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“I have not come to abolish but to fulfill” (Matthew 5:17).

2 Cor 3:4-11; Matt 5:17-19

The debate over the spirit and the letter of the law often implies that going with the spirit is much freer and therefore much easier. But the opposite is true. Having set requirements, even strict ones, when following the letter of the law, takes the worry and work out of having to discern the best response in each situation. Go by the book. The spirit of the law requires discernment. When Jesus summarized the entire law in the First Commandment of love, he shifted the focus from head to heart, from legal definitions to the rule of compassion for another person in need.

The Sermon on the Mount is based on this limitless and flexible measure of love. Jesus must have been accused of abolishing the law when he healed on the sabbath, touched the sick, ate with known sinners. No, Jesus responded, to act with love is to fulfill the law. He claims that love permeates the entire law, right down to each letter, the smallest part of a letter. He may have been addressing the legalism of the scribes, who parsed each rule with minute commentaries to cover every possible situation, as they did with the sabbath law to define whether an act was “work.” Love was the only guide you needed. And it was much more challenging than getting out the rule book.

When Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan to the scribe who asked who his neighbor was, he turned his world inside out. Looking for the precise limit beyond which he was not obligated to love, Jesus instead obligated him to love the whole world, wherever he encountered anyone in need of his compassion. The priest and Levite who passed by a fellow Jew on the road were acting within the law. The Samaritan upended all the rules by stopping to help a fellow human being. He was the neighbor who fulfilled the whole Law.

St Paul made obedience to the Spirit the centerpiece of discipleship. The new covenant is not of the letter but of the spirit, for the Spirit gives life. Even Moses, the great lawgiver, was drawn to the higher covenant when he encountered God face to face. He came down the mountain with the tablets of the law, but he was also so luminous with glory, he had to cover his face to protect the people. This was only a glimpse of what the Spirit gives disciples. When we love, we show our resemblance to God, who is Love. The rules bring order and justice, but the grace of this encounter with Love transforms us. If we keep the commandment to love, each day becomes an adventure and exploration of the complexities of compassion. But if we love, we will fulfill every lesser commandment.

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