

“The Life the Law Could Not Give”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
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Old Testament lesson: Psalm 130

New Testament lesson: Romans 8:5-11

What are the lawmakers in Washington thinking when it comes to healthcare in this country? I don't even think it's about healthcare anymore. It's about politics. If this were about healthcare, surely they could come up with a bill that could at least get a vote.

If you haven't heard, the Republicans last week failed to get enough Senators to support their plan to repeal and replace ObamaCare. Then they tried to repeal ObamaCare and do the replacement step later. This also failed to gain enough support. Why?

It's because of the place they start from in addressing healthcare and – quite frankly – most every other important issue facing this country. The Apostle Paul points to two very different starting points when it comes to making important decisions – the flesh or the spirit. “... Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh,” says Paul, “but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.”

Paul is saying that there are two possible starting points in making decisions – one guided by our human nature and the other guided by the Spirit of God. When it comes to public policy such as healthcare, or family rules and expectations such as mealtime together and Sunday worship or even how we treat each other at work, school or on the street corner. We have a choice of either following the letter of the law or the spirit of the law.

Throughout this section of his letter to the Romans, Paul is focused on the Law, the Torah, the Israelite code of conduct. His concern is that the Torah is being used to lead the way rather than the Spirit of God as embodied by Jesus *and* as given to us as God's indwelling presence. “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you,” says Paul, “he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also, through his Spirit that dwells in you.”

In other words, the rules that we create follow as mere mortals must be based on the Spirit of God, and not the other way around-as if the rules we make are more important than the spirit we live by. “To set the mind on the flesh is death,” says Paul, “but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.” And isn't that what we need in this country-life and peace.

When people in this our country, or our families, and our schools and workplaces struggle to treat one another as children of God, brothers and sisters in Christ, it's because we are putting the letter of the law above the Spirit of God.

Take the healthcare debate for example. There is a fundamental difference of opinion in this country about whether basic healthcare is a right or a privilege. If it's a privilege, than only those who rise to a certain status merit good, basic healthcare.

If it's a basic human right to have access to a doctor and the treatments prescribed, then the only question is how do we provide that, and at what cost? What are we to do to live into the spirit of God. Do you see how that flips things around? Healthcare as a privilege presupposes that some people will go without. If we're OK with that as a country, so be it. We have the freedom and power to choose.

But if we are not OK with people going without basic healthcare, then we do whatever is necessary to make the system work. Same with our families. Let's take mealtime and Sunday worship as an example. When family mealtime and Sunday worship are optional, it presupposes that relationships with one another and with God are not that important.

Now I know that some people miss church or family meals because they are tending to the needs of loved ones. It happens. The challenge in that and other such situations is to maintain the Spirit of family time, the spirit of godly worship despite the scheduling conflicts we have.

It's not the letter of the law that's most important – thou shalt worship on Sunday and break bread with your loved ones – but rather, it is the Spirit of the law – we ought to find ways to build and maintain healthy family relationships and to return thanks to God through worship and service, even if it's not on a Sunday morning or sitting around the family dinner table. Because when we don't – when we neglect the most important aspect of life – it's death we're living into, not life.

Our relationships die when we don't make them a priority. Our neighbors in this world die when we don't make basic healthcare a priority-at least come up with something. Our neighborhoods die when the wealthiest in this country set their sights on getting richer at the expense of fellow human beings.

It's all a matter of what comes first for you – the spirit of the law or the rules of the game, rigging the system or giving back, loving your neighbor as yourself or neglecting the least of these.

In his commentary on Romans 8, N.T. Wright calls it "The Life the Law Could Not Give." His point is that following the letter of the law without first infusing it with the Spirit of God will always lead to death – both spiritual and physical. And in fact, given our human nature, we are unable to know and follow God's Spirit apart from Jesus Christ.

God sent Jesus into this world to settle it once and for all – to put the Law in its place under the guidance of the Spirit, to overcome crucifixion with resurrection. The bottom line is, we don't get to decide what's most important – God has already set that before us. Matters of the spirit are most important. And we merely live with the consequences of our choices – what we end up valuing most.

Consider this. A wealthy tourist was admiring a necklace worn by a local Indian. "What is it made of?" she asked. "Alligator's teeth," the Indian replied. "I suppose," she said, "that they mean as much to you as pearls do to me." "Oh no," he objected. "Anybody can open an oyster, but an alligator's mouth ..."

The point is we don't really know what counts most in life, unless we look at things through the Spirit that God has given us. That's how we come to know what really matters, and how to receive it, and how to provide it for others.

The hard part is, it's against our human nature to live this way. Only those who live in the Spirit of Jesus Christ can give themselves over to God so fully as to put their fellow human beings ahead of themselves.

Or as Paul says, "... The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law – indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God."

Pretty harsh words, but oh so true. It is only by the power and grace of Jesus Christ that we can stand before God with any hope of doing the right thing, of making this world a better place, of treating our friends, loved ones, and neighbors as ourselves.

"... You (as Christians)," says Paul, "are not in the flesh. You are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you." "Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness" – because of Christ's righteousness, not ours.

This is the "the life the law could not give," the life so freely given to us in the Spirit of God, through the power of Jesus Christ. When we live in the Spirit of God over and above the flesh of our bodies, we have access to God's peace and love, God's care and provision, God's blessings and forgiveness, for ourselves and for all people.

You will have an opportunity this week to make that choice – to either be ruled by fear and scarcity or by faith and plenty, either by guilt or forgiveness, lashing out or embracing. That's the choice.

And if you count yourself a Christian, there really is no choice. Grace must win out over guilt, forgiveness over frustration, acceptance over anger. That's the spirit of the law, that's the spirit of life lived in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

As we gather together for worship, O Lord, unite our hearts, minds and our very selves with you. Let us breathe deeply of your presence with us as we settle into these few moments of prayer.

We take the concerns of our wellbeing, Lord, and turn them over to you. We release our worries to your great Spirit.

We look at all that is before us this week, and we set it aside in this moment to be in your presence, God. push

We breathe in your Spirit of love which sustains us and provides for us all we need in the days ahead.

And we ask, O Lord, that our awareness of your presence in our lives and in this world would carry forth from this place in the days to come.

We are thankful for the healing you provide, and ask it for those whom we know are in need – whether in body, mind or soul.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts, as we forgive
our debtors;
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory, forever. Amen.**