

Sermon: Jesus, not the law, defines our lifestyle
Mark 2:23-28; Colossians 2:16-3:4 Deuteronomy 15:12-15
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In so many stories about Jesus these Pharisees are popping up! It seems it was a choice of the four gospel writers to use especially those stories about Jesus and to describe the role of the Pharisees; they could have chosen many other stories, they could have chosen to ignore the role of the Pharisees, but they purposely described the life and acts and words of Jesus against the backdrop of this critical audience of the Pharisees.

The four gospels do not contain Sunday School stories. They are carefully edited documents with a theological target. Just like any historical book, editors make choices, they have angles. The choices made by the gospel writers had to do with the theological debates in the very early church.

The main debates in the early church were about the role of the Jewish laws. The churches consisted of an explosive mixture of law abiding Jews and gentiles you came straight from paganism. No wonder the issue of law was important.

For us this is also an important matter; half of the Bible consists of laws of some sort. What is the importance of these laws for us today?

1. Jesus does not live for the law

Jesus and his friends were walking, on the Jewish day of rest, through some grain fields. They plucked some grain, they rubbed it between their hands, they ate it; and there were the Pharisees! As could be expected. 'What you do, Jesus, is against the laws of God!'

To walk through grain fields and eat some grain was perfectly legal in Israel- even if it was not your own grain field. On this matter, we read in Deuteronomy 23:25:

If you go into your neighbour's standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbour's standing grain.

It was not acceptable to harvest from what belonged to your neighbour; that was considered theft. But if you just picked some grain for your own direct consumption - that was no problem. A great law to bless the poor and the hungry in the land! They were always allowed to eat what they needed. A beautiful, lovely, very humane and social Biblical law.

Those eternal Pharisees... if they were so irritated by Jesus all the time, why did they follow him anyway!

They did not blame our Lord for eating the grain as such, that was fine. But he did it on a Sabbath.

The Sabbath was made for resting and work was not permitted on this day in Israel. The Rabbis of Israel had made a list of 39 principal works, each subdivided in 6 categories. To do those things was not legal, because it was seen as work.

The plucking of heads of grain was seen as reaping - it was work! And the cleaning of the grains from its chaff was seen as winnowing. Crushing the grains in their hands was threshing, and what they did was seen as preparing a meal. Four illegal things in the strange law-book that the Pharisees had created on top of the Biblical laws.

Jesus condemns the Pharisees for abusing the laws of God in a way that made the people suffer.

God's laws are made for making man's life better, not for crushing us under a load of regulations that make our life hard. In the book of Deuteronomy we have read that one reason why God gave the Sabbath as a day for resting, was for instance, that the slaves in Israel also had a break. It was to bless people!

Jesus confronts the Pharisees... 'Have you never read the story of David?' He purposely makes them look embarrassed by challenging them in the area where they thought they were the best at. They saw themselves as the kings of exegesis of the Word of God. Jesus teaches them a good lesson here.

And they deserved it, with their continuous bickering and for making the lives of the people miserable.

Jesus referred to the time when David and his soldiers, hungry and tired of escaping from king Saul, received holy bread from the tent of God. Now that really broke the laws of God! The 12 loaves on the table in the tabernacle were changed once a week for fresh bread; the old 12 loaves were only to be eaten by a priest. Only by a priest.

So on that Sabbath day, when the loaves were refreshed, David and his men - they were not priests - took the old loaves. They broke

an explicit Mosaic, Biblical law, and they did this even on the Sabbath day with the clear blessing of God.

What you make of this, Jesus asks the Pharisees? Of course they did not dare to criticize David for breaking the Biblical laws. But David and his men clearly did. Jesus did not break any Biblical law; he just ignored the man-made rules of the Pharisees about the Sabbath.

Jesus then used this opportunity to show the basis for his dealing with these laws. He said: 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.'

2. Why God gave laws

We do not exist for keeping the laws of God. That was the approach of the Pharisees - their life existed for upholding Gods laws and also their self-made rules. Jesus cuts right through this.

The laws of God exist for our benefit. They are to help us live to the glory of God and to make our life better. And as the homemade regulations of the Pharisees became an insult to Gods beautiful laws, hence to his glory, and as they did not make the lives of the people better, Jesus ignored them.

How Jesus dealt with the Biblical laws is our guideline. He presents himself as the Lord of the Sabbath; he puts himself thereby above every law and the implementation of the laws. He proposes himself as the interpreter of religion, the true yardstick.

With the example of David He presents us with a guideline for the right application of the laws of God, in line with the summary of the will of God that Jesus gave us elsewhere: It is about loving God and loving our neighbour. If our interpretation of the laws of God does not align with this summary, something must be wrong with our interpretation and our application.

Even the sacred things in our faith are only used well, when they increase our love for God and if they serve others. Holy things, even our best morality, can only be good and true if it increases our love for God and other people. This is by the way also true, I believe, for government, and for our social and economic systems. If they do not serve people, they are not worth much. The social structures, the habits we have, our cultural habits must all be seen against this light.

Do they honour God? Do they serve the people? Do they make our lives better? Do they make the lives of other people better? Or do

our habits separate us from other people? Do they create division?

We should not support systems, laws, rules, either from government or in church or in our society, if they do not uphold the value and honour of all people, including the people we are not so fond of.

God has called us to radical love for others. This should dictate our morality, our laws, our behaviour.

3. Paul: above the law

This is a lesson we must hear again and again in church. In the early church in Colossae they had big problems with this issue.

People in that church were judgmental about what others were eating, and drinking, and about how people celebrated feasts, even how they stuck to the Sabbath as a day of rest.

Paul writes to that church that all these laws are shadows of the real thing.

You are more important than your shadow, this is logical. The fact that those Old Testament laws were just shadows means that the reality they are a shadow of is incomparably more important.

The Old Testament is full of food laws, rules for fasting, it stipulates the celebration of many feasts, including the Sabbath. Many laws were ceremonial and liturgical, only useful in the context of the Jewish temple worship, or in the context of Jewish life in its own land.

Paul speaks, I believe about all those sorts of laws. He does not speak of the heart of the laws of God, the Ten Commandments and the summary of that in love for God and love for people. Those he supports all the time as the heart of the will of God.

That Jewish believers in Christ wanted to continue celebrating all their own laws is not strange. This was after all there own culture. But they also blamed other people, especially non-Jews, for not following the same rules, and this divided the church.

This, for Paul, was unacceptable in church. Because this was in direct contradiction to the kindness, the humility, the meekness, the patience, the mutual love that he was advocating as the basis for the unity of the church.

Paul writes: 'All those rules and regulations, they are a shadow of things to come, and the real thing has come... the substance belongs to Christ. [Col 2:17]

Jesus says, 'I am Lord of the Sabbath. I am higher.' Thereby he makes himself the lawgiver.

er, which He really is, one with the Father and with the Holy Spirit.

And Jesus, the incarnated God, is also the one all laws were just shadows of. You can follow the shadow to Him, and then those shadows lose their importance. The laws, the shadows are defined by the substance, by the reality, by Jesus. And He makes love the criterion for a correct understanding of the laws.

So we should not judge one another on things that are really not so important. Whether we fast, or not fast, what we eat, what we drink, the length of our skirt, the length of our hair, how we use makeup, all this should never be allowed to create disunity because in the light of Christ, it is meaningless. It is not substantial.

Spiritual growth, a satisfied life that pleases God, does not come from following rules and laws... it comes from being connected with Jesus Christ. Through him we grow; through him, not through the law, the Church is built together. [Col 2:19]

This is the goal of God – our spiritual growth. And this does not come from law, but from Jesus Christ. Law and its interpretation divided the church in Colossae, as it does anywhere, if it is not interpreted and implemented by looking at the example of Jesus Christ. If we lose track of Jesus, we become moralistic.

Paul therefore advises us to not worry so much about all those rules of do not taste, touch not, do not this, do not that, but to focus our time and attention on the Lord Jesus Christ himself. He is the Son of God who with the Father is the author of all laws of the Bible.

And therefore we are told by the apostle to seek Him, and worry less about laws, habits, rules, rituals. 'Seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.' (Col 3:1-2)

This seeking of things that are above means, focus on Jesus Christ. It does not mean we have to be super spiritual, not interested on things on earth. A focus on Jesus, how he lived and how he explained the laws of God is very concrete and tangible.

In our pilgrimage to the Heavenly city we are to seek the things that are above in order to do Gods will here below. And his will is to love God and commitment to working with all people for the welfare of all people to build a world that is more human, more loving, more kind.

Work, family relationships, social involvements-- every aspect of human affairs--should be approached in this spirit of faith and done out of the love that Jesus Christ showed for God and for all people.

Conclusion

We are the greatest blessing for others, if our eyes are radically fixed on Jesus Christ, not on what laws and rules we and others may have to follow for being acceptable by God. A focus on law creates division between people.

Jesus never allowed laws and culture and habits, however good, to distance himself from other people. He broke many religious and cultural laws for the sake of being close to people.

So we also must be very careful not to let even our best beautiful laws and habits create distance between us and other people. If that happens, we directly contradict the target of the laws of God.

Our Lord wants to guide us to the best life possible on earth, together with other people. This best life is available in Jesus Christ himself; he is our yardstick for behaviour. And when we focus on Him, and follow Him, we live all the good laws of God – for Gods glory and the benefit of all people.

AMEN