

Am I the Exception to the Rule?

1 Samuel 21:1-6 (NIV84)

¹ David went to Nob, to Ahimelech the priest. Ahimelech trembled when he met him, and asked, "Why are you alone? Why is no one with you?" ² David answered Ahimelech the priest, "The king charged me with a certain matter and said to me, 'No one is to know anything about your mission and your instructions.' As for my men, I have told them to meet me at a certain place." ³ Now then, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever you can find." ⁴ But the priest answered David, "I don't have any ordinary bread on hand; however, there is some consecrated bread here—provided the men have kept themselves from women." ⁵ David replied, "Indeed women have been kept from us, as usual whenever I set out. The men's things are holy even on missions that are not holy. How much more so today!" ⁶ So the priest gave him the consecrated bread, since there was no bread there except the bread of the Presence that had been removed from before the LORD and replaced by hot bread on the day it was taken away.

There are some laws that just seem ridiculous. For those who were licensed and driving before 1983, there are many of you who don't want to buckle up now according to the law and who complain about that dingy new cars make calling you out on the fact that you are not buckling up. In 1984 the drinking age was changed from 18 to 21, and yet how many ignore that age limit as if to say, "You can't tell me how old I have to be to drink"?

Why do laws exist? They exist to help us, protect us, benefit us. Seatbelts are meant to protect and save lives. The drinking age was raised hoping that three years would mean more maturity to those going to purchase and drink alcohol, that the users would be more responsible. Laws are not created to inconvenience us, but that's often how we feel. When a law seem pointless and arbitrary, we have a hard time following it, thinking maybe that we have the right to ignore it, that we are the exception to the rule.

Laws are nothing new. God had given laws for all people to follow from the beginning. Some took these laws to the extreme. The Pharisees in our Gospel reading are an example of such people. They were a hypercritical, law driven sect of the Jewish faith. If they were around today, they would be the ones who would make a law for themselves to drive at least 5 under the speed limit at all times and who would look down on you for driving 69 mph on I-15, even though the speed limit is 70 mph. These hypercritical Jews see Jesus' disciples picking some heads of grain and eating them as they are walking along on a Sabbath day. They are outraged. "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" they ask Jesus (Mark 2:24).

The Sabbath was the God ordained day of rest, the day you are not supposed to do any work lest you be cut off from the Jewish nation and punished by death. This picking of some heads of grain is work according to the Pharisees! Look, Jesus, they are harvesting, working, on the Sabbath!

To be fair, the Sabbath was an important law that God had given to his people. "Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy." The Sabbath was a sign between God and his people, a day to rest from labors to reflect on the deliverance that the Lord had provided for them from slavery in Egypt. It was also a reminder of when the Lord rested on the seventh day, reflecting on his good creation. The Sabbath was a day to experience a foretaste of the eternal rest that they would have from God.

Observing the Sabbath was certainly ordained by God and is a command meant to be taken seriously. Jesus answered the Pharisees' objection with the events from our first reading of 1 Samuel chapter 21.

David and his companions were on the run from King Saul because Saul wanted to kill David, and they were hungry. They couldn't just stop at the local Smiths or Fresh Market to pick up groceries. They had to lay low. They needed charity to survive this flight. David seeks out the priest Ahimelech (also called Abiathar) at Nob and asks for any food that he has on hand, five loaves if you can spare it – a couple of days' worth of bread for him and his companions, not a huge request.

Ahimelech did not have any common bread on hand. He only had the bread that had been recently removed and replaced from the tabernacle. This was sacred bread, meant to show God's continuing providence for the Israelite nation and only to be eaten by the priests while they were in the tabernacle.

David didn't ask for these loaves, but Ahimelech offered them to David. He looked at David and knew that the King's servant needed help. Ahimelech didn't need the bread. He decided instead that it was best and God-pleasing to give this bread to David even though it was against God's law.

We could say that Ahimelech followed the spirit of God's law over of the letter of the law, as Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." (Mark 2:27) Should a man go hungry to obey the letter of God's law, or should he be fed out of obedience to the spirit of God's law - to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself? Ahimelech quickly decided that loving his neighbor had to be put before the laws governing the consecrated bread, just as the disciples had put the need to satiate their hunger by picking a few heads of grain over obeying the Pharisees' definition of work on the Sabbath.

To love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is the law from God that overrides any other law. This plays out multiple times in the Bible, even multiple times in Jesus' ministry. In the next chapter of Mark, Jesus would stand up on the Sabbath in the synagogue and heal a man's shriveled hand in front everyone. No doubt this would be considered "working on the Sabbath." But in Matthew's account Jesus would say as he did this, "If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out?" (In other words, will you not do work on the Sabbath when it is needed to protect God's gift of life?) "How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." (Matthew 12:11-12)

Seeing David get the consecrated bread, seeing the disciples picking some heads of grain on the Sabbath, seeing Jesus healing a person on the Sabbath, the temptation is to think that God's laws are like human laws and if they inconvenience us or we don't want to follow them, we don't have to abide by them. I can start coming up with ways of proving that I am the exception to God's rules. I know God told me to love my neighbor and speak well of him, but, really, after what they did to me? I know God said to set aside time for him and worship him, but I've already had a doozy of a week. I know God wants me to study his Word, but church and Bible study in one day means that my whole Sunday morning is shot by being at church.

Are you the exception to God's rules? Was Ahimelech? Were the disciples? The truth is, none of us are the exception to God's rules. We are called to obey his laws perfectly, but at times we will need to exercise our Christian judgment in following the spirit of the law, such as it was with Ahimelech dealing with David. We must ask ourselves, "Do I make myself the exception so that I don't have to feel guilty when I don't do something God wants me to do? Am I doing this to serve myself instead of God? Am I putting God first and loving him with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength and putting my neighbor's needs as a priority?"

God does not give us laws so that we can figure out how we are the exception to them. His laws are meant to guide our living to God-pleasing actions, not to be inconvenient to-do lists that we begrudgingly accept. The laws God gives us are meant to benefit us, not him. He gives us these laws to point us to him, just as the Sabbath law did, to point to our spiritual and eternal rest as only God can give.

When we get into those situations where we think we might be the exception to God's rules, we should ask ourselves, "How will following God's law not only be pleasing to him but also a benefit to me and to others?" Speaking well of our neighbors even when they don't deserve it, that shows them the forgiving attitude of God, that God gave me, and it increases their reputation as well as yours. Making sure that you set aside time to be in worship and to be in Bible class not only builds you up in the knowledge of your Lord and Savior, but it also encourages the other people here as we all rejoice in what God has done for us and it motivates us to keep coming back. Making time to be at church sets the priority for your family, showing them in your actions how important worshiping your God is for your week to week living, for your spiritual life and decision making.

When we put our love for God first as we make decisions, we can rest assured that God will bless us. Even more than that, if your conscience burdens you and loads you down, if you feel God's rules are opposing you, that no matter you do you can't keep them all, then remember that Christ kept every law perfectly, including those Sabbath laws. Even as Ahimelech broke God's law by giving the consecrated bread to David, Christ is the one who kept the law for him, for his disciples, and for us. He took the law of God which stood opposed to us, accusing us for thinking we were the exceptions, and nailed it to the cross, thus canceling that written code and giving us the true Sabbath rest as he forgave our sins.

Christ obeyed and lived under the rules for us. He is our guide for determining how we follow the spirit of the law as well as the letter of the law. As we strive to obey God's commands by loving him with our heart, mind, soul, and strength, we can rest in the forgiveness of sins he gave us by cancelling the written code that stood opposed to us. God grant you wisdom as you put your obedience to God first in following his laws. Amen.