I think most of you know this but if you don’t here goes: when I was in seminary, I spent a month serving a parish in Yorkshire, England. The town I was in was called Lundwood and was pretty economically depressed. In addition to its economic plight, it was also not a real hotbed of Christianity, with most individuals ranging from indifferent to antagonistic. But there was something funny and that was for all of their disinterest in the Christian faith there was one religious observance that they never forgot and that was the Sunday roast beef. Supposedly this tradition started during the reign of Henry VII with the basic idea being that you could put your roast in the oven, go to church and it would be ready for you when you were through. In the times before in-home ovens people would place their pots full of roast beef and vegetables in the oven of the town baker who I guess left their oven running, because they were closed on Sundays. They could then grab it after church and carry it home. It all made sense in that context but in its modern form where no one actually goes to church it always seemed a little odd. I mean if you did not go to church, there seemed to be no compelling reason to have your roast beef on Sunday. You could have it on Thursday or maybe go a little wild and eat it on Saturday for breakfast, but in Lundwood it had to be done on Sunday and eaten around the same time that you would have eaten it had you actually gone to church. It is strange when the mandates of God are ignored but the mandates of the secular world are followed with an ironclad devotion.

There is a phrase that gets bandied about in churches now and then and it sets out to make a distinction. The phrase is “man’s rules versus God’s rules.” The idea is that sometimes we follow the wrong one and do things that have no relation to the actual worship of God but believe that we are. And while in Lundwood, I don’t think anyone thought they were actually worshiping God by eating their Sunday Roast Beef (most of them were too drunk by the time it came to eating it anyway) but they still were performing a ritual that had once been connected with a pious observation. The pious part was now gone and all that remained was the Yorkshire Pudding. And in many ways when we read our Old and New Testament lessons together, we see something similar. We see a forgetting of the pious and devotional part and a zealous devotion to the other parts, the “man’s rules” in church speak. It starts with Moses giving some instructions about the laws of God. He says, “So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God with which I am charging you.” The quick version is God has given statutes and ordinances to Moses and he is passing them on to the Israelites. And in passing them on Moses adds the line that the Israelites “must neither add anything.” When we get to the New Testament, we see that some stuff has been added and the disciples are seen violating one of these new rules. For the Disciples have not thoroughly washed their hands and so the Pharisees and Scribes are upset. In response to their chastisement Jesus quotes from the Prophet Isaiah who among other things says, “in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.”

Ok so far so good. We are to obey God’s laws and we are not to conflate the laws of man with the laws of God. But it’s not really so simple because we sometimes need the laws of man to get us to a place where we can follow the laws of God and so the two become intertwined. Here is what I mean. Let’s take something like going to church on Sunday. You would be right if you said that nowhere in the Bible does it say that you should come to church on Sunday at 8:00 or 10:30 depending on how you feel about music and what works best with your golf schedule. Someone could, with reasonable justification, come to me and say I will not come to church on Sunday because that is man’s rules and not God’s rules and they would be technically correct. But this is where being technically right may be missing the spirit of what God says. In the Ten Commandments God says, “Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it Holy.” Jesus tells us in Matthew’s Gospel that, “where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” In the letter to the Colossians Paul says, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” I realize that last one doesn’t work so well for the 8:00 service but it is hard to read it and not think that it sounds a lot like a church service. So while you could say that regular Sunday church attendance are man’s rules how would you accomplish any of these things that Bible directs us to do without this rule of man? How would we keep the Sabbath holy, how would two or three be gathered and how would we sing hymns with thankfulness in our heart to God? Often times “man’s rules” are just a way we sinful humans make sure we are doing what God commands. As C.S. Lewis pointed out, surely we can worship God in the forest but no one actually does it. These rules of man form a frame in which we can follow the rules of God.

I bring all of this up because we need to be very careful when we start trying to tease out what are the things we must obey because they are instructed by God and what things can be ignored because they were created by man. I had a parishioner when I was in San Antonio who would frequently tell me that something like being baptized before receiving communion was man’s rules. I did point out that Jesus was baptized before he received communion but the larger thing that I found was that most of his classification system between the rules of God and rules of man was based on things he liked and things he did not like. Things he liked were God’s rules, things he didn’t like were man’s rules.

But this is not to say that there is not a real and important distinction that Jesus is pointing out today. There are times that we latch onto some peripheral Christian observation and make it central to our faith. I once had a boss who because he did not drink was convinced that he was an ideal Christian (he wasn’t). He chose to obey something that was not biblical and claim that it was central to the faith. And we can all do this. We can take things like our politics or our preferred style of worship and make them more important than God. There is an old story about the very pious Scotsman who refuses to do any work on the sabbath. A friend of his points out that Jesus healed people on the sabbath to which the Scotsman replies, “Ay and I’ve been suspicious of him ever since.”

As humans one of our great skills is to justify and rationalize things we like and disparage things we don’t. The church has had 2,000 years to work out what observances are “man’s rules” which help us fulfill “God’s rules” and although there have been mistakes made, we should be very careful before we say a church ritual is not worth doing. Whatever the case we need to take our wills and desires out of the equation so that we may follow God with our whole heart this day and forevermore.