

Three Strikes

Sunday 31 January 2010 – Rev Lance Thomas
1 Timothy 1:5-11

According to the news, I think promoted by Rodney Hyde, the Government is considering the introduction of a 'three strikes and you're out' policy for those who break serious laws against society. I must confess I have my doubts about this policy. It is a policy that is borrowed from the United States hence the name 'three strikes and you're out', which is a baseball term. It actually means three strikes and you are in for a very long time. It's borrowed from the States and my impression is that it doesn't work. USA has 715 adults in prison per 100,000 population. New Zealand has 169. USA has the highest total number in prison anywhere in the world – 2.3 million. China is second with 1.5 million but China has four times the population of the States. It's easy for me to say, it won't work, but I'm not a politician charged with creating policy to address a crime rate which is of concern to a lot of people.

But the main reason I have doubts about this or any other policy that addresses the symptoms, is just that, an addressing of the symptoms and ignoring the cause. That does fall into my responsibility and yours.

The quote we have on the newsheet is an unidentified quote I got from someone else, so I don't know who first penned it, but it identifies well the challenge of using law and punishment as a means to significantly change our society.

'Laws rules and regulations define social morality. They are often very little help in the growth of personal morality. The reason for this is not hard to understand. A law may prevent me from robbing my neighbour but no law can prevent me from coveting his possessions and thinking of new and devious ways of making them mine.

A law can discourage me, if not prevent me, from abandoning my wife and children, but it cannot stop me from making them miserable. A law can inhibit me from knifing an enemy, but it can do nothing if I merely hate him and make him feel my hate.

The law, in short can regulate my behaviour, within certain limits. It cannot cleanse my mind, nor purify my heart, nor neutralise the poison of my worst intentions.'

I think it is a reasonable statement when people say that the laws of the Western World are based on the laws of the Old Testament, specifically the Ten Commandments. Now many of the laws of our land are hard to connect to the Ten Commandments, but if we go back to their origins we see from where they have come. The basic understanding that there are regulations, that there are norms that guide and govern a healthy society.

What we don't recognise is that the Ten Commandments didn't work. They devolved into endless laws and regulations which endeavoured to bring people into a right style of living – but even at its best, produce an almost joyless sense of duty. Even the Ten Commandments may regulate behaviour, within certain limits, but they can't cleanse the mind, purify the heart, let alone neutralise the poison of our worst intentions.

Last week we began to look at the first letter the Apostle Paul wrote to his young leader in the church at Ephesus. Timothy is strongly encouraged to stand up against several strong groups that are vying for control of the Ephesus church, none of which Paul would call Christian. The first and most benign of them was a group who spent their time on myths and genealogies about the ancestors of the faith. Maybe well intentioned but in Paul's eyes just wasting time that could be spent on Christian living. The second was much more insidious, the early Gnostic movement, with their theology of the Spirit being created by God and therefore good and the material, the flesh, being of something less than God and evil. Stand up for the true Gospel was Paul's challenge to Timothy.

There is third group that Paul identifies. This group reflects the Jewish origins of the new Christian faith. Those that want to be teachers of the Law, Paul calls them. 'The goal is love which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Some have

wandered away from these and turned to meaningless talk. They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm.’ So the third group that Paul is calling Timothy to stand up against, are those who see the salvation of society in the law. Last year we looked at God’s Law as it comes to us in the Old Testament. We saw that it is more than the ten commandments but it is easiest for us to equate the law with the Ten Commandments. That’s what we are talking about when we use the phrase ‘The Law’.

Paul then goes on to say, ‘we know that the law is good, if one uses it properly. We also know that the law is made not for the righteous ...’ and then comes his list which we will look at in a moment.

The law is good, of course it is good, it came directly from God, burnt into stone on Mount Sinai. As we studied the Ten Commandments last year we saw that they reflect the character and the holiness of God. They are an expression of the life of God, both in outward behaviour and in inward attitudes.

The law is good and it has a usefulness, ‘but we know the law is not made for the righteous,’ says Paul. And he gives us a list of who it is made for. And it gives a pretty grim picture of what the first century world was like. Law breakers and rebels, those who know the laws of right and wrong and break them open eyed and deliberately and those who just refuse to obey authority. Ungodly, those deliberately in battle with God. Sinners - in the usage of the day meant lax, lazy, useless sort of characters. The unholy and irreligious, were much stronger words in their original context used to describe the Egyptian practise where brother could marry sister or the Persian practise of son marrying his mother. Violation of the ultimate decencies of life. And the person who soils everything in life, relationships, family, business – all of it grubby.

Those who strike or even kill their parents. In Roman law a son who struck a parent was liable to death. This describes the loss of gratitude, respect, shame and is really an offence against the heart.

Murderer, those who indulged in the smorgasbord of outrageous sexual practises of the time. Slave traders or slave kidnappers. There was a lot of money to be made from the slave trade – one of today’s equivalents may be the drug trade.

Finally liars and perjurers, people who did not hesitate to twist the truth to gain dishonourable ends.

Lists of evil doing has some attraction to us because it separates us from them. They belong in that category, not us. But then Paul goes and adds onto the end of this list, ‘and whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God’.

What’s the role of the law? I have said it doesn’t work in producing a changed society. What it does do says Paul is draw attention to sin.

Boat Story

After drawing attention to sin, it convicts us that we can’t change things in our own strength, it convinces us of our need for God. That conviction of sin is the beginning of the journey to righteousness, the acceptance of Jesus Christ, the cleansing of our minds, the purification of our hearts, the neutralising of the poison of our worst intentions.

So is that the end of it? One receives Christ, is freed from the consequences of the law, therefore the law of Moses no longer applies to the Christian?

At one level this is the case. We are no longer under the law as a means of winning approval from God. We have his approval already. We are no longer under the conviction of spiritual death through the transgression of the law. Christ has paid that debt.

But the law still identifies a standard of righteousness, a way of living that enables the release of all the human potential we are created with, all the human potential that sinful living reduces, distorts, destroys. The law helps us define and recognise sin. It still applies as a standard of righteousness. It is still what God requires of us, even if it is achieved by the power of the Spirit of Christ within us and not by our own strength and goodness.

The second thing we are all aware of is that the righteous are not immune from falling. But that does not make them unrighteous, rather, someone in need of restoration.

Paul says in Galatians 6:1 'if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted.'

Believers in Jesus, one of the most critical responsibilities we have in Kingdom calling is to help each other, in gentleness and love, to live with a clean mind and a pure heart, to live the character and holiness of God from a changed heart rather than a dutiful obedience to the law.