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## Introduction

Jesus brushes up against the law, and an attitude of legalism in his teaching and preaching. He responds with actions for justice and healing. And with a strong message of perspective and priorities which embeds and supports his threads of teaching throughout his ministry: put the needs of the hungry and the hurt at the top of your agenda. Stand up and speak out against the complicity of silence by those in power. You are invited to read this text through the lens of the top stories in our news this week – where is there a need for such perspective and re-prioritising in our world today?

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## Text

One Sabbath he was going through the cornfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, 'Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?' And he said to them, 'Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.' Then he said to them, 'The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.'

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, 'Come forward.' Then he said to them, 'Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?' But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

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## Comment

The message from this text? If people are hungry, offer food. If people are hurting, offer healing. Take direct action to respond to the needs of those around you. Keep legalism in perspective. And the message to those standing wringing their hands in the corner, anxious at best to be seen to be doing the right thing, malicious at worst as they seek to trap those they fear? Jesus says this: get your priorities right.

In a time where the delicacy of human life is being tested in law, where sexual predators are being held accountable, and where millions of corporations and charities are re-drawing their privacy rules to protect vulnerable people, it would be simplistic to infer from this text: disregard the law. This is not what I hear Jesus saying.

What I hear Jesus saying is 'be loving.' Be human. Be grounded. Take radical action to meet core needs of those around you. Do not let your hearts become hardened. Do not become so obsessed with legalism that you lose sight of what God requires (Micah 6).

Offer radical hospitality to the hungry and the hurting.

If in doing so you find yourself at odds with legalism, recognise this as 'radical hospitality.' Push on, test the law, stand up and speak out for those who have no voice.

If this means stepping into uncomfortable places or difficult conversations, then go there. For this is what it takes to be radical.

When two or three of you gather together in my name, there's bound to be conflict, misunderstanding, disagreement about money (Matthew 18: 23 – 35) and power (Matthew 18: 1 – 5). My message is this: "I will be with you" (Matthew 18: 20).

Jesus' power in this passage seems to come from three sources.

**Firstly**, Jesus' power comes from his rootedness in his own tradition. He quotes scripture to the Pharisees when they challenge his behaviour. This floors them.

**Secondly**, Jesus' power comes from his absolute commitment to taking action for justice and righteousness. He will feed the hungry if it means breaking the law. He will heal the sick if it means breaking the law.

And **thirdly**, Jesus' power comes from his reading of the 'signs of the times.' He is alert, and responsive to the needs of the people around him. He is able to tap quickly into the spirit of the millions who are hungry for change, for justice, for peace (see Mark 3: 7 and following for his radical action plan for change).

And finally a word on anger. And on silence. The Pharisees watch, intent on

catching Jesus in the act of transgression. He says: do you value justice or legalism? Silence. He says: is it better to save life or to kill? Silence. He saves. He is just. He feeds. Silence. This is no easy silence. This is no stillness designed to discern depth of meaning. This is a silence full of vengeance and plotting. And it enrages Jesus.

Anger is a powerful emotion. Anger usually alerts us to something vital. Anger itself is not wrong. Indeed as a warning signal that something vital needs attention, anger is crucial. What we **do** with this anger is the test of our humanity. Thrashing out to hurt others is one response. Another is to grieve for the sadness of the situation. And then to change the situation through action. Our role model here is Jesus: out of his anger, he grieves. He heals. He takes action.

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## Response

– How does church law (or church rules) impact life in your experience; in your denomination/faith community? For good? For ill?

– What processes do you and others around you engage in to discern which rules, or laws are to be challenged? How do you discern whether these prompts are from God, or from ego?

– What does it mean to you to offer ‘radical hospitality’?

– When have you felt anger at the silence of those with power? What actions have you taken in response to this anger?

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## Prayer

Dear Lord and lover  
of humanity,  
in humility  
we pray  
for the wisdom to know what it means to love;  
for the humanity to act for the hungry, the hurt;  
for the courage to challenge the vengeful, misguided silent  
complicity of those seeking to maintain abusive power.

May we be empowered by your witness  
to keep legalism in perspective  
and to keep love and transformation  
as our outer garments of faith.

In the name of Jesus we pray.  
Amen.

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