

The Letter and the Spirit

Sermon for August 29, 2021 – Minister Emeritus Rev. Harold Wells

The Ten Commandments: (Ex. 20, Deut. 5) VU 877; I Cor. 3: 4-6, 17-18; Mark 7: 1-23.

These texts this morning address a familiar problem in life. How strictly should we keep the rules? Should we follow the “letter of the law” at all times and all circumstances? Or should we follow the “spirit of the law,” as circumstances seem to demand?

Well, having just read these texts, we know the answer, from Jesus, and from Paul. They don’t want the letter of the law; they want the spirit of the law.

Now, we might take note, right off the bat, that sometimes the letter of the law is important. Sometimes we need people to be absolutely rigid about keeping the rules.

Just now we need people to be scrupulous about wearing masks and washing their hands.

What about the mechanics who inspect airplanes? We need them to keep the protocols of checking over the planes for safety, and to keep the rules with no exceptions. Hundreds of lives depend on it.

And doctors too. I’m told that a surgeon, before doing surgery must wash his hands for ten minutes!

It’s a rule, no compromises. Not six, or eight, but ten minutes! That’s a long time to scrub your hands.

Maybe some of you remember the old TV program, Mash? There was one hilarious scene where the military doctor was preparing for surgery, and had washed his hands vigorously with hot water and soap, for ten minutes.

Finally, he was ready to wield the scalpel. But just then someone shouted: “Doctor, you touched your nose!” “No I did not touch my nose,” he said. All the others shouted, “Yes you did. You touched your nose! Wash your hands again!”

So, it’s not only the great laws of God that we struggle with. It’s all kinds of rules and regulations in everyday life.

On this question of the letter and the spirit, the text from the gospel of Mark gives us the teaching of Jesus, and the one from II Corinthians gives us the teaching of the apostle Paul.

We see here that Paul’s teaching closely coheres with that of Jesus, since Paul considers himself a follower of Jesus.

Let’s look at Paul’s text first.

Remember that Paul was NOT one of Jesus’ original twelve disciples. He never knew Jesus of Nazareth personally, in the flesh. He’s a convert to Christ a few years after the death and resurrection events, but he’s indisputably the greatest and most productive of the apostles in spreading the story of Jesus far and wide.

Paul thought deeply about the meaning of the gospel of Christ for the gentile world of his time, i.e., the world of the Roman Empire. And he had an enormous impact on the shaping of the Christian tradition; he still has huge influence, since his writings are an important part of the Bible.

In those very early years, before the New Testament even existed, Paul planted brand new churches in what is now Turkey, Syria, Greece, and as far west as Rome, and after his departure from them, through his letters, he instructed those churches in matters of faith and practical living.

Here he is writing probably in the early 50's of the first century to a small, young congregation that he had planted in the Greek city of Corinth.

In this second letter to Corinth, Paul tells us that “the letter kills.” That is, the strict, literal application of law can be destructive, it can squelch our freedom, diminishing our quality of life.

But the spirit of the law, gives life.

Later, in the same text, Paul says, “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”

The Spirit is the Holy Spirit of God. And by “the Lord,” he means Jesus. The Spirit of Jesus, says Paul, sets us free from the letter of the law.

Now, by the “the law,” Paul means the law of Moses, understood as God's law.

So it's surprising that, later in this chapter Paul actually speaks of “setting aside” the law!

Setting aside the law!?! Now that was a really shocking, radical thing for Paul to say. How could a Jew speak of ‘setting aside’ the law of Moses?

Actually, he's in line with Jesus here, who sometimes overruled the law, as when he said: “You have heard that it was said by those of ancient times But I say unto you....” Jesus himself sets aside the law of Moses on several occasions.

If we read Paul's letters in general, we find that, in light of Christ, he also sets aside some aspects of the law. But NOT the whole of the law.

Generally, Paul sets aside the ceremonial or ritual law. For example, the law of circumcision, and ritual laws about sacrifices in the temple.

He also sets aside aspects of the judicial law, especially laws that exclude, for example, foreigners. (Remember Jesus himself spoke well of Samaritans and other foreigners).

He does not affirm the law which we hear in Leviticus that excluded disabled or disfigured people from offering gifts at the altar. Paul does not consider that sick or disabled people are ‘unclean’ or ‘defiled’.

In this too he was in line with Jesus, who was remarkably compassionate to sick and disabled people, who were often social outcasts, like the blind and the lepers.

Jesus even touched such people, making himself ritually ‘unclean’ according to the laws of the time.

Further, we hear nothing from Paul about certain harsh aspects of the judicial law, especially the death penalty, as laid down in the Hebrew scriptures.

For example, the law of Moses prescribed the death penalty for those committing adultery. We find this in both Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

Recall that, in the gospel of John we read that Jesus defended the adulteress who was about to be stoned, with his famous words: “Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone.” He was boldly overruling the law of Moses.

We also hear nothing in Paul about the death penalty for homosexual people, which is also taught in Leviticus.

Paul teaches equality among people. He says that in Christ there is no longer Greek nor Jew, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female – (today, I dare say, he might add: neither straight nor gay), for all are one in Christ.

So Paul, following Jesus, wants to break down the barriers that divide people from each other. Including the so-called good people, and the so-called bad people. There is one humanity, and Christ is for all people.

Paul also sets aside the dietary laws, i.e., restrictions on what one can and cannot eat. We find this clearly in the book of Acts.

This freedom from various aspects of the ritual law and the judicial law, must have been experienced by the first Christians as truly a liberation.

However, Paul did NOT set aside what we might call the 'moral law', especially the Ten commandments, that we read this morning. He clearly affirms the basic laws against killing, stealing, lying, committing adultery, and so on.

Even with the Ten Commandments, though, I would suggest, it's not always the letter of the law, but the spirit of the law that applies.

Perhaps there are no absolute rules or moral regulations regarding human relationships which absolutely always have to be obeyed. Life in this world can be very messy and the moral life can be very ambiguous. One can imagine exceptions to almost any moral rule.

But neither Jesus nor Paul set aside the great moral laws of Deuteronomy and Leviticus, in which we are commanded to love God, and to love our neighbours as ourselves.

Where human relationships are concerned, there is only one ethical rule of thumb which applies at all times, and that is, to love the neighbour as oneself.

Jesus had said that to love God and to love the neighbour is the "whole of the law and the prophets." In other words, these two commandments sum up the whole will of God for humanity.

In this too Paul's teaching is very much in line with that of Jesus. Remember Paul's great hymn to love in I Corinthians 13? There, love, i.e., agape, compassionate, charitable love, is the most important thing in life. We have these three, he says: faith, hope and love. But "the greatest of these is love."

When Paul says that "the letter kills, but the spirit gives life," he's saying: don't bother about all those rules and regulations that are part of the law of Moses. Just attend to the "law of Christ," which is "the law of love."

As he says in his letter to the Romans: "Whoever loves his neighbour, has fulfilled the whole law."

Now if we turn to this other text from Mark 7, we see again how close the teaching of Paul is to the teaching of Jesus. Even though the gospel of Mark wasn't written yet, when he wrote this letter, obviously he had heard the oral traditions about Jesus that were passed around by word of mouth in the early church.

In Mark 7 we find that Jesus is addressing this same question of the letter, versus the spirit of the law.

As Mark tells it, Jesus and his disciples are eating together, and are attacked by the Pharisees for not washing their hands before eating.

Who were the Pharisees? They were a group of people, a religious party, or, you might say, a very conservative 'school of thought' in ancient Judaism.

They were very devout, and very influential. Give them credit. They were serious people. They believed in the strict keeping of the law of Moses, including and especially the ritual laws, such as the laws of purification, strict keeping of the sabbath, and the dietary laws.

They believed that if the details of all the laws were not kept punctiliously, God would be angry, and God would punish the nation.

But their emphasis was not love of God, and love of neighbour, or even the keeping of the Ten Commandments. No, their emphasis was the ceremonial law, and the judicial law.

So, when Jesus defended his disciples for not washing their hands, was he defending deficient hygiene? Did he prefer to eat with filthy hands?

Surely not. Who knows how aware they may have been about hygiene? What was at stake here was not hygiene (or even driving off a virus). What was at stake was ceremonial law. It was about washing your hands publicly in a very particular way.

Jesus considered that much of the ceremonial law is not truly God's law at all, but merely a "tradition of the elders." He pushes back on the Pharisees, accusing them of hypocrisy.

Now the 'tradition of the elders' refers not to the law of Moses, but to various rules and regulations laid down orally by the scribal rabbis. (Some of the Pharisees themselves were scribes and rabbis.) These are just accumulated practices; just human doctrines, nothing divine about them.

We hear Jesus taking on the Pharisees on several occasions in the gospels. He says they're only concerned with the superficial outward appearance of things. In the gospel of Matthew he says the Pharisees are like "white washed tombs," outwardly clean and beautiful, but inside full of rot and corruption.

This is a major emphasis in the teaching of Jesus. To him it matters not only what you do, and what people see you do, but why you do it. What's going on in your mind and heart is very important.

What's going on in your mind and heart will eventually manifest itself in outward actions.

In this Mark 7 text, Jesus gives an example of the way rules and regulations were used by the Pharisees to avoid true obedience to God.

Apparently it was part of the rabbinical tradition that you could avoid looking after your elderly parents by saying to them: "Corban." The word means 'gift', particularly, a sacrificial gift to God.

So, they said, if your parents are in need in their old age, you should normally be helping them out – honour your father and your mother – but, you have the option, according to the Pharisees, to give the money to the Temple instead.

Like saying: Sorry, mom and dad, I know you don't have enough to eat properly, and you have nowhere to live, but "Corban" – what I might give to you, I've given to the Temple. God will bless me, and you, if I give the money to the Temple instead.

For Jesus, this was pious pretence. He said this was a wicked practice; he condemns it. He says they honour God with their lips, but their hearts are far from God.

We find Jesus attacking the Pharisees also in Matthew chapter 23. For example, he describes them carefully weighing out of their vegetable and grain offerings to the temple. The law laid down that they should give a tithe, i.e., one tenth of all their goods as an offering to God.

So, Jesus says, they weigh 1/10, exactly, even of all their spices – dill and mint and cummin – so that they won't give one ounce too little or too much.

Jesus uses ironic humour here: he says that the Pharisees "strain out a gnat and swallow a camel." In other words, they fuss about the minute details of the law, but neglect "the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy and faith."

Similarly, concerning the washing of hands: the Pharisees made a great fuss about washing their hands. This was to avoid 'defilement'.

Your hands might be defiled by something you've touched; maybe as a man, you touched a woman; that would defile you. Maybe you accidentally had contact with a defiled person, a sick or disabled person, or an animal. That would defile you, render you unclean.

If, as a woman, you were menstruating, you were for that reason 'defiled'. And certainly, if you ate or touched forbidden food, like pork, or shell fish, you were defiled.

You might then take this 'defilement' or uncleanness into your body, and so bring down God's judgment upon yourself. That's why you must wash your hands in a strict ceremonial fashion.

Jesus dismissed all this. He says: "...whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters not the heart, but the stomach and goes out into the sewer..."

By saying this, Mark comments, Jesus made all foods clean. In other words, he dismissed the dietary laws.

Rather, he says, "it is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

By the heart, "within," of course, he means the soul, our inner self, our deep inner personhood. The Spirit of God, seeks to cleanse us within. So we will not spew out defilement in the way we live. Jesus is saying that not only our outward, visible actions are important, our thoughts, our inner attitudes are also important.

Now these texts are very challenging for all of us. It tells us that we must look deeply within ourselves.

We need to be self-aware. We need self-examination and introspection.

Sometimes introspection is dismissed as "navel gazing." But surely, personal self-assessment and self-criticism is essential. Twice in the letters to Corinthians, Paul admonishes the people to "examine themselves." Especially, he says, before receiving holy communion, we should examine ourselves.

It's a good piece of spiritual advice. Because aren't most of us inclined to be critical of others more than we're critical of ourselves? Isn't it true that sometimes we're aware of other people's self-deception and lack of self-awareness; we can be acutely aware of other people's faults, but we don't see ourselves as others see us?

Or, as Jesus said, we tend to see the speck in our neighbour's eye, but don't notice the huge log sticking out of our own eye.

So sometimes I need to ask myself: What really motivates me? Why do I make the choices I make?

What attitudes and biases and prejudices might be going on deep in my inner self?

Is there perhaps a deep unconscious racism within me, or perhaps an unconscious sexism, or feelings of contempt for certain kinds of people.....?

How empathetic, or compassionate am I, really, within my own mind and heart?

Or am I overly concerned with money, perhaps, or the things money can buy, and piling up my financial fortune?

Sometimes other people can help us with us. People who love us may speak true and critical words to us, about what we do, what we think, and what we feel.

The practice of prayer, especially meditative prayer, is important for this purpose. Deep, thoughtful prayers of self-examination and confession are surely crucial to the Christian life, if we are to avoid what Jesus calls 'defilement' or uncleanness within.

So, what about the letter and the spirit?

It turns out that following the spirit of the law is much more demanding than following the letter of the law.

Following Jesus is much more than just mindlessly following rules. To follow the spirit of the law means that you have to think hard about how you live, what you're committed to, and why. That's why we have to examine our motives, and nourish our own spiritual lives.

There may be occasions for keeping the rules strictly and absolutely – times when washing your hands becomes an absolute requirement; but generally, as Paul says, "the letter kills, but the spirit gives life." And "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."