

OCTOBER 23, 2011: THIRTIETH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
Exodus 22:20-26 I Thessalonians 1:5a-10 Matthew 22:34-40

Like most kids, I grew up being taught I should do good and avoid evil. For the most part, I did. But when I asked myself, "Why?" I usually came up with the answer, "I'm afraid not to do good." Very early I learned that if I did something bad I got punished. So I choose the path of least pain.

Later, when I started to study my catechism, I discovered the punishment for some of my actions could extend even beyond this life; a few might even merit eternal punishment – a terrific motive for staying on the straight and narrow.

Then I began to study Scripture.

I quickly learned that practically all the authors of the Hebrew Scripture (including today's Exodus writer) knew nothing of an after-life as we know it. This naturally forced them to develop a system of reward and punishment that was limited to this life alone.

Yet as we hear in our Exodus reading, the ancient Israelites were motivated by more than just the fear of punishment. As faithful Jews, they tried to pattern their behavior on Yahweh's behavior. Since they only knew about Yahweh's behavior from Yahweh's actions in their own lives and history, they were expected to treat people as Yahweh had treated them. For instance, "You shall not molest or oppress an alien, for you were once aliens in the land of Egypt." Yahweh's generous treatment of them when they were helpless slaves set the standard for their treatment of the helpless among them; especially widows, orphans, aliens, and the poor.

God's unique behavior is perfectly described in the last line: "... I (Yahweh) am compassionate." Jewish morality was based on the conviction that those who related to others as Yahweh related to them would experience a happy, fulfilled life. A terrific motive for doing good!

Paul also employs an imitation model for doing good. But in his case, he encourages those in the Thessalonian church to imitate not only God but also himself. "You know what sort of people we were among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and the Lord, receiving the word in great affliction, with joy from the Holy Spirit, so that you became a model for all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia." Because they've faithfully copied God and Paul's behavior, now others are copying their behavior. It's a "benign circle."

Yet for Christians, Jesus is always the person who begins the circle. In one of the best-know passages of Scripture this Galilean carpenter compresses all 613 Mosaic laws into two essential commandments; the two commandments which governed his own life and ministry.

Perhaps too frequently I remind my classes of a mid-sixties national survey. Roman Catholics were asked a legitimate question: "Which is the more important law; love your neighbor or give up meat on Friday?" More than half of those questioned responded, "Give up meat on Friday!"

At some point along the more than 19 centuries of Christianity Jesus' command to love God and love your neighbor as yourself was relegated to a back burner. Rules and regulations became more important than imitating a person. Friday abstinence from meat was black and white. Loving God and our neighbor is always a little "hazy." Thankfully the obligation of meatless Fridays was lifted shortly after the survey.

Perhaps our recent return to a rules and regulations church can best be explained by the fact we who should be imitating Jesus rarely convey an image others can imitate. I suggest that in the next couple of days we all go online and Google Rodney Atkins' old country/western hit I'm Watching You, Dad."

If we don't have someone of faith to watch, rules and regulations can easily become the center of our faith.

Roger Vermalen Karban

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FOSIL, BOX 31, BELLEVILLE, IL 62222

OCTOBER 30, 2011: THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
 Malachi 1:14b-2:2b, 8-10 I Thessalonians 2:7b-9,13 Matthew 23:1-12

We old-timers clearly remember the strong reaction when John McKenzie's book *Authority in the Church* hit the pews in the late 60s. Some in authority immediately labeled him a heretic, others among the faithful called him a prophet. I finished the book and simply asked, "How come I never noticed that before?"

The "that" was the great "John L's" methodical exegesis of biblical authority texts; an exegesis which demonstrated that the most frequent problem our sacred authors faced had almost nothing to do with people disobeying those in authority. On the contrary, in practically every passage, the problem they addressed revolved around how those in authority exercised authority.

Having been faith-formed in an era when the catechism, not Scripture was the teaching tool, I presumed anyone who questioned or challenged those in church authority were purchasing a one-way ticket to hell. It was a given that the power our religious leaders held over us was a direct gift from God. To challenge them was to challenge God. As members of the faithful, our job was to obey every edict unflinchingly. People of faith simply did not even complain, much less disobey,

When I, like many of you, asked my religion teachers what I should do if someone in authority told me to do something I believed was a sin, I was told, "Do it!" The reason: "Most probably you don't know enough about the intricacies of your faith to accurately label it as sinful. Because he's a priest or bishop he'll always know more about those things than you. Besides, on those extremely rare occasions in which it might be a sin, if you do it, he'll go to hell, not you." (No wonder Catholic clerical abuse is such a unique, diabolical phenomenon.)

As an excellent exegete, McKenzie time and time again demonstrated that when a sacred author addressed abuses in authority, he or she wasn't interested in bringing up past history or concerned with condemning "other religions." The problems which drove them to put stylus to the papyrus were rampant in the communities for which they were writing, otherwise they wouldn't have brought up the subject.

It's not hard for us to hear Malachi's condemnation of the Jewish priests of his day and age. We Christians presume if they'd exercised their ministry correctly, God wouldn't have sent Jesus to clean up the mess.

It's another thing to read Matthew's famous chapter 23 pericope. Though he has "his" Jesus tear into the "scribes and Pharisees," his readers knew he was criticizing their own leadership. Already by the mid-80s some Christian leaders had started to wear distinctive clothes, demand honorary titles, and presume they were generally better than those they served. Jesus puts it in clear terms: "Do not follow their example!"

Authority in the church is completely unique. "The greatest among you must be as your servant. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled; those who humble themselves will be exalted." Nothing runs more counter to the way authority is exercised in other communities and institutions.

Paul, in the earliest Christian writing we possess - I Thessalonians - is forced to deal with the same problem. But instead of having recourse to Jesus, he uses himself as an example of good leadership. "We were gentle among you, as a nursing mother cares for her children . . . You recall, brothers and sisters our toil and drudgery. Working night and day in order not to burden any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God."

Remembering Paul's I Corinthians 10 comment about the oneness of the Christian community being symbolized in the one loaf of "messy" Eucharistic bread, I can only surmise that even he realized that some styles of early church leadership were contributing to the mess.

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