

Rev. Darcy Hawk
Sunday, September 27, 2020
The Challenge

Matthew 21:23-32

²³When *Jesus* entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" ²⁴Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' ²⁶But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." ²⁷So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. ²⁸What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' ²⁹He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. ³⁰The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. ³¹Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³²For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him."

On debarking from a plane in San Jose I overheard the people behind me discussing mysterious crop circles they saw while flying over the Midwest. It took me a moment to realize they were looking down on irrigated fields that use a central well and a long sprinkler arm that travels around the central axis. The resulting farm fields are round. However, there are crop circles claimed to be made by alien ships landing in fields and pressing down grain stalks in artistic patterns. The mystery of who actually created these crop circles was mostly solved by the supposed *aliens* being interviewed in local pubs explaining how to make them, not that they would admit to trespassing and ruining part of a farmer's hard work but they had friends who did such things. We may explain and dismiss these circles but there are around here mysterious circles of unknown origin that have appeared on everyday regular roads. My theory is that the British are at fault because they have a lot of these things. When confronted with this novel situation drivers seem to reach the end of legal interpretation. We know about stop signs and how to behave at intersections although if four drivers arrive at a four way stop at exactly the same time the rule of the one to the right going first means everyone has to just abandon their cars and walk away. New signs grace the new situations and confusion can result. At least collisions will be more of the side swiping kind, but yield is neither merge nor stop but somewhere in between. Wouldn't it be nice if our cars told us exactly what to do in order to obey the spirit of the law?

At the time of Jesus a large part of Judaism was convinced that the way to know you were doing the right thing was to be scrupulous in following the law. But, laws like rabbits in multiply exponentially. Jesus arrived about five thousand years after the first laws were handed to Moses. That meant a lot of law. Just about the time a person got one right another law came along, or was discovered that meant more unmet requirements.

Over time people lose sight of what the law is for. We are generally well meaning and hope to do the right thing more often than not, but what is the right thing? Some laws are meant to be broken and others need reinterpreting as situations change. "I was just following orders," was never an adequate defense of the inhumane treatment of others but it still crops up. Don't we punish people who disobey orders and, could the world work if everyone picked and chose

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the laws they would abide and those that were inconvenient? But, there's the problem. Mere inconvenience is not a defense; forcing unethical behavior is. If you do want to be right with God and do the right thing which laws apply? How can you tell if you're doing God's will or your own? Here's a tale about an early version of the smart car.

Numbers 22

²¹ So Balaam rose in the morning, and saddled his donkey, and went with the princes of Moab to curse the Israelites. ²² But God's anger was kindled because he went; and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the way as his adversary. Now he was riding on the donkey, and his two servants were with him. ²³ And the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road, with a drawn sword in his hand; and the donkey turned aside out of the road, and went into the field; and Balaam struck the donkey, to turn her into the road. ²⁴ Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on either side. ²⁵ And when the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she pushed against the wall, and pressed Balaam's foot against the wall; so he struck her again. ²⁶ Then the angel of the LORD went ahead, and stood in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn either to the right or to the left. ²⁷ When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam; and Balaam's anger was kindled, and he struck the donkey with his staff. ²⁸ Then the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" ²⁹ And Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have made sport of me. I wish I had a sword in my hand, for then I would kill you." ³⁰ And the donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey, upon which you have ridden all your life long to this day? Was I ever accustomed to do so to you?" And he said, "No." ³¹ Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way, with his drawn sword in his hand; and he bowed his head, and fell on his face. ³² And the angel of the LORD said to him, "Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come forth to withstand you, because your way is perverse before me; ³³ and the donkey saw me, and turned aside before me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, surely just now I would have slain you and let her live."

Pay attention because this is tricky. God is mostly very subtle about getting you to behave yourself. Webs of conflicting laws are more confusing than guiding. You might think God is blocking your path or it's just a hard task. Know that God does not require you to study law and pass a test, there is no license but there is a simple rule of rules, ^{Micah 6: 8} God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? That's your challenge.