

When Satan attacks God's people, he often does so by twisting God's words or trying to set one part of the faith against another. Two such things he often does this with are God's law and God's love.

Sometimes, we are tempted to use the love to throw out the law. This runs along the lines of ignoring those parts of God's word that society sees as "unloving" or "hurtful" or "oppressive." Surely Jesus would never make anyone feel bad, we say.

However, the Bible, including the words of Christ Himself, firmly rejects this idea, for instance when Jesus rebukes those who would relax the Commandments and teach others to do the same. Love, rightly understood, does not diminish or abolish the law of God.

The opposite of this approach can happen as well – trying to use the law to ignore or diminish love. This is often known as "legalism." It's this problem which Jesus addresses and condemns in our Gospel reading this morning.

We must avoid setting God's law against God's love, such as in legalism, for when we do this, we ignore God's word and end up harming faith, both ours and that of others. Instead, let us strive to see both the law and love as coming from God and therefore both good.

As I said, legalism could be simply described as attempting to use God's law to ignore or drive out love. This can be seen quite clearly in the actions of the Pharisees Jesus deals with in the text. A ruler of the Pharisees invites Jesus over for dinner on the Sabbath, a nice Sunday – or actually Saturday – dinner after church. How kind!

Yet as Jesus is coming into the house, we read: "And behold, there was a man before Him who had dropsy." Dropsy is a form of edema, or swelling due to excess fluids, and often very painful. And it's not by chance that the man is there where Jesus will see him. Not just anybody could walk into the house of a ruler of the Pharisees. A man of importance like that would have servants to watch the doors, especially if you're having people over for dinner.

So this guy, who was suffering greatly, was planted there by the Pharisees. Notice how the text points out that they were watching Jesus carefully. It's a trap, and this suffering man is being used as bait!

There is lovelessness! And the lovelessness is shown to be all the worse when we consider how sick people are usually brought to Jesus. Almost always, people who are sick or crippled or possessed are brought to Jesus by those who love them.

Think of the paralytic who is brought to Christ by his friends, friends who are so determined to get their friend to Christ that they tear apart a roof to do so. You might also remember that when the man is lowered down, Jesus doesn't first say, "I hope you guys are going to fix that hole you just made."

No, He sees the love they have for their friend, and the faith they have in Him to heal their friend. But back to our text, these Pharisees don't care about the man. They just want to get Jesus. They're not acting out of love, but out of pride.

This pride then causes them to warp the law, to try to use it to their own ends, rather than for the reasons God gave it. This whole set up doesn't fool Jesus, who as God knows perfectly the hearts and minds of all men, and so He then puts forth directly the question they're trying to use as a trap. "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?"

Now a good place to start in answering this question would be to ask, "What does the law actually say?" In Exodus 20, at the giving of the Ten Commandments, we read, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy."

So the law of God says that you shall not work on the Sabbath day. What then is meant by work? How shall we decide this?

The Pharisees, in pride, turn the Commandment into a tool by which they can exercise power. They'll decide what is work and what isn't, and use it to their own advantage. In this case, they'll decide that healing is in fact work.

And by the strict letter of the law, they can be right, because work can be defined as anything you do that takes effort. If you've ever been in the medical field, or even helped care for a sick family member, you know that healing can certainly entail plenty of work. And so, the Pharisees must be right. Ha! It looks like they've got Jesus now!

Except, they don't. And they know they don't. That's why they remain silent. They are convicted by this question, this trap they laid now being set before them. And Jesus, who again knows the heart, lays the matter out in the open. "Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?"

If healing is work, and therefore a violation of the Sabbath, then how much more lifting a man out of a well, or an ox, which would require many people? And yet, as Jesus points out, none of them would hesitate for a moment in doing this. And they know full well that none of them would ever teach in a synagogue that saving one's son or one's ox on the Sabbath was a sin.

They have clearly taken the law and, rather than using the Scriptures to rightly understand it and looking at it in love and applying it fairly to all, they've tried to use it as a weapon against Jesus. And they have failed, being publicly put to shame by the very person they were hoping to shame.

The temptation toward legalism is still very much present today. Though I would say that our culture by and large often crashes into the other ditch – throwing out the law of God by a flawed view of "love," - we still must be wary of this, and repent when we fall into it.

Any time we look at others and think we are inherently better than them because we are going more good works or keeping the Commandments better (in our eyes), we are not understanding or using the law in love.

If we do a good work, not out of love for God or our neighbor, but out of a desire to be seen as a good person, we are being legalists.

And any time we would refuse to forgive someone who repents because we don't think they deserve it or what they did was just too bad, we are driving out love with the law.

Rather than seeing the law of God and the love of God as opposed to one another, we must realize the truth, that both go together. This will allow us to rightly understand the law and rightly understand love.

First off, remember that both the law and love come from God. It wasn't Moses or some other man who invented the Commandments. They were written in stone by the finger of God Himself. And love – here meaning true sacrificial concern for another over yourself, not the warped ideas of warm fuzzies or butterflies in your stomach or just lust – love comes from God, because God is love.

There is no true love apart from God, and all that God says and does and wills is loving. God cannot contradict Himself, because He cannot contain falsehood or errors, and God does not change.

So the law and love go together. God gives the law to His people out of love, both because He wants them to know what is best for them, and so that they can reflect His love and His righteousness to the world around them.

To see this, let's consider the portion of the law that is in question in the text: Exodus 20 and not working on the Sabbath. On the seventh day of creation, the first Sabbath, God sets the day apart as holy and Himself rests. Does this mean that the Lord did absolutely nothing on that day? Of course not! God not only made the world and all that's in it, but He is the One who upholds it.

If God stopped holding the universe together, it would simply cease to exist. As the Scriptures tell us, "In Him all things hold together." God stopped His creative work on the seventh day, because it was complete, but He continued to sustain creation, to protect it, to cause it to continue functioning. He still loved creation, and His rest didn't interfere with that love or keep Him from doing the things that love required.

Looking at the big picture of that Commandment, and looking at it through love, lets us rightly understand what God is giving through the law. Note that Jesus doesn't say to the Pharisees that He is the love of God incarnate and so the law is gone or no longer applicable. He asks if healing is "lawful," in agreement with the law.

As the God who established the Commandment and who rested on the first Sabbath while still caring for His creation that day, Jesus is perfectly following the law by healing the man. He is caring for and restoring His creation, out of love for this suffering man.

When we consider this Commandment as an example, the same principle applies to us still today. God tells us to remember the Sabbath Day, by keeping it holy, out of love, and for our good. We don't have to observe the seventh day of the week specifically; the Scriptures tell us this in places such as Romans 14 and Colossians 2. And Jesus perfectly kept the Sabbath as He rested in the tomb on Holy Saturday.

But again, we don't just throw out the Commandment and do whatever we want. It is a Commandment, not a suggestion or a neat trick for a better life. God wants us to set aside a day as holy – dedicated to the Lord – and for rest. Why? Because God loves us and desires to bless us with His word and gifts.

Our sinful flesh desires the things of this life, money and pleasure and fun, and it's more than happy to ignore the things of God and focus on the things of self. Thus our God gives us this Commandment to curb our sinful flesh and lead us to what is truly important, and what truly matters.

Our Lord also commands His people to set a day aside so that they may gather together as the one flock of the Good Shepherd, the one body of Christ, the one bride of the bridegroom. If the force of this command was just "be sure to pick a day of your choosing and focus on God that day," then the church would fall apart, never gathering together as one and having the fellowship that comes with all being the household of God.

The Divine Service wouldn't be a gathering of God's children around their loving Father and Almighty Brother by the power of the one Spirit who dwells in us all. Instead it would be like some restaurant or service industry, where you just pop in when you need to grab a bite or get your oil changed, but you've got no meaningful relationship to the place or to anyone else there.

That individualistic attitude destroys faith, and our loving God doesn't want that, hence the command to gather together. And so from the time of the apostles, God's people have set aside Sunday, the day Christ rose from the dead, for them to all gather together.

God also gives us this command that we might have a day of rest. A couple weeks ago we talked about mammon, that false god of money and possessions and worldly stuff, and how no matter how much we devote to it, it's never enough. Our sinful flesh is always wanting more, and wanting to pursue more, and do more, and so our Lord comes in love and commands us to rest.

If we just go all the time, we begin to suffer. Our bodies wear out. Our relationships fall apart. Our mental well-being decreases. And our souls deteriorate.

God did not design us to go constantly and never rest. Even in the Garden, when everything was perfect and Adam and Eve could just pick the fruit off the trees and find absolute delight in what the Lord gave them to do, even then they were to rest.

Does this mean that we're just supposed to sit on our hands and stare resentfully at a Bible for the whole day? No, of course not! But God knows that rest, and even more so hearing His word, is the most beneficial thing you could do on that day, and in love, He desires you to have it.

The same approach could be taken with all the Commandments; this is just one. And there's one more place that we should look to see the law and the love of God coming together: the cross. There, Jesus – the love of God made flesh – fulfilled the law for us.

The Lord never desired for sin and death to be the fate of humanity. He has always had a plan to save us. Now, if love could throw out the law, He could have just one day said from heaven, "I've decided that sins aren't a thing anymore, and you're all forgiven and just do whatever you want. I love you!" But He didn't do that. He couldn't do that and still be a just God.

And on the other hand, He didn't decide that His love was wasted on us and just stick with the law, condemning us all to hell for not keeping it and starting a new universe from scratch. No, He had to keep the law, but loved us too much to watch us bear the law's just burden.

And so He, in love, came and bore that burden for us, paying the penalty with His blood. He pulled us, not just out of a well, but out of the pits of hell.

Having saved us, He didn't say that the law no longer applies to us. The law stands, even for us Christians. Hence St. Paul says in Romans, "Shall we go on sinning that grace may abound? By no means!"

Our Lord, from the cross, sent forth His Spirit, and that blessed third person of the Holy Trinity comes and dwells in our hearts in Holy Baptism, allowing us to actually keep the law and see God's love in it.

When we fall into sin and break the law, the Spirit then leads us back to our Lord in repentance, that His grace and mercy may again and again be poured out upon us.

Guided by the law, Christians live lives that are more fulfilling and which have eternal blessings. The law then also serves in the witness of the Church, as the world sees the holiness of God reflected in those who lead holy lives according to the law. This all serves to help bring other people to faith in Jesus, that they might experience the love of God forever in heaven.

So again, to wrap it all up, the law of God and the love of God are not opposed, but are both wonderful things that come from God Himself.

The Lord Jesus keeps the Sabbath as He heals the man, granting him rest from his affliction and showing him the love of God. The Lord keeps all the law, and then credits His perfect obedience to us on the cross. By the working of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, we see how the law is given in love, and we live lives in accord with it, that we and the world might be blessed by the love of God.

In the name of Jesus, amen.