

Deuteronomy 5:12-15  
Psalm 81:1-10  
2 Corinthians 4:5-12  
Mark 2:23-3:6

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Sermon: **SIN**

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Summary: Go and sin no more.

When you start thinking about laws, you soon begin to notice that our attitudes towards them are very interesting.

For example, jaywalking in New York state is against the law. But when I come to a corner that has that button attached to the post that controls the Walk/Don't walk function on the stop light across the street, I ignore it. I have never once on my life pushed that button that I can recall. I just look up and down the street, and if there's no one coming, I cross the street – even if the light's still red! I have even done it with police patrol cars cruising by. Or again, when I park across the street from the post office, I don't get out of the car, go around it and get on the sidewalk, then walk to the corner, wait for the light to turn, cross the street, then walk back to the Post Office. I just get out of the car, look both ways, then walk or sometimes trot across to the Post Office. And I suspect many of you do the same. We break the law, sometimes several times a day. And why do we break this particular law? Because we realize that it serves no worthwhile purpose, while complicating and burdening our lives. It's not the legality or illegality of jaywalking that determines our behavior, it's our common sense.

Compare that with the law against committing murder. We of course have such laws in our society: it's illegal to commit murder, to kill someone except in extreme self-defense. But why do we have these laws? Speaking strictly for myself – but I suspect the same could be said of all of you - we would not start killing people, even if there were no law against it. Why not? Again speaking only

for myself, but I suspect also for all of you, I know that killing someone is deeply wrong, and that knowledge – call it conscience – is determinative in me, it determines my behavior. It's not the legality or illegality of murder that determines whether I kill people: it's my conscience, and its influence in my personality.

You see how interesting laws are, and their relationship to our behavior, when you stop to think about it? Some laws are over-protective, some are largely unnecessary, and some are arbitrary. And this is all true in a free and democratic society like our own! How much more problematic in top-heavy societies like dictatorships or aristocracies, where the laws serve mainly to benefit the rulers or privileged classes?

One such top-heavy society was the Jewish world into which Jesus was born, where the authorities had laid down such an abundance of laws that virtually every aspect of everyone's daily life, from the time you got out of bed to the time you returned to sleep, was subject to some statutory requirement or prohibition.

But this Jewish world was unique in one respect: its laws derived, not from the ruling political or economic classes, but rather, they believed, from God. In the first five books of their Holy Scriptures there were 613 such laws that they believed God had personally dictated to Moses: the 10 Commandments and 603 additional laws. And in addition to these 613 original written laws, there was a vastly greater number of laws that had been derived from these over the centuries by religious scholars, to make them apply to specific circumstances that might arise, just as our legislators do today, constantly creating new laws derived from preceding precedents and all deriving ultimately from the Constitution to deal with an ever-changing set of new circumstances. But to repeat, the Jewish world of Christ's time was unique, in that its body of laws was far more detailed, and in that it was felt that each of those laws derived ultimately from God.

One subgroup of that body of laws had to do with what could and could not be done on the Sabbath, the day of rest, and all these laws derived ultimately from one of the fundamental laws of the Books of Moses: the Fourth Commandment. You'll remember what it says:

**Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it, you shall do no work...**

But of course the Fourth Commandment leaves it undefined what counts as ‘work’ and what doesn’t, and so over the centuries Jewish scholars had defined it in ever greater and greater detail, until, by the time of Jesus, it had reached the point that to us sounds absurd. To take just one example, it was considered work to carry a burden on the Sabbath. But what was a burden? The law laid it down that anything weighing more than two dried figs constituted a burden.

In the first of the two episodes recounted in our Gospel selection for today, Jesus treats of a few others of those Sabbath laws. He is walking on a Sabbath through a cornfield with his disciples, and they have reached the point in His ministry that he has begun to raise warning alarms among the religious authorities, so some Pharisees – those ultimate sticklers for the law – are trailing along with him. Let’s now read that episode together.

Mark 2: 23-28.

The disciples were plucking ears of ripe corn, rubbing them between their hands to free up the kernels and eating them, and in the strict Jewish calculation, that amounted to harvesting, threshing and preparing a meal, all of which were forbidden by their law. Again, to us this sounds almost comically absurd; but it’s important to focus, not on the cultural differences between then and now, but rather on the principle Jesus provides for the truly Christian understanding of the relationship between God and His human creation when he says: the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.

The law the Jews followed, including the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment, was, they believed, first enunciated by Moses, which in their reckoning would have been around fifteen hundred years earlier. But, again according to their understanding, man was created by God two thousand years earlier than that, back in the Garden of Eden days. So straightforwardly, man was not created for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath, the day of rest, two thousand years later, was created for man. It was God’s gift to man, created for man’s benefit. It was created to benefit man, not to burden him.

And the same fundamentally Christian instruction underlies the second episode recorded in our lectionary reading for today. So let’s read it now.

Mark 3: 1-6.

Jewish law stated that, unless someone’s life was in danger, no steps could be taken on the Sabbath to heal him or her from injury or disease, because that would constitute work. The Pharisees here in the synagogue proposed to test Jesus’

adherence to their law by pointing to a man with a withered hand. This man's life was obviously not in danger, and simply postponing his healing for a day wouldn't materially affect his overall well-being, but Jesus pointedly asks him to step forward and, in front of them all, on the Sabbath, he asks the Pharisees: Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good, or to do evil? When the Pharisees fail to answer, he instructs the man to stretch out his hand, and the miracle of healing takes place.

The moral here is the same as in the preceding episode: the Sabbath was created for man, it was a gift from God to man, a benefit, a blessing from God to man. That is its spirit, its true heavenly reality, and truly respecting that spirit, that reality, consists in doing good for one another, when the opportunity arises.

Here we are two thousand years later, and the Christianized society here in the West in which we live is obviously very different from the Jewish society in which Jesus appeared. Although different Christian subgroups within our society still take different views about how to hallow and respect the Sabbath, for example, to focus on those procedural differences is really, I believe, to miss the deep meaning that Jesus was conveying when he incarnated God within the circumstances of His own time and place two thousand years ago.

We must always remember that Jesus came to show us God at work within whatever circumstances humanity offers. He came to show us what motivates God, and then ask us to model our own lives around that motivation, to the best of our ability and understanding. Or to put this another way, he came to show us what actual sin is, and what he showed us is that that sin is a crime, not against human law, but against divine love.

Jaywalking, especially if there's a police cruiser in sight, may be foolish and risky, but it's not a sin, as Christianity understands sin. Murder is sinful, not because it violates a human law, but because it violates the divinity within ourselves, which is why our conscience, the awareness of our own divine spirit, cries out against it.

On another occasion, Jesus was asked what is the rule by which we should conduct our lives, and he answered:

*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang **all** the Law and the Prophets.*

The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. The law of love was implanted in each of us, from the beginning, when we were created in the image of God, not to benefit God, but as God's greatest gift to his beloved children.

And so our prayer for this morning, Father God, is that You make alive and vital in each of us the law of love for You and for one another, as it was alive and vital and eternal in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.