

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
BOY SCOUT SUNDAY
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“LAW AND GRACE”
FEBRUARY 13, 2011
Matthew 5:17-37
ALL SERVICES**

Today is Boy Scout Sunday in the United Methodist Church. A scout is reverent; therefore a Sunday observance is well within order. Scouts are taught to obey the law. But law and grace have often been presented as opposites. The law representing “**works**” righteousness, and grace representing “**God’s gift**” of forgiveness and love. A truly biblical point of view would have trouble making such a distinction, because the law was a gift of grace and grace is not without obedience and responsibility.

The biblical concept of righteousness stressed external behavior. Yet from God’s point of view, goodness is measured by inward integrity. That is at the very center of what scouts are taught. The true goodness of a work of piety or a deed of mercy depends on whether these actions are motivated by love for God and love for neighbor. And in God’s view love covers all of God’s children.

The most damaging criticism of the church, whether from within or from without, is that it is filled with hypocrisy. Some people use such charges as an excuse for not taking the church seriously. Unfortunately, there is more than a little truth in many of these charges.

James Fowler’s book *Stages of Faith* uses the insights of developmental psychology to identify six stages of faith development. While Fowler is a Christian minister, his stages of faith are relevant to most, if not all, faith traditions. It is not expected that everyone will identify with each stage, and a person’s age may have little to do with where that person feels at home in Fowler’s stages. The earlier stages, associated primarily with the young, involve a more literal and unquestioned orientation to faith. It is interesting to speculate on whether a similar development of faith, but on a more corporate level, can be found in biblical history. That is why we are charged to teach our young.

Perhaps you remember some of the rules under which you lived as a child. Parents enforce rules such as: Pick up your toys before going to bed. When we are older the rules change to things like: Make up your bed before you come to breakfast. No one likes rules, but that alone does not make them unimportant. It is important to know what is expected of us because we are sharing a living space with other people! In a perfect world, these early rules become somehow internalized and we grow up to be moral and responsible adults. That is the aim of scouting.

When Moses delivered the children of Israel from Egyptian bondage they were, spiritually, children. The wilderness wanderings were difficult largely for this reason, and poor Moses was often the only one mature enough to function as Parent. When things went wrong, as they often did, the people acted like children, bickering with each other, murmuring against Moses. Therefore, it was a great day when God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. Now these impossible children would know, from Commandment One to Commandment Ten, what was expected of them.

Ironically, the same set of laws that brought order out of chaos would eventually become a source of friction, factions, and idolatry. The good things God gives us can be used for purposes that God never intended.

The scribes and Pharisees, for all the attention they receive in the Gospels, had a relatively short history. They began a century or so before Jesus, as a spiritual renewal movement in Judaism. By the time of Jesus, however, many of them had become legalistic, self-righteous, and hypocritical. They stressed the literal observance of Jewish dietary and Sabbath laws, while neglecting the poor and the needy. The scribes and Pharisees received the harshest, most critical words Jesus spoke to anyone. They, in turn, used his verbal attacks to support their claim that he wanted to destroy the law. In today's lesson from Matthew Jesus addresses their accusation.

We are all familiar with the political strategy of taking a germ of truth and building a massive campaign around it. This is what they were doing with Jesus. He made an important clarification. He said plainly that he had not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it. Jesus was opposing two of the most enticing idolatries: legalism and literalism. These tend to appear where insecurity has generated a need for certainty. Literalism raises written words to a level of perfection and holiness that belongs only to God. The claim may be made that the words of Scripture are the actual words of God, which would seem to require

dictation rather than inspiration. Legalism does much the same thing, raising laws or commandments to a sovereign level that belongs only to God.

Jesus said he did not come to come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it. What is he saying? If it is a law, isn't it to be obeyed by everyone regardless of other circumstances? Are we referring to laws, or merely suggestions?

What was the purpose of the commandments God gave Moses on Mt. Moriah? It was to reinforce and protect the two most important things in every person's life: one's relationship to God, and one's relationship to other people. When asked by the Pharisees which commandment was greatest, Jesus answered that it was to love God and to love the neighbor. (Mt 22:34-40) He said, "***On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets,***" i.e., the Hebrew Scriptures.

A good and loving parent does not make rules simply to give the child something to obey, or disobey! Behind every rule is love, care, and compassionate concern. A very young child knows nothing about streets, certainly not that they have heavy machines moving at deadly speeds and expecting everyone to get out of the way. But the child understands, "**No! Do not go in the street!**" The spirit of the rule is love and safety. In time, the rule won't be needed anymore. A loving God has dreams for us, and, therefore, has rules for when we need them.

Jesus did not come to destroy the law. He called for keeping it. Jesus said keeping the law meant being committed to the spirit of the law. He said that love is the fulfilling of the law. If we loved as Jesus loved, we would need no laws. The Apostle Paul echoed Jesus: "***Love is the fulfilling of the law.***" (Ro 13:10) Paul also proclaimed that "***Christ is the end of the law, that everyone who has faith may be justified.***" (Ro 10:4) The testimony of the Great Church through the ages is that Christ is Lord, and this means he is Lord of Scripture. Jesus Christ is the living truth by which we are to understand all our scriptures. May we see him more clearly and love him more dearly.

Ernest Campbell said that hypocrisy is the tribute sin pays to virtue. Even as we shun hypocrisy ourselves, we should have a measure of sympathy for the hypocrite. We can hate the hypocrisy but love the sinner. Hypocrites have theoretical standards that they have not yet fully embraced. Therefore, there is hope for hypocrites, as for all of us who are sinners.

Today is Boy Scout Sunday! This church values your reverence as a scout. To be human is to be faced with a choice about the kind of person we will grow to be.

The stakes are high, and ultimately we are always choosing between life and death. Some ways will lead eventually to darkness and death; others lead inevitably to light and life. May you always choose the right path.