

The Spirit of the Law

by Josh Reimer

I. Introduction

- a. We are probably all familiar with the concept of the spirit of the law versus the letter of the law. This idea may sometimes have a bad connotation from how it can be misused. But I think it is a valid idea and one that the Scriptures well support.
- b. Throughout the lesson, one point is going to keep coming up. And that point is that it just isn't possible to keep the spirit of the law without knowing the letter of the law. So listen for that as we go along.
- c. Two main points:
 1. We need to keep this idea of the spirit of the law in mind before we cast judgment on others.
 2. Valuing the spirit of the law above the letter of the law is not the same as indifference or laziness towards God's law.

II. Keep the spirit of the law in mind before casting judgment.

- a. First of all, we all know that God is the judge - not us. That being said, there are occasions where we need to do some judging.
 1. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul addresses a problem with brethren taking each other to court (1 Corinthians 6:4+5).
 - A. Christians were suing each other and Paul is telling them they should be able to judge these matters themselves without going to court.
 - B. This is one type of judgment we may have to make - pertaining to earthly things.
 2. A more pertinent example of a judgment we have to make is in 1 Corinthians 5:10-12.
 - A. A brother or sister living in sin needs to have this discipline carried out on their behalf.
 - B. This can't happen without first making that judgment that they are living in sin.
 3. So even though none of us is the judge, there are occasions where judgment is necessary.
- b. And when we make those judgments, we need to exercise an awful lot of caution (Matthew 7:1-5).
 1. Before I accuse you of something, I had better make sure my own affairs are in order.
 2. I may be guilty of breaking the same law in a different way, and not even realize it.
- c. It seems that that was the case for the Pharisees in their judgment of Jesus regarding the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1-7).
 1. This is before Jesus put away the Old Law with His death, which means that these people were under the law that included keeping the Sabbath.
 2. The first question to ask here is, were Jesus' disciples breaking the letter of the law regarding the Sabbath?
 - A. Exodus 20:9+10 says:
Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates.

- B. The law definitely says not to work on the Sabbath. Is plucking heads of grain strenuous enough to be considered work?
 - I. Plucking heads of grain doesn't sound overly strenuous.
 - II. But in Numbers 15:32-36, a man was found gathering sticks on the Sabbath and he was put to death. To me, that doesn't sound too strenuous either.
- C. It appears that they did break the letter of the law. Yet, in Matthew 12:7, Jesus says that the Pharisees had "condemned the guiltless."
- 3. So why were Jesus' disciples guiltless even though they had broken the Sabbath. Jesus uses three scriptural references to explain it.
 - A. First, Jesus refers to the record of David eating the showbread that only priests were supposed to eat. David broke the letter of that law and yet it was not held against him.
 - B. Second, Jesus refers to the fact that priests did do work on the Sabbath but still remained blameless.
 - C. And third, Jesus refers to Hosea 6:6, which says: *I desire mercy and not sacrifice.*
 - D. Let's use the evidence Jesus gave to understand His point.
 - I. When David ate that bread it was unusual circumstances. This is in 1 Samuel 21 if you want to look at it later. David and his men were on the move and there was no other bread.
 - a. The bread was not lawful for him to eat - Jesus said it himself here in Matthew 12.
 - b. But would God have rather had David and his men starve? Apparently not.
 - II. Jesus also referred to the fact that the priests worked on the Sabbath. And this is where we get into the spirit of the law.
 - a. The law of the Sabbath was to do no work - we've seen that. But let's look at the reason for not working.
 - 1. Exodus 20:9-11 says:
Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.
 - 2. Deuteronomy 5:15 says:
And remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.
 - 3. The Sabbath was not just a day to not work. It was a day of honoring God. It was a day for remembering the Lord. Other activities - especially work - certainly would have gotten in the way.
 - b. Considering the type of work priests were responsible for, do you think it would help or hurt the purpose of the Sabbath for the priests to do no work on that day?

- c. And so, as Jesus pointed out, priests did do work on the Sabbath.
 - III. And then Jesus quoted the scripture, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice." We'll come back to that one.
 - E. God would rather have David break the letter of the law and eat the showbread than to have him go hungry. God would also rather have these followers of Jesus pluck heads of grain on the Sabbath than to have them go hungry.
 - F. But shouldn't these people have gone home the day before so that they wouldn't have to pluck heads of grain on the Sabbath?
 - I. Remember, the Sabbath was a day devoted to God.
 - II. How much better could they have devoted it to God than to continue listening to the Son of God teach?
- 4. Remember what I said at the beginning. One point is going to keep coming up. We can't understand the spirit of the law without knowing the letter of the law.
 - A. Jesus clearly understood the Sabbath better than the Pharisees did and He surely could not have done that without knowing the letter of the law - that the Sabbath was a day of rest devoted to the Lord.
 - B. And how did Jesus explain the spirit of the law in this case? He went to the scriptures for three different points.
- 5. The Pharisees were very interested in keeping the letter of the Sabbath law. But in so doing, they missed the point.
 - A. They missed the spirit of the law.
 - B. They cast their judgment with regard for the letter of the law but not for the spirit of the law. And it turned out to be a poor judgment.
- d. Or maybe the Pharisees were actually not as interested in the letter of the law as it seems ([Matthew 12:9-13](#)).
 - 1. It turns out that these Pharisees would have been willing to go to the effort of rescuing their livestock on the Sabbath day.
 - A. That speck in the eye and plank in the eye passage pretty easily comes to mind all of a sudden, doesn't it?
 - B. But notice that Jesus does not condemn them for being willing to rescue their livestock on the Sabbath - at least not the way I read it.
 - 2. Jesus says at the end of verse 12, "it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."
 - A. The letter of the law says to do no work on the Sabbath, but Jesus is explaining the spirit of the law.
 - B. Let's go back to Jesus' third point in how He explained the Sabbath at the beginning of Matthew 12. He quoted the scripture, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice."
 - C. God gave the Israelites this law of the Sabbath so they could take a pause from their everyday activities to remember Him.
 - I. But Jesus showed here that God did not want this to be done at the expense of all else. In Mark's account of this, [Mark 2:27](#) records Jesus as saying: *The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.*
 - II. If the Israelites used the Sabbath to forget what God wanted - things such as mercy - then they had made the Sabbath an end unto itself. Then they were serving the Sabbath, instead of using the Sabbath to serve God.
 - III. Devoting this day to God was a sacrifice that the Israelites were expected to make. But mercy is even more important than sacrifice.
 - IV. And so it was right for Jesus to heal this needful man on the Sabbath day.

- V. And so it would be right for me to miss taking the Lord's Supper some first day of the week when my neighbor needs someone to drive him to the emergency room.
- e. And so it would be foolish of me to rush to judgment when I'm here to take the Lord's Supper and you're not.
 - 1. Some sort of judgment may eventually be necessary - we saw earlier how that can be the case.
 - 2. But rushing to judgment would put us in danger of acting like the Pharisees did here. They rushed to judgment based on the letter of the law with no regard for the spirit of the law.
 - 3. And they were wrong.

III. Following the spirit of the law does not mean indifference toward the letter of the law.

- a. I made the point that there may be occasions where it would be acceptable to miss taking the Lord's Supper. And I'm sure many have taken this idea and twisted it to say the Lord's Supper is optional, or that assembling with the saints is optional. And so on.
- b. But following the spirit of the law over the letter of the law does not mean there is less effort involved. If anything, I would say it's more effort.
- c. As we've seen already, following the letter of the law seems to have been the focus of the Pharisees during Jesus' time on earth.
 - 1. These are the Pharisees that He described as "[cleansing] the outside of the cup...but inside they [were] full of extortion and self-indulgence" (Matthew 23:25).
 - 2. These are the same people He described as "whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness" (Matthew 23:27).
- d. Focusing only on the letter of the law is largely an outward effort, but God wants His law kept inwardly.
 - 1. He said that's how His new covenant would be (Jeremiah 31:31-34).
 - A. God's law isn't just this thing on paper or in stone.
 - B. It should be living in us.
 - 2. Paul's letter to the Romans indicates that some Jewish Christians were perhaps still very concerned with the letter of the Old Law (Romans 2:25-29).
 - A. The Jews were proud of having and keeping the Old Law - which included circumcision.
 - B. But the law that included circumcision wasn't going to save them because none could keep it perfectly. In Acts 15:10 Paul said that neither they nor their fathers were able to bear it.
 - C. It's not about the outward keeping of the law - it's about the inward keeping of it.
 - D. God's people are His people inwardly, in the heart.
- e. Keeping the spirit of the law may be a shift in priorities, but that doesn't mean it's easier than the letter of the law (Matthew 5:21-28).
 - 1. The letter of the law tells me that it's wrong to commit murder.
 - A. The letter of the law teaches me that emotions - such as anger - which lead to murder must be controlled. And so I learn the spirit of the law.
 - B. There's that point again. If I don't know the letter of the law, then I can't

understand the spirit of the law. Romans 7:7 says: *I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, "You shall not covet."*

- C. If I don't kill anyone I have kept the letter of the law. But if I get so angry and vengeful that I would kill someone if not for fear of the consequences, then I have failed the spirit of the law.
- D. I'm not just controlling my body anymore, but also my mind. That's harder!
- 2. Another example (vs 27) is adultery.
 - A. By saying that adultery is wrong, the letter teaches me that sexual feelings need to be controlled.
 - B. Suppose a man wanted to commit adultery but he just didn't have a willing partner or he didn't want to lose his kids.
 - I. He has kept the letter of the law because he hasn't done anything.
 - II. But he has missed the point. The law isn't in his heart, it's only on the outside. Or worse, he's just keeping it by coincidence.
 - III. Keeping it in body and in heart or mind is doing more than keeping it in body only.
- 3. So we can see that following the spirit of the law is not a valid excuse for ignoring the law. It seems that it usually means keeping the letter of the law plus going even further.
- 4. In verses 24 and 25 we see the idea once again that sacrifices are not the number one priority.
 - A. This individual is bringing his gift to the altar - this would be part of the law. And he remembers that his brother has something against him. What does he do?
 - I. First, he reconciles with his brother.
 - II. And only after he reconciles does he offer his gift.
 - B. He doesn't neglect this part of the Old Law - he does offer the gift. But it's not the top priority.
 - C. The Pharisees had these priorities backwards (Matthew 23:23).
 - I. They did a good job making sure they paid all their tithes and that was important. At the end of the verse Jesus says they should not have left those things undone.
 - II. However, that was not the top priority. The top priority - the weightier part of the law - is justice, mercy, and faith.
- f. God has always placed a higher emphasis on mercy and morality than on making these more ceremonial sacrifices for Him (Isaiah 1:10-17).
 - 1. These people had their priorities flipped around too.
 - A. They were making animal sacrifices to God and they were keeping His feasts.
 - B. But they weren't moral people.
 - 2. And so God found their sacrifices repulsive. He said they were futile, an abomination.
 - 3. Keeping the outward ceremonial things - the scheduled things - is not that hard. They could handle making some sacrifices and showing up for some feasts.
 - 4. Living good and moral lives seems to be harder, maybe because it's a 24/7 job.
 - 5. And it's the same for us. It's easier to show up every Sunday morning and take the Lord's Supper than it is to do good things every day.

- g.** Let's think of the Lord's Supper in a "spirit of the law" manner.
- 1.** First, what's the letter of the law? Because we can't know the spirit of the law without knowing the letter of the law.
 - A.** Take the unleavened bread as a symbol of Jesus' body, which was broken on our behalf.
 - B.** Take the fruit of the vine as a symbol of Jesus' blood, which He shed on our behalf.
 - C.** Do it in remembrance of Him.
 - 2.** Now the spirit of the law.
 - A.** We are doing this in remembrance of Jesus. We need to remember Him.
 - I.** Jesus was a servant.
 - a.** He came to serve us by teaching what we need and by paying for our sins.
 - b.** He told His disciples to follow His example of serving (John 13:14+15).
 - II.** Jesus died to take away our sins.
 - a.** He had to go through that because of our sins.
 - b.** And it shows us how horrible sin really is.
 - B.** Are we making the sacrifice of being here every Sunday to remember Jesus, without really remembering Him?
 - I.** I may follow the letter of the law by coming here every Sunday, taking these symbols, and thinking about Jesus while I take them.
 - II.** But if I am not living a life of service, then how well am I really remembering him?
 - III.** Or if I am continuing to live in sin, how well am I really remembering him? (Romans 6:1-4).
 - a.** Jesus allowed us to put away our sins.
 - b.** If we continue in sin, are we really remembering Jesus every week? Or are we perhaps missing the point of the Lord's Supper?
 - C.** Recall that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.
 - I.** The Sabbath was for remembering God, but if it actually prevented His people from living the lives He wanted from them, then they were missing the point. The Pharisees were missing the point when they questioned Jesus for healing on the Sabbath.
 - II.** If I take the Lord's Supper and declare myself holy enough for the week, then I believe I am missing the point.
- h.** Following the spirit of the law does not mean ignoring the law.
- 1.** It means going deeper, putting more thought into the letter of the law.
 - 2.** It means making a bigger commitment.

IV. Conclusion - Here's what I hope we can get out of this lesson.

- a.** Following the spirit of the law is a good thing. Jesus did it and He showed the Pharisees their error in not doing it.
- b.** We can't follow - or even understand - the spirit of the law unless we know the letter of the law.
- c.** We need to be very careful about judging others on the letter of the law with no regard

for the spirit of the law. That's what the Pharisees were guilty of with Jesus and His disciples.

- d.** Following the spirit of the law is an even bigger commitment than following the letter of the law.
- e.** Have you been following the spirit of God's law?
 - 1.** Are you putting thought into your actions and your service to God?
 - 2.** Are you serving God inwardly and not just outwardly?
 - 3.** If not, then I urge you to make that commitment and do it today.