

The Law of Unintended Consequences

Matthew 5:13-20

I'm sure all of us here today consider ourselves law-abiding citizens. I'm sure most of us believe that most laws in society are worthwhile and reasonable, established by lawmakers to keep us safe and provide for an orderly society. But every so often laws are made that, while intended for good, have unintended consequences.

What do I mean by that? Well, many states pass laws intended to protect the general public from those who have previously committed a crime. The American Bar Association found 46,000 laws across the United States that limit the activities of former criminals. The unintended consequence of many of these laws, as you might guess, is higher unemployment levels among former criminals which results quite naturally in higher crime rates.ⁱ

That's not what the lawmakers intended, but often that's what happens. The law of unintended consequences. These types of laws are sometimes referred to as having a "cobra effect."

Years ago parts of India were overrun with cobras. The British government offered reward money to Indian citizens who caught and killed cobras and turned in their dead bodies to local authorities. The incentive for turning in dead cobras was so good that citizens began breeding cobras just so they could kill them and turn them in for a reward.ⁱⁱ

In the U.S., the "cobra effect" could be called the "kudzu effect." Kudzu is a plant imported from Japan in the 1800s. It was used as animal feed and to prevent the erosion of farmlands across the South. But kudzu grows very quickly - up to one foot per day - and it's very hard to kill.

Soon, kudzu covered trees and crept up the sides of homes and covered power lines. It blocks out sunlight and kills other plants and trees. It costs power companies millions of dollars each year to clear kudzu from power lines. And kudzu eradication programs can take seven to ten years to actually get rid of the stuff.

Kudzu seemed like a helpful agricultural plant when it was first imported to this country. No one guessed how destructive it could be once it took root. Unintended, and a real nuisance.

Our passage this morning comes from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' first major teaching in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus has been preaching, teaching, casting out demons and healing sickness. A big crowd has gathered to see what he is going to do or say next. So Jesus sits down and begins to teach the gathered crowd about the kingdom of God. And the crowd was curious to hear what he had to say.

In Jesus' day, the religious leadership of the Jews was composed of four different groups—each with its own interpretation of the Torah.

- The Pharisees believed in following traditions and laws. They looked to the past for their standards and beliefs.
- The Sadducees were more liberal and believed that old laws and traditions needed to be re-interpreted for modern times.
- The Essenes believed that happiness came from separating one's self from the world. So they lived in the wilderness and were monads.

- The Zealots believed in political revolution and felt called to rebel against any power that in any way threatened the Jews.

So all the people wanted to hear what Jesus had to say and all these groups wanted Jesus to say things along their particular point of view. And Jesus, of course, confounded their expectations.

Which reminds me of a story about a country preacher who had a teenage son who was trying to choose a future profession. One day while the boy was at school his father decided to go into the boy's room and place three objects on the boy's desk: a Bible, a silver dollar and a bottle of whiskey.

Then, when it was about time for the boy to come home, the preacher hid himself in the closet with the door cracked just enough to see which of the three objects the boy would pick up. If he picked up the Bible, he'd choose to be a preacher. If he picked up the silver dollar, he'd be a businessman. If he picked up the bottle, he'd be a no-good drunk.

When his son came home, he went up to his room and spotted the objects on the table, and studied them for a moment. Then he picked up the Bible and placed it under his arm. He picked up the silver dollar and dropped it into his pocket. He picked up the bottle, uncorked it, and took a big gulp of the whiskey. "Lord, have mercy," the old man whispered, "He's gonna be a politician!"

The people that day came to see if Jesus would be a politician—if he would shape his message to please his listeners or the Pharisees, or the Sadducees, the or Essenes, or the Zealots. And with his words he pleased none of them and shocked them all.

Listen to his words in verses 17-20:

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

Anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."

Whether they were Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots or just ordinary folks like us, Jesus wanted them to rethink the role of the Law in their lives. He wanted them, first of all to see that **the Law was given to bring us into a relationship with God.**

The Law wasn't created for itself; it was created to keep God's people in a safe, harmonious relationship with God and each other. The Law was an expression of God's protective love for us. He wanted them to understand that when they fixated on the Law they ignore the relationship God wanted them to have with each other. And that was wrong.

The religious leaders with whom Jesus clashed replaced a living relationship with God with a list of rules. They fixated on rigid obedience to the Law rather than a loving relationship with the Lord.

The first laws given by God were given in the Garden of Eden. In Genesis 2, God created a beautiful, orderly, fruitful world for Adam and Eve to enjoy. In Genesis 2:15,

we read that God had one rule, one law to protect Adam and Eve in this perfect new world:

“The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.’”

What do you think: when God told Adam and Eve that there was a tree in the garden that was poisonous—that if they ate from it, they would die—was He threatening them or simply warning them of what would happen if they ate the fruit of that tree?

I believe it was the latter. I believe Adam and Eve were created to live in a close, fruitful relationship with God and with each other. I believe they were created to live in freedom so long as they lived under the protection of God’s one law. But they didn’t trust God enough to honor that relationship and by disobeying the one law God gave them, they lost that relationship.

We may not like the Law. We may rebel against the Law. But the Law is always rooted in love and given to us to bring us back into a relationship with God. That’s the first thing we need to see.

Secondly, a relationship with God helps us understand the purpose of the law.

Let me expand on something I just said: God’s law is always rooted in love and it’s always provided to give God’s people freedom.

The religious leaders of Jesus’ day had turned the Law – rooted in God’s love, intended to bring God’s people freedom - into an act of external obedience. They had tarnished the Law so much that it no longer reflected God’s love for His people. They removed the joy of living in obedient submission to God and transformed it into a list of rules that burdened people.

Jesus says to us that the Law was given to bring us into relationship with God and that, conversely, a relationship with God helps us understand the purpose of the law.

Which brings me to a final thing I want to say: **Jesus fulfilled the Law for us** by giving us his righteousness all so that we could enter his kingdom. That’s the meaning of grace. That’s what he meant when he said he didn’t come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it.

He fulfilled it in his life by living in perfect relationship with and obedience to God. And he fulfilled it in his death when he took on the penalty of the Law and gave us his righteous relationship with God so that we could have eternal life.

So to all those who think they’ll never be good enough to earn their way into the kingdom of heaven—you’re right. Give it up. You failed before you even started. Which is the *good news* Jesus came to bring.

In the Chinese language, the word for “righteousness” is composed of two symbols: the word for “lamb” over the word for “me.” Righteousness in the Chinese language is represented by the concept of “the lamb over me.”ⁱⁱⁱ

We will never be good enough to fulfill all the requirements of the Law. But Jesus was. And like a lamb to the slaughter, he took the penalty for us and gave us his goodness, his righteousness in its place.

So many people live lives as if they’ll be able to stand some day before a holy God and claim that they’re good enough to enter the kingdom of heaven based on their own

merit. Me? I want the perfect Son of God to stand in my place and open the gates of the kingdom for me. The choice is yours.

ⁱ <http://ucstories.com/unintended-consequences-stories/> by Leland Long on the "The Long of it . . ."

ⁱⁱ "The Law of Unintended Consequences: Shakespeare, Cobra Breeding, and a Tower in Pisa," Farnam Street blog, <https://fs.blog/2018/02/unintended-consequences/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://walkengeonwater.com/thelamb/>

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Lamb Me