

“Love is more demanding than the Law”

A sermon on Luke 13:10-17 by John Fowler, 21 August 2016

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Jesus causes outrage in the temple because he healed a woman. She had been chronically ill for 18 years. Why the outrage? Because she was a woman? Possibly! But the official reason was that he healed her on the Sabbath day! She was ecstatic – of course – and she sang praises to God. The congregation was impressed and amazed and shared her joy. But the religious leaders did not share the woman's or the congregation's joy. Instead of rejoicing that after such a long illness the woman had been healed, they were furious and they accused Jesus of breaking the Law. The Jewish religious leaders condemned Jesus' actions. To them the Law – not working on the Sabbath – was more important than the needs of people. I believe they enjoyed the power of enforcing the Law. Yes – they were so fanatical about the imperative of the Law they had apparently lost any sense of feeling and compassion for people. But when we take a look at the Law as Christ interpreted it, it doesn't lead to a works-righteousness equation or contract - it leads to other-centred love.

If I asked you to give me an indication – by a show of hands – whether, for you, it is more important to keep the Sabbath day holy by not doing any work – or to do some good work on the Sabbath day such as healing – I am pretty confident that all of you here would say it's OK to work/heal on the Sabbath. You'd probably even go further and say that it is our Christian obligation and responsibility to do so.

However – for some people – some sects – some religions – some denominations – even today the answer is not as simple nor as clear-cut as I believe it is for most of us here.

The fourth commandment as recorded in Exodus 20:8+ - King James Version - says:

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work

Nathan's straight-forward paraphrasing reads:

“Keep up the practice of making Saturday a dedicated rest day. You are to work on your business, projects, and chores on the other six days, and keep the seventh day as a rest day, dedicated to me, the LORD your God.”

I grew up in a mixed denominational household – last century. My mother was a Seventh-day Adventist – my father was a Methodist. So I knew a lot about “keeping the Sabbath”! From the Seventh-day Adventist side of my childhood the Sabbath began at sunset on Friday and ended at sunset on Saturday. And during that period of time we were not allowed to do any work, go to the shops, play sport, go fishing, do any gardening or even study. All of that was work and was thus prohibited!

But as my father was a staunch Methodist I had to experience a second Sabbath – beginning at midnight on Saturday and ending at midnight on Sunday. Similar rules or prohibitions applied – however I was allowed to go fishing on Sundays, play sport, do gardening and study! Shopping was not a problem as in those days it was illegal for shops – including petrol stations – to open on a Sunday. But although I was allowed to play tennis or golf on a Sunday I was forbidden to buy any drinks at the tennis club or the golf course!

I had to endure two Sabbaths! Legalism pervaded the whole experience. I saw it all as prohibitive and restrictive – especially as the Catholic kids and the Anglicans were allowed to buy a milk shake on a Saturday or a Sunday! My religious homes at the time taught that unless you kept the Sabbath strictly you had no chance of going to heaven! As I look back on it now that religious upbringing promoted a transactional type of religion - based on fear. Obey the Law – “Keep the Sabbath” – or face the prospect of hell. So much for Mark 2:27 which reads “...the Sabbath was made for man...” or as we would say today “....the Sabbath was made for humankind...”

And add to all of that – no card playing, no dancing, no alcohol and no cinema! No wonder I grew up believing that religion was a transactional – a behaviour/reward type process. Obey the Law or look forward to eternal punishment or damnation.

For some religious people, their church is not a safe or happy religious home – but it is a religious prison. For them legal compliance is paramount and overrides the Christian principles of Love, Joy and Peace. For some Christians their religious experience is transactional – a bit like a supermarket experience – obey (be legalistic/robotic) and you will earn the reward – salvation. This transactional notion of Christianity or religiosity is fear based – the aim of which is to avoid hell and eternal rejection. But it is so real – no wonder its adherents often look so unhappy! And that is the type of religious behaviour that the religious leaders’ of Jesus day were enforcing. Jesus tells us to only judge others as much as we want to be judged ourselves; and to extend grace and mercy to others in the same way we want it extended to us.

I now understand and believe that true Christianity is transformational. We are changed – transformed - through the grace of Jesus Christ. Our promised salvation is a gift given to us through grace - by Jesus Christ. It is not something we deserve – nor is it something we can buy or earn by obeying the Law (or laws).

Back to the legalism of the religious leaders of Jesus day. The Talmud says that there are 613 commandments in the Torah; 248 Positive Commandments (do's) and 365 Negative Commandments (do not's). In reality that meant that there were 613 commandments which had to be approached and completed in a transactional way for a Jewish person to be deemed to live according to the Law. What a big ask!

It is recorded that Jesus had many run-ins with the established religious community of his day and its supporters - especially its leaders. He challenged their lack of compassion, their lack of love and care for people - and their emphasis on legalism. This type of religious-legal battle still continues today in some places.

Jesus taught love, Jesus practised love. God’s form of justice is restoration – reconciliation – not punishment or retribution. God’s intention was to bring about a culture of grace and other-centred love.

But there is a sad history of Christianity using (or I should say “misusing”) the Bible to justify hate, legalism, injustice and discrimination.

Last week Nathan said from this pulpit that "... a lot of horrendous things have been done in the name of God..." Karen Armstrong – a British ex-nun and author of "A History of God" - wrote "Religion has been co-opted to reinforce injustice,"

- The Bible has been used to justify racism and slavery – and to promote white supremacy. [Being Middle Eastern, Jesus was probably had a good suntan – but so much western Art portrays him as a white person]
- The Bible has been used to subjugate women
- The Bible has been used to justify the non-ordination of women
- The Bible has been used to justify discrimination against GLBTI people
- The Bible has been used to deny the sacraments to divorcees etc.

Christian fundamentalism is based on sheer unswerving adherence to the Law. I believe that fundamentalism betrays the true meaning of Christianity – which is to love, love, love; grow, grow, grow; heal, heal, heal. But for some Christian fundamentalists compliance with their religious laws is so important they lose any sense of fairness and justice. Obeying the Law becomes an obsession - the only thing which matters.

Religious fundamentalism – the implementation of legalism - isn't about religion or spirituality – it is about power. The religious leaders of Jesus' day feared a loss of power if Jesus' simple message of love and healing - other centredness - was allowed to develop and to flourish. If love took over they would lose their control/power.

Religious fundamentalists have a theology of fear, self-righteousness, greed and hypocrisy. It fosters an us/them mentality.

No wonder Mahatma Ghandi said "I like your Christ, but I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." Perhaps this is why the world around us still regards Christ with great esteem but in general holds a very low view of Christians.

Jesus preached, taught and practised love. He tried to change the religious community and society of his day – and indeed our day. He offered and brought hope to an otherwise unhappy and legalistic world.

Today many people turn their back on Christianity claiming it is too legalistic, too hypocritical or just not appropriate for the twenty-first century. At a time when the Christian religion is too often portrayed as narrow minded and exclusive we have an obligation – and an opportunity – to model the true principles of Jesus' love and healing.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is – and must be – transformational. The grace of Jesus Christ is sufficient to transform us all. And we need to let the world know about that transformational gospel which can bring hope, healing, peace, justice, equality and love – other-centredness. Together we can help to grow a more just and a more peaceful world based on the loving principles of our hero Jesus Christ.

There is a saying – sometimes attributed to St Francis of Assisi – "Go and preach the gospel. Use words if necessary." That's certainly not saying 'earn your salvation by slavish adherence to the Law.' It's saying 'Live your life with love and compassion. That may be the only gospel some people read.'

Archbishop Desmond Tutu has said “Love is much more demanding than (the) Law.”

In the temple on that Sabbath day Jesus broke the Law of the religious leaders of his day. By so doing he showed other-centred love as he healed a woman who had been chronically ill for 18 years. His actions achieved much more than keeping the Law would have. It healed a woman and encouraged a congregation to re-think its stance to healing, to life, to each other and to the Law. Jesus challenged the conventional religious practices of his day. Similarly, today, we need to accept that Christianity is a dynamic entity constantly changing to adapt to new situations as they emerge. Like Jesus, we need to continue to comfort the disturbed - but we also need to disturb the comfortable.

Perhaps John Wesley’s Rule summarises Jesus’ other-centred love:

“DO ALL THE GOOD YOU CAN
BY ALL THE MEANS YOU CAN
IN ALL THE PLACES YOU CAN
AT ALL THE TIMES YOU CAN
FOR AS LONG A EVER YOU CAN.”

Amen.