

## LAWFUL OR RIGHT?

**Today's Text: Lk 14: 1-6**

### **Extracts:**

**Now it happened, as He went into the house of one of the rulers of the Pharisees to eat bread on the Sabbath, that they watched Him closely. And behold, there was a certain man before Him who had dropsy, and Jesus, answering, spoke to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" But they kept silent. And He took him and healed him, and let him go. Then He answered them, saying, "Which of you, having a donkey or an ox that has fallen into a pit, will not immediately pull him out on the Sabbath day?" And they could not answer Him regarding these things [Lk 14: 1-6]**

*In furtherance of a law which came into effect in 2007, the US Government began to mint \$1 coins commemorating dead US presidents.<sup>1</sup> The use of the \$1 coin instead of a note could save the nation \$700 million per year. The only problem, however, is that Americans have refused to use the coins, preferring the \$1 notes! The US Federal Reserve now has a stock pile of \$1 coins valued at \$1.1 billion that is expected to grow to \$2 billion by 2016. Recently, the US Mint Director, Edmond Moy, told a congressional panel, "We have tried every major idea that we can come up with, with limited success." In spite of spending about \$30 million to promote the presidential coins, there is no improvement in its use and the Federal Reserve has enough stock to last for the next ten years!*

*The US government has the power and the authority to enforce this law and yet it cannot force the people to obey it. That is because the law does not make practical sense to holders and users of currency notes in that country. It confirms a well-known principle that what is lawful may not necessarily be right, that law can be wrong, inappropriate or incomplete. In our day-to-day activities, we face situations where we have to choose between what the law allows (or does not punish) and what may offend our Christian morality. In this week's Bible text, Jesus asked lawyers and the Pharisees that had accused Him of breaking the law on the observance of the Sabbath whether it was lawful to heal on that day. His answer gives us a good lead on how to relate to law without offending God. Find out from this week's study.*

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<sup>1</sup> Based on Daniel Nasaw, "Why the US keeps minting coins people hate and won't use," *BBC News* Washington; 10 August 2010; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-10783019>

## 1. Background: The letter and spirit of the Sabbath law

Right from the day that Jesus publicly proclaimed His earthly ministry, He faced opposition and attacks from the Jewish leaders- priests, lawyers and the Pharisees. Apart from seeing Him as a blasphemer for calling Himself the Son of God, they were particularly sore about what they saw as His not observing the Law of Moses with respect to the Sabbath. On one occasion when His disciples were hungry and began to pluck heads of grains and to eat, the Pharisees said to Him, “Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!” [Matt. 12: 1-2]. Soon after, when He went into their synagogue where there was a man with a withered hand, they asked Him, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” [vv. 9-10].

This week’s Bible text is similar to the last story above, except that it took place in the house of one of the rulers of the Pharisees where He had gone to eat bread on the Sabbath [Lk 14: 1]. There was a certain man there who had dropsy, that is, a condition in which water is retained in the body, leading to swollen tissues. This time, Jesus did not wait for them to ask Him the question. Instead, He turned to the lawyers and Pharisees and asked them bluntly, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” They kept silent. So, He went ahead and healed the sick man and let him go [vv. 3-4].

How to spend Sabbath day (or Sunday for most Christians) as God wants it is a challenge for most of us. We all know that we should go to church that day to worship God. But what else can we do or not do to keep that day holy? Some of us are on shift duty that may require us to work on that day. Are we breaking God’s law? Some of us may be unable to go to church that day because of travel or other matters. Are we breaking the law?

The law on the Sabbath comes from the Ten Commandments that God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai when the children of Israel were on their way from Egypt to the Promised Land. God specifically said to Moses and the children of Israel [Ex. 20: 8-11]:

*Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work; ... For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.*

The issue before us is not whether Sabbath day is to be observed on Saturday (as in the Seventh Day Adventist Church) or Sunday (as in most other

denominations) and in the early church [Acts 20: 7].<sup>2</sup> God's commandment specifically says, 'IN IT YOU SHALL DO NO WORK.' So, the question that Jesus threw back at the lawyers and Pharisees was whether it broke the law for Him to heal on that day. Is it unlawful to do good on God's prescribed day of rest? The law was silent on that question! We know in the secular world that where a law is not explicit on an issue, it is referred to the courts for a judicial pronouncement which then becomes part of the law. That was exactly what Jesus set out to do in His capacity as the Lord of the Sabbath [Matt. 12: 8].

Jesus asked them what they would do if their donkey or ox fell into a pit on the Sabbath day. Would they not immediately bring the animal out? They kept silent [Lk 14: 5-6]! Under the Law of Moses, it is said to the children of Israel, "If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden, and you refrain from helping it, *you shall surely help him with it*" [Ex. 23: 5]. That left no room for exceptions, whether it was on a normal day or Sabbath day! Therefore, it was not wrong to do good on Sabbath day.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught that He did not come to destroy the Law (of Moses) or the Prophets but to fulfill. He added [Matt. 5: 17-20]:

*For assuredly I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled... For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.*

The point that Jesus was making is that ***the righteousness of law is not in the letter but in the spirit***. A strict legal interpretation can easily lead to hypocrisy whereas the righteousness of God (which is living faith) is more encompassing. For example, Liu Xiaobo, the Chinese dissident and 2010 Nobel Peace Prize winner, has said in "Charter 08" issued in 2008 along with 199 other dissidents, "The political reality ... is that China has many laws but no rule of law."<sup>3</sup> That is a very apt way to show that ***Christian morality based on the righteousness of God by Christ Jesus is superior to any law***, including the Law of Moses, because it addresses the core purpose of law which is to love God with our total being (heart, soul, strength and mind) and our neighbours as ourselves [Lk 10: 27]. This becomes clearer in the next section.

## 2. Why Christian morality is superior to law

We are using Christian morality advisedly to differentiate it from morality in other faiths that do not accept Jesus as the Son of God and as their Lord and

<sup>2</sup> For an interesting study of the subject, read, "Has Sunday rested Sabbath day?" *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 3 No. 20: 30 June 2002;

[http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume\\_3/PDFs/HasSundayrestedSabbathday.pdf](http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_3/PDFs/HasSundayrestedSabbathday.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Michael Bristow, "Charter 08: A call for change in China," *BBC News*, Beijing, 9 December 2010; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-11955763>

Saviour. Here are a few reasons to demonstrate the superiority of Christian morality (morality for short from here on) to law:

a) *Morality came before the Law*

The Ten Commandments were given to Moses on Mount Sinai but we know that right from the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve already knew something about good and evil [**Gen. 2: 16-17**]. So, when they disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit, they felt guilty and covered themselves up with fig leaves and hid among the trees [**Gen. 3: 7-8**]. When Cain envied his brother, Abel, God warned him that sin lay at his door and that he should rule over it. When Cain killed Abel, he himself knew that it was murder [**Gen. 4: 1-10**]. When God saw “that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil *continually*, He destroyed all living beings except the family of Noah that feared Him [**Gen. 6: 5; 7: 1-22**]. At the time that Sodom and Gomorrah were completely destroyed by fire for homosexuality [**Gen. 19: 1-25**], the Ten Commandments had not yet been given. Therefore, the Law of Moses merely recognized what had been there from the creation of man.

Paul put in quite succinctly in his letter to the Romans when he said [**Rom. 2: 12-15**]:

*For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law... for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them...*

That is why the just shall live by his/her faith [**Hab.2: 4; Rom. 1: 17**].

b) *Morality is based on truth; law on facts!*

Morality is based on the totality of the word of God, from Genesis to Revelation, not on favourable excerpts. It is based on truth, that is, an invariant reality, visible or invisible. Law, on the other hand, is a summary of required conduct which can be empirically proved. That is why you need lawyers and judges to interpret law. To prove a point in law, you must establish it beyond reasonable doubt. That means, you must produce evidence that can be *seen, heard, touched, smelt or tasted*. For example, in law, adultery has occurred only when there is physical sexual contact between a man and a woman, one or both of whom are married to others. But in morality, adultery had already occurred the moment there was lust

in their hearts towards each other [**Matt. 5: 27-28**]! That would be inadmissible in law because imagination is not a fact, yet God regarded the thoughts of men's hearts as evil and punishable by Noah's floods [**Gen. 6: 5, 7**]. Faith is not a fact because it is based on hope; yet, without it you cannot please God [**Heb. 11: 1, 6**].

The word of God says, "Jews request a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" [**1 Cor. 1: 22-24**].

c) *Law can be right but misapplied*

In most societies, law is as it is interpreted by the courts or those in authority. That was the situation that Jesus and His disciples faced with the Jewish leaders' interpretation of the observance of Sabbath day. While they paid more attention to the rituals and outward show, Jesus taught them to focus on the essence of the law, which is total obedience to the will of God in everything. The Jews believed in what they had been taught in the Law of Moses but refused to apply it to Jesus. For example, after Jesus had made clay on a Sabbath day and used it to open the eyes of the man born blind, the Pharisees complained, saying, "*This Man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath*" [**Jn 9: 14-16**]. That is a clear misapplication of God's law on the Sabbath. Jesus healed on that day but was it work of the type covered by the law? It was not!

d) *Law cannot legitimize error*

Sometimes, we may be under pressure to obey a law that is trying to legitimize error. For example, a believer who officiates in a public marriage registry may be required by law to solemnize the wedding of gay couples. What should s(he) do? Some of us would do it, calling it duty. Others would not mind to quit so as to preserve their faith.

Hebrew midwives in Egypt found themselves in such a situation. Pharaoh had decreed that all male children born to Hebrew women should be killed at birth to reduce the growth of the Hebrew population. But the midwives "feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt (had) commanded them, but saved the male children alive" [**Ex. 1: 15-17**]. For that, "God dealt well with the midwives, and the people multiplied and grew very mighty (and) because the midwives feared God... He provided households for them" [**vv. 20-21**].

We also recall the case of the woman caught in adultery. In accordance with the Law of Moses, she and her lover were to be stoned to death [**Lev. 20: 10**]. But Jesus came to preach the essence of that law, namely, that

God desires mercy and not sacrifice [ **Hos. 6: 6; Matt. 12: 7**]. Moreover, there is no one without sin [ **Ps. 14: 1; Rom. 3: 23**]. When Jesus drew on those aspects of the same law to challenge those without sin to cast the first stone, they all disappeared one by one! Without condemning the woman, He asked her to go and sin no more [ **Jn 8: 11**].

e) *Law cannot outlaw truth*

Some people who are power-drunk (or power-hungry!) think that they can use law to wipe off reality or the truth. For example, some brutal regimes block unfavourable international broadcasts to prevent their citizens from knowing the truth about their conditions. The danger of that is that such actions do not succeed in wiping away the truth. The Communist regime in the old Soviet block and apartheid in South Africa collapsed from within, not from outside, confirming that law can never outlaw truth!

We know the popular story of King Nebuchadnezzar who had decreed that everybody in his empire should worship the gold image that he had erected. Three young Jewish exiles in Babylon, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego saw the image as an idol and, therefore, an attempt to outlaw the Jewish worship of the true God. They refused to bow down and worship the gold image. For that, they were cast into a fiery furnace but God protected them. They did not burn! The king was forced to swallow his pride and acknowledge (with another law) that only the God of the three young men is the true God [ **Dan. 3: 1-30**].

From the forgoing, we can conclude that *law is an ass and no one can ride it successfully for too long*. It cannot save because you cannot keep all of its provisions, and to break one is to break all [ **Jam. 2: 10**]. *But* love covers a multitude of sins [ **1 Pet. 4: 8**]. *When you show love to all, including your enemies, on any day of the week, including Sabbath day or Sunday, you are doing the will of God.*

### 3. Conclusion: Jesus is the end of the law!

After His resurrection from the dead, Jesus appeared to His disciples and said to them, “These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, *that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me*” [ **Lk 24: 44**]. Therefore, Jesus is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. *So, there is no longer any distinction between Jew and Gentile but Jesus is rich to all who call upon Him in truth and in Spirit* [ **Rom. 10: 1-12**].