

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

*St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA*

*June 2, 2024*

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## **For Humankind**

Mark 2:23-3:6

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Rules are a part of living together in society. They provide structure as both those written and unwritten standards we've agreed to as a society. Rules can sometimes feel onerous or like a burden – like taxes. Or at the intersection of Jamestown Rd. and 199, there's a no left turn into or out of that 7-11. Drivers who wish to go into the 7-11 from the left should go down Jamestown Rd a bit and turn around. Despite this, folks make that left turn, even when it is inconvenient or downright dangerous.

As Lutherans, we sometimes have a weird and sometimes complicated relationship with the rules of the Hebrew Bible. We have this dichotomy of law and gospel – the thing that convicts us and the thing that sets us free. Sometimes, that leads us a bit too far, pushing us to see the Gospel as negating or overruling the Law, rendering it unimportant.

Luther took the law incredibly seriously, seeing the law and the gospel as two sides of the same coin. Luther's argument was never about the importance or the place of the law; instead in his lectures on Galatians, Luther says, "the Law is holy, righteous, and good, and it is given by God for our good, to lead us to Christ." The law curbs sin and provides a structure for society. But it also acts like a mirror,

showing us our need for a savior and our need for grace - because we can never meet God's righteous and holy standard. Through Jesus, through grace, we're freed from condemnation of the law and made right with God. And from that freedom, we're invited to live into and live out of the Law for the sake of the neighbor as a response to the love we've found in Jesus. To put it another way, God doesn't need our good works (or our obedience to God's command) but our neighbor does.

In seminary, my Hebrew bible professor, the Rev. Dr. Ralph Klein opened up the life-giving nature of the law, the instruction, the torah to me. He talked about the commandments, particularly the last 8 of the 10 commandments, as God's playpen. Think about a playpen – why do we use them for the little ones around us? We put up gates or walls and take out all the potential hazards so a kid can play. We don't use them to be mean (even if a child may think so sometimes). It is because we so love and care for them that we want to give them a place to play with relative safety and freedom but within the set boundaries that the walls provide. Playpens are for the sake of the child and their well-being. Yes, they can give weary parents a break. Or allow them to make dinner without too much fuss. But at the end of the day, the playpens exist for the benefit of the child – even if there's a benefit for the adults too.

Where we run into trouble is when we forget that the law is for humankind, when we think about the law as existing only or primarily for the sake of God. That

God needs us to do x, y, z and not to do a, b, c for God to love us, for God to care for us. Like the commandments are about what we owe to God. Or that the commandments are to win God over to our side. Like our relationship with God is transactional. And a transaction that primarily benefits God.

That is a common way – both in the ancient world and our own – to think about one’s relationship with the divine. People would dedicate statues or offer precious goods or pour wine on an altar to Zeus in hopes of getting success in battles and in hopes of a good harvest. The ancient Babylonians believed that humans were literally created in order to be slaves for the gods – that our existence is to serve the pantheon. How many times do we hear in our world that the bad things that happen are because we made God mad – like when Hurricane Katrina slammed the US in 2005? Like God is just waiting for us to mess it up so God can smite us?

And yet, the biblical witness is different – God created us out of delight, out of the enjoyment of creating. God engages with the world because God so loves the world – even a world that has turned away from God. Commandments and the law are intended as a gift to help us flourish. Sabbath is important, rest is important. So much so that even God rests on the 7<sup>th</sup> day in our first creation narrative. So much so that it is expected for Israelites to give that rest to servants and slaves – both because God rests and because they were once slaves themselves in Egypt and didn’t get that rest. So much so that Jesus goes into the mountains and into the countryside

for rest; even Jesus isn't always on the go. (He isn't always successful there... but he tries and recognizes the importance of it for him and for his followers). Nothing today negates that.

In our Gospel text, Jesus and his disciples are chastised for plucking heads of grain on the sabbath. The conflict intensifies as he heals a man with a withered hand. Our text then tells us that this act of healing on the sabbath pushed the Pharisees to join forces with the Herodians to figure out how to destroy him. Not just defeat. Not just lead people away from him. They plotted to destroy him. For plucking grain and for healing on the sabbath. It is they who look to the law to find grounds to smite and to destroy, not God. The Laws regarding the Sabbath become a weapon instead of a blessing. They become death-dealing instead of life-giving.

This group of Pharisees seem to have forgot that first and foremost the law was given for the sake of humankind. Jesus' response to the Pharisees' criticism is both profound and revealing. He reminds them that "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). This statement reorients the purpose of the law back to its intended function: to serve and uplift humanity, not to oppress or burden it. Jesus emphasizes that the Sabbath, like all of God's commandments, is a gift meant to enhance human life and wellbeing.

The healing of the man with the withered hand further illustrates this point. Jesus asks the Pharisees, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to

save life or to kill?” (Mark 3:4). When they remain silent, Jesus’ actions speak louder than words. He heals the man, showing that doing good, showing mercy, and promoting life are the ultimate expressions of the law’s intent. This is not particularly novel from Jesus – ancient rabbis and teachers also taught this kind of approach to the law prior to Jesus.

I’m going with a simple example: the prohibition against eating pork. But I want to be clear, it is completely fine if for religious reasons (or any other for that matter) to not eat pork. There is good reason for God to give that command. Pork happens to be one of the most dangerous meats to eat when it isn’t handled or cooked properly. We don’t put matches in a baby or toddler’s play pen, right? Or small marbles that could be swallowed? If the law is about caring about humankind, it makes total sense for God to say, “don’t eat that.” It isn’t about restricting us from the yumminess of bacon because somehow that pleases God. It is about protecting us and keeping us safer. The law is about humankind. Safer cooking and meat handling practices has drastically lessened the likelihood of pork making us deathly ill.

This perspective challenges us to rethink how we view the law and command of God. Are we adhering to them rigidly, forgetting their purpose? What law or command might we be upholding at the expense of another’s life? We’re at the beginning of Pride month: has the church’s traditional stance toward LGBTQIA+ folks put the letter of the law above the real lived lives of people? Have we made the law

something that is death-dealing instead of life-giving? I would argue that yes, as a bog “c” Church, we have. But I am sure there are other examples as well. When we forget that these laws are for our benefit and for the benefit of our neighbor, we risk turning them into burdens rather than blessings. And worse, we risk turning them into weapons that try to destroy.

What happens then if we understand the Law as guidelines designed to help us live more fully and in closer relationship with one another and with God? What if we trust that God’s Law is for the benefit of humankind – for you and for me? What happens if we lean into Luther and see the Law as something that faithful people live out for the sake of the neighbor as a response to the Gospel that is already ours?

Yeah, we may be chastised by the modern-day Pharisees. That’s totally possible. But I have to believe that we are called to something greater than rigid adherence to rules. We’re called to embody the love and grace of Jesus for the sake of the humankind that surrounds us.

Amen.