

Pentecost 9 – July 21, 2024  
Text: Ephesians 2:13-22  
Theme: No More Have To's

**Human beings understand Law, what God commands that we do or don't do, but we struggle with Gospel, what God did for us on the cross. That is why our default is always Law. Our life is often built around "have to's," "shoulds," and "oughts." These are Law. Someday take a count of how many times in any given day, you say "I have to, I should or I ought." Just carry a little piece of paper around with you and make a hash mark every time you say that you have to do something, should do something or ought to do something. My guess is that You will be shocked at how many things you think you have to do.**

**We have to go to work, go to school, cook dinner, visit with family, read the Bible, go to church. Do you find yourself saying that? "Oh, we can't attend that event, we have to go to church, or we ought to go to bed because we have to get up early for Sunday School. Is worshipping and studying about God something we have to do? Is worshipping God just one more box to tick in our legalistic list of "have to's?"**

**Some people make no apologies. They are legalistic, and they make no bones about it. There is a wrong way and there is their way and there is no other way. Whether it is a personal opinion or the**

**way they think something should be done, follow their rules or suffer their wrath and displeasure. A life of no gray area is certainly easier in many ways. One never has to think. It is either black or white. It's easy, but I just don't think it's very realistic or functional. Sooner or later, in that way of living, everybody is either us or them and them is normally a vast majority who cannot be won over by force.**

**Some people are more subtle. They might even bitterly complain about rules and regulations. They might fancy themselves the rebel who runs against the grain. But they place themselves under the very regulation against which they rebel. Nothing gives a law more credence than rebellion against it. If someone complains and rebels against a rule, it must be working to curb their behavior. Then the rebel will create counter laws, striving to control the first rule-maker.**

**Teenagers are masters of this strategy. She doesn't like an early curfew so she suddenly becomes unavailable to babysit the younger siblings and cannot seem to remember that mowing the lawn is on her chore list. She makes her own rules to control her parents, the rule-makers. There are more children than you might think who run their households, little princes and princesses who make their parents jump when they say jump. We wouldn't want to**

**upset little Sally or little Johnny because they will make our lives hell. And Sally and Johnny sit smugly having things their way. Except it is very bad for Sally and Johnny to believe that there is no authority in their lives and they are responsible for things far beyond their level of development.**

**Where does it end? In our efforts to control every aspect of our lives and everyone else's lives, we make rule upon rule upon rule. And then comes Jesus. Jesus is very frustrating to us when we are in a mood for rules. He is irritating to legalists because he is so diametrically opposed to legalism. Jesus is not a Lord of law but a Lord of gift. That is not to say that the Law is bad but that the Law is incomplete.**

**Without Jesus, all we have is Law. If you remove Jesus from the equation, there is only one way to get to heaven. Leviticus 19:2 tells us, "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy." Sometimes we forget that salvation under the law is an option if one can perfectly keep the law. The truly ridiculous thing is that there are actually people who are so legalistic that they honestly believe that they have kept the law perfectly.**

**Remember the rich young ruler? He wanted to know how to get to heaven and Jesus said keep the law. He said he had kept it so**

**Jesus said go sell all your possessions and then follow me. He went away sad because he was very rich and Jesus had just taken away his idol.**

**If one plays law games with Jesus, one loses, because Jesus refuses to play. Salvation is not about who keeps the rules best. With Jesus, salvation happens with either all Law or all Gift but you can't mix and match according to your pleasure. Personally, I prefer the Gospel. When we live our lives according to a bunch of legalistic "have to's," we miss the joy of being a child of God. The Christian life is about "get to's" because Jesus has fulfilled the Law for us. It's done. Now we get to live life without fear. We get to love one another without having to keep a record of wrongs. We get to live in a state of forgiveness regardless of how much we have sinned. We get to live in the peace of knowing that our God walks with us moment by moment.**

**St. Paul says that we get to do all of this because Jesus Christ removed the dividing wall of hostility. He destroyed the barrier that once existed between us and God. That barrier was our inability to keep the law of God. Since God created a perfect world, he had only made one provision for life with him - perfection. There was no other alternative. What's to be done in a perfect world when the very ones for whom this perfect world was created decide to sin?**

**I would have bagged it and started over. God, however, chose to formulate a plan whereby the world could once more be perfected. Jesus kept the law perfectly. He earned heaven by being damned, and then He gave it to us. He bridged the chasm of sin with the cross and destroyed the gulf that separated us from God. We who were far away were brought close - right up to God's throne of grace.**

**Jesus Christ is our bridge to God. Many in the world stand on the shores and look intently for some way to cross. They wish for some means by which they might cross that sea of sin - some method by which they might be made clean. They dream of a life without condemnation, guilt, and fear. They long to love and be loved without conditions. But there is only one bridge to paradise: Jesus. He is the only path to God.**

**Because of Christ we live in a world of grace. The question for us is never "what do I have to do?" but rather "what gift am I receiving now?" If we choose to live our lives under grace, every day is Christmas because God's blessing flows deep and wide. There is literally no end to them and just when you think you have seen them all, blessings you hadn't even imagined pour out upon you. If we question anything, perhaps we ought to question whether we are taking full advantage of all the gifts. The Word, the Lord's Supper,**

**Holy Baptism: all there free for the taking. Pure spiritual power - power to live under grace, power to love, power to conquer guilt and fear, power to live as ones who have conquered the dividing wall of hostility and live not as residents of this world but as strangers here who already have one foot in paradise.**