

## **“Letter of the Law”**

### **Sermon – February 8, 2026 Stone Presbyterian Church**

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Children are the best lawyers.

Like me, I’m sure many of you remember, riding in the back of your car as a child with your siblings. You start bothering each other. Finally, your mother would turn back and speak in a not so calm and quiet voice—typically to the older child, like me—“Stop touching your brother/sister.” There would be a few moments of silence then the younger sibling would start whining again. Your mother would say, “I told you not to touch him.” And you’d say, “I’m not.”—all while your finger was one inch from your sibling’s face.

I always wondered why my mother got so angry when I did that. Then God gave me children. Sauce for the goose, sauce for the gander.

Or maybe as a grandmother, you’re asked to watch your granddaughters while the parents are out. And the kids ask you, “Before dinner, can we have ice cream? With chocolate sauce? And sprinkles? And whipped cream?” And you say, “Well, your parents didn’t say you couldn’t.” “Yea, we love you, Grandma!”

You agree, I’m sure, that these are pretty good examples of following the “letter of the law.” In the first case, it focused on literal compliance of exactly what was commanded. The second also focused on literal compliance by taking advantage of the absence of a command. No stipulation therefore no violation.

Clearly, what both of these show is violating the “spirit of the law.” That is, what was the intended purpose behind the commands? In the first, it was basically, “Stop annoying your brother.” In the second, it was, “What would your parents say?”

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On the other hand, suppose as a parent you have a rule, “No screens after 8:00 p.m.” The purpose, of course, is to help the child wind down, reduce overstimulation, and promote good sleep.

Then one night the child says at 7:59 p.m., “I need to finish this homework video for school.” So, because it’s for school and not entertainment, you say, “OK.” But then it starts to become a habit and the rule loses its clarity and authority.

Thus, you need a balance between the two.

The letter of the law is measurable and objective while the spirit of the law requires maturity and judgment. It emphasizes values, ethics, and the broader goal.

In the broader context, the letter keeps society orderly. The spirit keeps society humane. The letter prevents chaos; the spirit prevents legalism. Healthy communities—and healthy souls—need both.

The Old Testament and Gospel lessons today point to that need.

The Old Testament lesson is from chapter 58 in the final section of the Book of Isaiah, commonly known as “Third Isaiah”. It was written to the residents of Jerusalem during and after Israel's return in 539 BCE

In it the people whine that God does not hear them despite them doing all the good religious practices, like fasting. They believe they are the victims, when in fact they are the victimizers.

God responds twice to this complaint. First, God notes that the people’s fast does not lead them to better behavior. It does not lead them to treat their neighbors or workers well. The ritual does them no good.

Fasting was and is a widespread and ancient religious ritual. It is particularly notable that for 97% of just recorded history, having

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sufficient food was not a guarantee. Therefore, giving it up was more than an inconvenience or luxury.

The intent of fasting, when done properly, is not a means of earning favor from God; it is a means of spiritual transformation. The purpose is to draw closer to God, foster humility, and strengthen the spirit over the flesh. It acts as a discipline to remove distractions, intensify prayer, seek guidance, repent from sin, and express empathy for the needy.

In today’s passage from Isaiah, the prophet interrupts the people’s claims to piety by calling for a series of behaviors that we find most of the prophets call for: to loosen the bonds of injustice, to share what we have with those who have not, to bring the homeless into one's house, to give clothing and shelter to the naked, to reconcile with one's family, to help the afflicted.

These are more than one-time actions. These are behaviors with broad social consequences, actions that will restructure relationships. God's desire is not for singular, pious acts, but for a whole cloth dismantling of unjust relationships.

The fasting acceptable to God is a daily fast from domination, blaming others, evil speech, self-satisfaction, entitlement and blindness to one's privilege. The fast that God seeks calls for vigilance for justice and generosity day in and day out.

The people, individually and corporately, cannot have a full relationship with God without a just relationship with each other. One's piety is not disconnected from the rest of everyday life.

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God is not a lone ranger, acting in isolation. God expects a partnership with restored and restorative people. The people are participants in God's life, agents in God's desires for them.

Jesus echoes this intent in today's gospel lesson from Matthew 5 continuing the Sermon on the Mount that we heard the beginning of last week with the Beatitudes. In the spirit of the prophets, the primary theme of the sermon is righteousness or justice.

To our ears it may sound a little discomfoting to hear Jesus say “not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.” It sounds legalistic and rigid. But Jesus' is \*not\* saying, “Forget about 1000 years of history and scripture. I've got a whole new set of rules for you.”

Jesus' teachings are best understood as those of a Jewish reformer, not as those of one who is attempting to denigrate and displace an “outdated” religious system.

And note that while the Greek word *nomos* we do correctly translate as “law” and we commonly refer to the Law of Moses, the Hebrew word is *Torah*.

*Torah* really means “teaching,” “instruction,” or “guidance”. Thus, the *Torah* implies guiding or directing behavior rather than just enforcing rules.

Thus, following the letter of the Law, the Torah, means following the spirit of the Law as well. Jesus calls for us to live and teach the commandments, not a call to mere moralism but a call to a life of trust in God.

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If we trust God’s promises, if we stand grateful for God’s actions, then we will bend our lives toward the life-giving ways God has called us to follow. Breaking a commandment is not just breaking a rule; it is denying the promises and actions of God.

The scribes and Pharisees followed the Torah scrupulously, to the letter of the law. But like the people in Isaiah, they were missing the point. To fulfill the law they needed to be in right relationship with God which meant being in right relationship with God’s people.

As Jesus chastises them in Matthew 23:23, “For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.”

They were keeping the Sabbath laws to the letter, but the spirit—like rest, restoration, compassion—was forgotten.

Thus, Jesus tells his followers they must be more committed to God's justice in the world than these “esteemed” leaders. And not just in words but actions; not just isolated instances but systemic issues.

Justice, then, in the fullest sense, is the marriage of both the letter and spirit of the law. The letter provides boundaries. The spirit provides wisdom. Together they produce righteousness, fairness, and mercy.

Like the Pharisees, so many Christians today want a simple checklist. And they also “proof text” for political positions, ignoring God’s priorities articulated by the prophets and Jesus. When they do so, you can quote Paul from 2 Corinthians 3:6, “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.  
Amen.