

“Why Red Means ‘Stop’ and Green Means ‘Go’”

Psalm 19; Luke 10:25-37

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This message is on the importance of law and its uses and misuses as we reflect on God’s law. Think for a moment of the first law or rule you remember. It may have been to obey mother or father; to not cross the street without an adult; to not talk to strangers.

One of the first laws I remember learning is that, at a traffic light, red means “stop” and green means “go.” My father, philosophical and skeptical, would ask “*Why does red mean stop? Who says? Why don’t we go for red and stop for green?*” This was more than contrariness. Dad was a professional in law enforcement: first as a Maryland State Trooper and most of his career as a civilian investigator for the U.S. Navy. The discussions that ensued were designed to help instill in us the belief that law helped protect us and create order out of chaos.

I recently researched his question. While red has been a warning sign since Roman legions carried red flags into battle more than two millennia ago, the red/green dichotomy was started by the railroads in the middle of the 19th century. Using signals that displayed these colors along particular sections of track, train movements could be controlled with multiple trains on a given section of track. Initially a clear color meant “go,” but after a disastrous accident that occurred because a red lens fell out of a signal, green became the color for go. By the time automobiles proliferated enough to require traffic signals, these colors were established and chosen for the traffic lights we see today.

The law protects us. Just ask anyone who has tried to go through Governor’s Avenue and Cherry Street recently, where the traffic light is out and drivers are relying on temporary stop signs. Good luck with that! Lights also create order from chaos by establishing protocols we all agree on. Traffic patterns remain orderly instead of chaotic.

Both natural and religious law is the subject of Psalm 19. The first six verses speak of the order of creation, the first verse inspiring Haydn's great oratorio, "The heavens are telling the glory of God." God's glory is revealed in nature and those of us who have dwelled there believe, with the psalmist:

*"In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,
which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy."*

Nature grasps our imagination, our sense of wonder, our creativity. Law, in contrast, we are inclined to perceive as restrictive, confining, stifling. Yet the psalmist pairs these two, natural and religious law, balancing the symphony of nature by extolling the glory of religious law. It *"revives the soul; makes us wise, rejoices the heart and enlightens the eyes."* So wonderful are God's statutes that they are to be desired even more than the sweetest delicacy—honey—or the greatest treasure—gold.

There is one more important piece to this in verse 11: *"by them [the laws] your servant is warned."* The train signal and traffic light don't go directly from green to red. It first shifts to yellow. Despite the tendency of some drivers to interpret it to mean "speed up," the traffic code is clear that it means to slow down and prepare to stop. Laws warn us of danger. An old saying on the railroad is *"The rules in the rulebook are written in blood."* They are there because someone once got hurt or killed and the rules are designed to prevent that from happening again.

So if the law is so great, why do we have reservations about it? First, there is a temptation to make the law an end in itself, rule-keeping for the sake of rule-keeping instead of protecting us, ordering society and pointing us toward God. Yet how often Jesus spoke against this very thing! Challenged on multiple occasions for violating the Fourth Commandment, Jesus pointed out that not working on the Sabbath was super-ceded by the command to love; and to the hypocrisy of his accusers who would pull out an animal stranded in a pit but object to Jesus' healing on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:9ff).

In fact, both human and religious law gets it wrong at times and needs to change in response to understanding that more closely approximates the Kingdom of God. Less than half a century ago interracial marriage was illegal in nearly 1/3 of the United States until the U.S. Supreme Court case of *Loving vs. Virginia*. Richard Loving, a white man, and Mildred Jeter Loving, a woman of African-American and Rappahannock Native American descent, appealed Virginia's anti-miscegenation (anti-interracial) marriage law. They won and these laws were overturned in the remaining 16 states that had them. In the last ten years this case has been used in civil courts to support same-sex marriage. On the 40th anniversary in 2007 Mildred Loving said:

"I believe all Americans, no matter their race, no matter their sex, no matter their sexual orientation, should have the same freedom to marry. I am still not a political person...but I am proud that Richard's and my name is on a court case that can help reinforce the love, the commitment, the fairness and the family that so many people, black or white, young or old, gay or straight, seek in life....That's what Loving, and loving, are all about."

So we sometimes have reservations about law because law gets it wrong or does not change with newer understandings.

We also have reservations about law because it can be misused. This does not need elaboration. Two quick comments: first, the Nazi's rise to power in 20th century Germany, and their extermination of 6 million Jews and 6 million non-Jews, was perfectly legal. Second, for an entertaining interpretation of law misused (and with lots of trains), go see Disney's "The Lone Ranger."

Finally, we have reservations about law because we are anxious that it will place a demand on us. And we are right to be anxious because it does! This is the irony of today's gospel story, a story we call "the good Samaritan." It is ironic because the word "good" appears nowhere in it and, more profoundly, because the priest and Levite, religious leaders, fail to help a man assaulted and on the verge of death.

The story does not tell us why they pass by. The road on which they traveled, from Jerusalem to Jericho, was notoriously dangerous.

They might be next. They also might have been in a hurry. Malcolm Gladwell in his book, The Tipping Point, quotes a study of Princeton seminarians who studied this very story and then, while on their way to their next appointment, had opportunity to assist someone. The single factor that most determined whether or not they would stop and help was whether they believed they were late to their next appointment. Righteousness demands of us time as well as compassion.

As to the religious law, many scholars suggest that the priest and Levite do not stop to avoid becoming ritually unclean by touching a person they presume to be dead. In observing the letter of the law they ignore the weightier matter of “*do(ing) unto others as you would have them do unto you.*”

Jesus expands the meaning of law by expanding the answer to the lawyer’s question “*Who is my neighbor?*” As the lawyer himself was convicted to admit, “*The one who showed mercy*” was neighbor. The hated Samaritan, the enemy of the Jew, the half-breed descendent of the interracial marriage of Jews and their Assyrian conquerors was held high as the epitome of neighborliness. And then the punch line and the highest demands of religious law: “*Go and do likewise.*”

To move deeper in faith we must—in the words of Daniel Towner’s hymn—“Trust and Obey.” We trust God who loves and redeems us and creation even at the cost of his Son. When we consider what God sacrificed for human redemption, and begin to see every person as one of sacred worth, then law is servant instead of Master.

Daniel Towner began his music career at a Methodist church in Binghamton, New York and served churches in Ohio and Kentucky before being asked to join Dwight L. Moody’s evangelistic organization in 1885, the equivalent of the Billy Graham Crusade today. The story behind the hymn is that, during a series of evangelistic meetings in Brockton, Massachusetts, a young man rose in testimony and said, “I am not quite sure—but I am going to trust and I am going to obey.” Towner wrote that sentence down, sent it to a Presbyterian minister friend, J.H. Sammis, who wrote a poem and sent it back to Towner for the music.

Alfred Smith, in his Treasury of Hymn Histories, adds that while writing the music, Dr. Towner got discouraged, crumpling his work and throwing it away. His wife found the crumpled paper, retrieved it, sang the song, left the manuscript on the organ and told him, *“I feel the melody you have written is just what is needed to carry the message.”*

She was right. When law is servant instead of Master, then it serves the living God. The living God uses such law to revive the soul, make wise the simple, protect us, order our journeys and warn us when danger nears. Let us seek God’s law of love in all things. Amen.