

Luke 13:10-17
August 21, 2022

Seventh Day

Bear with me while I tell a football story. I tell it only because it is harmless, and when it comes to religious practices, like Sabbath observances, it is risky to tell stories that might be harmful, which is not my intention.

When I was in college we used to have a little joke about the football games. The coach, who was a devout Christian, and very decent person (and still is), and a pretty good football coach (he was revered because his teams won more than half of their games, which for us, seemed much better than the alternative of not winning any), had some ideas about how a football game should be played.

He preferred the running game over the passing game, and he liked what they call, “the option,” which was a *certain kind* of running play. As a matter of fact, very often the first play of the game on offense was an option play. Everyone knew it; we knew it, all the people in the stands knew it, including those cheering for the opposition, and the opposition knew it. It was rarely successful, usually ending in about a four yard loss. And that was the joke, “why don’t we just skip that play and rather than begin with first and ten, start out with second and fourteen?”

“Legalism” is not the word for when there is a practice or a belief, like always running the option on the first play, but when one insists on doing it over and over

even when it isn’t working, or insisting that everyone else do things that way because it is the only right way. It shows up in sports, like in a football game, and also in other realms of life, such as education, or retail, politics, economics, or the military, and even family life. As a matter of fact, there doesn’t seem to be any realm of human experience in which it *can’t* apply.

There are several charges against legalism. First and foremost is the charge of hypocrisy, because those who want to practice it are very rarely consistent; that is, they do some things legalistically, but not others, and sometimes they only stay with the strict practices when it suits them, and are not gracious with others who apply the same level of inconsistency. Another charge against it regards the possibility of doing harm, or conversely, not doing good.

It is *not* held in high regard in the scriptures, especially when applied to religion, and today’s reading from The Gospel of Luke is a good example. Jesus went to church one Saturday morning, because of course, the Sabbath is the seventh day, and Saturday is also the seventh day. While there, he met a woman who had suffered a malady for eighteen years, who was stooped over and couldn’t straighten up.

Jesus went ahead and straightened her up, bringing great relief and joy, only to be shot down by those who insisted on “running the option,” so to speak, on the first play, I mean severe observance of the Sabbath rule, while everyone else was delighted:

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” Exodus 20:8-11.

The commandment never says anything about going to church, but never mind about that, the issue here is about whether it is allowable to do good on the Sabbath, if it requires work. The answer of Jesus is that it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.

(Now, please allow me a digression. I have never met a person, myself included, that wanted to admit to being a, “legalist,” or to advocate a works righteousness. Additionally, neither football, nor retail, education, nor any other endeavor is legalistic by nature. And sometimes, legalism is good, like requiring surgeons to *always* scrub in before surgery.

It is easy to judge other people’s legalisms and be unaware of one’s own. I believe it is responsible for me to warn against judging others on this point, and to, rather, encourage self-analysis instead. For instance, I was raised to believe that Catholicism is a “works righteous” religion and is “legalistic.” I was also raised around Catholics who often defied that judgement.

And though no one warned me, I have found legalisms among my Baptist brothers and sisters.

My digression would be amiss if I did not mention Judaism. Christians have been arguing for thousands of years that Judaism is inherently “legalistic” because the opponents in the New Testament were Jewish. A great deal of harm has been done by that generalization and we should refrain from it.

I am sure that hyper-ritualistic, excessively demanding, and hypocritical beliefs and practices can be found anywhere, but that doesn’t mean one should characterize *whole* groups of people without knowing them. Now, at last, ends my digression.

It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. In another place Jesus said, “the Sabbath was made for human beings, not humans beings for the Sabbath,” which conveys the same idea.

But in addition to doing good and avoiding hypocrisy and not judging others, how might religious people, people of faith and conviction live their convictions regarding beliefs and rituals and life principles, *without* being “legalistic,” or turning their faith into a de facto religion of works righteousness? By way of an answer I want to speak of a life sincerely lived, that one does what is meaningful to them, without *any* sense of obligation, any judgment of others or imposing on others a burdensome task.

There is an old expression, “Wild horses couldn’t keep me away.” Come to think of it, the Rolling Stones made it into a song. It means that the reason one might show up somewhere isn’t out of a sense of duty, even if there is one, or to attain a reward or avoid a punishment, even if there are rewards and punishments, but because showing up is at the heart of their being, who they are, what they want to do. It means that there doesn’t need to be a duty or a reward or a punishment.

“Bless the Lord, O my soul,” the psalmist wrote, “Let all that is within me bless God’s holy name.”

The message of grace is that this is the way God loves. This is the way we love when we are at our best. I don’t suppose we ever entirely clear out ulterior motives, but it is right when we do. And when we do, we won’t get tripped up on the seventh day or any other time, condemning someone when they are doing good, looking silly really, headed for a four yard loss, while everyone else is delighted at what God is doing?