**You have heard… but now I tell you** (Matthew 5.21f, 27f, 32 & 33f)

What are the laws of New Zealand? Far too many to write down or remember, yet we break the law if we do not keep them, ignorant or not. Many people have rules - The Church, the road, schools, places of work, and many families. We often have our own personal ones.

Sometimes Churches give the impression that keeping rules is what religion is all about. This is understandable, but not helpful (Jesus came to carry our burdens not make them heavier).

Christians tend to distinguish between ritual and non-ritual laws in the Torah, leaving the former, and keeping the latter. In fact most Jews would do much the same (no Temple to sacrifice in today!).

Some Christians would pick and choose from the non-ritual laws too – eg. wearing clothes made of two materials, blood transfusions, working on the Sabbath (what counts as work?).

So where do we draw the line? And how firm do we keep these laws anyway?

As Christians we look to Jesus to give us guidance. When we look at him we often see one whose law-keeping was lax – he ate with outcasts, did not fast, healed on the Sabbath, for instance (Mark chapters 2-3).

But in Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5.17-47, especially) we see a Jesus who seems to insist on excessive keeping of the law. In Matthew 5.17 **I have not come to do away with the Law, but to perfect it**. TEXT. What does Jesus mean?

Jesus seems to be a little harsh. In our reading we have laws concerning murder, adultery, divorce and making vows. The Law says one thing and Jesus makes them harder to keep – anger is wrong, lust is wrong, divorce should not be so easy, only say Yes or No. This is confusing. The effect of Jesus’ interpretation is to make the laws harder to keep; so is Jesus lax or strict?

One answer is to say that law needs interpretation (which is why laws accumulate, becoming more complex). NB in 5.17 above is Jesus refuses to slavishly follow the letter of the law, and instead follows its spirit. So is Jesus calling for a simpler letter, but a deeper spirit of the law? Is it our *attitude* that needs changing?

Our default attitude is to wriggle out of laws, excusing ourselves, finding loopholes (which is why the super-rich pay little tax, and criminals avoid prison).

TEXT. Jesus’ attitude is to dig behind the laws rather than blindly imposing them.

It is this spirit that we should discuss, and maybe disagree about (though respectfully).

Somehow this still seems like wriggling out of it! TEXT. Maybe Jesus is making following laws so impossible that we are forced to turn to God and throw ourselves at his mercy, recognising our inadequacy. At a Communion service we do just that; all is down to what *Jesus* did, *not* what *we* do.