

In 1815, a penniless man was released from jail. He had spent five years in jail for stealing a loaf of bread for his starving sister and her family. Unjustly and harshly condemned by an unfair judicial system, he tried to escape but each failed effort only added more time to his sentence. Finally, after 19 years, he is set free, but he is a marked man. His passport identifies him as a former convict, and he is shunned by everyone. Cold and alone, he sleeps on the street, angry and bitter.ⁱ If the story sounds a little familiar, then you may have read Victor Hugo's novel *Les Miserables*.

God calls us to be compassionate for others and especially to care for those who are hungry. And when it is our time to be judged, Jesus will remind us of his teaching, "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me" (Mt 25:35). Jesus teaching stemmed from the Jewish law. In the book of Deuteronomy, we read, "When you go through your neighbor's vineyard, you may eat as many grapes as you wish, until you are satisfied, but do not put them in your basket. When you go through your neighbor's grainfield, you may pluck some of the ears with your hand, but do not put a sickle to your neighbor's grain" (23:25-26).

Isn't this unfair to the farmer? He has tilled the soil, sown the seeds, and cared for the plants. Yes, but God supplied the sun and the rain and created the earth. All are given freely by God. If God has given so much to us, should we not share with those in need. The Jewish people understood this, and the law allowed for those who were hungry to take from the abundance of food growing on the vine or in the field so long as they did not take advantage of the situation.

In the 6th Chapter of Luke, Jesus and his disciples are walking through a field picking heads of grain, rubbing them together and eating them. The Pharisees find fault that they were gathering grain, not because they were taking what someone else had planted, but rather instead because there was a minimal amount of labor involved and the law very strictly observed would prevent them from working on the sabbath. Jesus counters that satisfying a human need such as hunger takes precedence over the sabbath rest. Jesus will also heal the sick, be criticized by the same Pharisees and argue again that performing works of mercy is consistent with the sabbath, not a violation of it.

Working on the sabbath to help others in need follows the spirit of the sabbath. Part of the reason that God calls us to Sunday worship is so that we will be more aware of the needs of others and respond to those who truly need a helping hand.

Every age has it's Pharisees who understand the letter of the law and completely miss its spirit. Victor Hugo's novel set in 19th century France was based on real life events he witnessed. If he lived in our day and age, he would have seen the same thing.

In 1997, Gregory Taylor was homeless. A church in Los Angeles provided shelter and he had a safe space to sleep. One night when hunger got the better of him, he tried to break into the church's soup kitchen. He was arrested and the judge sentenced him for 25 years to life under the 3 strikes sentencing law.ⁱⁱ After 13 years in jail for this petty crime, his case was reviewed, and a judge set him free. Gregory was released for time served and thanked the judge for giving him another chance.

In our first reading the Apostle Paul tells us, "To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clad and roughly treated, we wander about homeless and we toil, working with our own hands" (1 Cor 4:11). Instead of putting our energy into finding fault with others as the Pharisees did, our time would be better spent in searching for those in true need and offering a helping hand.

ⁱ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Les_Mis%C3%A9rables

ⁱⁱ seattletimes.com/nation-world/judge-frees-hungry-thief-sentenced-in-3-strikes-case/