

Daily View

"But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today'" Hebrews 3:13

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The greatest cartoon series at least since Peanuts: Calvin & Hobbes, by Bill Waterston

The Spirit v. the Letter of the Law

When I was in the Army, during my last couple of months, I was anxious to get out and get on with my life. I was a “short-timer,” not doing anything important, just biding my time. There was another even shorter-timer whose last name was Djdz. We pronounced it “Digits.”

Djdz and I were not close. He was a likable guy, but a hippie, through and through. I was much more buttoned-down. He was known mostly for smoking marijuana and you could smell it on him whenever he walked into a room. I have no idea how he stayed out of the stockade (Army jail). He also liked to wad up his fatigues every night and stuff them in his duffel bag. When we came out of the barracks each day, we laughed because his uniform could not have been more wrinkled.

I’m ashamed to admit this, but Djdz and I combined to pull a fast one on our sergeant. The sergeant decided that we needed a job, so he commissioned Djdz and me to paint a restroom that definitely did not need painting. I think he decided to punish a couple of short-timers. The instructions were simple: “*paint the inside of the auxiliary restroom with this gray paint.*” That’s all he said. I was feeling my short-timer-ness so I decided to obey the sergeant *to the letter*. Of course, I had a willing confederate in my fellow short-timer Djdz.

So, we painted the restroom. We painted the walls, the door, the handles on the door, the little window, including the glass, the toilet, the sink, the toilet paper and paper towel holders — everything but the toilet paper itself. We felt that was a little too much work. Everything was very gray when we were done.

When the sergeant came to inspect he said, “*what did you do??*” I told him we did what he told us to do, we painted the bathroom gray. Speechless, he just walked away.

Later on, after I repented, I decided that this might be an interesting example of obeying the letter of the law, if not the spirit. Many such examples crop up in daily life. For example,

there was a picture in a restaurant with a sign that said, “do not touch the picture with your hands.” Obeying just the letter of the law means that we could touch the picture with a nose, an ear or an elbow or a knee — just not with the hands. The *spirit* of the law, of course, is “don’t touch the picture, *period.*” The Calvin & Hobbes cartoon above is another humorous illustration of the principle. And when I see people driving in cars by themselves with masks on, I think they are missing the “spirit” of the law (or they just forgot to take it off).

In the New Testament, we see several examples of the letter versus the spirit of the law, especially the Sabbath law. Here’s one example:

One Sabbath, when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully. And behold, there was a man before him who had dropsy. And Jesus responded to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?” But they remained silent. Then he took him and healed him and sent him away. And he said to them, “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?” And they could not reply to these things. ^{Luke 14:1-6}

The Pharisees completely missed the spirit of the Sabbath, and added more “letter law” so they could get around it. I knew what the “spirit” of our sergeant’s instructions were, but chose the letter of the law instead. He could have called me on it, but he didn’t.

As mature adults, we observe the “spirit” of the law, even if the “letter” suggests something else. Or, we often obey the “letter” of the law, even if we feel we are complying with the “spirit.” For example, by not assembling at the building we are obeying the letter of the “law,” even though the *spirit* of the law is designed to stop the spreading the virus and we were doing that with social distancing and masks and all the other steps we have taken to be safe while in the building. But, we’re not as rebellious as I was when the sergeant told me to paint the restroom. That’s probably a good thing.