

# Internalizing God's law

*This article is from the "Edifying the Body" section of the Church of God Big Sandy's Web site, churchofgodbigandy.com. It was posted for the weekend of May 22-23, 2010.*

**By David F. Maas**

HAWKINS, Texas—Years ago I heard motivational author-speaker Stephen Covey use the term "proactive" to distinguish internal, as opposed to external, motivation to accomplish something. I quickly recognized how the concept of a proactive approach applied to conversion and Commandment-keeping.

In Matthew 5:20 we read the familiar, though enigmatic, passage: "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."

The key to understanding the leaven of the Pharisees is to realize it does not consist of their zeal of keeping the law, but in their zeal to find loopholes to circumvent the law: How close can we get to the edge without going over? We might refer to this practice as brinkmanship or marginalism.

## **Boundary markers**

I am reminded of homiletics teacher Ralph Levy's analogy of the Ten Commandments as the boundary markers along the ski trail. Ralph is an avid skier. Every year when he would contemplate the boundary markers at Vail or Aspen, he reflected that only an idiot would ski as close to the edge as he could.

The legalist and the lawbreaker both have a morbid curiosity about boundaries rather than concentrating on the vast latitude of choices between markers. This is much the same as our parents Adam and Eve developing a morbid curiosity about the one tree that was forbidden, ignoring the thousands upon thousands of varieties that were not forbidden.

(In David Burns popular best-seller *Feeling Good*, this behavior falls into cognitive distortion No. 3, the mental filter: You dwell on the negative and ignore the positive.)

Examples about the boundary markers and the forbidden tree point to the reality that the spirit of legalism and lawlessness are twin siblings. If you doubt my assertion, the next time you see a family-law attorney ask him how many families he has put back together in the last year.

When you place the critical points of the law-grace-legalism-transgression issue in proper perspective, law and grace are powerful allies in opposition to legalism and lawlessness.

### Heart problem

In Deuteronomy 5:29 the Lord said to Moses, "Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep my commandments always, so that it may go well with them and their children forever."

Romans 7:12, 14: "The law is spiritual," "The law is holy."

As the apostle Paul plainly teaches us in Hebrews 8:7-9, God found no fault with the law, nor with the original covenant.

Reflecting on Deuteronomy 5:29 again, the real problem was in the hearts, the inner core, of the people.

The apostle Paul continues in Hebrews 8:10 as well as 10:16 (quoting a pivotal passage in Jeremiah 31:31-35): "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put My laws in their minds and write them on their hearts."

It sounds even more emphatic in German: *Ich will mein Gesetz geben in ihren Sinn, und in ihr Herz will ich es schreiben.* "I will be their God and they will be My people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know Me."

### Embryo stage

The ultimate fulfillment of the process will culminate when we are completely composed of spirit and God's law will be our first nature, not just second nature. But the process has already started with us—incrementally—as God incrementally displaces in our embryo stage, in our fetus stage, the carnality and sin, replacing them with God's Holy Spirit, leading to godly righteous behavior.

Conversion is a lifelong process in which we move from a reactive approach to law-keeping (an approach motivated by rewards and punishments) to a proactive approach (motivated by a deeply placed inner desire to yield to the law's principles, knowing intrinsically from experience that they work for our good and the harmony of all creation).

Actually, I don't know anyone anywhere who is truly converted, but I know many people who are in various stages of converting.

### Contrasting motivation

Alfie Kohn has written a book called *Punished By Rewards* in which he questions the long-term effects of external motivators such as grades, financial incentives, gold stars or tokens to sustain learning behavior. Dr. Kohn supplies some surprising evidence that carrots and sticks—"Do this and you'll get that"—become detrimental in the long run, diverting the focus away from the learning outcome onto the reward or punishment.

Dr. Kohn, Dr. Jerome Bruner and a host of other educators suggest that internal motivators such as satisfying curiosity, imitating role models and attaining competency work better to motivate over the long term than do GPAs, scholarships, grants and other external incentives.

I think one of the supreme tragedies in the world of music occurred when the government of Finland supplied a guaranteed pension and large mansion in the woods near Jarvenpaa to composer Jean Sibelius. After his guaranteed pension, *not one* musical idea, not one note, emanated from his pen.

Likewise with us, our spiritual growth and maturity will become stunted if our motivation for righteous behavior is externally demonstrated rather than internally determined.

Unless the motivation for doing right comes from the inside out, we are no more converted than a donkey. I take that back. At least a donkey behaves as a donkey is programmed to act.

### **Embracing God's law**

Proactively obeying the law means embracing it in the spirit of Psalm 119:97: "Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all through the day."

Taking the law into our nervous systems applies it to myriads of situations. Proactively obeying the law means knowing how to use it wisely in contingencies when there is no clear-cut either-or behavior.

In Psalm 119:11 we read: "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." The more God's law can be learned by heart, the more it becomes a permanent part of us, and the less inclination we'll have to sin.

Several analogies from music may add insight. A mutual friend of Jack Bularowski and me (David Hoover, who once conducted the Glendale College Band) used to insist that the music is not the notes on staff paper, but what we do with it once it has been processed through our nervous systems.

I had a dance band up in Duluth called the Norshore Four. One of its members couldn't read music but could play by ear fabulously. One member could play by note flawlessly but couldn't improvise his way out of a paper bag. I learned to look upon both of these deficits with equal frustration—somewhat like too much law or too much grace.

Not being able to depart from the written notes may be detrimental at times, if a note violates a law of harmony and resulted from a mistake in transcription, as is sometimes the case with the *kappelmeister's* transcriptions in the Ulmer Band (at least that's the excuse I've used up until now).

One time, as I was playing a clarinet in the Mankato Symphony Orchestra, the Director stopped the music and glared at me. I defensively said, "Dr. Scheuer, I'm playing it exactly as it is written."

Dr. Scheuer replied, "But it's not music!"

The notes violated the musical laws of harmony and consonance. This incident brought home Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 3:6: The letter kills but the spirit gives life.

I have since learned that arrangers take liberties with the scores of composers, especially if they are converting operatic scores or symphonic scores to piano solos. But they do not ever feel at liberty to violate the laws of music: the principles of harmony, rhythm and tonality.

I learned that the composer Serge Rachmaninoff (Rhapsody on a theme of Paganini Prelude in C-sharp minor) never played his own compositions the same way twice. He would often use chord inversions (first, second or third inversions) that would create similar but not necessarily identical structures.

The laws of music allow some flexibility and latitude, but you have to know them to explore those flexibilities and latitudes. Spike Jones, Victor Borge and P.D.Q. Bach have proved that you have to know the musical laws to break them knowledgeably.

### **Assimilate instruction**

Proactively keeping the law implies a flexibility that comes from thoroughly knowing a subject. In 1989 I had lunch with Thomas Jefferson, actually a Thomas Jefferson impersonator by the name of Clay Jenkinson who lived up in Colorado.

He had studied Jefferson's letters and official writings so thoroughly that he could make inferences about Jefferson's behavior if he were still alive.

I have met people who have made careers imitating the lives of others, including Abraham Lincoln, Henry David Thoreau and John Wesley. My former boss, Danny Smith, used to get into costume every Saturday night to do his Mark Twain shtick up in Jefferson, Texas. It took many years of assimilating Twain before Danny felt comfortable portraying him.

I knew a history professor at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minn., the late Dr. Reusch, who mastered the contents of the Koran so thoroughly that he traversed the inner Islam holy place of Mecca without fear of detection of his non-Islam background.

Proactively keeping the law means that as we mature we assimilate our parents' instructions into the core of our nervous system. In the pop psychology book *I'm OK, You're OK*, one central thesis was that as we grow into adulthood we assimilate the parental data we had accumulated from Mom and Dad, minister, teacher and other parent figures. We in effect have to eventually parent ourselves.

Much of our spiritual maturity comes from assimilating the example Christ set for us. In 1 Timothy 2:21 we learn that Christ left us an example that we should follow in His footsteps; that is, not only believe that He exists but do what He does.

## Servant to son

Proactively keeping the law means we move from the position of a hired hand to that of a trusted family member. The Saturn Corp. embarked on a program of involving the employees in the planning of policy-making including a code of ethics. This approach inspires collectively and individually. Employees can feel they have a stake in the well-being of the company.

Jesus evidently felt the disciples needed the same kind of collegiality when He said in John 15:15, "No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you My friends for all things that I heard from My Father, I have made known to you."

When we are insiders we have vested interest in God's plan. As a member of the God family, we make it our plan.

We have a saying in Texas: When the preacher cusses, when the English teacher uses bad grammar, the point they emphasize is probably important.

To reiterate the words of Dave Hoover, it ain't music until the notes get from the paper into our heads.

## Leads to peace

We are not really converted until the law moves from the pages of the Bible into our deeds, until the motivation moves from external to internal, prompted by God's Spirit, which some people describe as God's law in action. This does not occur easily.

The Yiddish proverb teaches us, "*Nit azoy gik maxt zic vi es traxt zic*: Things are not as quickly achieved as conceived.

Knowing God's Law proactively backwards, forwards, sideways, upwards, downwards, first inversion, second inversion, augmented, diminished, major, minor and key of C, G, F, B-flat will insure inner peace.

Psalm 119:165 assures us, "Great peace have they who love your law—nothing can make them stumble."