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When the Good Excludes God

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Luke 13:10-17

After setting the Hebrew people free from slavery in Egypt, God led the people to the bottom of Mount Sinai where God gave the people The Law. The Ten Commandments, recorded in both Exodus and Deuteronomy, gave the people a blueprint for how to live as God's people instead of living as Pharaoh's slaves. The people had had 400 years to learn how to live as slaves to Pharaoh, and let's just say it is still a challenge to live according to the laws that God gave us. But among those Ten Commandments that God gave from Mount Sinai is this fourth one:

Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord our God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work – you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord our God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day. [Deut 5:12-15]

Set aside for a moment the realization that this commandment – one of the original 10 – is perhaps the one that we ignore and break with the most support from the culture and the church. But this is the commandment that is at issue in Luke's story of the encounter between Jesus, the crippled woman and the synagogue leader. The synagogue leader says that Jesus has broken #4 of the commandments God gave Moses and therefore he has sinned.

So, if I may, let me offer one other piece of guidance from the wisdom of the Church. In 1649, the Church of England produced The Westminster Confession of faith, along with two catechisms that were intended to be teaching aids and summaries of the longer confession. The Westminster Shorter Catechism – which I memorized as a sixth grader – has this question and answer to guide Christians.

Q14. What is sin?

A. Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God.

This question and answer means that we sin both by crossing over the line set by the Law of God – by breaking the Law – AND we can sin by failing to meet the standard of the Law of God. So, there are sins of commission – when we do that which is forbidden by the Law. And there

are sins of omission – when we fail to meet the demands of the law or fall short of what God calls us to be and to do. So, The Shorter Catechism then goes on to address each of the Ten Commandments by explaining both what is forbidden and what is commanded of us in order to keep the commandment.

Now as the oldest of three children – as a person who likes to get things right – as one who believes in structure, procedure and process – and as one trained in and entrusted with the interpretation of Scripture – I understand the complaint of the Leader of the Synagogue in Luke’s Gospel. Before we dismiss the synagogue leader as arrogant, legalistic and threatened, Scripture invites us to look deeply inside ourselves and see if there is any of the Leader of the Synagogue living in us.

If we like law and order more than chaos – then we might be a synagogue leader

If we think that there is a time and a place for most everything – we might be a synagogue leader

If we believe that discipline and good habits are essential to virtue – we might be a synagogue leader.

If we take seriously – both for ourselves and for others – the observance of the Law of God - we might be a synagogue leader.

If we feel it is important to call out those who break God’s Law – to identify where people either do what is forbidden or fail to meet God’s standard – we might be a synagogue leader.

If we think to ourselves, “This woman had lived bent over for 18 years! Would one more day have killed her? It could have waited till Monday morning.” – we might be a synagogue leader.

And to us, Jesus says, “You hypocrites! Don’t each of you treat your own animals with compassion – untying them to give them water to drink on the Sabbath? Why then is it wrong to relieve this woman’s suffering after 18 long years and set her free?” (Luke 13:15-16)

There is – in both the Old and New Testaments – the always present danger that those who fear God will use the Law- the Good – to exclude God. It happens all the time. Good Christian People use the Law to exclude others, to control access to power, and to avoid doing and being what God means for us to do and to be. The Synagogue Leader in Luke is not the first nor the last well meaning, God-fearing person to use the good to exclude God. Where in our lives and in this church do we use what is good to exclude God?

Dr. Paul Lehmann, a professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York in the 80’s & 90’s, wrote a bookⁱ in which he gives important guidance in how to understand and how to live God’s Law. Lehmann says the too often we live as though The Law was the Gospel, rather than understanding that The Gospel is the Law.

In other words, both Law and Gospel are important, but it is critical to determine which is primary. Lehmann says that we must live so that we show that The Gospel is primary. When we understand that Gospel – God’s invitation to humanity to be in right relationship through Christ – is most important and central to how we live our lives, then we understand that The

Law is given to guide or to form that relationship. God initiates relationship with us and gives us the Law to give the Gospel shape. Law does not come first. Law only comes second – to give form to the good news of the Gospel. The Law is the *form* of the gospelⁱⁱ but not the gospel itself. The Gospel is Law. The Law is not the Gospel. Think about that distinction.

The synagogue leader – in Luke’s Gospel and in us – always wants the Law to be primary, to control, to govern and to define who God knows, loves and has invited into relationship. The Synagogue Leader is so clear about this that he condemns the healing of a woman on the Sabbath as contrary to God’s intent or command. The keeping of the Law, for him, is more important than freeing a woman from bondage and restoring her to wholeness.

We can be so determined to make the Law primary that that we can believe that any challenge to our power, our control or the order of things that serves us is evil. The synagogue leader in us believes that the observance of the law is more important than the relationship with God through Christ that gives the Law its meaning. The Synagogue Leader allows the good Sabbath Law to exclude God because he has things backwards.

Jesus – on the other hand – heals the woman as a way of living out the Gospel that God provides for rest, relief and wholeness for all of God’s creation. For Jesus, God’s love for and relationship with us is the Gospel, and all else – especially the Law - serves that reality. Until we can understand, believe and live that, we will continue to allow the good to exclude God.

It is a good Law that commands us to keep a day of rest and worship, and when that law serves the Gospel, it means that we attend to our relationship with God, others, self and creation as the embodiment of that Law. But when – in our history – we used the Sabbath Law to limit human freedom and to control people for the purposes of the institution of Church, then human beings began to reject even the good law. Some would say that what is needed is a return of the old “blue laws” that forced businesses to close and limited activities. I disagree. I think that this thinking is the result of believing that the Law is Gospel. Instead, in the midst of our context and culture, you and I are to arrange our lives to rest, to attend to our relationship with God, self, others and creation in a spirit of gratitude and worship for the God who sets us free from slavery. We GET to observe the Sabbath because the Gospel is Law – not the other way around! When the Christian Church still had enough clout and power in our culture to control things, we used the Law of God to serve our own purposes. The blue laws served the purposes of the synagogue leaders (The American Christian Church). If there was nothing else happening on Sunday morning and Sunday night, then it was much easier to get people to worship. I went to Sunday night youth group as a teenager, because that is where everyone was – there was nothing else open – nowhere else to congregate! I didn’t observe the Sabbath because I loved God and wanted to worship. I observed the Sabbath because there was not another option. The Law was Gospel. And forced obedience is not discipleship. The American Church used the Law to control and to dominate. We forgot that the law is rightly used to help us live out the Gospel – that in Jesus Christ God came so that we might be healed, reconciled, forgiven and realigned.

The Law of God exists to serve God’s purpose and God’s kingdom – not our churches, our control, our power or our privilege. Only when we acknowledge that, will we have the ability to

live the Law of God as Gospel and begin to know for ourselves and to show others what a real, living, loving relationship with God looks like.

Jesus says that God intends for all of us to be set free from whatever it is that keeps us from standing up straight and looking to heaven to praise God. Remember – it was the leader of the Synagogue who wanted to prevent the purpose of the Gospel and who was put to shame.

When the Church uses Law and order to protect those who abuse women and children, then we know that the Law has become Gospel instead of the Gospel being the Law.

When the Church uses Law to drum up fear of and hate for others because of their race, their religion, their nationality or their sexuality, then the Law is Gospel instead of the Gospel being Law.

When the Church uses the Law to protect any system that serves the privilege and wealth of the powerful instead of serving the least of these, then the Law is Gospel instead of the Gospel being Law.

The Synagogue leader in Luke, and the synagogue leader in us is always tempted to make the Law primary. But Jesus will not allow it. The Law is only rightly observed when it serves the Gospel – never the other way around. When Gospel is primary, we will both be able to do good and to recognize God in our midst.

ⁱ The Decalogue and a Human Future: The Meaning of the Commandments for Making & Keeping Human Life Human. Paul L. Lehmann. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., c. 1995.

ⁱⁱ Ibid. p. 19.