

The Law and the Lord's Prayer
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In the last weeks we have heard much about lawyers and laws and how they interact with the teachings of the Gospels and of the Epistles of Paul, otherwise known as Saul of Tarsus. Today we will examine how they relate to the Lord's Prayer.

When we hear the word "law," we think we know what the speaker means, but usually we need a context to appreciate the many possible messages intended. Consider these three examples:

First: "And God spoke all these words: 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me . . .,'" and so on goes the Law of Moses.

Second: "NOW this is the Law of the Jungle – as old and as true as the sky; And the Wolf that shall keep it may prosper, but the Wolf that shall break it must die."

Third: "I fought the Law and the Law won." A plain and profound statement for sure.

The first of these is the beginning of God's instructions to the Israelites sometimes called the Law of Moses or the Ten Commandments and found at Exodus, Chapter 20. This is a Law of God in relationship to his creation Man, and derives its legitimacy from revelation set forth in Scripture, sometimes called Holy Writ. The second is from The Law of the Wolves found in Rudyard Kipling's Jungle Book, and it is a good example of what is called inherent or natural law,

or the laws of instinct, and applies both to man and to the beasts. The third is from a popular song, and describes the laws of man, sometimes called secular or positive law.

All three of these types of law compete with each other, demanding obedience. Sometimes, all three types of law are found to apply in ways at least consistent, if not harmonious. More often they seem in conflict, though perhaps reconcilable at some level. Sometimes they are in clear conflict, and then the awful choice inherent in the free will, given to us by God, comes to test our intellect.

Let's look at the Law of God gleaned from revelation of the Old Testament. We have the law which God sets before Adam and Eve in the Garden, that is, what they may and may not do and, particularly, eat. After the Flood, we have the code laid down by God to Noah in Genesis, Chapter 7, described in the Talmud as the Seven Laws of Noah. Hebraic scholarship traditionally enumerated these laws as: Do not deny God, do not blaspheme God, do not murder, Do not engage in illicit sexual relations, do not steal, do not eat of a live animal, establish courts and legal systems to ensure obedience to the law. According to the Talmud the Laws of Noah apply to all humankind through descent from the only family to survive the Flood. Of course, that includes the Gentiles.

Then we have the Ten Commandments, Given to Moses, similar in many ways to the Laws of Noah. The commandments include instructions to worship only God, to honor parents, and to keep the Sabbath; as well as prohibitions against idolatry, blasphemy, murder, adultery, theft, false witness, and coveting. Different

religious groups follow different traditions for interpreting and numbering them.

There were, and are, many disputes among Jews and among Gentiles, including Christians, as to which of laws said to be given by God through revelation, are properly included in the fundamental rules of their group, and which laws apply to other groups, and which laws need to be obeyed in order to be righteous and to be included in the many and varying versions of salvation to eternal life.

This is the point of today's reading from Colossians, where Paul preaches freedom from much of the minutia of the old Jewish laws of circumcision, diet, but not the Ten Commandments, and even a dispensation from laws of man inconsistent with the mandates of the Christ. He says,

"When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. * * * 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."

And what are we to think could be that reality found in Christ? Does it not have to be adherence to the law given, modified and ratified by the Christ's words and by inference from His teachings?

Now, the Lord's Prayer, one form of which (out of many) is set forth in in today's Gospel reading, Luke 11:1-13, often is described as a set of petitions to God. Here is the Lord's Prayer in this version:

"He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.' He said to them, 'When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.'"

The petitions within this prayer, repeatedly invoke the consequences of law-breaking, and particularly they ask God for the ability to live a righteous life by adherence to law. Forgiveness of sins or trespasses clearly invokes the metes and bounds of law, for how is human conduct to be considered sinful except in comparison to a moral law? Avoiding the trial of temptation cannot be understood except as an adjunct to a moral law. Avoiding the time of trial also is a reference to judgment, a concept meaningless without application of a governing law.

Having answered his disciple's question how to pray to God, Jesus immediately, and without transition whatsoever, launches into a parable about how a true friend, if you are persistent (like Abraham, in his bargaining with God in today's reading from Genesis, 18:20-33) will give you what you ask even if inconvenient: "Ask and it will be given you, search and you will find, knock and the door will be opened for you . . . How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ASK Him."

This is a famous and profound Gospel parable, but does it have anything to do with the immediately preceding teaching of the Lord's Prayer? When we recite the Lord's Prayer, when we make these petitions to our Creator, we are asking His aid in obeying the law so that we can do our fundamental Christian duty to know, love, and serve God. We know that the law from revelation in Scripture is not clear, despite Paul's help. We know that natural law and secular law seem often in conflict with what the Christ tells us we must do to find grace and follow a path to salvation. What the parable tells us, then, is that, if we try, persistently, to know God and to achieve obedience to His law, even if by our imperfect understanding we do not get it quite right, He will forgive us.

To me, this is a great consolation, because it is harmonious with Christ's last words as a living human being: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Amen.