

Spirit of the Law

One Sabbath Jesus was going through the grainfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" He answered, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions." Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." (Mark 2:23-28)

When I taught seventh grade in Milwaukee, one challenge for teachers was enforcing the school dress code. Although we didn't have school uniforms, we wanted to set some rules for what students could wear--especially in the upper grades. We decided as a faculty that students could wear polo shirts and pants (but not jeans) or skirts.

Of course, the students soon realized that this leaves a lot of "wiggle room". Teachers soon started hearing comments such as, "Ms. Polzin, Sally's wearing tan jeans. That's against the dress code!" Or "Ms. Polzin, the logo on Bobby's polo shirt is too big!" Eventually, teachers would hear students complain "That's not fair!" or "Fred didn't get in trouble last week!" Enforcement of the dress code made many of the teachers want to pull out their hair!

At faculty meetings we would discuss what students were allowed to wear under the dress code and we would talk to parents and students to clarify and explain the rules. But how do you clarify the letter of the law versus the spirit of the law to middle school students? The purpose of the dress code was to keep order and to take pressure off of students to dress in a certain way or to impress each other. The rules were not put in place to hurt or to cause division.

In this story, the Pharisees used the Old Testament laws against Jesus' disciples. Instead of using the law as a guide for themselves, they were using it as a stumbling block for their fellow Jews and to point out the 'wrongs' of others. Why did the Pharisees strive to keep the law? Where did their hearts lie? In Mark 2:27, Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for their emphasis on man-made laws, and for failure to recognize the purpose of the Sabbath: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." Jesus clarifies God's purpose in establishing the Sabbath. This day of rest was primarily intended to restore and rejuvenate God's people, not to make them slaves of arbitrary rules.

Here we see Jesus demonstrate his authority and wisdom. When the Pharisees accuse his disciples of violating the Sabbath, Jesus uses this opportunity to claim divine authority and assert his Messianic status. Jesus' reason for referring to the story of David eating the holy bread becomes clear: the Lord of the Sabbath - Jesus - is greater than King David. Jesus, the son of David, would abolish all the Law through his redemptive work and make the law empty and useless. Unfortunately these Pharisees failed to recognize what we know---Jesus our Savior came and obediently kept all the laws in our place. God credits Christ's obedience to us

all. That, together with his sacrificial death and his glorious resurrection, is the guarantee of our new life with him, now and forever.

Prayer:

Dear Lord, help us to use your Laws in the way you intended. Free us from arbitrary laws that entangle and lead us to judge others and sin ourselves, and forgive us when we fall. Thank you for the gift of rest and most of all the gift of your Son. Thank you for our saving faith in Him who kept all the laws perfectly in our place. Amen.

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