

**THE LETTER OF THE LAW – OR – THE SPIRIT OF THE LAW:
SEEING CLEARLY FROM GOD’S PERSPECTIVE**

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 14, 2025

Out of deep love for God and for all humanity, Jesus knew when to follow the letter of the law, and when to break it, following instead the spirit of the law.

In Exodus and 1 Timothy and Luke we read about sin and righteousness and God’s judgment and God’s mercy. Exodus tells us about the Hebrew people who were led by God out of Egypt towards the Promised Land. But as they lingered at the base of Mt. Horeb while Moses conversed with God on its summit, time went by, and they began to grow restless. As their minds wandered, they started thinking about all the other gods they had worshipped in Egypt; Isis and Osiris and Amun; all their glorious statues and images. But their God, Yahweh, who had led them safely out of danger by fire and cloud, he was now nowhere to be found. So they decided to turn away from Yahweh towards those other gods. And in doing so, they sin.

Fifteen hundred years later the apostle Paul turned from God as well, in his own way, and in doing this, he considered himself the worst of sinners. Not because he was more wicked and immoral than anyone else. No, he was more righteous than most. As a devout Pharisee he had followed the Law of Moses in every detail. There was nothing in his life that you or I might normally consider as sinful, certainly nothing that could have made Paul the “worst of sinners.” So, what was his offence?

He tells us in today’s gospel. He writes: “[Christ Jesus] considered me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence.” Paul saw himself the

“worst of sinners,” because he had fought against Jesus Christ through his persecution of Jesus’ disciples.

He realized that his heart had grown calloused. He had been unwilling to open his eyes and heart to consider that Jesus’ aberrant teachings just might possibly be true; willing to see his Jewish religion and spirituality in a different, new way. His mind and heart were clouded, preventing him from seeing the presence of God right in front of him in the Christians who were claiming that Jesus was their messiah. Paul had only seen these people as lawbreakers and heretics who must be silenced for the good of Jewish orthodoxy. And so, he persecuted them and had them arrested.

The Pharisee Paul’s problem was the same as many of the Pharisees and scribes at the time. They were incensed that Jesus would sit down to a meal with tax collectors and sinners, in direct violation of the Jewish law. Legally, they were in the right. But they weren’t seeing the big picture, from God’s perspective. But Jesus was. They lacked a heart of love. But Jesus embodied the full measure of divine love.

Just as the Hebrew people had sinned and turned to other gods, and Paul had become the worst of sinners through his persecution of Jesus Christ and the Christians, these Pharisees and Scribes were also the worst of sinners. Not because they were necessarily wicked and immoral, although some of them may have been, but because in their rigid adherence to the Law of Moses. They were not seeing the work of God right in front of them in Jesus.

There’s a lesson here about passion and zeal. Zeal for God can be a good thing, when it comes with an open heart that is able to see the works of God, and can lead people down the right path. But zeal for God can also be blinding and dangerous. It can come from a hard heart that is more

concerned with the Law and orthodoxy than with the needs of the people right in front of them.

Jesus was passionate for the Jewish faith as well. You remember that time when he overturned the tables on the Temple grounds, and his disciples remembered these words: “zeal for your house will consume me.” Yes, he was passionate for God’s House.

But Jesus’ zeal came from a heart wide open to God; a heart that gave him a passion and compassion for all humanity. And so, when the religious leaders berated him for eating with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus told them a story: “If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won’t he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders. When he arrives, he will call together his friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.’” Jesus used hyperbole to get his point across by speaking of a shepherd who was so concerned about one foolish sheep that had wandered away, that he was willing to leave all the rest who were staying put, the other 99 now vulnerable sheep, to go after and bring back that one that was lost.

It was a story about zeal and passion and an open heart for the lost. But it was a story that revealed the hardened hearts of the religious leaders who were more concerned with adherence to the Law and orthodoxy, than the real struggle and deep needs of the people.

These Pharisees and scribes were very much like the Hebrews in the wilderness who had grown calloused and turned from God, and the apostle Paul, who in his hardness, had missed the presence of God in the Christians right in front of him.

But we shouldn't be too hard on those Pharisees. Their descendants were sometimes much like them. As their Jewish religion developed and formalized over the years, their theology and doctrine and liturgy gained clarity and specificity. They established a clear understanding of worship and what obedience to God might look like. But sometimes, they went a bit overboard.

Maybe they went a bit overboard when they took those God given ten mitzvot (commandments) and came up with a list of 613 commandments for the devout Jews to follow.

But the Jewish religion was not the only one to have leaders who could get overzealous and calloused of heart, and unable to bend and follow the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law to meet the needs of hurting people.

As our Christian religion began to formalize over the centuries, our theology and doctrine and liturgy gained further clarity and specificity, giving us a clear structure in what to believe and how to worship and how to live. But sometimes these Christian leaders went a bit overboard as well.

Even though our founder, our Lord and teacher Jesus had shown us the way to listen to the Spirit and bend the letter of the law when necessary, we as Christians have been known to get overzealous as well about the letter of the law, and calloused of heart, and unwilling to see, and bend to meet the deep needs of hurting people.

We may not have codified 613 commandments like our brothers the Jews, but we have been known to go overboard as well in our own unique way. Here's an example. One parish offers a version of an Examination of

Conscience online that they provide to help Christians grow in their faith. It lays out each of the Ten Commandments, identifying specific activities and behaviors under each commandment that qualifies as either Mortal or Venial sins. Here is just a small sampling regarding the first commandment:

“The first Commandment. I am the Lord your God. You shall not have strange gods before me. MORTAL SINS: Involvement in occult practices, e.g., witchcraft, ouija boards, seances, palm reading, tarot cards, hypnotism, divination, black magic, sorcery, etc. Involvement in or adherence to New Age or Eastern philosophies, atheism or agnosticism. Apostasy (leaving the Church). Adherence to a schismatic group. Putting faith in superstition. Joining the Masons or other secret society. Receiving a Sacrament or Holy Communion in the state of mortal sin without prior Confession.”

“VENIAL SINS: Failure to pray on a daily basis; Not trying to love God with my whole mind, heart, soul and strength; Trying to control things rather than seek God’s will; Entertaining doubts against the Faith; Failing to seek out or learn the teachings of the Church; Indifference or ingratitude to God; Luke warmness in the relationship with God; Not trying to grow spiritually; being content with mediocrity; Acedia (spiritual sloth); Putting other things or people before God, e.g., TV, radio, sports, hobbies, etc.” – and the list goes on and on through each commandment with their list of mortal and venial sins.

Yes, zeal for God’s house, and for God’s people, and for all humanity is important. But it must come from an open heart of love, a heart that is willing for the good of humanity to veer from the letter in order to follow the spirit.