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Sermon

To Answer the Distortion of Good

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One of the great dangers for human beings is to turn a perfectly good action into a meaningless ritual. Any of the great festivals of the Church can suffer that fate. Christmas and Easter have suffered this fate in our society. What should be the retelling of the greatest story ever told has become a celebration of family at best and a time where commercialism reigns supreme at worst. Easter celebrates the greatest act of self-giving love the world has ever seen or known followed by the mightiest act of powerful love the world will ever know. Yet it has become at best a celebration of new life symbolised by chocolate eggs and chocolate bunnies and a long weekend holiday at worst.

Both great festivals have become events stripped of their original meaning and celebrated by a society that has forgotten the roots from which it has grown.

It is so easy for all our festivals to become like that; Lent being no exception. It is too easy to reduce it to the answer to the question, "What will I give up for Lent this year?" when what is needed is a time of reviewing our relationship with God.

We need to be asking instead, "Where are my growth points in relationship with our Heavenly Father?" "How am I growing in my relationship with Jesus?" What is the Holy Spirit leading me to do with my gifts to promote the ministry and mission of God through all my relationships with others?" "Am I growing in Faith Love and Mission?"

In that context it is quite correct to ask the question, "What do I have to give up this Lent?" To answer that question, I want to show you the nature of sin and suggest some things it would be good to give up this Lent.

Sin in general is so often a distortion of something good. It does this in two ways; the secular and the religious.

Our Nation was born out of Christian view of reality. Ian told us when we celebrated Waitangi Day how at the signing of the Treaty Governor Hobson shook each hand and said, "Now we are one people." Not One people to be dominated by another, (Colonisation) but one people joined in partnership. Remove the Biblical idea (See Ephesians 2:19-22 and Galatians 3:28) from that and we see a people oppressed in their own land. Operate that on a Biblical base and all are freed under God to be one with each other without diminishing the other. Remove the Biblical base and you have one group wanting to dominate the other. That is exactly what we see around us now.

The religious way was the problem of the Pharisees. Starting with a perfectly good law, they added bits to help us keep the law and ended up with a legalism never intended by God. Jesus described it this way, "They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to help them. (Matthew 23: 4)

There is too much of the Pharisee in each of us. We need to be reminded constantly that all the laws in the Bible are given for the GOOD of humanity. "The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath. So, the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath." (Mark 2:27-28) And that can be said of all the laws in the Bible. Jesus said, "I have not come to abolish the Law but to fulfil it."

So, both the secular and the religious ways are as bad as the other and always end up hurting people.

As great a problem as that, is the way we treat people who do not walk in accordance with the commands of God. Again, there are two responses to this.

As one example, divorce is a terrible thing. Ask anyone who has been through it. Yet the way people viewed those who were divorced was often sub-Christian. There was little attempt to understand WHY the divorce was necessary with little pastoral care for those who were going through one of the great tragedies of life. Judgementalism ruled.

But the other extreme is just as deadly. Obviously, the Bible (and Church teaching in general on this matter) is wrong. So, let's reverse that and say that divorce is ok or better still the problem is the whole teaching we have on marriage. Let us apply our own wisdom to this matter and not accept anything as God-revealed truth. The Bible is obviously outdated. We can come up with a better approach.

The results are all around us. Ask anyone who has been through a divorce if they think it is a good experience. It may have been necessary but certainly not something pleasant to go through.

Instead of these two responses is it not time that we started to ask a different question? "What was God intending by this law? What GOOD purpose was behind it?"

This helps remove a judgemental attitude. Jesus said, I have not come to judge the world, but to save it. (John 3:17)

Yet neither are we starting with the idea that the law is the problem. Jesus said, "I have not come to abolish the Law." (Matt 5:17) Rather we are saying that the people struggling with this command are loved by God and must therefore be loved by us. We begin every approach to someone who has broken the law with compassion and a desire to understand. We are not going to place heavy loads on people's backs. But neither are we going to abolish the Law.

What is needed instead is a constant prayer for God-given, lay- down- your- life- for- others wisdom. This wisdom is God-given and comes as we wrestle in prayer for the people we come across. This love is the kind that is portrayed on the Cross.

Ask any Priest or Pastor and you will find them face to face with issues like this on a regular base.

Many of you will know similar things as life is lived in a family or at work.

Living a life that is faithful to the revealed will of God and yet demonstrates the love and wisdom of God is no easy matter. But that is what we are called to. We live in obedience to that and no less.

Now let me tell you one story that demonstrates what I am sharing. It is a true story and happened over 50 years ago.

A couple who had been living together for a considerable time and had two children came to talk with their local Pastor. They had had been attending Church and recently made a commitment to Christ as Lord and

Saviour. Now they were faced with a problem because both had been married before and were not divorced. So, getting married was not possible. Their previous partners had entered new relationships and like them had Children. So, returning to their wife or husband was not possible. Should they end their relationship and hurt their children? Should they return to their previous spouses and destroy three families?

What would you say in this situation? How can they live in obedience to God and marry when doing so broke so many other commands?

This Pastor prayed and suggested after that they come to the Church with him, ask forgiveness for all the wrong that had been created and promise in God's presence to marry as soon as they possibly could.

That seemed to me to be a wise solution that honoured as much as possible their obedience to God and their responsibilities to their children and their previous relationships.

This Lent, will you give up being judgemental and ask for the wisdom and grace to walk in obedience to the Law and the prophets. Will you ask for wisdom (James 1:5) in all of your relationships and walk more closely with Him who loves all?