

Cultural and legal sensibilities change over time. For instance, our grandparents and great grandparents would be shocked by some of the customs, music, and language commonly accepted today. What is acceptable in one culture might cause great offense in another. It can be confusing!

Moses was given ten simple laws, which by Jesus day had been adjusted and interpreted into over six hundred different categories of very specific do's and don'ts. Continued refinement dealt with new questions and cultural changes. As the law from Moses had to do with one's relationship with God, everything was considered an act of worship. Every behavior was understood in terms of how best to glorify God and gain his favor. The scribes and rabbis had the responsibility for determining what was acceptable, based on the law.

What was OK came to be called "kosher," meaning in accordance with religious law and tradition. Our culture once used that word to mean anything acceptable according to our standards. Our term is politically correct, which has the same approval stamp of our culture. So, what is right? What is wrong? Well, it depends on what law you live by, and who interprets such customs and laws.

People of faith believe God's words reflect God-pleasing relationships. Faithful living is a response to God's purpose and plan, rather allowing other standards to have greater sway than God's guidance. Cultural sensibilities and demands are more arbitrary. God's guidance never changes. Earthly laws and customs do.

That leads to many struggles today. Who can take communion or get married? What music is appropriate for worship? Should assisted suicide be legal? Is abortion acceptable in every circumstance? Should genetic engineering be used to guarantee a child's hair color or sex? The lists are endless.

Jesus revealed God's intent so the relationship with God and neighbor would always inform the law, rather than the law being changed by the opinions and decisions of imperfect people. And that got Jesus in hot water with the powers that be. He was seen as a rule breaker and insensitive to the customs of his day.

He was condemned for being theologically, culturally, and politically incorrect. Some of his crimes were his willingness to heal on the Sabbath or allow fishermen and tax collectors to be disciples. He broke the law by touching people with open wounds, lepers, and even dead bodies. He allowed outsiders to join him in meals and gave women and gentiles equal consideration and love. His crime was to allow God's love rather than human wisdom to flavor his mission.

Peter struggled in the same way as he carried the Gospel to gentile territories, where people had never heard of the one true God or stories of Moses and the Exodus. Rather than convert them to Judaism and its rules, Peter instead was inspired to call

them to feel and share God's love rather than force them to be guided by the laws of the scribes and rabbis. God inspired him to understand the law was never THE path to God but a means to proclaim God makes me different! God is love! If value that love, we will love!

If my love for God the guide for living, there should be no need for law. As we cannot perfectly love, we are blessed with forgiveness, and need guidance in living responsibly in a complicated world, just as was the case in Jesus' day. Jesus didn't create new laws; he came to show by his life what God's purpose will always be. Because God loves, we respond with love. We are called to rise above selfishness and model his love as a light to the world. Where we fail we are forgiven and daily start all over again with a commitment to love as we have been loved. This is the heart and legality of the Gospel.

In World War 2, after the horrific battle at Normandy, three soldiers brought the body of fallen comrade to a little country church to have the priest bury their friend. The priest gently asked if he was a baptized Catholic. They didn't know. The priest said he could bury him, but the cemetery was only for Catholics. He allowed them to dig a grave on the other side of the fence and said prayers over the body of their friend. They returned the next day with a marker carved out of wood, but the grave was no longer by the fence! They asked the priest what had happened. He replied he thought about what he had done, couldn't sleep, and spent the entire night digging up the fence and moving it, so their friend was inside the cemetery. That is the law of love.

The Gospel proclaims we are not to be subject to changing interpretations or demands of a broken world but guided by the love of God and a plan for all to be one. Jesus taught if we need a law to make this clear, it is simply, "Love God! Love neighbor!" We should be suspicious of any law or custom that breaks our relationship of love with God or neighbor.

What is right or wrong for us today? If we are dependent on the world to tell us how to live, we are in trouble already. Remember WHOSE you are! Our actions never establish a relationship with God, but they should reflect the only relationship that brings life, healing, and peace. Our goal should never be to condemn a world that doesn't know God but proclaim God's love so darkness can be informed by the light.

In John 13 Jesus is recorded as telling his followers, "*I give you a new command, that you love one another, by this everyone will know that you are my disciple.*" This is our law, our custom, and our cultural guide.

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