

Religion As Control *versus* Religion As Empowerment

On Sunday, we continued our sermon series called “Journey To The Cross” by exploring a Gospel passage offering a third critical clue as to why Jesus was killed.

1. Warm up question. At the outset of Sunday’s sermon, Jeff asked us to consider a hypothetical story about two very different approaches to parenting. How would you describe the style of parenting you grew up with?
2. In his hypothetical, Jeff described one Mom who used a controlling style of parenting that relied heavily on dictated rules and fear of punishment. The other Mom used an empowering style of parenting that relied heavily on interactive dialogue meant to help the son think through consequences and make life-giving decisions.
 - a. For those of us who’ve experienced controlling forms of parenting, how did that feel? Did it help you grow and develop?
 - b. For those of us who’ve experienced empowering forms of parenting, how did that feel? Did it help you to grow and develop?
 - c. Jeff’s hypothetical captures the essence of what’s happening in this week’s Gospel passage, except instead of raising teenagers, the question is how to best help us humans grow up into our full spiritual potential. The Pharisees took a controlling approach based on rules and fear. Jesus advocated an empowering approach based on love and compassion and internal dialogue with the Holy Spirit. Think about your own life. Which approach did your spiritual mentors primarily rely upon – and how did that effect your spiritual growth?
3. Today’s Gospel passage consists of two complimentary scenes that both occur on the Sabbath day. Let’s read the first scene: Mark 2:23-28.
 - a. For background on the Sabbath rule, read Exodus 20:8-10, Exodus 35:2-3, and Numbers 15:32-36. Based on these passages, how would you articulate the Sabbath rule, what was its intended purpose, and how strictly was it to be observed?
 - b. Why did the disciples pluck and husk grain as they walked through the fields on the Sabbath? What was the need? Was it urgent? Did their behavior seem consistent with strict observance of the Sabbath rule?
 - c. In defense of his disciples’ actions, Jesus reminded the Pharisees of an Old Testament story about a time David was running for his life and ate holy bread from a temple in violation of applicable rules. Read I Samuel 21:1-6. What point do you think Jesus was trying to make? What lesson was he drawing from David’s example?

- d. In Mark 2:27, Jesus says, “The Sabbath [rule] was made for humanity, and not humanity for the Sabbath [rule]. . . .” Jeff called this statement “revolutionary.” What principle can we draw from verse 27 for how followers of Jesus should interact with religious rules? How comfortable are you with that principle?
 - e. Jeff suggested that, due to the limits of human language, there is no such thing as a perfect rule that is able to anticipate every possible situation. Therefore, mindless application of rules can be dangerous. Examples: Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not bear false witness. Thou shalt not steal. Can you think of moral exceptions to these rules?
4. Now let’s read the second scene in today’s Gospel passage: Mark 3:1-6.
- a. Jesus could have easily waited until the next day to heal the disabled man. Why didn’t he? Were his actions consistent with strict observance of the Sabbath rule?
 - b. In verse 5 the Pharisees are accused of having hard hearts. How would they have likely defended themselves?
 - c. What point was Jesus trying to make by healing the man on the Sabbath? What principle can we draw from this story for how followers of Jesus should interact with religious rules? How comfortable are you with that principle?
 - d. According to verse 6, what Jesus does in today’s passage convinced the Pharisees that Jesus must be destroyed. Why?
 - e. Galatians 5:1 says, “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.” What does that mean? Free from what?
5. Jeff suggested that we think of religious rules as being like Lieutenants and the voice of God’s Spirit inside us as being like a General. Religious rules have authority over us, but they are not the ultimate authority. The ultimate authority is the voice of the Spirit (Galatians 5:18). Therefore, whenever there is a conflict between a religious rule and what God’s Spirit says to us, we should obey the Spirit.
- a. Do you buy that? Why or why not?
 - b. Several states now have “death-with-dignity” statutes that, under strict guidelines, allow doctors to prescribe medication that terminally ill patients can take to euthanize themselves when their suffering grows dire. Jeff told the story of Brittany Maynard. As her life neared the end, many religious people told her there is a rule against euthanasia. (The Bible doesn’t address euthanasia, but some churches prohibit it based on extrapolation from Scripture.) Brittany very publically pushed back and chose to die, surrounded by family, on November 1, 2014. If you were faced with such a decision, how would you decide? In other words, how should Christians go about making important moral decisions?