

Are You Following the Law or God?

Luke 13:10-17

August 26, 2007

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight.

When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day."

But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?"

When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

Have you ever been set free? I don't mean set free from prison (although that's a good experience, too). I mean set free from restrictions that confine you—set free to make your own choices for good or for bad?

I remember my first real "freeing" experience. It was when I went to college for as a freshman. During the initial two weeks of my freshman year, I felt as though I had been liberated from all rules and laws. I could stay up as late as I wanted, eat what I wanted, go where I wanted, and be who I wanted. There were no family restrictions. And so during those first two weeks I explored my freedom to the hilt. Of course, after those two weeks were over I realized that if I kept exploring my freedom in the same way, I'd flunk out of college by December.

After that, I discovered other kinds of freeing experiences. The most prominent one was the freedom to study what I wanted for the first time, and to get good grades for myself. Before then I always had to study what school wanted me to study, and I was told to get good grades because others wanted me to get good grades. I was not a good student back then because I wasn't necessarily motivated by the rule that we have to get good grades. But I discovered that I could make choices now. I could get good grades for good reasons. I had the freedom to choose what the course of my life would be, and it was wonderful. This was a deeper freedom than the earlier freedom to play. This was a freedom to take off shackles and become who I wanted to become.

All of us are constrained in some way. All of us live in a world of principles, axioms, rules, laws, and regulations. By and large they are good for us. But as good as they are, when they get too strong they can stifle us. They can rob us of creativity and growth. There is a point at which rules, regulations, and principles can do more than guide us to what is good. They can bar us from discovering what is better.

Albert Einstein understood what I'm talking about. Do you know what made him a genius? It's not necessarily what most people think. Einstein was certainly smart. I'm sure that his I.Q. was quite high, but that's not what made him a genius. I've always had a small fascination with Einstein, and so over the summer I've been working through a wonderful biography of him: *Einstein: His Life and Universe*, by Walter Isaacson. In my reading I think I've discovered what really made him a genius, and what makes others truly geniuses.

In Einstein's time there were plenty of people who were just as smart as him, and perhaps even smarter. What made Einstein a genius was his ability to jettison restrictive theories and axioms in order to discover new ones. For instance, during his time Newtonian physics were *the* guiding set of theories about how the universe works. Newtonian physics were based on the discoveries and writings of an earlier genius, Sir Isaac Newton, who discovered gravity (remember the apple falling on his head) and theorized that the universe was like a great machine in which every action had an equal reaction.

Einstein, like all other physicists of his day, was schooled in Newtonian principles. The basic, unspoken rule was that no one questioned the Newtonian approach. Einstein did. For example, according to Newtonian principles, gravity is absolute and unchanging. Einstein noticed that this wasn't true. Instead of trying to fit his theories with Newton's, he developed his theory of special relativity, which eventually became his theory of general relativity. His theory basically said that gravity is relative to velocity and mass. It changes depending on how fast a body is going, and how large a body is. This was a radical departure and one that could only be presented by someone willing to go against the rules.

In addition, during Einstein's day there was a belief that light spread through the "ether" (what they believed was some sort of conducting, invisible matter that existed all throughout the universe) like all other electro-magnetic currents. In other words, light acted like radio waves in that it spread through the universe like a wave moves through water. Everyone, except Einstein, accepted this. Einstein realized that light also moved like particles, or packets of particles (what he called "quanta," but we now also call "photons"). Light wasn't one thing or another. It was both a wave and particles. It was two things at once. This was a radical thought that made even Einstein uncomfortable. He had blown through hundreds of years of accepted thought to promote a new idea. He was breaking the rules, but instead of succumbing to the rules and changing his theories, he promoted his theories and radically changed the world. His ability to bring new ideas together and to become free of restrictive rules that led away from truth were what made him a genius.

Jesus was a genius, more so than Einstein, and part of his genius was knowing that the Ten Commandments and the Law, as good as they were, could get in the way of our following God. He knew that the commandments and the law were given to guide people to live as God wanted them to live. But he also knew that the people of faith were often guilty of substituting adherence to the law for devotion to God. And our passage for this morning was an example of that. Here's the story: Jesus is in the midst of his ministry around the Sea of Galilee. He has been preaching, teaching, and healing all over, and now has a reputation—both good and bad. It

is the Sabbath, and Jesus is worshipping in the synagogue. A woman, who has been bent over for eighteen years, approaches him and asks to be healed. And so Jesus heals her.

There's one big problem. In healing her, Jesus has just broken the sacred Law. He has done work on the Sabbath. According to the Jewish Law from Deuteronomy, no one is allowed to do work on the Sabbath. It is a holy time for resting. Even good work, even God's work, is forbidden. So Jesus has broken the law, and the rabbis take him to task for it. They were devoted to following God's law to the letter so that they could be closer to God. The problem is that the Law had become a false god for them, and their stringent devotion to law actually moved them away from God. They couldn't see that healing a woman, even on the Sabbath, was what God wanted and truly cared about. Jesus was making it clear: where the law gets in the way of faith, it needs to be corrected.

Do you know what really gets me about much of modern Christianity? It's that there are so many Christian fundamentalists and evangelists who try to take Christianity back to those good ole days when faith was about following the law. They fight to put the Ten Commandments in courtrooms, they scream about how this a Christian nation and how we should follow Christian laws, and they preach out of the Old Testament about the law and God's judgment. And in the process of preaching the message of Jesus, they miss entirely what Jesus was trying to teach.

Now please don't get me wrong. I'm not saying, in any way, shape, or form, that the Commandments and the Law are bad and that we should do away with them. Instead, I'm trying to say to you what Jesus taught. As important as the Ten Commandments are, their main focus isn't necessarily on God. Think about them for a moment. What are the commandments trying to do? They are trying to teach us how to act and behave. Their focus is on us and our behavior. That's a good thing, and no one will ever go wrong by following the commandments. Unfortunately, because their focus is on us and our behavior, they can also move us away from putting our real focus on God and what God wills.

The Ten Commandments and the Law are only a beginning of faith. They are like rules of behavior for small children. What Jesus was trying to teach is the idea that as good as the Law and the commandments are, they can lead people astray by making adherence to law more important than devotion to God. Jesus wanted something much more than for us to be good. Jesus wanted us to be living conduits for God to be alive in the world in and through us. This is the message Jesus taught in what I believe to be, perhaps, the most profound passage of the Bible: John 15.

Listen to what Jesus taught his disciples in John 15: *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Live in me as I live in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it lives in the vine, neither can you unless you live in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who live in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.... If you live in me, and my words live in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."*

I don't know if you can hear how radical this passage is. It's still radical because the majority of the Christian world doesn't get it. The passage goes completely against the idea of just following the commandments and the Law. The key word in the passage is "live." Jesus is telling his disciples that faith isn't just a matter of having the right behavior. It's a matter of having the right kind of life in which we actually let Jesus come alive *in* us, as we come alive *in* him. Let that rest in your mind a bit. He is saying that there is a way of living our faith in which God isn't just external. There's a way of living life in which God is alive inside of us, guiding us through all we do. This is deeply profound because it's a mystical way of living. We don't just follow God's laws. We actually let God's thoughts flow in and through us.

I have a very hard time trying to figure out a way to explain the whole process of letting Christ become alive in us, and us in him. But there is one way that I think helps. It's from the film, *The Matrix*. *The Matrix* is an interesting film that was very popular a few years back. It's the story of a man named Neo, who is visited by another man named Morpheus. Morpheus tells him that all in the world is not what it seems, and that what Neo thinks is reality really isn't real. Morpheus gives Neo a pill that he promises will reveal reality to him. Neo takes it and immediately finds himself in another world that is gritty and harsh. It's a world in which humans are fighting against computers that have taken over the world, and have plugged all humans into a massive computer that generates a simulated world. In other words, the world that Neo had lived his whole life in turns out to be nothing more than a computer-generated world, albeit one that seems as real as real. All humans in the computer world actually live their lives immersed in small pods, with their brains being connected to the computer via a data port surgically implanted in their brains. Their bodies never move, but in their minds they are alive in what seems to be the real world. When they are connected to a data conduit, they enter the computer-generated world, which has all the properties and experiences that we are experiencing right now in our world.

The real Morpheus teaches the real Neo how to go back into the false world and to begin freeing people from being subjected to the false reality of the computer world. Here's where the connection is to John 15. As part of Neo's training, Morpheus needs to teach him marshal arts. But instead of training him, he simply connects him to a computer program that automatically inserts all marshal arts training and knowledge into his brain. In an instant, Neo knows how to do kung fu. He is able to fight like a life-long trained master. He just "knows."

In many ways, what Jesus talks about in John 15 is similar. There is a kind of truth and knowledge available to us when we let Christ come alive in us. When we become people who, instead of just following the law and the commandments, allow Christ to awaken within us and live through us, just know what is right and wrong, good and evil. But we know more. We begin to know God's mind, and we are then able to just "know" how God wants us to live, just as Neo just "knew" how to do kung fu. Jesus was calling all of us to live this kind of life, but to do it we have to actually be willing to free ourselves from obligation to the law so that we can live in openness to God who is alive in us. I don't mean that we are free to create our own laws. Instead, we are free to follow God who is now within us and guides us, rather than being bound by rules that are good, but can lead us away from God.

You are free to live by the law, but when you live a life that is really deeply open to Christ being alive in you, then you live by the Spirit. And that's what Jesus was teaching us all to do. The commandments are good, but living in way that lets Christ live within us is great. So here's my question for you: are you following the law or God?

Amen.