

Within the Law? Greed, Gratitude, and Grace

1 Kings 21: 1-10, 14-15 Galatians 2: 15-21

Jesus demonstrates the lesson in practical terms, and Paul explains a similar lesson in more philosophical terms. Each of them reveals the way that something can be lawful, legally permitted, or even required, and yet still be unjust, flawed, and even harmful when applied to different people.

It's something that **we** don't typically give a whole lot of thought. The law tends to work pretty well for us. The culture tends to work pretty well for us. We feel relatively secure and we esteem the law as generally pretty fair and just. It helps a lot that we're all white, tend to be middle or better in financial class status, don't worry about paying our bills too much, and expect that if we have any encounter with law enforcement or government services that we'll be given the benefit of the doubt and treated reasonably.

For people who are not white, not comfortably middle class, who see family and neighbors *who look like them* struggling within social, legal, and economic systems, what is lawful and legal, and just and fair, looks very different. These systems are experienced as punitive, judgmental, unfair, unyielding, and oppressive. It's highly stressful, never really feeling like you know what to expect from the system, knowing that it seems to seek every opportunity to knock you down. The capricious nature of the way things work for people *who look like you* is unmistakable, from the security staff that follow you around a store, to the number of people you know personally who are in jail or prison or on probation, to the special rules of conduct that you need to observe in basic social situations, to the awareness that people in authority don't care about you at all; no, not much even in election season.

In Jesus' time, and of course in every era before and since, the social systems served the interests of people well, *if* the people being served were the same people who made the laws, ruled the government, owned the wealth, and defined the system and what would be considered acceptable, lawful, just, and fair. The people on whom Jesus focused his ministry were not the people who made the rules, or interpreted the laws, or exercised power and influence. They tended to be those who were, one way or another, poorly regarded by the society in general.

We see this use of power against the relatively powerless in many stories in scripture. Today's lesson from 1 Kings about King Ahab is one of the classics. It shows us God's regard for the powerless, something Jesus reflected when he came in ministry. It isn't something new; we simply need to remember that Jesus' ministry was a reflection of God's priorities before his arrival, reflecting the values of the Kingdom.

In the story of Naboth's vineyard, greed and gratitude collide. First, we see a king's infantile desire for power, wealth, and control. Then we see Naboth as grateful, having been graced by God in receiving the land of his ancestors, a land he sees as given by God in God's providence and covenant with him.

Naboth spurns the king's offer of even better land, or more valuable land, or more productive land, or even a hefty price. He won't hear of it. And sin of sins, he doesn't even want to dicker over the package. No dickering? No haggling? How unreasonable is that?

Something worth more than money or profit motivates Naboth to say "no" to – of all people – the king. For Naboth, the land is sacred, endowed with the ancient and everlasting blessing of God. The land in a family stays in the family because God's covenant with that family/ tribe/ people is wrapped in it. It's as if Naboth wasn't actually the sole owner of the land that he'd even be able to sell it.

Similarly, Native American Indians did not see the land as something which an individual could own. They would learn the hard way about European notions of land ownership.

King Ahab may have an awareness of Naboth's sacred tradition, but the bottom line is: *he didn't get what he wanted*. Ahab goes off in a deep sulk. The king is so petulant and childish that he's gone to his room, won't come out, and won't eat.

Queen Jezebel is from Sidon in Phoenicia and she has no appreciation for these silly Jews, or their ancient traditions, or their God. Jezebel sees the king in a pathetic state and reminds him that he's **the king**, and he needs to act like it. Since he seems so unwilling to behave as king, she helps him out. She concocts a scheme that uses this silly Jewish tradition to indict Naboth fraudulently and get him executed.

Ahab and Jezebel appear thoroughly contemptible. We cannot imagine ourselves being so demanding, so disappointed, so greedy, so self-absorbed, or so jealous. We may find it easier to excuse our own bad attitudes and behavior, surely operating on a different scale, but flowing out of the same source – "I want what I want, and I deserve it," or "I didn't get what I wanted; it's what I deserve." Feeling deprived, threatened or victimized, we might act to right the injustice, and feel pretty righteous about what we'll do to obtain satisfaction. We may not be monarchs, but there are times when we can act like we're royalty. Oh, please, let's admit it; we can act as infantile, petulant, and selfish as the king and queen here.

With Naboth and the monarchs, the clear contrast is between a man of faithful integrity, grateful and devoted to God's promise, versus the selfish, ugly greed of those devoted to themselves and their desires.

Now we'd never kill for a plot of land, so it seems remote, and it may be insulting that pastor would even suggest that we all swim in the same slimy pool. Well, few of *our* ancestors thought there was any injustice in taking the very land on which we live today from the people who lived on that land, who often regarded the land as a sacred and holy trust.

I've told you before about my first relation in the colonies, Capt. John Seaman. Going from England to Holland, he arrived in Massachusetts. He bounced around for a

few years in Massachusetts and Rhode Island. Then he ventured into eastern Connecticut and got involved in the Pequot Indian Wars in the late 1630s, earning a field commission in this conflict that was really an undisguised campaign to exterminate the Pequot. This kind of conflict at the beginning of the white man's occupation became the model for dealing with Native Americans. In fact, the [Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation](#) describes this point in their history like this: *In 1637, the Pequots became the first native people to survive a genocidal massacre at the hands of European immigrants.* Capt. John Seaman, my ancestor, got the honor of his rank serving in this "genocidal massacre." Let's say that today, this isn't a source of family pride.

Could it be that today we live in Naboth's vineyard, benefiting from a greedy quest to take what could never have been ours any other way? How many other points in our history reflect the justification of greed by those who held the power to do the justifying, to set the rules, and to decide what was just and fair, and for whom?

In Paul's letter to the Galatians, we know from my previous sermon that Paul is incensed by what has happened there. Peter's behavior among the Galatians is the source of Paul's rage.

We know that Peter had been a ground-breaker in setting aside the dietary and social rules of Judaism when among Gentile converts and believers. A quick read of the previous part of Galatians chapter 2 describes the whole thing. Paul writes (vvs. 12-13): *For until certain people came from James [James being the reputed leader of the Jewish wing of the Jesus people in Jerusalem], [Peter] used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, [Peter] drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined [Peter] in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.*

Such events, and the issues raised (or re-raised), cause Paul to respond in a very thorough and thoughtful philosophical manner. Where the story of Jesus' relation to the Torah-Law comes through narrative stories, in Paul we have logical argument in the fashion of Greek philosophy. This passage in Galatians is a nice mix of the two, starting with a story and then followed by the logic and reasoning.

Paul proceeds to compare himself with Peter, without ever naming Peter again. Underlying Paul's premise is the idea that all mortals are sinners who stand condemned before God. How then can a person justify themselves – become reconciled – to God? How does a person get made righteous once again and thereby reconciled to God?

For Paul, justification comes through Jesus Christ for all people. Paul didn't believe that the Torah-Law was flawed or invalid. Rather, Paul believed that the Torah-Law offered no real means for restoration and reconciliation. One might follow all of the precepts and yet still be in a new state of sinfulness instantly, a never ending cycle that is defeating. He believed that Torah-Law revealed sinfulness and thereby revealed God's will, purpose, and promise. But a person only truly gains reconciliation and salvation through Jesus Christ. The Torah-Law cannot do that. So Paul sees the Torah-Law as the servant of sinfulness and condemnation, not of justification and salvation.

Peter attempted to have it both ways among the Galatians: to profess his faith and salvation in Jesus Christ, and then waffle, insisting on abiding by some precepts of Torah-Law, is not simply wrong and hypocritical. For Paul, it means that Peter would thereby nullify the grace of the God in Jesus.

'If you're going to follow the Torah-Law, Peter, then you end up denying the grace and forgiveness, and the reconciliation to new life in Jesus when you do that.' For Paul, Peter is not simply accommodating the Judaizers and backsliding on his commitment to the full participation of Gentiles in the Jesus faith community. Worse, Peter is really denying Jesus and his grace that's given to him.

In our passages, we find people desiring something that they cannot lay claim to on their own. For King Ahab, it was that wonderful vineyard owned by Naboth. For Naboth, it didn't matter what offer was made, he didn't believe he could lay claim to the vineyard all on his own. The vineyard was a wonderful blessing of God to his family. Naboth was not about to subvert, deny, or disregard the gracious blessing of God.

In seeking to be justified before God, to gain reconciliation in our sinfulness, we seek something that we cannot obtain on our own. Paul chastises Peter for striving for something – perfection in practice of the Torah-Law – which he knew he could not obtain on his own. Paul makes the case that it is through the grace of God in Jesus that all may be reconciled and united to Jesus' promise of new life.

What motivates us to have what we cannot obtain on our own? Having gratitude, we're brought to peace and the recognition of our blessing. Having what we cannot obtain on our own certainly has an element of greed, wanting to have it both ways, wanting to have it all. When we turn greedy, like Ahab for sure, but also Peter, we cause plenty of problems, harming others, and ultimately harming ourselves while denying the blessings we've already received. In this case, what is *lawful* is not *helpful*; it's even harmful.

What is lawful, legal, and just always needs discernment and perspective. Such things are not absolute. Any law needs interpretation, and in practice what is lawful can always be corrupted, biased, abused, and utilized for exploitation.

What is a reflection of the Kingdom, of the will of God, is the blessing of grace. It is the amazing gift that cannot be obtained on one's own. Yet it is *freely* given through the gift of new life in Jesus. May we always seek to recognize greed in our hearts and spirits, practice gratitude in thanksgiving, and celebrate and reflect the wondrous blessing of grace, faithfully received and faithfully given.