

Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 5:13-20

The Law's Intent

A man named A.J. Jacobs has written a book entitled, "The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible."

In it, he documents his one-year experiment to follow as many of the Laws found in the Bible as possible. There are hundred of laws in the Bible and his plan was not to pick and choose, but to follow as many of them as possible.

There are laws against wearing two different kinds of cloth at once, against eating certain foods, against trimming the sides of your beard, against doing any kind of work on the Sabbath.

There are also laws requiring things like tending your sheep, playing a ten-string harp, fasting on the Day of Atonement, and keeping the traditional rituals and festival days.

The 10 Commandments are included, of course. But there are literally hundreds of little-known laws in the Old Testament.

AJ found it impossible to follow all of them all at once, so he focused on a few at a time. He took trips to places, including Israel, because some of the laws could not be obeyed in New York City.

AJ ended up with a long shaggy beard, looking like Moses or ZZ Top. He wore cotton robes and simple sandals. He carried a staff and for a time he was a shepherd. It was a very unusual year for him!

It was a huge challenge to live by all of those Laws, some of which just seem plain silly and outdated. And yet, there they are, in black and white, in holy scripture.

Maybe we should all try to follow them.

But we don't. Not all of them. We tend to pick the big ones and do our best with those. Not many of us cover our heads for worship or on a daily basis. I don't know anyone who is concerned about not wearing more than one type of cloth at a time.

And I hear sometimes that it's because, as Christians, we live under grace, not under the law.

And yet Jesus says in this morning's passage from Matthew that he has not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it!

So---are we all in trouble? We don't even know all the Laws, so how can we possibly follow them?

In our passage from Isaiah this morning, we read that God, through the prophet, told the people that they were paying too much attention to the letter of the law.

They were so busy being good at fasting and praying that they were missing something.

All their fasting and praying had kind of turned into a competition. Isaiah talks about hitting with a closed fist and about pointing fingers and saying bad things about each other.

The passage doesn't tell us about the details any more than that, but it makes it clear that all their efforts to outdo each other in being obedient to the law were having the wrong outcome.

Instead of following the law to give God the glory, they were trying to glorify themselves.

Instead of building a relationship with God and others by fasting and praying, they were actually breaking down relationships.

God tells them that the fast he desires from them has more to do with making a difference in the world than it does with their personal disciplines.

God tells them that what he wants them to do is to work against injustice, to free the oppressed, to feed the hungry and help the homeless and the poor.

God wants them to build the kingdom of God here on earth and not spend their time trying to earn his blessing by praying and fasting more than everyone else does!

God tells them, tells us!! that by serving others our light will shine in the darkness and our gloom will be like the noonday sun!

And Jesus, according to Matthew, tells us that we are the light of the world!

The light of the world shining like a beacon from a hill, for all the world to see!

To make a difference for all the world to know by working against injustice, oppression, hunger, and need.

Because that's what the light of the world does----shine into the darkness of hopelessness and despair, into the darkness of the hunger and need found outside of the kingdom of God.

Jesus also said the two greatest commandments were to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves.

He said that on these two commandments "rest all of the law and the prophets."

So right there is the key to the law's intent. All of the hundreds of laws in the Bible hinge on that intent.

All of them have the purpose of leading us to either love God better or love others better, or both.

When the scribes and the Pharisees criticized Jesus for harvesting grain or for healing on the Sabbath, he pointed that out to them. He said, “The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath.” In other words, we have a day of rest for our good, not just to have an arbitrary rule to follow.

Healing on the Sabbath was allowed, according to Jesus, because anyone would give an animal water on the Sabbath, so why wouldn't you give people what they needed?

Again, the intent of the law was obeyed. It was someone's interpretation of the law, and not the law itself, that was broken.

Harvesting grain on the Sabbath fed the hungry.

Healing on the Sabbath freed people from the chains of their illness and cared for those who were suffering. Both were acts of love toward neighbor.

Jesus told us that we are the light of the world and that we must not hide our light! When we know that we are loved by God and we find ourselves loving God more and more by praying, fasting, or whatever spiritual disciplines we practice, then we are able to reflect God's love and light to others more and more brightly.

Loving others by serving them, by meeting their needs for freedom, belonging, food, and shelter, among others, is a way to shine. Every act of love shines light into the darkness of the world.

Jesus also said that we are the salt of the earth. Salt brings out the flavor of food that tastes bland. It brings out the flavor that is there, but it is somehow hidden.

When we are the salt of the earth, we bring out of others what is already there. We bring out the love that God has for all of creation, we bring out the goodness that exists in ourselves and in others, we bring out the presence of God where others cannot see it,

We bring out the love for God and others that is inside of everyone.

How do we do that? By loving them and by sharing our love for God and God's love for us and them.

This is the Law's intent.

The Law does not intend for us to mindlessly obey rules that make no sense to us. The Law does not intend for us to try to outdo one another in being pious or outwardly religious.

There is no benefit in fasting longer or praying louder than anyone else.

The intent of the Law is simple. Love and worship God and Love others as we love ourselves. Serve God by serving others.

On these two depend all of the Law and the Prophets, in the words of Jesus.

And this is what Isaiah was told to tell the people. The kind of fast that God wants from the people is the kind that serves others.

To be the light of the world and the salt of the earth,
that's what we are called to do.

So how do we avoid the trap of mindless obedience?
Of just going through the motions or of fasting and praying for
the wrong reasons?

Someone once gave me a keychain with a different
kind of cross on it and I have it attached to my purse as a
reminder. Take out a pen or pencil and draw it to remind
yourself.

First, make a relatively large plus sign. Leave room around it on all four sides.

Now draw a circle around the plus sign.

Put a smaller plus sign in each of the four sections of the large one.

Outside the circle on the left write “acts of piety”. On the right, write “acts of mercy.”

On the top, write “public.”

On the bottom, write “private”

So now the small cross on the top left symbolizes public acts of piety, such as this worship service.

The bottom left symbolizes private acts of piety---daily prayers and devotions. It includes things like reading the Bible and the Upper Room or any other daily time you spend with God.

The top right is public acts of mercy. This includes any volunteer work you do in the community, such as at a homeless shelter or mission trips. It can also be supporting legislation that helps the poor.

The bottom right is private acts of mercy. This includes things like donations to UMCOR and giving canned goods to Bayside, anything that is fairly anonymous. It also includes forgiving others and anything that happens between you and one other person.

Now, here's the way this works to keep us honest in our acts of piety and holiness.

Our private acts stay private. Our prayers stay in secret, as Jesus told us to do. Our anonymous service to others stays anonymous.

Our public acts are done in community, either with our church family or other group of volunteers.

The most important thing is this----

BALANCE. All four of these areas are important to our spiritual development.

If we emphasize one over the others, we don't grow properly, any more than a child who eats only one kind of food grows the way he or she should.

We NEED the public and the private, the acts of piety and of mercy, all of them together.

And this balance will make our relationship with God and our relationships with our neighbors strong and vital and growing.

And when our relationships are growing and strong, we will be at our brightest as the light of the world, and our saltiest as the salt of the earth.

And that is the law's intent---to make our relationships with God and each other the best, the strongest they can be!

When AJ Jacobs began his year-long experiment of following all the laws found in the Bible, he was, he says, an agnostic. He thought that God might or might not exist.

He had no relationship with God.

And here's the funny thing.

As silly as some of those laws seem to us today, as arbitrary and out-dated and out of place here in the 21st century, an amazing thing happened.

After a year of living with those rules and ending up looking like Moses or Elijah or someone from the Bible,

He found himself closer to God.

He still wasn't quite sure he believed, but somehow there was a relationship beginning. He found himself more willing to believe. He had also spent time serving others as required by those laws.

The Laws had lived up to their intent---to bring him into a closer relationship with God and neighbor.

Even though AJ was not looking for that result, even though he was not seeking that relationship, it happened.

Imagine --- Dream! About what might happen if we spend time trying to have a better relationship with God and with others!

Seek balance in your spiritual life and just see how God answers your prayers.

With God's help, we can be the light of the world and the salt of the earth.

Amen.