

## **The Right Use of God's Law**

*Sermon for the Parish of South Darebin*

*Second Sunday After Pentecost, 2 June 2024*

*1 Samuel 3:1–10; Psalm 139:1–6, 13–18; 2 Corinthians 4: 5–12; Mark 2:23–3:6*

The Reverend Canon Christopher Carolane

If you were to give a title to our Gospel reading this morning, I wonder what it would be? 'Jesus breaks the Sabbath law!' perhaps, or 'Jesus takes on the Pharisees', or even, 'Pharisees plot with Herodians to kill Jesus'. A more positive, less politically-charged title might be, 'Miraculous healing of disabled man.'

Whatever title one might choose, I think it is obvious that in both situations described in our Gospel reading, the theme of what it means to obey the fourth of the Ten Commandments – 'Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy' - is paramount. The rejection of cruel and uncompassionate legalism runs a close second.

The Pharisees accused Jesus' disciples of breaking the fourth commandment because on the sabbath day, the disciples dared to pluck heads of grain in a corn field and eat them as they walked through it.

Not surprisingly, Jesus' reply was both clever and compassionate.

...he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions." Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man [Jesus' term for himself] is lord even of the sabbath." (Mark 2: 25–28)

Mark follows this account with another story that occurred not necessarily on the same sabbath day, when Jesus healed a man who had a withered hand. It's interesting to note that Mark tells us the Pharisees were watching Jesus to see if he would heal the man on the sabbath, so that they could accuse him of breaking the law. Jesus disarmed them by asking,

"Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him." (Mark 3:4–6)

These passages challenge us to re-examine our understanding of the application of God's laws and the spirit behind our religious practices. Jesus' actions and teachings in these verses reveal a radical approach to God's law—one that emphasises mercy, compassion and, with respect to the fourth of ten commandments, the true purpose of the sabbath.

Throughout my ministry in the church, both as a layman and as an ordained person, I have come across many people who apply God's laws in the church in the same legalistic way that the Pharisees were applying them. The letter of the law is taken to be far more important than the spirit of the law and the compassionate and pastorally sensitive application of the law to the lives of the people.

I am sure that probably many of you are also aware of such hurtful, unhelpful legalism in the church.

Sadly, when I was a child, my father was legalistic like the Pharisees. I was taught that it was sinful to have playmates at home on a Sunday, because it was a day of rest. He taught me that it was sinful to dance (as it might lead to more lustful pursuits!). He also taught me that it was sinful to watch TV or go to the movies. It was sinful for my sister to cut her hair (quoting an obscure Old Testament verse), and so the list went on of what it meant to be 'holy' in my father's eyes. Although my father changed these views in later life, at the time I think the way he applied the Scriptures to the lives of me and my sisters was a form of spiritual abuse.

It's not hard to see similar pharisaic pronouncements made by certain sections of the church today. Still in the Diocese of Sydney it is seen to be sinful to remarry if you are divorced or the one you want to marry is divorced. Thankfully this application of Biblical teaching was changed in this Diocese in the late 1970s and since then many divorced people have been married in the church.

Today there are large sections of the church who declare those living in same-sex relationships to be living in sin. Although this matter is being addressed in a positive way by some, there is still a hard and pharisaic attitude being declared by many in the church to the point that some fear it may lead to a schism in church polity.

I believe that if we ponder the words of Jesus in our gospel today, we discover that Jesus looks with compassion on people and seeks what is best for them, rather than putting great stumbling blocks in their way by a harsh and unloving application of law. When Jesus was asked what the greatest of the laws was, we need to focus on his reply:

“ ‘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 our neighbour as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22:35–40)

Later, just prior to his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus gave his followers a new commandment. What was this new commandment? Jesus said:

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34)

Whenever we apply God’s law, we must first ask ourselves: is this application of God’s law loving, is it compassionate, is it life promoting, is it what Jesus would do?

It is important to remember that in applying the law of God in love, this does not give us *carte blanche* to live as we please and throw caution to the wind. We are still called to be holy; we are still called to turn away from our sin and to reject all that is evil. But following Christ must be what drives all that we do and the decisions we make. It is embodied in the first baptismal question. Do you *turn to Christ*? To which we reply: I turn to Christ.

We must follow Christ. When we truly have faith in him and are determined to live for him, through faith, then our words and actions will be loving. They will be compassionate. Paul said, ‘whatever is not of faith, is sin’. (Romans 14:23)

Let us put our trust and faith firmly in the Lord Jesus who taught us to love God and our neighbours with radical love that demonstrates his compassion and love.

*Amen.*