

Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, Jan 23rd 2013

Often these readings are presented as being a contest between the "letter" and the "spirit" of God's law. We all see the absurdity of having a rule that forbids one from working a miracle on the Sabbath. While we aren't capable of working miracles in Jesus' sense, many are capable of performing CPR. Would someone really take the position that if a person with a heart condition collapsed on the Sabbath that it would be a sin to perform CPR on that person until the ambulance arrived? In fact, the Pharisees' law contained some emergency exceptions. It was permissible, for instance, for one to pull an ox out of a ditch on the Sabbath.

To cast the Gospel as a contest between the letter and the spirit of God's law misses the point by a bit. The Pharisees' laws about minute questions of what constituted Sabbath breaking weren't God's law at all. They weren't founded in any direct way on Old Testament scripture; they weren't divinely inspired.

Rather, they represented an unpleasant tendency that many of us have, which is when given a little bit of power over other humans, we have a sometimes insatiable desire to demonstrate our power.

Recently I was picking up my son at an out-of-town airport with which neither of us were familiar. It was not crowded and I pulled into the lane for passenger pick up. I was conversing with my son about which door to come out because the view of my car was obscured by two large buses. Just as my son and I caught sight of each other, one of the workers in charge of directing the flow of traffic started banging angrily on my window and yelling: "No waiting!" I pointed to my son coming out the door and explained that he was within 15 seconds of reaching my car and he waved. No matter she attempted to insist, I would have to circle back around the empty loop and return to the exact spot.

I admit to having harbored some very un-Christian thoughts at this point. By the time we had finished our argument, my son had gotten to the car and thrown his bag in and we drove off with the attendant now visibly more angry and yelling at me as I left.

I'm sure that outside of this context that she's a fine person. Perhaps she was doing exactly what she had been trained to do. But attempting to enforce the rule in the way she did would have served no purpose except to have me make a pointless one mile loop around the airport. The Pharisees were a

classic example of a bit of power going to their heads. We all have this tendency, but we could all benefit from Jesus' example.

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