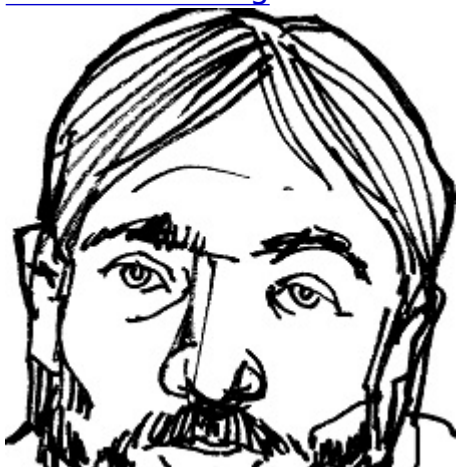


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“I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” (Matthew 6:17).

Deut 4:1, 5-9; Matt 6:17-19

The charge that Jesus was a lawbreaker must have been a serious issue for the primitive church. The Gospels address this often, arguing that though Jesus did not observe some ritual cleansing practices, Sabbath restrictions, and was known to touch lepers and associate with sinners, he was in fact fulfilling the underlying Commandment of love.

There is no question Jesus radically challenged some deeper principles by reclaiming for humans, whom he called the “son of man,” or “human being” the power to discern compassion and necessity over sabbath rules when he healed on the sabbath. If a farmer could pull a donkey out of a ditch on the sabbath, so could Jesus or anyone save a human being. Or when Jesus said in another instance that “the son of man” (human beings) could forgive sins, he was asserting that human mercy was an extension of divine mercy.

The most radical assertion the church had to do with Jesus himself. He was greater than the Torah. He was the Way, the Truth and the Life. Rabbinic Judaism revered the Torah, the core revelation of God. To study the Law was to worship God. To keep the Law perfectly included observing the 619 extrapolated laws that acted as a kind of fence around the Torah to be sure you did not stray from any aspect of the law.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus directly defends obedience to the law for himself and his disciples. What the first covenant mandated, the new covenant affirmed. His followers were to keep and teach the Law in order to enter the Kingdom of God. But this was not about legalism or a slavish observance of the letter of the law, but a commitment to the Spirit of the law, to love God and neighbor.

Observing the Commandments provided a framework for right relationships with everyone. It kept people out of trouble, but its prohibitions were only to bring us to the maturity of love, a creative and constant challenge to discern in each instance what love required. Rules are for children. Adults apply the rules or alter them to fit the situation, even risking the letter to fulfill the spirit.

One of the main goals of Vatican II was to affirm the full maturity of the laity as the church. Bringing people formed in dependence and blind obedience into adult freedom and discernment was welcomed by many but resisted by others.

Hierarchical and clerical control did not cease automatically but was negotiated over time and by generation. It is still a work in progress. Our Lenten desert is an exercise in moving forward without visible signs and directions. All we have is the Spirit who blows like the wind and Jesus, who goes before us saying, "Follow me." The rest is up to us. Our compass is love, and this will get us where we need to go, or someplace else just as interesting.

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