

Killing Grace

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Strange, is it not, that the very demonstration of God as He truly is brings hostility and hatred.

The arrival of Jesus as a baby is the cause of Herod's extermination of all boys under two in Bethlehem.

When Jesus first speaks in his hometown of Nazareth, telling of the freeing of the captives and the giving of sight to the blind, his neighbors try to throw him off a cliff.

And when Jesus performs his miracles, the authorities want him dead.

Strange how the gospel of grace is so often met with violence and enmity, as if the graciousness of God could be destroyed through sufficient evil.

Yet the fact is that time and again the truth of Jesus brings demonic opposition that tries to blot out not only Jesus as individual but also the God he reveals. For the reason the religious leaders want Jesus dead is because his message of grace is totally opposed to their teachings of ritual and requirement.

For them, the freedom offered by Jesus is heresy of the worst kind—for it undermines their elaborate structure based not on grace, but on rules and observances and traditions. Such a system blinds such believers and provides a justification for hatred and anger—for Jesus is seen as the destroyer of all they value.

The emphasis of the scribes and Pharisees—in fact all of the religious establishment—on legality and form of religion is the very opposite of Jesus' life and teachings. Their attitude led to the killing of Jesus precisely because he did not appear to obey the letter of the law.

Fatal logic

Take a “for instance”:

“At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, ‘Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath.’”
Matthew 12:1,2 NIV.

Jesus is confronted by incensed and offended religionists. Their belief structure is one based on what is lawful. That's the first question “Are you allowed to...?” This is not legalism necessarily, but a stress on legality—the first point of reference is to ask what

the law says. So the disciples' action of simply picking and eating grain is to them a violation of Sabbath law. They see no farther than what they perceive to be a clear breaking of a holy law. Nothing more needs to be said. The law is beyond debate.

Theirs is a fatal logic. Since picking a head of grain is to be equated to reaping, and rubbing the grains between hands is the equivalent of threshing, the disciples are working on the Sabbath. They do not think to ask if this is real work. They would not even dare to inquire why work on the Sabbath was prohibited by God in the first place. If they had done so, they might have decided that picking and eating a few ears of grain was not the same as everyday manual labor. For why did God say not to work? Was it not so we could spend time with Him? And the disciples were already with God in Christ, speaking and listening to him throughout the Sabbath day.

But this is not the absolutist logic of the Pharisees.

In his answer Jesus points to the higher “law” of fulfilling not legal requirements but rather fundamental principles, referring them to the actions of David and of the “work” done by priests on the Sabbath, concluding that:

“I tell you that one greater than the temple is here. If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” Matthew 12:6-8 NIV.

The Pharisees, the self-proclaimed keepers of the law—already incensed—would hardly have taken such words easily. Jesus is claiming to be more important, and to supersede, the very temple—the shrine of the law. And he even claims supremacy as Lord of the Sabbath.

Meaningless worship

Jesus is quoting Hosea 6:6, “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.” (NIV). Even the system given by God is not expressing what God really wants, says Jesus. For sacrifice without thought, as a legal and ritual ceremony, brings the worshiper no closer to God, nor to understanding. What God is rejecting is meaningless worship, as He told His people through Isaiah:

“‘The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?’ says the LORD. ‘I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats... Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them.’” Isaiah 1:11-14 NIV.

Enough! says God. You do not get the point. For no amount of sacrificial blood or ritual observance provides what I want—a true relationship with each one of you.

Jesus makes the same point, quoting the same verse, as he responds to the Pharisees' complaint that he does not observe the laws of not associating with "known sinners":

"While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and 'sinners' came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?' On hearing this, Jesus said, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'" Matthew 9:10-13 NIV.

Those who see themselves as keepers of the faith, observers of the law, and guardians of the received truth—they do not see themselves as sinners. And they are offended by any suggestion that they are not "righteous," since they are the ones who have defined what is "righteous."

Is it Lawful?

But back to the story. After saying he is the Lord of the Sabbath and more important than the Temple, the shrine of the law, Jesus goes ahead and proves it:

"Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked him, 'Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?' He said to them, 'If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.' Then he said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other." Matthew 12:9-13 NIV.

The law-based believers are only looking for a cast-iron example of Jesus' flouting of their religious regulations. The test question is a reflection of their preoccupation: "Is it lawful?"

Jesus' response is not a rabbinical debate, but a practical demonstration that *really* upsets the law-minded Pharisees. For Jesus goes to the heart of the question—not dealing with their perceptions of what is or is not acceptable, but what is the purpose of the Sabbath and the meaning of any laws surrounding it. Pointing out the hypocrisy of permitting the saving an animal—a valuable possession—but rejecting the saving of a human being from illness, Jesus shows that customs, regulations and rituals must be judged by the clear principles of right and compassion. "Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath," he concludes, as if that needed to be said at all!

To prove the point Jesus does just that. He does good. He performs a miracle of healing.

The reaction of the legally-preoccupied is not of joy in the man's healing, but bitter outrage at this deliberate infraction of Sabbath rules. After all, could Jesus not have

waited until after Sabbath, they might have argued. It was not as if a deformed hand was a life-or-death emergency. One more day was not going to make any difference.

It is this attitude that Jesus deliberately confronts. Because Jesus wants to point out what is the right approach to God. Not a contractual law-observance, but a free acceptance of transforming grace.

But they see things very differently, and are furious at this affront to their methods. They see Jesus' action as a direct attack on their very basis for divine acceptance. Consequently, they just want him dead.

“But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.” Matthew 12:14 NIV.

Killing Jesus

Here is revealed in complete clarity where obsession with legality leads. Jesus in his deliberate act showed the consequences of such beliefs, and how different this thinking is from God and His gracious salvation. The reaction of the self-appointed defenders of the law is to demand retribution, to exact vengeance, to require that the ultimate penalty be paid.

In Mark's account, the attitudes and feelings of Jesus to the stubborn Pharisees are apparent:

“Then Jesus asked them, ‘Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?’ But they remained silent. He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.” Mark 3:4-6 NIV.

Mark adds this mention of the Herodians—the ruling political party. Interesting how religionists and politicians, traditional enemies, join forces to destroy Christ...

Luke gives the feelings of the Pharisees as they reacted to the situation, and the immediate turning to less than spiritual thoughts in dealing with Jesus:

“But they were furious and began to discuss with one another what they might do to Jesus.” Luke 6:11 NIV.

Killing grace. For when the challenge comes to your religious prejudices, the usual response is to strike back. For you feel you have invested so much in the system, you dare not even consider the possibility it could be wrong. Instead you would rather destroy the challenger.

So when grace is displayed for all to see, the controlling religionists take it upon themselves to plot to kill such grace, grace that they see as license and compromise. For if they let Jesus continue, they argue, then they will lose everything.

John explains the telling story, one of subterfuge and expediency that leads to rejection and betrayal. Immediately after the amazing resurrection of Lazarus—proof if ever it was needed of Jesus' life-giving power—the reaction is plot and intrigue and conspiracy.

“Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. ‘What are we accomplishing?’ they asked. ‘Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.’

“Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, ‘You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.’ He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one.

“So from that day on they plotted to take his life.” John 11:45-53 NIV.

They try all they can to make a legal case against him. The recourse is to law, to their concept of punitive penalty, and they are willing to compromise honesty, truth and justice to accomplish their objective. Strange how such observers of the law could so easily sacrifice such fundamental principles.

So when the end comes, the religious leaders accuse Jesus of law-breaking, even though they have a hard time getting false witnesses to agree, and even though pagan Pilate cannot find any basis for such charges (see Matthew 27:12, Mark 15:3, John 19:7). Jesus dies an outlaw, one who is paying the penalty for legal infraction. Having disposed of the Lord of the Sabbath by making sure he dies before the Sabbath, the law-keepers then go to their homes to keep the Sabbath.

If they had listened to the Sermon on mount, if they had taken to heart Jesus' “you have heard that it was said... but I say to you,” if they had seen the foolishness of a religious system that made observance more important than relationship, they would not have crucified their Lord. Jesus's message illustrated how the stress on legality must transformed into the acceptance of grace through the graciousness of God. As Paul says later: “I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” Galatians 2:21 NIV.

System or Salvation?

This is the sad story of killing grace and the immense dangers of setting up a system of ritual observance and legal contract. The Pharisees thought they were special, repositories of God's system of salvation. But theirs was no system of salvation at all, rather a means of enslavement that led to mechanical worship and personal guilt. That's why Jesus reserved his strongest condemnation for such "true followers of God," calling them hypocrites and white-washed sepulchers. For there is nothing life-giving in such a crippling system of punishment and penance.

To save their system they were willing to sacrifice one man for the sake of the people, to forfeit the principles of truth and right and love, and to engineer the cruel death of an innocent man.

Their merciless plotting illustrates just how far we will go to defend our own systems of salvation. In the process, we kill grace, and crucify afresh the Son of God and put him to an open shame (see Hebrews 6:6).

Strange how often we forget, and how we take out our sharpened knives of criticism and condemnation, especially to deal with those in theological opposition. How often come the stories of individuals cut down by other members, of fellow workers mistreated, of characters assassinated, all in the name of some 'system' that demands such tributes, such pagan sacrifices.

Even our own theological systems are marred by the 'judicial' concepts that led to the rejection of Jesus. That God demands appeasement. That the relationship is based on legal contract. That rule-keeping is more important than understanding.

The terrible danger is not that we may have an imperfect and incomplete awareness of truth, and especially of salvation, but that we seek to make our faulty and even totally wrong concepts the definition of truth. False ideas of God, His character and nature, and the way in which He saves, led the religious systematizers to kill Jesus. The risk for us is that we do the same. Doing evil in the name of good is the ultimate blasphemy.

To reduce God's wonderful offer of free and full salvation to a set of mechanical concepts, to make a loving relationship into a legal contract, to turn truth into error—all of this is as easy as setting up a system based on human concepts of appeasement, satisfaction, penalties, payments, retribution, justification, punishment, and reparation.

Those who reject the "legal satisfaction" system are easily denounced as heretics, and as easily disposed of, since "right" is on the side of such a system—and as "justified" as Shylock wanting to collect on his pound of flesh.

The preoccupation with legality and systematized "justice" led to Jesus' death on the cross, since it was "better" that one man should die than the whole system be compromised. The demonic hatred of the scribes and Pharisees that led to their

conspiracy to kill Jesus came from their commitment to a false idea of God and his saving methods. Could it be that we share some of these feelings and purposes that come from our own false ideas about God and salvation?

God's grace is supposed to bring happiness and acceptance, not hostility and anger and plotting. If our theological system leads us to fight fellow believers, to use intrigue and deceit to damage others with whom we disagree, to think that the end justifies the means, then we need to think again.

Or are we with the grace-killers?

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