

*November 2, 2014*  
**Thought For The Week**

Scripture References:

Exodus 22: 20-26 • 1 Thessalonians 1:5c-10 • Matthew 22:34-40

Somewhere out of my distant past, I remember this line: "Laws are made to keep human beings human." The interesting insight about that saying is that laws are indeed made by humans to keep themselves and others more human. Given, therefore, that laws are made by and for humans, the deeper question remains, why should we need laws at all? Could we not simply get along together on the basis of the Jewish and Christian scriptures? "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." It all seems so simple and reasonable and yet our history tells us that it has never worked. Historically, we have done unmentionable things to one another. Christians might say that it is all the result of Original Sin, the collapse of the human conscience. Others would claim that by our nature we think and act primarily for our own good, not for the good of others. "It is so natural," we say.

Nonetheless, despite all we have said thus far, human individuals do have conscience and they normally exhibit a sense of guilt, even sadness when they offend another. In order to assist human conscience, therefore, we have made laws to assist one another in our own failure to keep the law. Perhaps, if there were no laws, this planet would be the scene of utter chaos.

Another interesting element in the making and keeping of laws is that our sense of what is appropriate for daily life gradually changes. Happily, we often become more sensitive regarding what should be considered first or last, important or not so important.

For many years capital punishment by death has simply been taken for granted in many countries. Today, such punishment is being discontinued as a less than human practice. Many Christians, for instance, consider the old rules of fasting and abstinence or confession to be outmoded. Conversely many Christians find spiritual reward in acts of kindness, involvement in peace activities or social justice issues. There is evidence among many, therefore, that some human activities are of higher value than others.

This is the question that arises in the scriptures; what is the commandment of first importance. In the Mosaic Law there were some 615 such laws concerning worship, human relationships, dietary rules, personal hygiene, etc. Some of these were obviously kept more stringently than others. Nonetheless, if you asked any devout Jew to name the most important of the laws, he or she would tell you that love of God and love of neighbor stands in first place: neighbor meaning especially the widow and the orphan, the resident alien and any others who could not sustain their lives on their own. In other words, the wealthy and the powerful could take care of themselves. The poor and the powerless needed to depend on the law for help.

In the gospel we have the well-known conversation between Jesus and a Pharisee regarding which of the Mosaic laws were most important. The Pharisee already had the answer, of course, but he wanted to see if Jesus truly believed in the Torah and all its minuscule legalities. Jesus brought the controversy to a close by quoting the Torah: "Hear O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." Then, however, Jesus added an important quote from the Book of Leviticus 19:18: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The point of all this being that the 613 statutes in the law were important but not as important as observing the more critical law of caring for one's neighbor. Again, the point being that we need to be able to separate the chaff from the wheat.

It would be an interesting exercise in Christian ethics if we, members of the Community of Christ, were asked to draw up our Top Ten list of Christian laws, those we have kept so scrupulously over the years. Where would fasting & abstinence fit? Where would acts of justice and kindness, care for children and the elderly fit? Would the first commandment still fit at the top of the list?

Finally, the crux of the question regarding the Law and laws is the one that asks whether we are willing to move from the abstract into the concrete, to ask who exactly is my neighbor and what does she or he mean to me.

"It seems clear some Christians have had problems with their Top Ten list. In a many tragic examples, there would have been no spousal & child abuse in our communities if we had put the care of the most vulnerable high on our list. No matter how

eloquently we preach God's word, there's always a possible disconnect between that ministry and our actual living God's Word."

Knowing the law is important, but living it is what ultimately counts.

## Prayer For The Week

God of all nations, we praise you. We give thanks for this time to remember your goodness, your loving care, your guidance and your vision for creation to be at peace.

Forgive us when we have been guilty of actions and thoughts that did not promote peace. Guide us in being your presence of love and peace in our homes, our communities and our world.

God of unity, we pray for our brothers and sisters in Comoros, guide political and religious leaders to give direction for their people to build just communities of love and peace.

Guide and bless church leaders, members, and all who engage in the compassionate mission of Jesus Christ.

In the name of Jesus Christ, whose peace we seek for all creation, Amen.

## Stewardship Thought For The Week

The parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16) could be interpreted several different ways. One way would be that the landowner is God, and he promises eternal life no matter when you turn to him. We certainly don't need to get into the sort of flowery deep allegory of the Fathers, but isn't this standard explanation already something of an allegory (a symbolic meaning)?

And when we begin to read the parables as allegories, particularly as allegories that demand nothing of us, we are probably on the wrong track. The parables are meant to challenge us, not make us comfortable.

The idea of people receiving the same wage for vastly different levels of effort also occurs in other places in scripture. The rabbinic tradition recommends this practice as a form of justice for the poor.

So while one way to hear the parable is about the mercy of God, who welcomes all no matter what the hour, what if we were to consider this one of those "Go and do likewise" parables, like the story of the Good Samaritan? What if the landowner is having compassion on the late workers and gives them a living wage so they can feed their families?

What if we are being asked to do what the landowner did, to go the extra mile for the poor and the outcast because they have no one else to turn to but us? To become church of mercy, or as Jesus said, "Be merciful as your Father is merciful."

Hey, did you just fidget a little? So did I. It's that uncomfortable feeling I get when I don't measure up to one of the parables. That would seem to indicate we're on the right track here.

Paying the same wage for different levels of work doesn't make sense to us, but recall what the Lord said through the Prophet Isaiah:

*"My ways are not your ways."*