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SERMON TITLE: Righteousness with Reason

Walking as Disciples of Jesus Series

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 12:1-14

DATE: March 15, 2020

Check out the service at www.fpcd.org.

Read also *Leviticus 24:5-9*. Check out the service at www.fpcd.org

We have been talking about daily life “walking” as disciples of Jesus by looking at a variety of stories of Jesus as he encountered all types of people. Today’s story is about the Sabbath. The Sabbath was given to rest. The Sabbath was given for worship. The Sabbath was given to help us know we are not in charge in this world! If you know all this, if you embrace it; if you stop and rest in God, you will have less stress. So to get into the story about the Sabbath, I want to ask you some questions.

In your work environment, how much is dependent on mercy and how much is dependent on law?

In your schooling, how much is dependent on mercy and how much is dependent on law?

In your marriage, how much is dependent on mercy and how much is dependent on doing the right or expected thing?

What would you say in answer to the question?

Take an informal poll—

- In the work environment, does mercy or law primarily rule? (usually law)
- In schools, does mercy or law primarily rule? (more often law)
- In your marriage, does mercy or law primarily rule? (in good marriages, mercy)

This is not about the exception, but what generally predominates. What do you think?

What do you *prefer* to be the primary rule?

What does it take for mercy to rule? (goodness, trust, integrity) In other words, if school starts at 8:15 a.m., if your work day starts at 8:00 a.m., you need good employees and students willing to be in their seats by that time. Mercy generally will not stimulate obedience.

In the church does mercy or law primarily rule? This is the question Jesus is confronted with. Let’s hear it. READ Matthew 12:1-14

In religious life what did the Pharisees think mattered? What is your answer to that question?

Obviously they shaped religious life around keeping the law, or what had developed into traditions. (Don’t we do that sometimes in church when we think “this is the way we do things.”) But Jesus shaped religious life around the Scriptures.

“Haven’t you read? Didn’t you do your Bible reading this morning?”

Kind of reminds you of a teacher asking if you did your homework.

The thing is, Jesus was right! Here’s the story:

King Saul was trying to kill David and so David fled. He secretly went to Ahimelech the priest for help: he needed food for his men. Concealing the problem, he said,

“The king has sent me on a private matter,” David said. “He told me not to tell anyone why I am here. I have told my men where to meet me later. Now, what is there to eat? Give me five loaves of bread or anything else you have.” “We don’t have any regular bread,” the priest replied. “But there is the holy bread, which you can have if your young men have not slept with any women recently.” “Don’t worry, I never allow my men to be with women when they are on a campaign. And since they stay clean even on ordinary trips, how much more on this one!” Since there was no other food available, the priest gave him the holy bread -- the Bread of the Presence that was placed before the LORD in the Tabernacle. It had just been replaced that day with fresh bread. ~ 1 Samuel 21:2-6

So David and his men essentially broke the law due to mitigating circumstances. They were hungry.

The second argument Jesus gave was that every week the priests break the Sabbath when they work leading worship.

I asked the folks last Wednesday night when we read this passage¹ if that meant I might get Sundays off . . . to which they replied—*no, we are like Jesus—it’s okay for you to break the Sabbath!!* Unless you don’t want to get paid!

There’s a tension there between obeying the law and having mercy. What rules are so precious to the church in 2020 that we

¹ Join us at First Presbyterian Church at 6:30-7:30 for “Conversations with God” in the sanctuary. Everyone is welcome and no Bible background is needed!

might be inflexible over them? If we get slack about them the fear is, then won't we lose all order?

Jesus was not dealing with laws about everything – morality, justice, greed, retaliation, honoring your parents – things like that. He was talking about righteousness with reason. It is okay to break the tradition, to break the law, to do things that express caring.

Once someone asked Jesus, “which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus replied,

“‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22:36-40)

All the law hangs on caring.

Listen to how Eugene Peterson in *The Message* put it:

One Sabbath, Jesus was strolling with his disciples through a field of ripe grain. Hungry, the disciples were pulling off the heads of grain and munching on them. Some Pharisees reported them to Jesus: “Your disciples are breaking the Sabbath rules!” Jesus said, “*Really?*”(v. 1-2)

It is interesting that Jesus was with his disciples and yet he was not watching them like a hawk to see that they not break any rules. Earlier he called them innocent disciples.

Do you have that picture as Jesus' attitude toward you?

Do you ever feel guilty that you have broken some law and disappointed Jesus? If so, shed the guilt! Jesus had respect for the disciples' need to eat and their decision to pluck the grain. Isn't it great that Jesus gives autonomy rather than strict overriding control of our lives?

That makes me love him that much more!

Jesus explains that caring is his first consideration:

‘Love the Lord with all your heart, all your soul, and with all your mind. Love your neighbor as yourself.’

So Jesus then walked into the synagogue, into their church, and he saw a man with a handicap. The Pharisees tried to trap him. As always, he got to the real heart of the matter:

“Is there a person here who, finding one of your lambs fallen into a ravine, wouldn't, even though it was a Sabbath, pull it out? Surely kindness to people is as legal as kindness to animals!” (vs. 11-14)

On Wednesday night someone said *what if someone came into our service and had such a handicap. Would anyone go over*

to that person immediately and pray for him? Or would we tell him to wait to the end?

He's got a good point. Perhaps what we need to learn is how very great Jesus' cares about people; how much mercy matters. This takes courage.

We need to care right now in the midst of this pandemic rather than let fear rise.

The U.S. Army has its own court and set of rules. When someone transgresses military law, another soldier steps in and defends that person. A man in this church was called upon to defend a soldier who had gone AWOL. Upon investigation, the soldier had gone AWOL because he had gotten word that his mother was dying, so he took off to see his mother before she died. There were mitigating circumstances that, in light of mercy, should call upon the military to declare him innocent. And they did.

Jesus is in charge and he asks us, “Who cares for people? Aren't they more important than your rules?”

- This takes righteousness with reason;
- letting go of the old way of doing things;
- letting go of fear;
- trusting Jesus' mercy;
- and willingness to stand up and change things that are wrong or hurting someone.

Jesus said, “There is far more at stake here than religion. . . . ‘I prefer a flexible heart to an inflexible ritual’ . . .

“The Son of Man is in charge of the Sabbath.” (vs. 6-8)

AMEN