

ESF, Lord's day service message  
11/13/2016

## **Freedom from Legalism**

Luke 6:1-11

*One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grain fields, and his disciples began to pick some heads of grain, rub them in their hands and eat the kernels. <sup>2</sup>Some of the Pharisees asked, "Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"*

*<sup>3</sup>Jesus answered them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? <sup>4</sup>He entered the house of God, and taking the consecrated bread, he ate what is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions." <sup>5</sup>Then Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. <sup>6</sup>On another Sabbath he went into the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was shriveled. <sup>7</sup>The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal on the Sabbath. <sup>8</sup>But Jesus knew what they were thinking and said to the man with the shriveled hand, "Get up and stand in front of everyone." So he got up and stood there. <sup>9</sup>Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?" <sup>10</sup>He looked around at them all, and then said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He did so, and his hand was completely restored. <sup>11</sup>But they were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus.*

A parishioner called his pastor, very angry on a Monday morning.

"Pastor" He said "I tried to get you on Friday, but you weren't in."

"It was my day off," the pastor replied.

"Day off?" the parishioner stormed. "The Devil never has a day off."

"Well, if I didn't have a day off," the pastor responded, "I'd be just like him!"

Some people believe that man can become holy and righteous by

keeping the law. They reduce the broad, inclusive, and general precepts of the Bible to narrow and rigid moral codes. They over-emphasize discipline of conduct. For them keeping the law is more important than living by the grace of God. Such people's attitude and belief is called legalism. Legalism makes people narrow and divisive. A legalistic person insist that everyone must live up to the standard of the person. In other words, everyone needs to be like the person. A legalistic person is always negative and critical. We tend to think others are legalistic, but that we're not. However, we're all legalistic by nature. We tend to judge others by our own standards of what is acceptable and what isn't. We tend to be intolerant to people whose behavior and attitude offend our rules and regulations.

Jesus teaches that believers' lives are not to be bound by legalism. Jesus teaches us how we can be free from legalism which robs us of freedom and joy. Jesus teaches us how we can joyfully obey God's will without being enslaved by the law.

### **Apply every law in context**

Here in this text the Pharisees had trouble with Jesus' disciples. The Pharisees were upset when they saw the disciples picking some heads of grains and rubbing them and eating the kernels. The reason the Pharisees had trouble with what the disciples did was not because of their behavior itself, but the timing of the behavior. It was the Sabbath day when the disciples were doing it. The Pharisees thought that doing such a thing on the Sabbath was unlawful.

In Jewish tradition, there were many activities forbidden on the Sabbath-and harvesting was one of them. The teachers of the law even went so far as to describe different methods of harvesting. One method was to rub the heads of grain between the hands, as the disciples were doing here.

So, according to the tradition, such a behavior was a clear violation against the Sabbath law. And it upset the Pharisees who always emphasized tradition. And they challenged Jesus with this word: *Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?*

In responding to their challenge, Jesus told them another law in the Scripture: *Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and taking the consecrated bread, he ate what is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions (verses 3-4).*

According to the law, only priests could eat the food in the house of God (Leviticus 24:1-9). But when David and his companions were hungry on the road they entered the house of God and were allowed to eat the food there (1 Samuel 21:1-6).

In that case, God did not condemn their behavior as a violation of the law. The Pharisees also did not think that David violated the law. It was lawful for David to eat the bread only priest could eat in God's house, when he was extremely hungry and could not find any other food except the bread. It means that every law must be interpreted and applied in the context of the whole Bible.

Here, Jesus proves that keeping the law of the Sabbath should not mean forbidding hungry people who have no food at all from getting food legitimately available. Another law said, *"If you enter your neighbor's grainfield, you may pick kernels with your hands, but you must not put a sickle to their standing grain"* (Deuteronomy 23:25).

So, if the law of the Sabbath was applied in the context of the whole Bible, the disciples would not have been guilty of violating the Sabbath law. Although they might have violated the Pharisees' rules, they did not break any divine law.

Every law should be understood and applied in the whole context of the Scripture. When we apply laws and regulations, we must see not only the details of each law or regulation but also its correct meaning in the whole context of the Scripture.

The problem of the Pharisees came not from doing their best to keep the law but from not being able to see the law in the whole context of God's word. Their problem came from seeing details of a law without seeing the whole picture of the law. While they were trying to keep the law as best they could, they made many detailed regulations. Then they tried to keep the law by keeping those many detailed regulations. Their intention was good. There was nothing wrong with their intention to keep the law as best as they could. But they were so concerned with the detailed regulations that they lost their sight of the real point of keeping the law in the whole context of the Scripture.

This was the problem. The problem was not their desire to keep the law, but of keeping the law out of context. If they had understood the Sabbath law in the whole context of the Scripture they would not have applied the Sabbath in such a narrow way. When they applied the details of the law out of context, they became narrow minded and legalistic. Their legalistic application of law robbed them of joy and made them negatively critical against anybody who did not follow their tradition.

How about you? Do you have a problem of intolerance toward other people around you? Do you easily get irritated and angered by their behaviors and attitudes? Are you often criticizing people around you with an angry voice like this? "*Why are you ignoring the rule? Why are you violating such a regulation?*" You may have the same problem as the Pharisees'. You may have the problem of legalism.

Try to apply every law and regulation to you and others in the whole

context of the Bible. See God's law both in a specific word and in the whole context of the Bible. While you are digging into some passages in the Bible deeply, you have to read other passages and connect them together to understand a whole picture of God's will. You need both deep study and wide study. And you can keep yourself free from such legalism which always brings irritation and anger and makes your life miserable. You can be a softer and gentler person. You can be a peacemaker instead of being a trouble maker.

### **Apply every law with love**

The key point of all laws is to *“love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as love yourself”* (Matthew 22:34-40).

Although Jesus advised the Pharisees to apply the Sabbath law in the whole context of the Scripture, and to overcome their narrow-minded legalism, they did not accept the advice. They became more furious at Jesus' interpretation and application of the law of the Sabbath. They were unable to acknowledge their error corrected by Jesus. So they tried to find another way to attack Him. *<sup>6</sup>On another Sabbath he went into the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was shriveled. <sup>7</sup>The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal on the Sabbath.*

They were trying to find a reason to accuse Jesus on the Sabbath. Their legalistic attitude on keeping the law of God made them so stubborn that they became blind to the truth. On the day of the Sabbath when they had to worship God and serve other people, their hearts were filled with grudges, anger and condemnation against others. Although they tried to worship God by keeping the law of the Sabbath as best they could, they missed the real spirit of the Sabbath law which was loving God and loving others.

The key point in all Ten Commandments is loving God with all your heart and loving your neighbor as you love yourself. The key point of keeping the law of the Sabbath is also loving God and loving your neighbor. The purpose of keeping the law of the Sabbath is to rest in God's blessing. It is to care for people who are in need. Just keeping all the regulations for the sake of keeping them, which forbids all kinds of work, is not the purpose of the Sabbath law.

Being blessed by God through resting and taking care of souls is the purpose of the Sabbath law. When they had such grudges and condemning spirits in their hearts how in the world could they love God and love their neighbors? While they were saying that they were keeping the law of the Sabbath, in fact, they were violating the key spirit of the law.

So Jesus showed them the real point of keeping the law of the Sabbath.

On the Sabbath day, while the Pharisees were angry and upset, Jesus used God's blessing to heal the man with the shriveled hand. Then He said to them: *"I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?"*

What Jesus is teaching by His action and word here is that practicing love is far more important than just keeping the law. It is more important to serve people with love and mercy than just judging people with the concept of right and wrong. To be free from legalism, you must judge people's behaviors through the true spirit of the law, which is loving God with all your heart and loving your neighbor as you love yourself.

When you emphasize right and wrong in people's behavior or attitude more than loving people, you may become like the Pharisees here. You may become a killer of freedom and joy.

But when you follow Jesus' example and try to love people instead of judging them legalistically you can become a joy giver, you can become an encourager.

Some years ago, a local church elder told me a difficult situation in his church. One of the church members opened a new store. Then he invited the pastor of the church to the store to have a blessing service for the newly opened business. When the pastor went there he found that the business was a Karaoke business which included serving alcohol. The pastor was a little bit perplexed without knowing how to bless the business owner. But anyway he had a worship service at the store. Then several days later, one of the elders in the church seriously raised an issue: "Is it ok for our church to have a worship service to bless a man who opens a business to sell alcohol?"

And the elder asked me how the church leadership was supposed to handle the issue. It was difficult for me to give an answer to the question. I prayed for a short moment to seek God's wisdom. And I remembered the lesson of Jesus teaching here. I thought that it is more important to ask whether we do certain things with the love of God and man or only with judgment of right and wrong. So, I told him, "*Elder, I believe that in such a situation loving the person is more important than judging the person based on the law.*"

People have different opinions, attitudes and emphasis on the issues. Some people may take liberal positions on certain issues while others are very conservative on the same issues. On the same issue, believers may have different views and emphasis from each other. Some believers may think that drinking is ok if it is controlled properly. Other believers may believe that drinking is wrong and could even be a sin. Some believers may think that smoking is ok (I have been in a church in Chicago where there were ash trays in the fellowship hall) while others consider smoking a sin. There may be an endless list of such issues.

But when we go back to this basic teaching of Jesus on freedom from legalism, we can maintain a joyful spirit. Before we judge other people's behavior negatively and get upset and angry at their behaviors, we must think about God's love and mercy.

Jesus is the Lord of freedom. He fights for freedom from legalism. Jesus' freedom does not mean lawless freedom. It means freedom from legalism. It means freedom from false concepts of becoming a better person or a holier person by keeping many detailed regulations. Let Jesus be the Lord of all your judgments. Always apply Jesus' love to the treatment of others whose behavior or attitude may offend you.