

Do you ever get a little nervous that maybe the Pharisees are right? I mean rules are good, laws are important. None of us really wants to live in a world where anything goes, at least not if we have any concept of how sinful and crooked human beings can be. I mean, I just talked last week about how important it was for the Priests to resist Uzziah when he came to impose his power on them. I think we can be pretty sure, given what we know about God's righteousness and justice that it is not okay for us to just do whatever we want or even whatever our culture tells us is acceptable. So what is the right attitude to have regarding the law and the rules? That's a question that followers of Jesus have been wrestling with since the very beginning, and I think it is one that we always need to wrestle with. New moral challenges demand it of us. In Jesus' time it was morally acceptable to own people, neither he nor the early church really challenged that. It is no longer acceptable, and the church has had to deal with that and change.

The Gospels give us the Sabbath as the test case to use for the Law. This is notable because it is not an obscure rule, but one of the Ten Commandments. It is also a specifically religious law, and one that has broad implications for how people live. Beyond that, it is an objectively good and beneficent law, Sabbath rest is important, and Jesus valued it himself. Keeping the Sabbath is an immensely beneficial practice, it helps you balance life and gives you a much needed place to examine and appreciate your life and the Spirit of the Lord. It can also be nothing like that if you do it the way the Pharisees did.

Let's look for a minute at Deuteronomy 5: 12-15, the Old Testament lesson today.

Now, I want you to notice something pretty crucial about that law: it is communal, meaning no one, not even animals is exempted from it. It was intended to be a time where the whole show stopped and rested, it was a tradition that was made for a people to practice living as God intended them to live, to give them a time and space to be together and to worship their Creator, and indeed to reflect the values that their Creator had given them. The very purpose of the law was to be a blessing to everyone and the very ecosystem itself. By the time Jesus shows up on the scene, this sort of observance was all but impossible for most people. Even those who made a show of trying to keep the Law had wandered far away from a society that sought to imitate the holiness of God and become nothing but legalists. What was more, the only people who could even make a show of Sabbath keeping were the wealthy and powerful, and they did this largely by making their slaves and those less fortunate pick up the slack. Those who had the advantages could keep the Sabbath and look down their noses at all the people who had to work to eat; no, unfortunately that attitude is not new and I don't imagine it's going away anytime soon.

The way that the Sabbath was observed made Jesus angry, precisely because it was not observed with justice to the whole community, thus actually negating the very core of the blessing at the center of the rule. So he breaks the rule, intentionally and visibly. The Pharisees first ask him about the disciples plucking grain and he argues with them about a story involving King David. He argues about the purpose of the Sabbath and how it is supposed to be a blessing, not a burden. They don't get it. So in the synagogue, there is a clearer case, a man with a withered hand. Jesus knows that they're out to catch him, and he gives them exactly what they want, but he also presents them with a moral question: what is more important, the rules or a person? It says "he was grieved by their hardness of heart." I get that feeling a lot when I look around these days.

Let's be clear, the rule is not the problem. The Sabbath particularly is a good rule, it's a rule that could markedly improve our spiritual life and life in general, but it can be twisted by sin into something that

makes Jesus mad. A lot of rules are like that: good and righteous in intent, but spiteful and unjust in practice. That's not the rule's fault, it's the fault of the rule followers. When you become a legalist you obsess on the letter of the law and lose the spirit. You take something that was intended to increase justice and dignity and use it to oppress and demean others, or you simply use it as a justification to let others suffer.

Jesus never exactly "wins" this argument, in that he doesn't convince the Pharisees that they're wrong, he only convinces them that he needs to be gotten rid of. That also tends to be the way legalists react to those who challenge them to recover the spirit of the law, even if it means bending the letter of the law, they accuse you of being an agent of chaos or a revolutionary. In that respect Jesus was exactly that, he insisted on challenging, even the holy traditions that had ceased to be a blessing to the children of God. We, as the church should always keep that in mind. The long and difficult coming of the Kingdom of Heaven is still working on our hearts today, and I really wonder sometimes if we're getting any closer or just changing which rules we would rather observe rather than truly loving one another.