

Unlawful Laws

Mark 7:1-13

Cradock Presbyterian Church

September 2, 2012

I've heard it said, that we are a "nation of laws." I think that's right, and it's a good thing, to have laws. But do we have to have so many *stupid* ones?

I went on line to get some examples for this sermon, and I was amazed! There are some laws that make you wonder what they were thinking. Here's one that makes you think: "In Devon, Texas, it is against the law to make furniture while you are naked." Is this really a problem? Was there a sudden outbreak of really ridiculous injuries with power tools? I don't even want to think about my table saw right now. Here's another head-scratcher: In Richmond, right up the road, "It is illegal to flip a coin in a restaurant to see who pays for a coffee." But let's be serious for a moment, shall we? In New York, where they have all those skyscrapers, the penalty for jumping off a building is: *Death*. Isn't that kind of, like, unnecessary? Don't things sort of work themselves out? And it's still on the books: in Texas, if you are going to commit a crime, you legally have to give 24 hours notice to the police!

It's not that we don't have weirdness right in our own backyard. Did you know that In Virginia Beach, it is illegal for a person to ride on the handlebars of a bike? When was the last time you saw any kids "doubling," as we used to call it? Virginia Beach has a lot of laws that, upon reflection, really are in need of some *further* reflection. For instance, "It is illegal to use profanity on Atlantic Avenue or the boardwalk." Of course, on *Pacific Avenue*, you can let 'er rip, no problem! And you wouldn't believe the things they say over there on Baltic! Now, they take their cars and their driving seriously over

in Virginia Beach. Did you know that “It is unlawful to drive by the same place within 30 minutes on Atlantic Avenue.” Must want to make sure there’s a lot of *variety* for the people on the sidewalks – can’t have the same old cars comin’ by, over and over again! And you better stay straight in Virginia Beach! “If you are drunk and not driving your car, and the person who is driving your car is drunk as well, you may *both* receive DUI’s.” And when you go to court, you better find your parking space on the first try, so you don’t have to pass it again within 30 minutes, and get *another* violation!

Are you surprised that there are laws about what you can do on the street? We spend so much time in our cars, I guess it makes sense. Too bad not all the laws that deal with the street do. Prince William County, Virginia: “It is illegal to park a car on railroad tracks.” Something tells me that the insurance companies lobbied for this one! Or maybe the railroads. In Salt Lake County, Utah, it is *illegal* to walk down the street carrying a violin in a paper bag. What if you were running? Would that free you from penalty? And the best one, in Culpeper, Virginia: “No one may wash a mule on the sidewalk.” So if you decide to open a mule wash in Culpeper, make sure they don’t put in a sidewalk in front of your business!

Maybe that one’s out of concern for the animal’s sensitivities. We have a lot of laws concerned with that. Why, right next door here, in Norfolk, “Spitting on a sea gull is not tolerated.” No wonder PETA made their headquarters over there! It’s a fact that I”n Oklahoma, you can be arrested for making ugly faces at a dog.” What if the *dog* has an ugly face? Is there a fine for bringing it out in public? And in Illinois, giving a lighted cigar

to an animal is illegal. Smokeless tobacco, on the other hand, is A-OK. When you look at all these animal laws, it's clear: we hold our animals in high regard.

We might even hold our animals in higher regard than our women! Did you know that in half of the states in the United States, there are laws on the books that describe when you can legally beat your wife? In Virginia, in Stafford County, a man may beat his wife, but only on the courthouse steps, and only before 8:00 PM. That's a good deal more lenient than most states; most states only allow wife beating, again on the courthouse steps, but *only on Sunday!* Is that crazy, or what? And as if that wasn't enough, in Arkansas, it is illegal for a woman getting married for the second time to wear a white wedding gown. I guess the penalty might involve a stick of some kind.

Here's what is craziest of all, or maybe saddest: Those last laws about women were *intended* to be, *believed* to be, *helpful!* You want to hear why? Making it illegal to wear white if it's your second time around was intended to prevent a woman from deceiving her husband as to her real marital status. And telling a husband he had to go to the courthouse before he could beat his wife, so the reasoning went, was *intended* to give the man a cooling-of period. By the time they got there, the anger would be gone, and then he wouldn't want to do it anymore.

Crazy.

But maybe no crazier than the way those Pharisees pursued the Law. The question to Jesus was about his disciples not washing their hands. If they were concerned for health reasons, you'd have something there! But in fact the Pharisees weren't worried about the disciples' health. Notice, they don't say "dirty hands," but

“*defiled* hands.” That’s a word that describes hands that are unacceptable to God. Now let’s be sensible, unlike the people who want to wash mules on the sidewalk. Nobody would eat with hands that are full of dirt or anything else that would get in the food. They might even have actually put water and soap to their hands, already. The Pharisees were talking about *ritual* washing. Washing according to their laws. If you ever wondered about Jesus going off over this, now you know. It really was more about the “traditions of the elders,” and nothing else. Jesus’ little speech about the Pharisees abandoning the commandment of God is all about their constantly putting “The Law” above what God really wants: a truly good life for all his people.

See, that’s why God took the time and went to the trouble to put the Ten Commandments on those stone tablets and give them to Moses. If you read them, you can easily see: holding to those commandments means a really good life. It’s a life that no politician can give you, even though he or she might promise it over and over again. Those commandments set you right with God; but more than that, they set you right with all of your neighbors. And if you’re all “right” with each other – well, your life is gonna be awesome.

I chose this passage today because it’s perhaps the clearest one regarding Jesus, the commandments, and stupid laws. *Unlawful* laws. What’s an unlawful law? It’s one that contradicts what a bigger, foundational law, says. Sometimes there are reasons for laws that make sense. Then they’re not stupid. You know what the Pharisees were doing, with laws, or “traditions,” like this one? They had a belief, a core belief, that *you*

must do everything you can to avoid being “unclean.” And if they could obey all those laws, most of which they cooked up, then God would be obliged to them.

Obliged to them? How stupid do you have to be? Or how *unlawful*? Or how much opposed to God!

Jesus knew what was in their hearts. He knew that they were only concerned with themselves. So he was ready with a devastating example, right from the commandments. If you look at the commandments, the first three have to do with God. You shall have no other God before me; you shall not make an idol; you shall not take the name of the Lord in vain. The there is a transitional one, one that honors God and cares for people, “you shall honor the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy.” The very *first* one that has to do with people only is “Honor your Father and your Mother.’ But listen to the rest of it! “... so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.” God wants us to live long! So God gave us these laws that he *knows* are for our absolute good.

But the Pharisees can’t have it – no, sir! If it was that simple, they’d lose considerable power. Their power resided in the fact that their Law was so complicated, you needed experts to help you figure it out, help keep you from, you feared, making God mad. And it also protected them, so they could always find justification for some of the selfish things they did.

Jesus zeroes in: God said you should Honor your father and your mother; but you people would take their support away for your own good! “Corban” means something like “tithe;” these people would starve out their mother and father in order to

have something to put in the offering plate! Would the parents be living a good, happy life like God wanted? If you refused to help them so that you could maintain your tithe, would you be living right with your ultimate neighbor – family? Jesus knew: God’s intentions had been foiled; these people really were “making void” the word of God.

I’m afraid that we, in our modern, American society, have forgotten God’s intentions for our lives. We work to make our lives happy and peaceful on our own. We make all kinds of rules and laws that we think will do the job – quite apart from God. And I’m really afraid that, like the Pharisees, we take all the credit, and make ourselves bigger and more important than we really are – or ever could be. Have we “made void the Word of God?” Or have we simply forgotten about it?

Think about some of the things we have worried about, or are worrying about today. Can we set those worries aside, and pick up the much easier way that God has intended all along? I could make a list here, I suppose, but for everything I list, someone might get offended, or might just laugh. Think about those things yourself today, this afternoon, as you lay down tonight, as you go through your week. If we tried to live by these really basic things – and the really basic commandment that underlies them, Jesus’ Great Commandment – how much more would our lives be unanxious, unafraid, uncluttered – and unbe-*liev*-able?

That’s what you’re going to hear in the next 11 weeks. Yeah, I know we said there would be ten weeks on the commandments. There are actually 11, because next week we’re going to have a sort of “warm-up,” talking about Jesus’ Great Commandment. I have an assignment for you. Mark 12:28-34 is the passage that

describes Jesus issuing the great commandment. Go home and read it this week, preferably tonight. Mark it in your Bible, and maybe even re-read it during the week, think about it. How good would your life be if you and everyone else lived by that great double commandment?

And with that said, let us pray.