

SAVING KNOWLEDGE

Q: What's the difference between a lawyer and a vulture?

A: *The lawyer gets frequent flyer miles.*

Q: What's the difference between a lawyer and God?

A: *God doesn't think he's a lawyer.*

Q: Why won't sharks attack lawyers?

A: *Professional courtesy.*

These are just a few examples of how our popular culture **loves to hate** lawyers. We understand that they are stereotypes. We understand that, often, the worst cases can tarnish the reputation of a whole group. We understand that not all lawyers are like this, that many are quite mentally and morally mature -- thank God.

But there is probably also an important truth concealed in the negative popular judgments of lawyers in our day. The truth that *motives matter*.

We know that becoming a lawyer (*or a physician, or a priest, or a teacher -- or any role in which one has considerably more power than those in his or her care*) -- can be quite attractive to persons who are seeking to possess and wield that power for their own selfish ends. All of the popular jokes and barbs that belittle lawyers seem to focus on those who abuse power in these ways. Those who -- even though their actions may be strictly "legal" -- strike us as deeply immoral. They cause us to question the systems that give such characters the power to represent something so important as the law. And rightly so.

The role of lawyers in the time of Jesus was a religious one. They were the literate experts in the Mosaic law. So they could teach the law. They could answer questions and settle disputes about the law. And they also functioned as "scribes" -- making letter-perfect copies of the ancient scrolls.

All lawyers, both then and now, are knowledge workers. All lawyers are employed for what they know, for what they have learned through carefully studying good books, and conversing about them, over considerable time.

The great challenge of becoming a *knowledge worker* is that, no matter how clever we may be, our level of understanding is always governed -- always limited or enhanced -- by our own personal moral character. If a lawyer's personal character is formed in ways that put seeking his or her own pleasure (or wealth, or fame) above all else, he or she will only develop a surface understanding of the law -- at best a technical understanding. But deeper knowledge -- knowledge of the law's **roots** in the virtues of justice and mercy -- will elude them, because they have not cultivated these virtues within their own characters. They may well be able to memorize and "mouth" certain just & merciful words, but merely as rhetoric. The real *meaning* of those words will escape them, because it does not resonate within their own personal characters.

Our Gospels refer mostly to "lawyers" with these kinds of character problems. And so, Jesus frequently points out their hypocrisy. They used their expertise with words to ferret out ways for themselves to **technically** comply with the law, without following its **spirit** of justice and mercy. At the same time, they heaped heavy, moralistic burdens on those entrusted to their care. And so, their influence in the Jewish community was harmful, not helpful.

But there were good lawyers as well. In fact, one of them Jesus **praises** for his wisdom, telling him that he is "*not far from the kingdom of God*" (Mark 12:28-34). What made this lawyer different was that he had clearly **not only** studied the Mosaic law; he had **also** meditated on the prophets, and the psalms, and the wisdom literature of the Jewish scriptures, with a **desire to understand the Living God**. And, in this way, he gained an understanding of the law that was not merely technical or legalistic, but godly and wise.

Unfortunately, the lawyer whom addresses Jesus in this morning's gospel text (Luke 10:25-37) was not one of the wise ones.

When Jesus questions his understanding of the way to eternal life, he gives the official right answer: "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your mind, and with all your strength; and your neighbor as yourself.*" And so, very matter-of-factly, Jesus acknowledges the rightness of the answer, tells him to "do it," and promises that -- if he does -- he will find the life he hopes for.

But this lawyer has a character problem. The gears of his mind must have been quickly spinning in this conversation with Jesus. I imagine his thinking process might have gone something like this:

*"OK, loving God with all my heart -- etcetera, etcetera. That's a metaphysical thing; it's completely invisible; no one can actually see whether I'm doing it or not. So as long as I show up at synagogue on time, say the prayers, follow the rituals, act "lawyerly," and so on, I'm covered. No one can accuse me of not loving God. But this second part -- about "loving my neighbor as myself" -- that could be tricky. It's mostly other lawyers who live in my neighbourhood, and the ones I like are all like me! So I could easily love those neighbors as I love myself... It's the perfect loophole. **But** you just can't trust these rabbis -- what if he's trying to trick me by defining "neighbor" in some peculiar way?"*

So, wanting to justify the self-centeredness of his character, he asks Jesus, "**And who is my neighbor?**"

But Jesus was on to him from the beginning. And notice what Jesus does. He doesn't issue a decree about the right definition of the word "neighbor." A lawyer would have a field day with that -- quoting scriptural precedents upon precedents where the word "neighbor" was defined differently, and creating "reasonable doubt."

Instead, what Jesus does is construct a special type of analogy -- a "parable" -- which points to the deep Justice and Mercy of God that lies beneath the law, at a level where only those who **desire to know the Living God** can perceive it. And as Jesus tells it, the only person in the parable who is actually perceiving and co-operating with divine justice and mercy is *the Samaritan -- an outsider! a follower of a different religion!* And, in contrast, the persons in the parable who are **least** aware of and **least** open to divine justice and mercy are the religious "professionals", who knew the mosaic law extensively, but who clearly knew it superficially, much like the lawyer in the story knew it.

In this way, Jesus leaves the lawyer without a leg to stand on, for he exposes the tragic flaw in his character, which distorts the real meaning of the law in his mind.

Why does Jesus do this? Is it to publicly humiliate him, as this lawyer had no doubt done to others? No. He exposes the error-of-his-ways out of love, out of a deep understanding of his character, out of a desire for him to gain **genuine knowledge** of God's grace, of himself, and of others -- which is what the law is really meant to do.

This is what happens to us when we meet Jesus at the core of our being. We know divine grace. And within that grace, the tragic flaws of our own personal characters come to light. And the opportunity for healing and transformation comes to light. Then, like the lawyer, we are faced with a real choice. To stay with Jesus, to abide with him, in his light, in his grace, and be gradually changed from the inside out -- or -- to return to the old, well-worn patterns of character that create suffering in our lives and the lives of those who are affected by our actions.

Religious knowledge, including knowledge of the Bible, is not an end in itself. It is really only valuable when it leads to knowing God, to knowing the Love, the Justice, the Mercy, the Wisdom that are ***eternally alive***, because they belong to the very nature of God. Religious knowledge is really only valuable when it leads to such transforming, "saving" knowledge.

We can accrue religious knowledge, including knowledge of the Bible, without meeting Jesus at the core of our being, without actually being transformed into "Good Samaritans" at the level of our characters. If we've ever had the misfortune of being attacked by a religious fundamentalist, we know that what he or she *lacked* was not "knowledge of the Bible."

Far be it from me to discourage anyone from developing religious knowledge, including knowledge of the Bible. God knows, we need much, much more in the Anglican Church. But let's not forget that the real ***measure*** of such knowledge is actually loving God *with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your strength; and your neighbor as yourself.*

Christians are also called to be "*knowledge workers*," in this very deep sense of transforming, "saving" knowledge.

In closing, let us pray for ourselves, using the prayer we heard in our 2nd reading (Col. 1:1-14), where St. Paul prays for the Colossian church, the church that was known for their "love in the Spirit":

that we may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,

that we may lead lives worthy of our Lord, as we bear fruit in every good work and as we grow in the knowledge of God.

Amen.

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