

Sin and the poverty of law

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Can law or religious rules be effective in overcoming sin? Since we were previously discussing the Pharisees, we could put it differently: could their quest for producing righteous behavior through detailed regulations ever have succeeded? Or was it doomed to failure?

It was doomed to failure.

We are going to see that the force of sin is so powerful that lawmaking is ineffectual before it. If all we have are rules and laws, we are doomed. Salvation will require more than a religion based on rules.

Lack any value

In the first century, the early Christian church repeatedly found itself getting tangled up in religious regulation, probably because many of the early converts were Pharisees. Paul also had been a Pharisee, but his confrontation with the risen Christ had created a profound epiphany within him. He experienced viscerally how hollow religious rules can be, even when they are pursued with passionate zeal—perhaps especially when they are pursued with passionate zeal. And so he frequently returns to the topic of religious regulation. Here's an example:

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. (Col 2:16–17)

There were many religious festivals associated the law of Moses. Which of them should a Christian believer keep (or not)? Paul's answer is that the choice is personal—don't let anyone else judge you, it is no-one else's business. To modernize it, you reject Easter? Fine. You celebrate it? That's fine too. Don't let another person judge you according to what you choose. These are the superficial aspects of religion. At best they are just shadows trying to depict something about

Christ and our relationship with God. They are not the purpose of religion. They are not the intent.

And Paul's perspective goes beyond religious festivals. Many religious rules had to do with clean and unclean foods, with how far you could walk on the Sabbath, with how you wash your hands, and so on. So he continues:

Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. (Col 2:20–22)

Reject this class of religious regulations, says Paul. Even though they may have been well-motivated, they are really just human regulations.

The fact that these religious practices look very holy is deceptive. You see the Pharisee who wears an impressive prayer shawl and tassels? "Hypocritical," says Jesus. Or the "holy man" who very visibly engages in extensive fasting? Public praise is the only benefit he will get.

Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence. (Col 2:23)

Outward religious acts can cause a person to look at you and think, 'He is very religious,' or 'I wish I was as religious as she is.' But Paul says that rules like these don't get to the real problem of dealing with sin. They lack any value, he says, in restraining our natural drives and indulgences.

The problem is that even when we desire to please God, we can be betrayed by sinful tendencies inside us. Scripture is full of examples of people who were holy, and yet failed at critical moments. It's a fact of our human nature that if we try to be righteous by white-knuckling our way through temptation, we will fail. Here's Paul again:

I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. (Rom 7:18–19)

And there's a logical conclusion to this. Paul says,

All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the law.” (Gal 3:10)

If you think that by observing the rules you will get into the kingdom of God, then you are wrong. Because you will fail. And you will find yourself under a curse.

A temporary restraining order

This is all really stark. Depressing even. If I’m going to fail however hard I try, why even bother? And if the behavioral rules in religion cannot save—if they cannot rescue us—what’s their purpose? Why have any rules at all? What was God trying to accomplish by giving law in the first place?

Paul’s answer is that the laws of God have two complementary purposes. First, they provide a temporary restraint against the effects of sin. And second, they shine a light on the nature of sin.

Let’s start with the first: law as a restraint against the effects of sin. Paul says,

We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers (1Tim 1:9)

Law is to limit the damage we can cause with our sin. He also says,

Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law. (Gal 3:23–25)

The King James translation from 1611 has “the law is a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ.” The Greek word translated schoolmaster is *paidagogos*, which has been imported into English as *pedagog*, a fancy word for teacher. So it’s natural that the translators from 400 years ago should have picked the word schoolmaster to translate it, which in turn could lead us to think that the purpose of the law was to teach us about Christ, that its purpose was to inform us. But it turns out that’s not how *paidagogos* was originally used in Greek.

The original meaning of *paidagogos* was not a teacher in the school, but was the slave who took the young man by the hand and made sure he arrived at school—and didn’t run off to play

in the marketplace—and that once at school he paid attention to the lessons. The *paidagogos* was a disciplinarian, a truant officer. The NIV quoted above uses the phrase, “put in charge to lead us to Christ,” which captures the idea correctly. But I like a more colorful statement. “The law was a truant officer that brought us to Christ.” That really captures the purpose of law. Human tendency is to want to skip out on salvation, to go and waste our time following other pursuits. The purpose of the law was to make us show up, and to be in a fit state to start learning once we finally come face to face with Jesus and his teachings.

Paul is claiming that the laws of God were designed as constraints on us, to hold us in check, to limit the damage we would cause with our sin. The laws protect other people—and ourselves—from the egregious consequences of our selfish tendencies. So while the laws themselves do not save, they help us to be ready to start the process of salvation.

That’s an exciting idea. Religious law was designed to restrain us—constrain us—until we are ready to engage with faith—deep, abiding, and transforming faith.

So that’s the first purpose: God gave laws in an attempt to restrain the damaging effect of sin. But laws have a second purpose too: to shine light on our spiritual unhealthiness so that we become aware of it.

The nature of sin

We need to take a brief detour here and think about sin itself. What is it? We often think that we can define sin as follows:

Sinning = Breaking God’s commandments

But that raises a chicken and egg question. Does God make a law about something because it is sinful, or does something become sinful simply because God has made a law about it? Are some things inherently “sinful” whether or not God had actually made a command about them? Or, conversely, are there things that would not have been “sinful” if only God had not prohibited them?

Questions like these have vexed philosophers for thousands of years. But the tension in the question originates with a hidden assumption, that sin is primarily about rules and law, i.e. that every act could be classified as sinful or not, that all actions carry a binary moral value. This was how the ancient Greeks thought about their responsibilities to their pantheon of gods. It was also

how the Pharisees thought about the God of Israel. But the assumption is wrong. And so let's unwind it. Instead of thinking of sin as breaking commandments, let us think of it as spiritual unhealthiness.

To see what I mean, consider a parallel with physical unhealthiness. Some actions in life—like smoking or eating excessively sugary foods—are going to be physically unhealthy for anyone. Other actions—like moderate exercise or eating vegetables—will be supportive of physical health for anyone. However many more actions—like taking a sauna or running a marathon—might be physically dangerous for some people but healthful for others. It is not possible to assign a binary good/bad for health to every action we might take.

And so it is with sin. Some actions are spiritually destructive for anyone who engages in them, and other actions are universally beneficial to spirituality. But there are many other actions that may damage the faith of some, but could enhance the spiritual lives of others. Drinking in the tavern? It could be deadly for some—literally. Easy to frown upon. Easy to criticize someone who does it. But when the Pharisees criticized Jesus for doing it, they didn't realize that he was engaging in a spiritually healthful activity—for him, that is. And, incidentally, it allowed him to reach other people who desperately needed him.

So we see that sin cannot be defined by dividing actions into good or bad buckets. Rather, sin is about spiritual unhealthiness, especially when expressed in action.

Sin is about being separated from one another. Sin is when we are not in tune with God. Sin is anti-love. Sin is anti-oneness. Sin is the rebellion of selfishness. Sin is destructiveness.

Sin = Hurting ourselves or hurting others.

I think this is one of the most practically helpful definitions. It's not theologically crisp but it is rich and complex while also being incredibly simple. Even though it doesn't mention God explicitly, both Jesus and John teach us that the only way you can truly love God is by loving other people. Or to put it the other way round, if I want to know, "Am I loving or hurting God?" a very good test is to ask, "Am I loving or hurting myself or the people around me?"

Become conscious of sin

So, to return to our main thread, how can law shine light on our spiritual unhealthiness? The answer Paul gives is that law provides a tripwire that rings alarm bells,

no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. (Rom 3:20)

There are two clauses in this verse. The first reiterates the message we were seeing earlier. Even if you have every regulation memorized and you diligently do every one of them, you will still not be declared righteous in God's eyes. Religious rules and regulations are not about becoming righteous, Paul says. Instead, as he declares in the second clause, they are there to help us become aware of our spiritual need. Through the law we become conscious of our spiritual unhealthiness, of our susceptibility to hurting ourselves or to hurting other people. Whenever God gives a law, it gives us a chance to see what our heart is really like, to see what's going on inside us.

Paul develops this point a few chapters later. Until we have law from God, he says, we can be deeply and fundamentally ignorant of our spiritual need. But the very presence of a law draws latent spiritual rebellion to the surface. It manifests itself in action and we see it for what it is.

For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet." But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead. (Rom 7:7-8)

So, far from thinking that sin is the act of breaking a commandment, we now see that breaking a commandment is a symptom of sin, a symptom of the spiritually-unhealthy natural drives that are already inside of us. Paul calls it, "sin living in me,"

Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. (Rom 7:20)

"Sin living in me" is a description of an aspect of my being, not of my actions. This sin, this tendency to selfish rebellion, lies latent in our beings, but once law is stated, Pauls says, sin manifests itself visibly in our doings. And seeing the sin in action can make us conscious of our spiritual need.

Eden

I think this perspective gives us insight into the Eden narrative. Adam and Eve were described as naked yet feeling no shame (Gen 2:25). This may have been about physical

nakedness, but more significantly it seems to be a reflection on their deeper spiritual nakedness—they were spiritually naked and yet were unashamed. Their moral development was not sufficient for them to understand that they had a spiritual need. Everything in life was provided, all was easy, why should they look any deeper?

So, in order that they may come to understand their spiritual need, God gives them a law. He is working on the principle that (to use Paul's phrase again), through the law they might become conscious of sin.

Their transgression—the act of taking the fruit—wasn't the thing that estranged them from the divine. Rather, it was a symptom that they were already estranged. If they had been completely in tune with God, they would not have taken the fruit. Their real problem preceded the act of transgression. The taking of the fruit was a manifestation that there was already a separation within their hearts and minds away from God.

By analogy, a person doesn't go out and commit adultery and so become estranged from their spouse. Rather, they go out and commit adultery because in some sense they are already estranged from their spouse. And so it was with our forebears. And so it is with us.

Conscious of sin

Before God gives law, we humans might presume we are just fine the way we are, no need to change at all. We may presume the divine being to be just like us, that we are perfectly aligned with the eternal spirit. But once law is given, the latent disease within us is manifest, and our nature is revealed. Paul puts it this way,

Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. (Rom 7:9)

Before law, we are like the alcoholic who has no idea of the damage they are doing to themselves and others. "It's just a few drinks. I could stop any time, I just don't want to yet." They may have a sense of some of the damage they are causing, but still underestimate how severely they themselves are damaged. It may only be when they fail again and again to stop that they experience their powerlessness in the face of their disease.

And so it is with sin. Our self-centeredness runs deep within us, isolating us from each other, isolating us from God. And it can be hard for us to realize the profound need we have. But, as

Paul has told us, God gives law to open our eyes. It wasn't designed to cure us. It was designed to make us aware of our need. It was intended as a diagnostic tool. It shows us the symptoms of latent sin within us. It draws out manifestations of that sin so that humans may, as God says of Adam and Eve,

now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. (Gen 3:21)

When we primarily equate sin with the acts of breaking law, we forget that sin is really a destructive force inside of us—deep selfishness and spiritual separation between us and God. Law was provided as safety rails, and a diagnostic to alert us to our need. It never claimed to be a full characterization of spiritual unhealthiness.

Conclusion

This chapter is called, 'Sin and the Poverty of Law.' Why poverty of law? Because law is so weak when confronted with the power of sin. Law can restrain us; it can even help to wake us up to the reality of our condition; but it is powerless to save us.

Our calling from God isn't to just-keep-more-laws. Rather his calling is for each of us to become a different person, to let the sin-drive within us die. His calling is for us to be transformed, to be changed from the inside out. Only then can we be reunited with him at the level of our being.