

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Matthew 5:17-20

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Grasshopper on the Road: The Voyage

Grasshopper came to a puddle of water in the road. He was just about to hop over the puddle. "Wait!" cried a tiny voice. Grasshopper looked down. At the edge of the puddle was a mosquito. He was sitting in a little boat. "It is a rule," said the mosquito. "You must use this ferry boat to get across the lake." "But sire," said Grasshopper, "I can easily jump over to the other side."

"Rules are rules," said the mosquito. "Climb into my boat." "Your boat is too small for me," said Grasshopper. "Rules are rules," said the mosquito. "You *must* get into my boat!" "I can't fit into your boat," said Grasshopper. "Rules are still rules!" shouted the mosquito. "Well then," said Grasshopper, "there is only one thing for me to do." Grasshopper picked up the boat.

"All aboard," called the mosquito. Grasshopper held the boat very carefully. He stepped into the puddle. "You are lucky to be with me on this voyage," said the mosquito. "I have been sailing back and forth across this lake for many years," said the mosquito. "I am not afraid of storms or waves." Grasshopper took another step.

"I know more about sailing than anyone else around here," said the mosquito. Grasshopper took one more step. He was on the other side of the puddle. He put the boat down into the water. "That was a good trip," said the mosquito. "Now I must hurry back to the other shore to wait for new riders."

"Thank you," said Grasshopper. "Thank you very much for taking me safely across the lake." "I was glad to do it," said the mosquito. Grasshopper waved good-bye and kept on walking down the road.

Sermon

Rules are rules. Law is life, disobedience is death.

I wonder if you can remember back to when you were first learning how to drive? I was a farm kid and so I learned to drive the truck and the tractor in the fields around the age of 12 or 13. But that was very different than learning to drive a car, on the road, with other cars. We lived in the country and had to drive into the city for most anything we wanted. And so I vividly remember the first time I drove on the interstate. The anxiety about merging into traffic, the fear of the large semi-trucks that were either passing me or when I was passing them. I still remember the moment that I was about to move over a lane and my dad had to grab the wheel because I missed the car next to me in the mirror. I think learning to drive might be the first time for many of us to realize just how true it is that laws are life, and disobedience is death.

Thomas Long wrote about this passage that, "In Judaism, the law is a blessing, a good gift, a source of life. But what about the Jewish law for Christians? What is the force of these ancient commandments now that the new event of Jesus Christ has occurred?... there are two obvious, and diametrically opposed, resolutions to this question: one, that what we now call the Old Testament law remains in full effect for Christians; and, two, that the new freedom in Christ cancels and abolishes the requirements of the law. So, to put it simply, either Christ leaves the law intact or Christ replaces the law with something new. Which shall it be?"

Obedience is the way of life we read in Deuteronomy, and disobedience leads to death. But surely Jesus' love and grace outweigh that of the old laws. Surely we can depend on God's mercy in life and in death. And who can truly fulfill all of the laws anyway. There are too many.

Yet Jesus pushes his listeners by indicating that not one law, not even the least of them, will go away until the end of time. So what does it all mean?

It comes to our understanding of what Jesus means when he says, "I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." What does it mean for Jesus to fulfill the law? In part it means that Jesus becomes the lens in which the law is interpreted. Instead of wrote obedience to the letter of the law, now Jesus asks his followers to see each and every commandment, from least to greatest, through the eyes of the new thing that has happened in and through him.

We must purposefully and obediently come to each law and commandment and ask ourselves, "What is the will of God that stands behind this commandment, and how may we be obedient to that will?" This is neither abolishment nor unthinking acceptance of the law. Instead it asks the church to interpret and understand the spirit of the law, literally the will of God in which the law was given.

One example of this later in Matthew's gospel is time where the pharisees call out Jesus' disciples for plucking grain on the sabbath or the time where Jesus heals a man on the sabbath. Both are technically against the commandment of keeping the sabbath. But behind this commandment is a God who wills that human society be just and merciful, that human life be nourished and restored. This is the heart of the sabbath commandment. Jesus' argument then is that by violating the commandment's surface requirements, he and his disciples have, in fact, fulfilled its depths.

And so we must be careful, because too often the church and you and I as individuals, fall into one easy choice or another. Strict obedience or abolishment. But Jesus calls his followers to a much more difficult task. The task of discernment that involves knowledge of the law and knowledge of the author of those laws. This takes time and study, it takes a community working together and it takes a strong faith that God's grace will help us to see God's will.

In the Sermon, Jesus expresses this move to the depths of the law by saying, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven". The word "exceed," in this case, refers to the quality of righteousness, not the quantity. This is not about offering two lambs when the Pharisees offer one. No, the followers of Jesus are called to a different kind of righteousness, a righteousness that seeks to be ever expressive of the merciful, forgiving, reconciling will of God that lies at the center of the law. That, my friends, is truly where life can be found. Amen