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GOOD NEWS *Unlimited*

Unkind Cuts

By Ron Allen

My parents gave me a helpful impression of God. I mean, they didn't turn me off God; they imparted in me a thirst for him. They influenced me toward a theistic worldview and gave me to understand that God was reasonable, even likeable.

Whether it was Mom and Dad, or the church they took me to every week, I am not sure, but some of my early religious ideas were laden with sober awareness that God did not laugh at some of the crude comedy that is too often a rite of passage for little boys. I mention this now because in church sermons and Bible classes I sometimes heard the use of a strange-sounding word: circumcision. I was jolted one day when it became known to me what the word signified. It took me some time to take in the gravity of the situation. Here were ministers of God, quoting from the holiest of all books, drawing attention to forbidden things!

To this day, I confess that each time the relevant Scriptures are read aloud in church, I marvel to myself that an ancient, drastically intrusive and, for some, inexplicable procedure, should form part of the language and conversation of people at worship. What on earth has a primitive reconfiguring of male private parts got to do with following Jesus?

It happens that circumcision was a live issue in New Testament times. This because of the central place it held within the religion of Israel. The rite took on religious meaning for Abraham and, from thence among his descendents, it signified membership in the covenant community. Circumcision was emphasized again at the Exodus and reinforced forty years later when the redeemed crossed Jordan to occupy the Promised Land.

Among the many stipulations contained in the Mosaic code were those that came to be known as 'purity' laws; laws administering clean versus un-clean conditions and practices. Many of these laws are puzzling to us because it is not always easy to detect a consistent rationale for them. One idea, however, makes some sense.

Creatures inhabiting the sea having fins and scales are deemed to be clean and fit to eat. Animals in the sea having no fins or scales (lobsters for example) are unclean

and not to be eaten (Leviticus 11:9-11). The thinking seems to be that there is a fitness attaching to sea creatures with fins and scales that does not apply to sea creatures with say, legs. Legs are more suited to land animals. They ought not be in the water at all. Their out-of-placeness renders them 'detestable.'

The same intent is apparent in other purity laws. In Canaan, the people were forbidden to occasion the mating of different animal species or to make a garment from two different cloth materials (Leviticus 19). The underlying indicated is that such practices blurred distinctions inherent in God's creation. The blurring is detestable because it disrupts proprieties established by God in his universe.

The people of God are to model existence as he intended it. They are not to be like the Egyptians. They must not imitate the Canaanites. By observing the proper order of things, Israel would live out its unique relation to God. It would avoid breaking over limits and boundaries designed to regard and promote human life.

When God made his covenant of circumcision with Abraham there was no mention of purity or otherwise, but God *did* direct that any male descendant who remained uncircumcised should be expelled from the community. Since circumcision expressly spoke of the covenant people, it does not surprise us that it came to signify notions of purity.

Un-circumcision, on the other hand, became tantamount to impurity. In the war against the Philistines, 'un-circumcised' was a nickname men of that nation. Needless to say, the 'un-circumcised' stood outside God's blessing; outside the divine order; not included in the Lord's favor.

Under the laws governing purity, it was assumed that an individual could be rendered unclean through contact with an 'unclean' person—a Gentile, for example. In order to remain safe from such infection, an Israelite would not touch a corpse or risk the society of the un-circumcised. Purity laws thus became mechanisms by which Jews kept themselves separate from persons believed to be unclean in order to abide in God's favor, in order to stay **right with him**.

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EDITORIAL . . .



Pastor Ron Allen

“You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?” (Romans 2:23)

When Paul was writing that, ‘law’ was the will of God in its most explicit form—the religion of Israel. He is alluding to the perennial and vexing problem known wherever there is religion. Namely: human beings acquiring stewardship of a body of theological thought and opinion, are prone to wear it as badge of pride. They fall prey to the idea that their apprehension of God somehow sets them above their fellow creatures as their moral betters. They imagine that by the same means, they possess a claim on God; they have some rights concerning him which those who know not what they know, and do not as they do, have not.

It comes about, therefore, that religious men and women in this day and age, set forth to preach, prophesy, admonish, rebuke, call for repentance, summon the populace back to church, back to duty and responsibility, back to reverence, to discipline, standards and true doctrine.

Yet many of the duly admonished know that their religious fellow citizens, along with institutions represented by them, are not as right with God as they appear to believe they are. Some are known to be adulterers. Others are found to be addicted to pornography. Some, tragically, are pedophiles. More yet are exposed for making themselves rich at the expense of their flocks. These examples, ‘chinks’ in the armor of so-called righteousness, are evidence that those who ‘brag about the law’, are just as flawed as the irreligious masses.

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Even after the Resurrection when large numbers of Jews had become followers of Jesus, many among them continued in the strong belief that non-Jews who turned to Christ should be circumcised in order to remain **in the right** with him. The apostle Paul did not accept that teaching. He argued that it was not necessary for persons to become Jews in order to be clean. This question is discussed in his letter to the Romans.

In chapter 4, Paul demolishes the assumption that Israel’s progenitor, Abraham, became right with God on grounds of his obedience. On the contrary, he shows that Abraham achieved rightness with God as a man who *does not work, but trusts in God who justifies the wicked* (verse 5). Abraham was not the

They are to be found not just among churchmen. Their secular counterparts present as enlightened moralists, self-appointed wardens of social propriety. They exist on the right and the left of politics and media. They legislate, pass judgment, denounce and bemoan. ‘Law and order’ is an oft-repeated catch cry of theirs. They frequently call for zero tolerance, more stringent measures, tougher sentencing and stronger police powers. All the while, prisons overflow, hate multiplies, evil multiplies and things are not what they ought to be.

Brer Fox thinks to set things to rights by whacking the Tar Baby, but with each blow, he is further entangled. In the same way, the most strenuous activists and the most passionate religionists fail to establish righteousness in the earth. Even when earnest, well-intentioned, morally sensitive men and women promote ideals in the name of truth and equity, they still fall short because they are themselves flawed. They are, by default, part of the problem.

The struggle for truth and justice is ever noble, but we need to know that something more powerful than social engineering; something more enlightening than religion for its own sake, is needed. Human beings, both secular and religious, whether they know little or much, need a place to stand on together, where all agree with the principle of Romans 3:23, *“For all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God.”*

poster-boy for righteousness by rectitude that many Jews thought.

Paul carries his argument a step further as he entertains the question: “If Abraham was justified by faith in God, what were his circumstances at the time? Was it before he was circumcised, or afterward?” He goes on to answer: “It was before.” (verse 10)

The man looked upon as Israel’s spiritual template and prime exemplar became **right with God** when he was one of the un-circumcised. He was **right with God** even when he was not separate and distinct from the uncleanness of other nations. He was **right with God** at a time when he was someone with whom his descendants would not risk association lest they too become unclean. →

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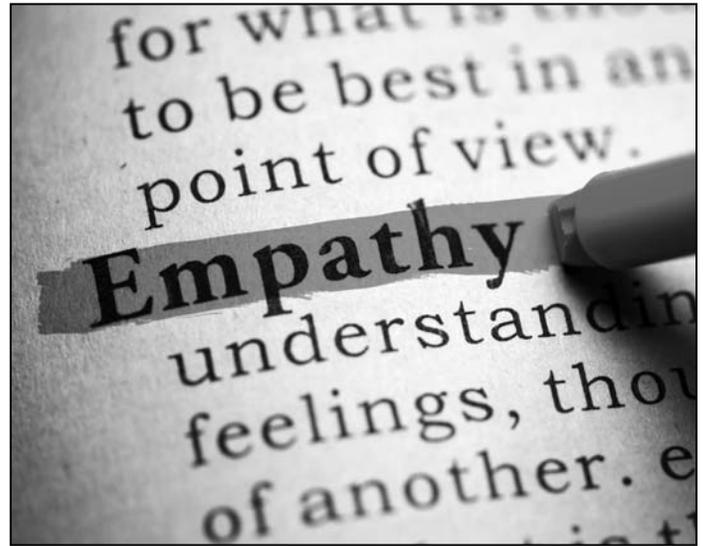
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Empathy

By Helmut Thielicke

Many people today hesitate to go to a pastor because they think that he will simply apply to their problem some ready-made dogmatic formula in which he does not express himself and that he does not basically share. They thus prefer to go to other men and women whom they meet in the office or in the street. It is not that these people can give them a patent remedy for the problem which bothers them. The only answer they want is a little sympathy and understanding. They do not want an 'answer' in the strict sense. They certainly do not want anything ready-made and therefore alien. What we require in all the various needs and problems of our age is a sympathetic person who is perhaps as perplexed and troubled as we are, not the consolation of a peace which is above and beyond. What we desire is not a voice from beyond, but a voice which comes from this world, the voice of brother men in solidarity with us, the voice which chimes in with the chorus of the struggling and the oppressed.

-Helmut Thielicke



Paul's keeps the motor of his logic running. In 4:11, he points out that Jews cannot have Abraham all to themselves. He is not just the biological father of his posterity; he is also the spiritual patriarch of the un-circumcised heathen multitude whose trust is in the God who "gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were." (verse 17)

What makes a person clean? How can a man, a woman, be right with God? It happens because God in his wisdom and mercy, justifies the wicked. From the human side of things, it happens by faith. Not by circumcision; not through attention to some cultic obligation, nor by avoidance thereof. Genuine children of Abraham are those who believe in God and rely on his work.

In Paul's discussion, rightness with God is either by faith or through circumcision. The same mutual exclusivity is expressed as promise versus law (verses 13, 14). Promise is to faith, as circumcision is to law. If being right with God is not achieved through circumcision, neither is it achieved through adherence to law. In the present context, law encompasses what Jews meant by law—their religion. Circumcision was part of that law, but Paul's logic applies with equal force to law in its generic sense; to law per se—any law.

In his novel, John Cornwall tells of a group of Jesuits priests who journey far into the Peruvian jungle to evangelize 'pre-contact' tribes living there. The leader, Father Christian O'Rourke, succeeds early in getting control of the food supply by using baubles and trinkets to buy up all the villager's food stocks and securing them in a locked stockade.

When a viral infection—brought by the missionaries—begins to decimate the tribe, O'Rourke sees his chance. Having quarantined the food, he goes from hut to hut with his interpreter, urging each ailing native to submit to Christian baptism. With food in one hand and aspirin in the other, he pesters the delirious and dying, telling them that after they have submitted to baptism, they will be permitted the blessings of the kingdom of heaven.

In this case, baptism at the hands of O'Rourke is like circumcision. It is the law that must be obeyed by the hapless primitives so they can enter into the favor of God.

To this day, there are religious groups that presume to withhold the favor of God from men and women who will not submit to their version of circumcision. This is how it comes about that those groups feel justified in refusing fellowship to alcoholics and people with other addictions; jobless people, homeless people; people unable to afford proper hygiene or dental care, people with exceptional sexual orientation. It has happened; still does happen, that individuals are fired, their careers terminated, their names expunged from church books when, in good conscience, they are unable to subscribe to one of the articles of faith—for not believing in eternal hellfire, for playing down the importance of baptism or for questioning the exclusive of women from the pulpit.

When religious institutions and/or movements exclude or excise persons who are unable to accede to their law, they revoke the gospel. Their action teaches the very thing Paul's critics were saying when they refused fellowship to persons who had not submitted to circumcision: the Promise of God is insufficient; the **in-the-rightness** awarded by God to faith requires the certification of a particular form of compliance that, once rendered, will demonstrate separateness from the disordered masses.

Requirements such as these are crude devices, unkind cuts. They cause people to believe they can never be right with God unless they acquiesce to a formula urged upon them by persons who would enslave them. Only as men and women discover rest, security and hope in what God does to make them right with himself are they freed from the worry of staying pure; of keeping a safe distance from those who could defile. Only as they stand upon the bedrock surety of God's gift of righteousness do they experience liberty enough to not subject other human beings to unkind cuts that do nothing for their victims, or themselves.

Trying—Without Trying Harder

By C.S. Lewis

I said just now that the question of faith arises after a man has tried his level best to practice Christianity, and found that he fails, and seen that even if he could he would only be giving back to God what was already God's own. In other words, he discovers his bankruptcy. Now, once again, what God cares about is not exactly our actions. What he cares about is that we should be creatures of a certain kind or quality—the kind of creatures he intended us to be—creatures related to himself in a certain way. I do not add “and related to one another in a certain way,” because that is included: if you are right with him you will inevitably be right with all your fellow creatures.

As long as a man is thinking of God as an examiner who has set him a sort of paper to do, or as the opposite party in a sort of bargain—as long as he is thinking of claims and counter-claims between himself and God—he is not yet in the right relation to him. He is misunderstanding what he and what God is. And he cannot get into the right relation till he has discovered the fact of our bankruptcy.

Any child, if given a certain kind of religious education, will soon learn to say that we have nothing to offer to God that is not already his own and that we find ourselves failing to offer even *that* without keeping something back. But I am talking of *really* discovering this: really finding out by experience that it is true.

Now we cannot, in that sense, discover our failure to keep God's law except by trying our very hardest (and then failing). Unless we really try, whatever we say there will always be at the back of our minds the idea that if we try harder next time we shall succeed in being completely good. Thus, in one sense, the road back to God is a road of moral effort, of trying harder and harder. In another sense, it is *not* trying that is ever going to bring us home. All this trying leads up to the vital moment at which you turn to God and say, “You must do this. I can't.”

The sense in which a person leaves it to God is that he puts all his trust in Christ: trusts that Christ will somehow share with him the perfect obedience that he carried out from his birth to his crucifixion: that Christ will make the man more like himself and, in a sense, make good his deficiencies. In Christian language, he will share his “Sonship” with us, will make us, like himself, “Sons of God.”

Christ offers something for nothing: He even offers everything for nothing. In a sense, the whole Christian life consists in accepting that very remarkable offer. But the difficulty is to reach the point of recognizing that all we have and can do is nothing.

What we should have liked would be for God to count our good points and ignore our bad ones.

Again, in a sense, you may say that no temptation is ever

overcome until we stop trying to overcome it—throw up the sponge. But then you could “stop trying” in the right way and for the right reason until you had tried your very hardest. And, in yet another sense, handing everything over to Christ does not, of course, mean that you stop trying. To trust him means, of course, trying to do all that he says. There would be no sense in saying you trusted a person if you would not take his advice. Thus, if you really have handed yourself over to him, it must follow that you are trying to obey him, but trying in a new way, a less worried way. Not doing these things in order to be saved, but because he has begun to save you already. Not hoping to get to heaven as a reward for your actions but inevitably wanting to act in a certain way because a first faint gleam of heaven is already inside you.

There are two parodies of the truth that different sets of Christians have, in the past, been accused by other Christians of believing. One set were accused of saying, “Good actions are all that matters. The best good action is charity. The best kind of charity is giving money. The best thing to give money to is the church. So hand over \$10,000 and we will see you through.” The answer to that nonsense, of course, would be that good actions done for that motive, done with the idea that heaven can be bought, would not be good actions at all, but only commercial speculations.

The other set were accused of saying, “Faith is all that matters. Consequently, if you have faith, it doesn't matter what you do. Sin away, my lad, and have a good time and Christ will see that it makes no difference in the end.” The answer to that nonsense is that, if what you call your ‘faith’ in Christ does not involve taking the slightest notice of what he says, then it is not faith at all—not faith or trust in him, but only intellectual acceptance of some theory about him.

I think all Christians would agree with me if I said that though Christianity seems at first to be all about morality, all about duties and rules and guilt and virtue, yet it leads

you on, out of all that, into something beyond. One has a glimpse of a country where they do not talk of those things, except perhaps as a joke.

Everyone there is filled full with what we should call goodness as a mirror is filled with light. But they do not call it goodness. They do not call it anything. They are not thinking of it. They are too busy looking at the source from which it comes. But this is near the stage where the road passes over the rim of our world. No one's eyes can see very far beyond that: lots of people's eyes can see further than mine.

-C.S. Lewis: MERE CHRISTIANITY, pp. 124-129. 

