

“Love Overrules”  
Isaiah 58:1-12; 1 Corinthians 2:1-16;  
Matthew 5:13-20

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I’m in a difficult place as a preacher today. Normally, we’re nearing the end of the service at this point, but I’m going to try to quickly work through what I would like to offer today.

I would like to think quickly about three vignettes that Jesus was part of. The first one was when he and his disciples were walking through a grain field and started picking some of the grain. It happened to be on a Sabbath, a day on which, in their culture and religion, they shouldn’t be harvesting. They were also probably eating without washing, which was breaking another rule. So, they were breaking a few rules as they walked through the grain field. The scribes and Pharisees, those people who were paying attention to those rules particularly, noticed and asked about it. Jesus said, “What is the Sabbath for? Were people made for the Sabbath, or is the Sabbath made for people?”

Another time, he came upon a man whose hand was not working for some reason. The scripture says it was withered. Jesus was there. The man was there. The scribes and Pharisees were there. Jesus said to them, “What should I do? It’s the Sabbath. Can I do good on the Sabbath even though you might consider it work?” They didn’t really want to answer him, because they didn’t want to say you can’t do good. But at the same time, they didn’t want to break the rules. Jesus went ahead and healed the man, and they were not too happy with him.

One other time when Jesus breaks the rules is when he went to visit Mary and Martha. It was a given that only the boys got to sit around the Rabbi’s feet, yet here was Mary sitting there and learning along with all the others in the room. You may remember her sister, Martha, wasn’t happy about that because she was doing all the work to prepare a meal. She came to Jesus and asked him to make Mary help her. He said, “No, she’s doing what she needs to do. A better part.” He refused to follow that rule that only the boys get to learn at the feet of the Master and invited Mary to be part of that.

Why do I bring up these three stories? We didn’t read any of these today. You see, when we try to interpret scripture, there are things we look at. We look at the centrality of Christ to help us understand what a scripture is about. We look at the plain sense of the text—what’s it saying? We look at how scripture is interpreted by scripture. We look at how it has been interpreted in our tradition and through faith, and we recognize that it takes some diligent study, some work, because scripture is always given in a particular context in a particular place. We need to take some of that into account. And we need to always leave room for the Spirit to work and guide us. In fact, whenever I think I know what a scripture says, I’m pretty sure that God’s going to knock me on the side of the head somehow and help me see something new.

So how do we interpret what Jesus is saying in the Sermon on the Mount? Last week we looked at the Beatitudes and all the ways Jesus is inviting us to recognize that in coming near him, coming behind him, finding him in our lives, and following him, we will be blessed in ways we never expected.

In light of all these things, he goes on in Matthew 5 to talk about how he's not doing away with the law and the prophets, but he's here to fulfill them, to accomplish them. Then he says something pretty startling. He says, "You must have righteousness greater than the scribes and the Pharisees."

Part of the reason I'm looking at what Jesus did in the rest of scripture is that sometimes there are things that are hard to understand, or they might have multiple meanings. I titled this sermon "Love Overrules." Depending on how you say that, it can mean two different things: love over rules, or love overrules the rules. You can think of it either way.

I think this passage is the same kind of thing, where Jesus is saying something that can be taken in two ways. I've always taken this statement as if, when it says "you must have more righteousness than the scribes and pharisees," it means I've got to follow the rules better than they do. We have those laws, but it doesn't seem like what Jesus meant. He went out and broke some rules. What is he telling us when he says he wants to fulfill the law and accomplish the laws, and that we must have righteousness greater than the scribes and pharisees? He's not saying that the law shouldn't be there or that we shouldn't have any kind of standards or understandings about what we shouldn't do. But that's just the point, isn't it? Laws are about the things we shouldn't do. Jesus is about the things we should do, the people he wants us to be, the relationships we should share, the hopes we can have.

Jesus comes and gives us something that is central, rather than just things we're not supposed to do. He says the greatest goals are to love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself.

Most of the laws are about making sure we don't break our relationships, or, if something has gone wrong, how we make it right. What Jesus is inviting us to do is to fulfill that and make it become a way we live that is not about *not* doing something, but is about how we *do* something, how we bring good to life. That's what the Scout Oath and Law are about. They are inviting you to create character, have a way of being, that is bringing good into the world, into life. Jesus is inviting us to do that as well.

We think about it in slightly different ways sometimes, yet it's all about how we bring good to life. How do we let love rule? I think following Christ is beginning to recognize a difference between just not breaking the rules but actually bringing the good to life. That's what we want to look for in our leaders. It's more than just not breaking the rules; it's about doing what is right and bringing good to life. That's what we look for in young

people as they grow up. We want to see how they can become good people and bring good to life.

Central to that is the idea of righteousness. I know that's a big fancy word, but when I hear the word "righteousness" I think about it as being a friend to someone else, knowing that I love the people in this church. It's about right relationship. It's not about doing the rules, although rules are helpful sometimes. But if all you try to do is not break a rule, there's not a lot of life in that.

We're invited to care for one another, to share our lives together, to be aware of who we're with and how things are going and how we can care for each other. It's hard to give you a recipe for how to care for every person you know because each person is different. Each person has a slightly different set of things they really like. Some people are allergic to things that other people are not. It's like a dance that we have to do together to figure out how we can best work together and be a people who bring good to life.

I really believe that in knowing Jesus and finding the grace he gives us, that as we follow him we not only get to know that someday we'll be with God, it's also that we get to bring goodness to life now and share in each other's lives. We can help each other get more merit badges. We can help each other find jobs. We can help each other in whatever way we need to help so that we can bring good to life. Then, perhaps, we can be those who shine the light of God's love in the world. We can enhance the way the world works by giving that flavor, that salt. Or as Isaiah said, we can be repairers of the breach, builders of community. Amen.