

I come in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

On a recent visit, my Jewish aunt shared a childhood story. Background: She grew up in a Jewish neighborhood in St. Louis. The degree to which a Jewish family adhered to mitzvot (the 613 rules), varied from household to household. Mitzvot includes the dietary restrictions associated with being kosher, as well as the rules for sabbath rest. Today we focus on Sabbath rest. Have you ever been to a hotel, where elevators have ‘sabbath,’ mode? It is where elevator compartments automatically ride up and down, and stop at each floor on Shabbat, which runs from sundown Friday until sundown Saturday. In Jewish law, it is prohibited to push an elevator button because it is considered ‘work.’ This includes anything that creates a spark or fire. To adhere to mitzvot, a typical household would turn lights on prior to Shabbat, and leave them on for the duration.

My aunt was invited to her friend’s house for a sleepover on a Friday evening (Sabbath). They strictly observed the rules that prohibit work on Shabbat. Before bedtime, my aunt made a bathroom visit, and as she exited, she habitually turned off the light. Being the Sabbath, no one was allowed to turn the light back on until Saturday evening, meaning all bathroom activities had to be done in the dark. The family deserves credit, they obediently kept the Sabbath holy.

The light switch episode may sound silly to us – after all, what’s the big deal? But, in Judaism, obedience to the Law is the way to demonstrate one’s love for God, and to show gratitude for all that has been given. Obedience is not a chore, but rather an honor. In reality, the earth would not come to an end if someone turned the light back on, but it would have been an act of disobedience, and that’s the issue. Hold that thought.

In our reading from Hebrews, the author compares the experience at Mt. Sinai to Mt. Zion (New Jerusalem). At Sinai, access to God was limited to only Moses and Aaron. Only Moses was permitted to go up the mountain to hear God’s voice and receive the tablets. All others were prohibited, and were fearful of God. They did not want to hear God’s voice for fear that they would die. They did not want to hear God’s truth. Yet, God had provided them laws to help them live in community, to become a nation, to have an identity. Rather than listen to God’s voice, they listened to earthly voices, drawing them into idol worship (golden calf episode). Even Moses became fearful, fearful that the people would abandon obedience, and would be remain ungrateful.

In contrast, Zion offers unrestricted and unlimited access to God through Jesus. The author paints a glorious picture of the New Jerusalem, a gift to us through Christ.

But the author warns that even though God is more accessible, the temptations of the world remain. At the end of time, all that is temporal will vanish, and the New Jerusalem will be all that is left.

Therefore, is it not in our best interest to remain in steadfast obedience to God's word and laws? And with all that God promises, the inconceivable glory of the future, it is only fitting to dedicate time to Him in gratitude.

You have likely heard the phrases, "The Spirit of the law" and the "Letter of the law." The light-switch example demonstrates the letter of the law. It is a specific instruction to be obeyed. Does the position of the light switch really matter? No. Is altering our behavior in obedience demonstrate our gratitude to God matter? Yes! But if we merely check the box and trap us in legalism. It's like being unable to see the forest because of the trees.

Our readings today remind us to be obedient and grateful. God's promise is so amazing, yet we constantly try to 'beat the system?' Do you ever apply your own interpretation of a rule, and decide it stupid – resulting in dismissiveness of it? Do you ever play the game, doing just barely enough? Do you ever rationalize disobedience? Do you convince yourself that rule doesn't apply to you, or that you are above the law?

For example. (Keep Holy the Sabbath) If I come into church at the Gospel, and leave right after Communion, does it count?

(Thou shalt not steal) If I receive incorrect change in my favor at a retail store, can I keep it? (Thou shalt not bear false witness) Is it really gossip if the dirt I dish out on someone is true? Rationalization: Everyone drives 5mph over the speed limit, so it's not speeding. Rules that don't apply to me because I am smarter than they are. There is a rule, in bold type, included in the user manual for a Rowenta clothes iron that states, "Never press clothes while they are being worn."

Our readings today are about following rules, as well as breaking them. They are about the spirit of the law vs the letter of the law.

In our Gospel, Jesus heals a woman, breaking the mitzvah prohibiting work on the Sabbath. In the story, "the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.'" Jesus violated the letter of the law.

If Jesus can break the law, then why can't we? After all, rules are rules. And, Jesus broke the laws of mitzvot, God's commandment. Wouldn't this act of disobedience violate his love of God? Disobedience seems acceptable. So, which is it? Obedience or not?

Jesus puts things into perspective. The leadership chastises him for violating the letter of the law by healing a woman, while they, on the Sabbath, tend to their livestock. Hmmm. Healing a chronically ill human vs. watering a cow.

Isaiah told us today, if you honor the Sabbath, “not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth.”

I suggest that Jesus obeyed the spirit of the law. He put the ill woman, a child of God, ahead of himself. He was of service to her, and glorified the Father. He got nothing out of the deal.

So where is the Good News in all of this?

We live in a 7 x 24 x 365 world. People expect services at all times, all days of the week. Many people are required to work on the Sabbath. In strict obedience to the letter of the law, many positions could not be filled by those who observe sabbath rest. They could not be in law enforcement, firefighting, health care, retail sales, hospitality services, or in transportation. Today, it is not realistic to be without these essential services. We have been given a glimpse into God’s promise of Zion. We have a promise of a glorious life in the New Jerusalem. We are commanded to set sights on the eternal vision. We cannot ignore God’s intent for us. So, what does one do?

Even if we rationalize our way out of obedience, we must be aware that some rules simply need to be kept, whether we agree or not. We need to obey those rules that are good for us, whether in the spirit of the law, or in the letters of the law. Today, we are reminded that it is imperative to set time aside for God.

If circumstances make it difficult to obey on Sunday, perhaps the time can be set aside on Tuesday. ‘When’ is unimportant – obedience is important.

Showing gratitude is incredibly important, whether through prayer, reflection, rest, or service in Jesus’ Name. Perhaps we need to adhere to the letter of the law. Or, we may be called to obey the spirit of the law. Discern that.

Is it permissible to be a rule-breaker? Absolutely! Should one ignore every rule? Absolutely not! Should one discern the spirit of a rule? Yes. Should one discern a higher order? Yes. For example, should you exceed the speed limit in an effort to get an ill person to the hospital? Yes. Should you provide care to a needy neighbor on Sunday, rather than going to church? Yes. Must you set time aside for God? Yes. Should you update your LinkedIn account to get a better job? Maybe not.

May you be granted the wisdom to discern whether the letter of a law can be broken, from those that should be obeyed. May you be a time-keeper – keeping time for God. May you be granted the confidence, through faith, to accept God’s laws, and, in trust, obey them. May you have the determination to trust in God’s providence and promise, and commit yourself to seeking God’s promise. May you be filled with gratitude at the wonders of this world, and the world to come. If necessary, flip the switch, and to loosely quote Tom Bodett and Motel 6: “Keep the light of Christ on for you.” Amen.