

June 16, 2013
4th Sunday after Pentecost
Dr. Stephen C. Brewer

“Unknown Footsteps”

1 Kings 21:1-10

Galatians 2:15-21

Luke 7:36-8:3

The “Hawthorne Effect” was named after an experiment done in 1927 among workers in the Hawthorne Works Factory of Western Electric Company. Up until this experiment, it was thought that it was primarily wages and working conditions that had direct bearing on work performance and output. This experiment proved that increasing the lighting improved work performance. The business world responded with one voice, “We need better lighting!” which was logically correct, but experimentally inaccurate. It turned out, you see, that *decreasing* the lighting also improved performance! What really made the difference was not the quality of lighting, but the *change* in lighting – or perhaps receiving the individual attention that resulted from making the changes. Sometimes we just need a new perspective on things.

Paul was both making changes and offering personal attention in the community of faith. But not all agreed with his methods. The law was the center of controversy. Some in the early church wanted to concentrate on the law – taking comfort in obeying all the nuances of the Torah. Others wanted to change the law, or even ignore it. This focus on the law was understandable for those who had their foundation in Judaism, where the Torah is the centerpiece of daily life among the faithful. But Paul knew that there was such a thing as too much reliance upon the law, especially in matters of faith. What Paul was most concerned about was living as God would have us live, and he understood that this happens through serving Christ. Paul called what he saw as right relationship with God “justification.”

Paul was sure that obedience to the law alone does not insure right relationship. He believed that only one thing could do that—faith in Jesus Christ, and responding to that faith with complete trust, which would naturally be expressed in the way we live our lives.

This may seem so obvious to you that wonder why it even needs mentioning. But the fact is, much of the world, including those who claim Christianity, hold that *correct belief* saves us. Ironically, adhering to approved church doctrine is very much like the dependence on obeying the law; when we place it before God’s love in importance, we have a strange kind of “pious idolatry.” We might say doctrine-centered Christianity is the new legalism; the very thing Paul was warning the Early Church against.

What does the law do? Well what about some applications close to home. Some of us can identify with the following examples of 21st century legalism.

How do teen-aged children respond when parents “clamp down,” or institute a new set of rules?

In our house the bottom of the ironing board is a ceremonious place. Whenever anyone in our family says something significant -- with lifelong implications -- it gets written on the bottom of the ironing board, for posterity. Among other words of wisdom are these, spoken by one who was a teen-ager at the time: “I will never tell my children to obey me ‘just because I said so.’”

Young people often will obey rules which adults impose upon them. This usually makes life easier for the adults, and maybe even for the young people. But what does the imposition of arbitrary rules do to the relationship between the rule-makers and the ones on whom the rules are

imposed? Seldom does it bring people closer together in love. What function does the law have for us, as people of faith?

Paul believed that keeping the laws of God, or of our city, state, or household -- is simply a sort of default moral obligation: it's the *least* a person can do. The law – or belief in so-called “correct doctrine” does not refine us or make us better people; it merely serves as a fence, to show us where we have gone outside the boundaries of what is acceptable. It is an emergency action -- like marshal law – intended to prevent catastrophe in times of great danger, or when the people being protected are not able to understand or deal with reality; as an adult would deal with a small child.

The amazing thing we learn about God through Christ is that God no longer wants to treat us as if we were a mob unable to reason, or as if we were babies; God wants a different kind of relationship with us which merely living under the law cannot provide.

But if faith in Christ is what brings us closer to God, how does that faith express itself?

Toward the end of the 19th century, Charles Sheldon, pastor of an average church in an average community, decided he needed to do something to perk up his Sunday evening services. Sheldon began preaching a kind of serial sermon, in which he told stories about average men and women and the kinds of situations and challenges they might find themselves facing in their ordinary lives.

The question Sheldon put on the lips of his fictional sermonic characters—and the question he posed to his own parishioners—was this: “What would Jesus do” in these same circumstances? This serial sermon or spiritual soap opera hit just the right note with his people. They were curious enough about the next “installment” to return week after week after week. They were so challenged by Sheldon’s urging them to consider what Jesus would do if he were faced with the same issues as they, that a revival of sorts broke out in his church. It spread to the rest of the nation through the publication of *In His Steps*, the second best-selling “religious” book in all of American history. Only the Bible itself beats it out.

Since its publication over a century ago, *In His Steps* has become a kind of Christian mantra for the faithful. But a curious thing has happened; what started out as a new and challenging road has gradually become a kind of safe, well-traveled path.

For many Christians, claiming to be following “in Jesus’ steps” has become a substitute for forging ahead into unknown territories, for taking faith into places where the church has not yet moved.

This was Paul’s warning to the Galatians in this week’s epistle reading. Like Peter in Antioch, we are all constantly tempted to reinstate a simple, written down, black-and-white law which can only stifle and stagnate a living, breathing, growing and changing faith.

These days it is not falling back on the Mosaic Law that we find appealing and reassuring. What we might call our “new legalism” has grown a bit more subtle. It is the temptation to make Jesus’ footsteps themselves our new “law”—to base every action we take literally on those few paths we know Jesus walked as described in the gospels – and to venture no further.

This was also part of Paul’s problem with Peter. Already in Paul’s day, there were situations arising that lay outside the scope of Jesus’ earthly walk. The whole issue of the mission to the Gentiles is a prime example. Peter wanted to play it safe—follow only in the known footprints of Jesus—whom he knew as a circumcised, Torah-loving Jew, as well as his Savior and Messiah.

Paul preached that it must be the spirit of the risen Lord within the heart that must direct our steps and shape our attitudes. Peter had made the earthly footsteps of Jesus the new law. And so following “in his steps” had become an act of law, not an act of living faith.

Back in the last millenium, in the 1970s, a gasoline shortage was at its height. Gas prices had increased to the horrifying level of \$2 per gallon! Any possible proposal for increasing the miles-per-gallon ratio was taken up with enthusiasm.

One popular, but not terribly effective, scheme was to tuck your own car right up behind any large truck barreling down the highway. The conventional wisdom was that the tremendous draft created by the truck would help “drag” your own vehicle along—reducing the air friction on it and thus increasing your own gas mileage. Following in the wake of the truck took some of the effort to move forward off of your own car. (Don’t try this at home, kids!)

For many Christians, following “in Jesus’ steps” has become its own kind of spiritual coasting, riding in the wake of Jesus’ own first-century actions and reactions in order to relieve some of the responsibility for making our own 21st- century responses. We are not called to follow in Jesus’ wake.

Perhaps Paul’s greatest genius was in knowing that only a living Christ of faith could address the challenges that faced the first-century church. How much more so is that true for the 21st-century church! Even if we wanted to, we could not find Jesus’ exact footsteps from a distance of two thousand years. And perhaps that is the way it should be. But what we can do—as have people of faith in every generation since the church’s birth—is to live so thoroughly in Christ, to have Christ within so completely, that our own footsteps become Christ’s new walk in this world.

Grace, mercy and peace. Amen.