

Alright, so this morning I want to discuss something that I don't think we have discussed as a church, since I have been here.

But it's a topic that has been debated by Christians for centuries.

And this is kind of a heady sermon this morning, so stick with me.

The question that's been debated is this, when Jesus lived and taught and preached, did he think he was the Messiah?

Was Jesus, through his life and ministry, trying to get the Jews to follow and worship him?

My humble opinion is, no, and I think that for a lot of reasons.

But my main reasons for believing that is because Jesus was Jewish, he was a professed Jew.

So it doesn't make sense to me that he would have tried to pull the Jews away from their ancestral faith.

He went through sacred Jewish rituals, starting at 8 days old when the scriptures tell us that he was circumcised and then presented at the temple (Luke 2: 21-24).

He kept the Sabbath, he frequently visited the Synagogue, he observed purity laws.

He celebrated Passover and other high holy days!

He frequently quoted the Prophet Isaiah from the Hebrew Bible.

If he came with the intention of having everyone worship him, then he wasn't very good at it, as he kept pointing everyone towards God.

Now, one text that is often used to dispute Jesus' commitment to Judaism, is the scripture we heard today.

People claim that the statements Jesus makes refute or undermine the authority of the 10 Commandments.

I am referring to the statements he makes, like, "you have heard it said, you shall not murder, but I say to you..."

and "you have heard it said you shall not commit adultery, but I say to you..."

and "you have heard it said, you shall not swear falsely, but I say to you..."

Christians have argued that Jesus is challenging the law, telling his followers that it no longer applies, that they don't need to follow the 10 Commandments.

Some Christians think Jesus is telling his disciples that they shouldn't concern themselves with the written Torah law anymore, now they should just listen to what Jesus says.

This is one main argument people make when trying to claim that Jesus was not a faithful Jew, but was trying to have them worship him, claiming that he knew he was the Messiah or the one sent to fulfill the Jewish prophesy.

The problem with this argument is that in this very chapter in the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 5, Jesus says in verse 17, *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”*

The text says that he did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill the teachings, in fact, in the very next verse (18), he goes on to say, *“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.”*

He is trying to fulfill the law, in other words, not abolish it or draw people away from it, quite the opposite, reinforce it, actually hold people to a *higher* standard than what the law dictates.

Imagine if one of the laws was that the Jews had to give half of their wealth to the poor, Jesus’ response would be, “You have heard it said that you should give half of your wealth to the poor, but truly I tell you, you should give away all of it.”

See, he’s not contradicting it, but taking it to another whole level.

He was telling his followers that the law must not be a litmus test for whether or not we are being good, moral and ethical beings, but we should hold ourselves to a higher standard.

You shouldn’t go to bed each night, and while reflecting on your day, pat yourself on the back for not committing murder, stealing or committing adultery.

That’s a pretty low bar.

Jesus is trying to hold them to the spirit of the law, not the letter of the law.

In fact, sometimes upholding the spirit of the law means breaking it.

Later on in the Gospel of Matthew, the Pharisees get very angry and start plotting about how they can kill Jesus because he healed someone on the Sabbath, which was against Jewish law.

But Jesus' point was that the purpose of the Sabbath is to reconnect with God, with family, to strengthen those relationships.

And if an opportunity presents itself, on the Sabbath, in which you need to do something which you believe is aligned with what God wants you to do, then do it.

And do not worry about the fact that you "worked" on the Sabbath, because you upheld the spirit of the law, you considered your relationship with God before acting.

That's what these laws are about, they are not an end in and of themselves.

They are a means to an end, the end is that we are in right relationship with each other and with God.

Or, in my opinion, the end goal is to follow Jesus' ultimate commandment, which is *"To love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind... and to love your neighbour as yourself."* (Matthew 22:36-39).

And you know what's really interesting?

After Jesus says this great commandment, he says one last important line.

He says, *“On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”*

His point was that all the laws are supposed to point to that ultimate goal- to love God and love each other.

The purpose of all those laws is to create healthy, strong relationships between the people and God, which means that we need to hold ourselves to a higher standard than what the law literally says.

He says we need to broaden the scope of the law so that it helps us to achieve our ultimate aim of loving God as best we can, and loving each other as fully as we can.

That’s why, *“It’s not enough just to refrain from murder.*

*We should also treat each other with respect and that means not speaking hateful words.*

*It is not enough to avoid physically committing adultery.*

*We should also not objectify other persons by seeing them as a means to satisfy our physical desires by lusting after them.*

*It is not enough to follow the letter of the law regarding divorce.*

*We should not treat people as disposable and should make sure that the most vulnerable -- in this culture that often meant women and children -- are provided for.*

*It is not enough to keep ourselves from swearing falsely or lying to others.*

*We should speak and act truthfully in all of our dealings so that we don't need to make oaths at all."*

(*"The Relational God," Rev. Dr. David Lose, Workingpreacher.org*).

What Jesus called his followers, and calls us, to do, is more challenging than following a black and white law.

It's easier to live by lists and rules than it is to live by dynamic guidelines that are up for interpretation, as we apply them to our lives.

It's easy to say I won't kill someone else, but saying that you'll do everything you can to protect and preserve life?

That's a much higher aim.

And it is relatively easy to say that you won't have sexual relations with anyone other than your spouse, but to promise never to lust after anyone else, or have inappropriate thoughts about anyone else, or have a flirtatious conversation with anyone else, ever?

That's a lot harder.

And it's easy to say, okay, I won't swear against God, or take God's name in vain, but to never lie, about anything, ever?

Or, to never say thing that you don't fully mean, 100%.

That's a lot harder, but that is what Jesus asks of us.

I like to think that Jesus knew his crowd, he knew they weren't perfect, that they'd fall down and stumble and mess up, and then through forgiveness and grace, they'd get back up again.

Our goal is to love God and each other as best we can, and because we are imperfect, we need signposts and guidelines to help us do that, which is what the 10 Commandments are, and it's the higher standards that Jesus held us to.

But that's the beauty of goals.

They are something to aspire to, so do the best you can each and every day, to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself, and remember that we don't follow rules for the sake of the rules, but for our sake and the sake of the world.

Amen.