

LEGALIZED LOVE AND MERCY

I'm a big fan of Bob Ross. For those who don't know, Bob Ross, who passed away over twenty years ago, had a program on PBS that ran for quite a while, called *The Joy of Painting*. I rediscovered Bob a number of months ago when I found some of his shows on Amazon Prime Video, of which I'm a member. He was a bearded, soft-spoken man with an out of control afro hairstyle who, in addition to being an artist, was also part humorist, part life-coach, and part spiritual philosopher.

Bob painted "happy little clouds" that floated around on his canvas and had fun all day. He washed his paint brush in odorless paint thinner and, with a chuckle and big smile, "beat the devil out of it" against the leg of his easel to dry it. And he ended every show with a big, friendly smile and the sincere sign-off, "God bless."

Bob Ross had some well-known sayings that were meant to inspire and encourage his audience of wannabe painters, such as, "We don't make mistakes; we only have happy accidents;" "You can do this, you really can do this;" and "This is your world. You can do anything you want in it. You get to decide."

There's another Bob Ross quote about painting that really struck me, and I wrote it down so I wouldn't forget it. He said, "You have to have dark in order to show light. It's just like in life."

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The sharp contrast between darkness and light is what makes both of them evident and observable. The thing about the presence of darkness and light in our lives is that, in a lot of cases, it's a choice we make. As Bob Ross said, "This is your world. You can do anything you want in it." Will you choose darkness or light? "You get to decide."

That's what Jesus was telling the Pharisees and Herodians who constantly complained that he wasn't properly keeping the Sabbath. Even though Jesus broke the Sabbath for legitimate reasons, by plucking grain (a person has to eat, for crying out loud!), and because he felt compassion and wanted to heal a man who had been struggling through life with a withered hand, the Pharisees and

Herodians still griped, got aggravated and even contemplated committing cold-blooded murder. Because in their minds you weren't supposed to do any work at all on the Sabbath, for any reason.

Clearly those dark, threatening attitudes and intentions were totally contrary to the upright purpose and spirit of the Sabbath God originally had in mind when God blessed it and set it aside as a day of rest and restoration. Those religious leaders who confronted Jesus, and who claimed to be closer and more faithful to God than everybody else, chose to live in darkness, even as the light of God was shining brightly around them. And a furious Jesus wasn't shy in pointing that out to them.

Jesus didn't use the terms "darkness" and "light," but he was referring to the very same thing when he said, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil; to save life or to kill?" What our Lord was calling out the Pharisees and Herodians for, and what his rage at the religious leaders stemmed from, was how they had perverted God's original intent for the Sabbath and were using it as a religious weapon to attack, intimidate and put down other people.

They were using the Sabbath law for dark purposes, rather than light; to accuse people of not being as faithful to God and the Jewish faith as they were. And this was not at all what God's intent was when God made the Sabbath. In fact, The interpretation of the Sabbath that the Pharisees and Herodians had was the exact opposite of God's purpose for it.

So, I want to add another dichotomy to those I have already mentioned. Along with darkness and light, good and evil, and saving life and killing, there's legalism, or the law, and mercy.

God never intended for the Law to be more important than the people it was intended to help; but that's precisely what the Pharisees and Herodians did. God's created the law to be a catalyst for mercy. The law was supposed to guide one into God's love to lead people out of darkness and into the light; but the religious leaders turned the law into a bludgeon to judge and condemn people with

The Law of God was God's instruction manual to human beings, God's "how-to's" of life. It taught God's people what a moral, ethical life under God was supposed to be. This moral and ethical life lived under God wasn't an end in itself, but the means to an end: the end being a life of mercy and love, compassion and caring. That's the true purpose behind God's Commandments.

In Micah 6:8 the same purpose for living is pointed to. "[God] has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

The prophet Hosea, speaking on behalf of God, put it this way: ". . . I

desire mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.” Another Bible translation, *The New Living Translation* makes God’s word even clearer: “I want you to show love, not offer sacrifices. I want you to know me more than I want your burnt offerings.”

God’s Law was originally created as an instrument to bestow God’s mercy and love. But somewhere along the line, somewhere in history, the true purpose and reason for God’s law took a wrong turn off the main highway. And instead of being the reason why we live—to show mercy and love—it became a rigid, unwavering way we must live by, or else. The result was that mercy and love were smothered under the law instead of being the foundation upon which God’s law was established. And that’s why Jesus was so angry and upset with the Pharisees and Herodians. They had twisted God’s law and were using it for their own self-serving purpose: to hold on to their power and authority as religious leaders.

The underlying goal of the religious leaders was to maintain their high religious standing by advocating for their own interpretation of the law and what they claimed it was intended for, even if it wasn’t what God had created it for. As a result, the rules of the Law became more important than the people those rules were meant to teach, bless and benefit.

Sometimes we can see the same kind of thing going on in the church today. These days we call it legalism, which exists whenever the Law becomes more important than the people the Law was meant to bless and benefit; and when judgmentalism rather than love becomes the Law’s primary purpose.

I can’t help but remember my mother’s funeral, which took place almost two years ago now. Because my mom was Catholic, it was held in a Catholic church. Near the end of the service, the officiating priest announced that it was time to celebrate the Eucharist, Holy Communion. Then he said only Catholics were allowed to receive the bread and wine. In other words, non-Catholics weren’t welcome at Christ’s table; but if they wanted they could come forward with their arms crossed over their chests to receive a blessing from the priest.

Call it a consolation prize, I guess.

Now, in the past I’ve attended a few Masses in Catholic churches where no one knew I was a Protestant minister. And I would go forward *incognito* and receive Communion, knowing full well that I was going against the rules of the Catholic Church; but at my mother’s funeral, the priest knew who I was and knew I was no longer a Catholic. And I didn’t want to confront the priest during the funeral service and cause a scene that would disrespect the memory of my mom or upset my devotedly Catholic father and the rest of my family. So I stayed seated in the pew, feeling excluded, angry and sad all at the same

time. Having had that experience, I can very much relate to Jesus' anger—and I'm sure his sadness, as well—when the Pharisees wanted to forbid him from healing a man with a withered hand because it was the Sabbath, and they believed Law forbid it.

According to their interpretation of God's law, it was forbidden. But Jesus begged to differ with them. And I truly believe that, if it had been Jesus serving Communion at my mother's funeral, he would have motioned to me—and all the other non-Catholics there—to come forward if they wished and receive the bread and the cup—the way Jesus intended. I thank God that here in this church we have an open table, where all are welcome and invited to come share the Lord's Supper together and no one has to feel excluded. And in just a few minutes everyone here will have an opportunity to do that.

Throughout the Gospels, many times and in many ways, by his words and by his actions, Jesus made it clear that love and mercy come through the Law, and the Law is God's instrument of mercy and love. And when God's law is perverted and changed into a rigid form of legalism that keeps people away from God, it falls under the shadow of darkness, of evil, of death. But when God's law is used as a channel of God's mercy and love, it becomes what God intended it to be: an instrument God uses to show and share God's goodness and promote life.

The author William Barclay once wrote that the best use of holy and sacred things is to use them to help people. And when the Law is used to criticize and judge and condemn people, that's a perversion of God's purpose for it. Because the final measure of everything we do for God and everything the church uses to serve God, including the Law, is love and mercy. That is the Law's original and still intended purpose.

An angry, frustrated Jesus asked his powerful religious critics, during church, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil; to save life or to kill?" Now you and I know the answer to that question. Because, you see, the truth is, God's Law legalizes love and mercy, and makes it illegal to commit acts of hatred, cruelty and judgmentalism against other human beings.

That's why God created the Law; that's the way Jesus used the Law; and that is how you and I are supposed to be governed by the Law. And when we stand before the Lord on the Last Day and give an account of our lives, we won't be judged on whether or not we worked on the Sabbath, but on whether we acted with mercy and love toward our neighbor, even on the Sabbath, as God's Law commands. Amen.