

When was your last encounter with the law? Was it that time when you looked in your rear-view mirror and saw the blue light flashing on the patrol car behind you? Was it when you stepped across the line of company policy and the boss pointed out your error? Or was it way back when you were a kid and you were caught taking apples from a neighbor's tree and you got sent home for a good scolding?

Whenever it was, it was not fun. We don't like to run into the law, whatever form it takes. It seems unfair, harsh, certainly not something positive.

That's the experience of Jesus' disciples one Sabbath day. Going through some fields, they innocently, perhaps even absent-mindedly, began to pick some heads of grain. That was a "no no" in Jewish religious law. The Pharisees, those punctilious keepers of the codes, caught them red-handed. The result was a sermon from Jesus on the nature of the law.

Now right off we need to understand that the law here in Mark's Gospel is not the kind of law we usually think of. It really doesn't have much to do with what we might call "the law of the land," laws enacted by legislative bodies that guide our conduct and set standards for behavior in society. The Law we are struggling to understand here is God's Law. Law with a capital "L": law that encompasses the way God judges as well as guides us. This is the Law we usually think of in connection with the Ten Commandments. It is, you could say, God's restraining and correcting presence.

As the Pharisees understood that presence, it was mainly a *negative* power. The Law was a kind of bogeyman who haunted life. You could never escape its all-pervading influence.

I suspect that's the kind of view we take of God's Law even in our day. Look how often we see the Law as something that's "out to get us," something that's calculated just so as to make us feel guilty, to force us to do something we don't really want to do. Is it any wonder we have so much trouble not only with the rule of law in our faith lives, but also with its rule in society at large?

As a priest, one of my toughest jobs is to help people get over their negativity toward the Law of God, while at the same time respecting its necessity. It's a delicate balance.

God doesn't want us to wallow in guilt – but God also doesn't want us to be in rebellion, OR in just plain ignorance of what God would have us be or do.

Thanks be to God, we have the guidance of Jesus himself on this important subject. His attitude toward the Law, as articulated in today's Gospel, can help us out of our anger and confusion about God's Law, and perhaps even see why the Law is a good and loving thing for us to have in our lives.

One mistake we need to avoid is thinking that Jesus had a cavalier attitude toward the Law. Many readers of the New Testament have come to that conclusion. Scholars give them a fancy name, “*antinomians*,” a Latin term meaning, literally, “lawless people.” This understanding, which has come to pervade much of mainline Christian thinking in recent years, holds that the Christian life is free from the need to observe or follow the rules and obligations set down in the Bible, particularly those articulated in the Hebrew Scriptures. It may be oversimplifying things a bit to say this, but the result is an “anything goes” religion. This flies hard in the face of what Jesus himself had to say. He reminds us forcefully: “Don't think I have come to do away with the Law. I have come instead to fulfill the Law.”

One way Jesus fulfills the Law is to put a *positive thrust* on it. The commandment regarding worship, for example, is not some dark, terrible obligation put upon us to make our lives miserable. It is given to help us – to form the framework for a right relationship with God.

“The Sabbath was made for humankind,” Jesus tells his disciples, “not humankind for the Sabbath.” What he's telling us is that we need a time for rest, for meditation, for setting aside our daily duties so we can concentrate on being with our Lord in prayer and worship. The important distinction Jesus makes is that the Law commending us to do that is not meant to enslave us into a rigid adherence that makes the Sabbath an end in itself. If some small task needs be done, that we might better fulfill the spirit of this Law's requirement, so be it.

In the particular case of the story we hear today, it would seem the disciples had to eat. If that means picking some grain so they can concentrate on worship and not their growling stomachs, Jesus is saying, in essence, “What's wrong with that?”

You see, the Law can be a positive power for life. The Law can free us. It is not the confining force we so often take it to be. The law concerning the Sabbath is for our benefit. It is given that we might be more fully alive. Worship makes us *more* human, not *less*.

It's important to take time away from work to strengthen our lives. All Jesus is saying is, don't be abused *by* this Law, don't be fenced in by it. Keep in mind its overall purpose – why the Law was given in the first place.

In this thought, we find another important matter for our understanding. We obey the Law, not to please *God*, not to win God's *favor*, but to live *our* lives more fully and positively. The Law frees us to serve others – to better love our neighbors. In so doing, it ultimately makes us happier, more fulfilled, human beings. The motivation is not the *external* one of avoiding some negative consequence, of avoiding some perceived threat. It is the positive, *internal* one of having a richer, fuller life.

Now be honest. Have you thought of the Law in these kinds of terms before? Have you lived, at least sometimes, in fear and guilt? In the misery of looking at God as one who held a club over your head? If so, let today's Gospel invite you to a new *understanding* – a new *vision* of the Law: as one of God's most wonderful gifts given us. The Law is our guide to freedom, wholeness, and happiness. May God direct us to honor it in love. Amen.