

## A Law Written On Our Hearts

Jeremiah 31:31-34

You've seen her--the lady with the blindfold, a balance, and a sword. Her name is Lady Justice. She's supposed to represent our judicial system. Since the 15th century the blindfold has represented the idea that justice should be meted out objectively, without fear or favor, regardless of identity, money, power, or weakness.

At least that's what the lady with the blindfold is supposed to represent. For some that blindfold may represents the imperfection of some of those who make our laws. After all, there are some crazy laws on the books in some of our states.

For example,

- In Connecticut it's against the law to walk across a street on your hands.
- In Florida there's a law that prohibits unmarried women from parachuting on Sunday.
- In Kentucky it's illegal to transport an ice cream cone in your pocket.
- In Nebraska a parent can be arrested if his child cannot hold back a burp during a church service.
- In Illinois, it's illegal to give lighted cigars to dogs, cats, and other pets.
- In Ohio, the installation and usage of slot machines in outhouses is prohibited.
- In Indiana it's illegal to go to a movie, to the theater, or to ride public transportation within four hours of eating garlic. (At least that one makes sense).
- In WV it's illegal for a clergyman to tell jokes or humorous stories from the pulpit.

Our lesson for today is one of the most beautiful and important prophecies in the Hebrew Bible. It's from the prophet Jeremiah: **"The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.**

**It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the Lord.**

**"I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."**

What an extraordinary statement. You know how important the Law was to the Jews. The people of Israel for hundreds of years had been the people of the Law. From the time Moses received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai to our current day--these commandments have played a fundamental role in Jewish life.

Too many believe that Judaism is just a set of beliefs about God, man and the universe. In truth, Judaism is a comprehensive way of life, filled with rules and practices that affect every aspect of life: what you do when you wake up in the morning, what you can and cannot eat, what you can and cannot wear, how to groom yourself, how to conduct business, who you can marry, how to observe the holidays and the Sabbath, and most important, how to treat God and other people. To be an observant Jew is to pledge allegiance to God's Law as revealed in the first five books of the Bible.

And yet here's this prophet saying that the days are coming when God will put His "law in their minds and write it on their hearts." No longer will the people have an external list of commandments, but they will have an internal guide to how to live. How will God do that?

Christians believe that this prophecy was fulfilled in Bethlehem 2000 years ago when a child was born and the “Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” No longer were the people of God constricted to a written code. In Jesus of Nazareth they could see in the flesh what God desires out of us. Which is to live as Jesus lived.

The Word which had been handed down on Mount Sinai in the form of a tablet was fulfilled by the Word who came to earth and lived among us. And, when we understand that truth, it changes everything about what we believe about the Law.

When we understand this truth--that God has made a new covenant with humankind through the life and death of Jesus Christ--we become empowered to move beyond being simply law-abiding folks to persons who are making a real difference in the world.

Now be sure that you understand this. **It's important that we be law abiding.** We should abide by the laws of God as well as the laws of the state. Disobey the laws of the state or the community in which we live and we may land in jail. Disobey the laws of God on a regular basis and we will find ourselves estranged from God.

Let's use an example. It might surprise you to know that writer Ernest Hemingway, author of such works as *The Sun Also Rises*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and *A Farewell to Arms* was the son of devout Christian parents. And yet Hemingway's writing exhibited none of the beliefs his parents tried to instill in him.

A letter from his mother written in 1920 illustrates how completely he had divorced himself from their beliefs: “Unless you, my son, Ernest, come to yourself, cease your lazy loafing and pleasure seeking . . . stop trading on your handsome face . . . and neglecting your duties to God and your Savior Jesus Christ . . . there is nothing for you but bankruptcy; you have overdrawn.”

Hemingway told a writer for a magazine in 1956 that “what is immoral is what you feel bad after.” By his own standard, then, he was a man of unimpeachable morals--nothing made him feel bad. “People with different ideas about morality would call him a sinner, and the wages of sin, they say, is death. Hemingway has cheated death time and time again to become a scarred and bearded American legend, a great white hunter, a husband of four wives, and a winner of Nobel and Pulitzer prizes . . . Sin has paid off for Hemingway,” the article continued.

Ten years later, however, in the same magazine there appeared a review of the book *Papa Hemingway* by A.E. Hotchner. It gave a different account of Hemingway's life that chronicled of repeated suicide attempts, paranoia, multiple affairs and marriages, and finally, his final--and successful--suicide attempt.<sup>1</sup> Ernest Hemingway thumbed his nose at the laws of God and paid the price of doing so.

The great missionary/theologian, E. Stanley Jones used to say, “We don't break God's laws. We break ourselves on God's laws.” It's important that we obey the law, whether it's the laws made by human beings or the law established by God.

But it's important for us to see that obeying the law is not enough. **Merely obeying the law is not what Christian faith is about.** This is critical. Many Christians, even today, settle for being law abiding. They're nice, moral people, but they don't have a clue about what God really expects out of them.

This was the situation of many of the Pharisees that Jesus encountered. They kept the letter of the law, but not the spirit of the law.

Pastor John Ortberg, who authored the book our morning Discipleship classes are reading, tells about a group known as the “blind and bleeding rabbis.” They were called that because, in order to never be accused of violating the commandment against adultery, not only would they

never speak to a woman, but they would close their eyes when one came into their peripheral vision. The result of this was they were forever falling off curbs and bumping into buildings.<sup>2</sup>

Well, congratulations to them for avoiding adultery, but closing your eyes whenever a woman is present is not the same as showing women respect or, in the case of a woman who is in need, showing her compassion.

You can be law abiding and still be worthless as far as the Kingdom of God is concerned. You can obey the law and ignore acts of injustice going on all about you.

Dr. David Zersen once noted that during Dietrich Bonhoeffer's time, specifically in 1933, roughly 2,500 of the Protestant clergy in Germany sided with Adolph Hitler. About 2,500 opposed him. And roughly 15,000 took no stand at all. This was beyond belief to Dr. Zersen--that fifteen thousand pastors could turn their heads away and ignore Hitler's crimes.<sup>3</sup> After all, Germany was thought to be a Christian country!

The same thing happens all the time. It was a rude awakening for many Americans when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. confronted us with the legacy of racial injustice so rampant in our land, some of which still continues today.

How could it be so? We are a Christian people! Ironically, some of the most blatant injustices were occurring in the Bible Belt section of our country, and they were being perpetrated by some of our citizens who would dub themselves as law-abiding.

You can be law-abiding and still be miles from the heart of Christ. Christians are called to go beyond simply obeying the law. That's especially important for us to see during this season of Lent. The people who crucified Jesus were the most law abiding citizens in their society. But simply obeying the law is never enough.

**We understand that there is a greater law even than the Ten Commandments which is the law of love.** "A new command I give you," says Jesus in our lesson today, "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." That's the law written on the Christian's heart. However, most of us struggle to live that law out fully.

I suspect that none of us are by our own volition capable of loving as deeply as we should, but with God's help we can. The people we seek to love may never return that love. That's who they are. But who are we? We are followers of the man from Galilee who loved so much that he gave his life in our behalf.

That's more than simply being law-abiding. That's living with the law written on your heart.

It's like a man who moved into a small town and bought a little house across the street from the railroad tracks. Every morning he noticed an elderly lady walking along the tracks picking up something and putting it into a bag that she carried. The man got curious about this lady and so he went to the corner "Mom & Pop" grocery store that had been there forever and asked the owner about this lady.

"Oh, that's the widow Jacobs," he said. "Every day she comes half way across town to pick up the coal that spills on the tracks when the early morning train runs through town." "But there hasn't been a steam locomotive using coal on these tracks for years," replied the new resident.

"That's right," said the store owner. "When the steam train stopped running, old Mr. Simpson who runs the hardware store was concerned that the widow Jacobs would no longer have coal to heat and cook with. He knew she was too proud to take charity, so he gets up early every morning, takes a bag of coal and drops it along the tracks. The widow Jacobs still thinks the steam train runs by here every morning. I think old Mr. Simpson's been doing that for about 5 years now."<sup>4</sup>

No way to know for certain that old Mr. Simpson abided by the laws of his community. I suspect he did. But we can be certain he didn't stop there. He followed the example of the Master. He had the most important law of all written on his heart. It's the law of love. "A new command I give you," said Jesus, "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another."

<sup>1</sup> Ed Young, *Against All Odds: Family Survival in a Hostile World* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> John Ortberg, *When the Game Is Over, It All Goes Back in the Box* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.predigten.unigoettingen.de/archiv8/0603266e.html>

<sup>4</sup> Edward F. Markquart, [http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series\\_b\\_dont\\_show\\_off\\_your\\_faith.htm](http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_b_dont_show_off_your_faith.htm).