

and the solution. When looking at Jerusalem and the Jews who prided themselves in their righteousness—in being right—in the keeping of the law—he said,

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, *the city* that kills the prophets and stones those sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, just as a hen *gathers* her brood under her wings, and you would not *have it!* (Lk. 13:34)

The emptiness in our lives is filled by Christ! But we must want and accept His Love. We must confess our great need, our emptiness, and then we must run to Him and not to the law. We must see Him **not** as primarily the *Giver of the Law* but rather as the *Lover of mankind*. The law is unable to forgive us, or to love us, or to fulfill us. Only Christ Jesus can do all these things.

And when we are under the wings of our Loving God, the *first* result is not the keeping of the law but rather the giving of mercy and love to our neighbor—we reflect Christ's love. Then we begin to observe the rules of the Church and its small “t” traditions in order to keep our eyes on the Lover of Mankind and to remind us that the ultimate *law of God* is *Love—that we love God with our heart, mind, and soul, and our neighbor as ourselves*.

Conclusion: Jesus made this exact point in our text. The Ruler of the Synagogue was more interested in the law than in people. On the other hand, Jesus, the very Law Giver Himself, was more interested in loving and healing people. Which of these two would you prefer to follow? The laws of God are not wrong or to be ignored, the rules and traditions of the Church are not wrong or to be ignored, but the law's purpose and the purpose of the rules of the Church are to bring us to Christ and to His Love and to share that love with others. ***We need to be more like Christ and less like the Ruler of the Synagogue. Amen!***



ON LEGALISM IN THE CHURCH

“People who put their trust in the keeping of the rules—who look for fulfillment in being “right” often end up with an even greater emptiness than when they started.”

Homily given at All Saints Orthodox Church
on the 25th Sunday after Pentecost, 2008,
by Fr. Nicholas Sorensen

At that time, Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And there was a woman who had had a spirit of infirmity for eighteen years; she was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. And when Jesus saw her, He called her and said to her, "Woman, you are freed from your infirmity." And He laid His hands upon her, and immediately she was made straight, and she praised God. But the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the people, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day." Then the Lord answered him, "You hypocrite! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his ass from the manger, and lead it away to water it? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?" As Jesus said this, all His adversaries were put to shame; and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by Him. (Luke 13:10-17)

Our Gospel reading focuses on the contrast between Jesus and the ruler of the synagogue. It is the contrast between an emphasis on rules and an emphasis on loving people

I. Emphasis on Rules

One of the most common and most difficult problems for us in Orthodox Christianity today is to learn how to understand and practice the many rules and traditions of our church. It is all too easy for us in our Western legalistic mentality to over-emphasize the importance of rules and to minimize the importance of love and mercy. We often confuse precision in keeping the rules and small traditions of our Church for holiness of life. The Jews in the New Testament times also had this problem. This was especially true of the religious professionals such as the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Jesus had stern words for these people:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. (Mt. 23:27)

Yet in another place Jesus said:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. "You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!" (Mt. 23:23-24)

For most of us who fall into the trap of the Pharisees, our fascination with rules and prayers and holy days and liturgical precision comes from our recognition that something is missing in our lives. There is an emptiness, a vacuum, that needs to be filled—but filled with what? Like the person in the song who looks for love in all the wrong places, so, at times, we look for fulfillment in the wrong places. It is very attractive to think that we can find what is missing by just keeping the rules, by praying more, by coming to church more, by reading the Scripture more, by venerating more icons, by doing more prostrations, by fasting more, etc. And while all of these things are not bad in themselves, they are not ultimately what we need to fill up the void in our life. Properly understood these are tools that keep us pointed in the right direction. They point to the only One who is able to fill up our emptiness, to complete what is imperfect, to fix what is broken—they point us to the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. But by themselves, when these tools become ends in themselves, then they can be spiritually deadly—not only to the person who uses them improperly but to those around them.

People who put their trust in the keeping of the rules—who look for fulfillment in being "right" often end up with an even greater emptiness than when they started.

II. Emphasis on Loving People

Jesus also said: "I desire compassion and not sacrifice, for I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mt. 9:13). In another place Jesus put his finger on the problem