarchy and the generals in the army and they said we need to silence this guy. We will go ahead and break in here.

Jeremiah 38:4. *Therefore the princes said unto the king, We beseech thee, let this man be put to death: for thus he weakeneth the hands of the men of war that remain in this city, and the hands of all the people, in speaking such words unto them: for this man seeketh not the welfare of this people, but the hurt.*

5) *Then Zedekiah the king said, Behold, he is in your hand: for the king is not he that can do anything against you.*

6) *Then took they Jeremiah, and cast him into the dungeon of Malchiah the son of Hammelech, that was in the court of the prison: and they let down Jeremiah with cords. And in the dungeon there was no water, but mire: so Jeremiah sunk in the mire.*

7) *Now when Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, one of the eunuchs which was in the king's house, heard that they had put Jeremiah in the dungeon; the king then sitting in the gate of Benjamin; (KJV)*

As near as I can tell this was less than a quarter of a mile away.

8) *Ebed-melech went forth out of the king's house, and spake to the king, saying,*

9) *My lord the king, these men have done evil in all that they have done to Jeremiah the prophet, whom they have cast into the dungeon; and he is like to die for hunger in the place where he is: for there is no more bread in the city.*

10) *Then the king commanded Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, saying, Take from hence thirty men with thee, and take up Jeremiah the prophet out of the dungeon, before he die. (KJV)*

So just to get one person out of a well it took thirty people. He may have taken some with him for protection, but obviously he just didn't go down by himself to pull Jeremiah out of the well. Ebed-melech rushed from the palace. Time was of the essence to get Jeremiah out of the well before he got in too deep where they couldn't get him out. When there is someone in the well, you can't wait until Sunday or Monday to get to it. In this sort of situation you need to act quickly.

Back to when Christ did the healing there are two other examples that can be found of Christ healing on the Sabbath. One can be found in Luke 6:11. The one we will turn to

will be in Matthew 12:9-14. This is where he makes another reference to an animal when he is doing a healing on the Sabbath.

Matthew 12:9. *And when he was departed thence, he went into their synagogue: (KJV)*

So, the first time Christ healed on the Sabbath was in a home. The second time was in a synagogue.

10) And, behold, there was a man which had his hand withered. And they asked him, saying, Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath days? that they might accuse him.

11) And he said unto them, What man shall there be among you, that shall have one sheep, and if it fall into a pit [well] on the Sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out?

12) How much then is a man better than a sheep? Wherefore it is lawful to do well on the Sabbath days.

13) Then saith he to the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it forth; and it was restored whole, like as the other.

14) Then the Pharisees went out, and held a council against him, how they might destroy [kill] him. (KJV)

As we can see here, Christ was basically putting His life on the line just to heal this man, because He knew their thoughts. They were going to threaten to kill Him if they got a chance.

Christ healed more than once on the Sabbath day, but He happened just to come upon these individuals. He did not go out looking for them to heal. One time He went for the dinner and then there was a guy that needed to be healed. The second time He went to preach in the synagogue and there happened to be someone there that needed to be healed.

We don't need to go looking for an ox to pull out of the ditch. These situations will find us or we will find ourselves in these situations.

What is an ox in the ditch situation? What do all of the examples that we have discussed today have in common. I have three points.

Point 1: The act of retrieving or the act of healing in Christ's example did not do any good for those that did the good deed.

As I said, I had some sore ribs. The two boys that were helping with the others were coated in mud and freezing and miserable. Christ was threatened to be killed for trying to heal on the Sabbath day. So, there was no benefit to the one that was actually doing the good deed.

Point 2: The ox, the sheep, the man with dropsy and the man with the withered hand had a much better Sabbath and a much better life after that than they would have had otherwise.

Well, you say they are just animals, what is the difference? Isn't it that I have a Sabbath really, really important and an animal is just an animal? If you turn to Exodus 20:10 it says:

Exodus 20:10. But the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: (KJV)

God wants your cattle, your livestock to have a good Sabbath. If they are stuck in the mire and the mud, they are not having a good Sabbath. It is great for the beneficiary of the ox in the ditch when there is a deed that is done well for them.

Point 3: All of the examples were time and chance.

During regular Sabbath activities when you come upon someone or something in need, it is not every Sabbath. Let's everybody come over to Roecks' house Sabbath and we're going to pull an ox out of the ditch and it'll be fun. It's not planned. It's just something in normal life and it happens. They are all examples in regular life situations needing action and then get back to the Sabbath as Jesus planned.

So, is seeing a football game Friday night an ox in the ditch? Is it adverse to the one doing the good? Is it beneficial to the one that is being watched? I guess it would be, but it is planned. That's the thing. You don't find yourself thinking what am I doing here in the middle of a football game? It doesn't work that way.

How about a flat tire on the way to church? It is miserable changing a tire on the way to church. Your family is not going to want to sit in the car until the sun goes down, so it's beneficial for you to go out and change the tire. There is also everyone at church. It is not something that you plan on. If you have a flat tire, that's definitely an ox in the ditch.

What about if your neighbor's house is on fire? That is a definite ox in the ditch. Is it a benefit to you? No. I've fought fires. That is not fun. It's hot. It's miserable and it's dangerous. Is it beneficial to somebody else? Yes. They get to keep their home. It is something you aren't planning on? Nobody plans on burning their house down. It happens. You get in there and finish up. You get dressed and keep the rest of the Sabbath the way you can.

Those are three examples. One of them would not be an ox in the ditch. Two would definitely be. We can apply the ox in the ditch principle in our daily lives following Christ's example on the Sabbath and yet keep the Sabbath holy. Matthew 12:12 states;

Matthew 12:12. ... *“Wherefore it is lawful to do well on the Sabbath days.”*
(KJV)

In conclusion turn to Luke 6:9.

Luke 6:9. *Then Jesus said unto 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 it?”* (KJV)