

There was an interesting theological exchange on ESPN’s “Sports Center” a few weeks ago. Lou Holtz, the former Notre Dame football coach and commentator Mark May probably didn’t realize that they were having a theological debate, but their exchanges speaks right to the heart of the gospel reading for this morning. Holtz and May were discussing South Carolina’s last minute loss to Kentucky. South Carolina was only trailing by 3 points when their quarterback threw a game ending interception. Here’s the conversation:

May: You're Steve Spurrier, (South Carolina coach) you're on the road in a hostile environment. They called a timeout before the play. You tell your quarterback there are two things you cannot do.

Holtz: No! No! **May:** (1) fumble the ball, (2) throw an interception.

Holtz: No! No! **May:** You have the field goal try in the bag. What does he do - he underthrows the fade and throws an interception. You can't turn the ball over.

Holtz: No! No! **May:** Turn the ball over you lose. What does he do? Turns the ball over - they lose.

Holtz: You don't ever say "Don't do this!" Because it will happen every time! We're playing Penn State. We've got the ball on the 3 yard line. I say to Jeff Graham: "I've got three points on the board. Don't take them off. Don't throw an interception." Guess what happens. Boom! He throws the interception! You don't say don't do this.

Host John Saunders: It's like standing on the [golf] tee and saying, don't hit it in the water. It happens every time.

The exchange is theological because it speaks to the effect of the Law on the human heart. The Law is God’s command, either in Thou Shall or a Thou Shall Not form. The Law is good and is intended for our human happiness. If we followed and obeyed the 10 commandments, there would be no war, no poverty, no relational strife, no global wreckage. The Law is good.

The problem is not with the Law, which is good. The problem is with the human heart, which is not good. Our reaction to the Law is the problem. We do not obey the Law, either because we cannot or because we simply do not want to. Often the Law produces the opposite effect. As in Lou Holtz saying “I say don’t throw an interception and Boom! He throws the interception!”

So in order to live in obedience to God’s law, we need something more than the Law. We need Grace. We see a perfect example of the result of grace in the story of Zacchaeus, “the wee little man and a wee little man was he, who climbed up in the sycamore tree for the Lord he wanted to see. “

I’ll get to the wee little man and we’ll see the Lord in a second, but first I want to say something about Law and Grace as it relates to preaching. Both Dave Johnson and Dave Zahl and I sometimes get comments about the preaching we do here at Christ Church. Sometimes I hear that we focus too much on the grace of God. Some wonder if the

preaching of grace leads to people believing that they can do whatever they want to do, since God will forgive them anyway. The theological term for this is “antinomianism” – or “against the law.” People say, “enough grace already!” We’ve got to “lay down the law”, especially with our children so they will behave.

The first thing to say is that I can, like everyone else, relate to that emotion, especially when my children don’t do what I ask them to do. Any time you are powerless, you fall back on the law – you try to use force. You run out of patience and you say, “OK – it’s just time to git ‘er done, or else. Time for some tough love. We’ve just gone too far with this love and grace thing.”

I love the new Geico commercial that asks “Would a former marine drill sergeant make a terrible psychotherapist?” A wimpy fellow is lying on a couch and says, “That’s why yellow makes me sad I think.” Sitting on a chair is a rugged, bald former drill sergeant who responds, “That’s interesting. You know what makes me sad? YOU DO! MAYBE WE COULD CHUG ON OVER TO NAMBY PAMBY LAND, WHERE MAYBE WE CAN FIND SOME SELF-CONFIDENCE FOR YOU, YOU JACKWAGON!

I’m embarrassed by how many times I turn into the drill sergeant, trying to rely on force or the law to accomplish the behavior or outcome I want. And sometimes our reliance on the law is comical. We got a blow dryer the other day. Rule number 7 in the instruction manual is – and I am not making this up – “*Never use Hair Dryer while sleeping*”!!!

The deeper problem, as we’ve seen, is that the Law does not really work. It does not really produce the obedience or the change in a person that we may hope for. Or worse, it works on the surface, but not in the heart. The Law may produce children who are forced to behave out of fear, but not children who want to behave out of love.

Another way to put it is that the Law does a decent job of keeping people from killing each other (although not a great job, empirically), but a lousy job of getting people to love each other. And the self-confidence you get when you are forced to march over to namby pamby land will never see you through the dark night.

Forced behavior is like putting on a Halloween Costume. It’s good for one night. It’s not even good for the whole weekend. In fact, I’m told that our college students now need 3 or 4 costumes per Halloween, because you just can’t wear the same costume to a different Halloween party. Like a costume, forced behavior in response to the Law just doesn’t go all the way down where it can effect real change; it stays on the surface like a plastic smile.

Like everyone else, we want to see people living by God’s law, for their own happiness, not to mention society’s general good. But the only way to effect obedience is through the heart. As we prayed in our collect last week, “*make us love what you command.*” Life experience and the Bible agree on this one: the only way to the heart is

through Grace. And Grace is exactly what Zacchaeus got and exactly what changed his bitter and ostracized heart. He was a tax collector; Dave reminded us in his excellent sermon last week how hated tax collectors were. But not only was he a tax collector, he was a short guy tax collector.

Everyone has heard of the short guy complex – short guys being extra aggressive to compensate for their stature. But here “short” is shorthand for anything about you that elicits judgment or ridicule from others. Could be a big nose or a waxy complexion or a flabby gluteus maximus. Could be your last name or your hometown or your failure to finish college. Whatever it is about you that makes you feel, well, small – unable to measure up. And as Randy Newman sings, “*Short people got nobody.*”

So Jesus is walking down the road and sees the short guy that nobody really wants to be with, because the short guy has climbed up into a sycamore tree. Turns out that his shortness helps him, because it forces him to get noticed. Jesus calls him by name, “Zacchaeus! Get down here! I’m coming to your house today.” This undoes the Pharisees because Jesus, the respected and religious teacher, is going to what will surely be an unruly party with unsavory characters.

But do you see how the short guy reacts? This is before Jesus comes to his house, and certainly before Jesus says anything to the tax collector about treating people with integrity and doing his job with fiscal honesty (ie. Obeying God’s Law). Zacchaeus shimmy down the sycamore and declares, “*Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything I will pay back four times as much.*” Are you kidding me? Zacchaeus has gone way way way beyond the letter of the Law (what the Law requires) and acts now with love, generosity and grace. Why? Because Jesus treated him with grace. And his heart was so moved that he couldn’t help but want to give his money away.

I had a profound experience of this love, His love recently. I had held a bitter and gnawing resentment against a person for many, many years. She made an appointment to see me, which, of course I dreaded and complained about. Then, in the coffee shop where I was trying to behave, she said something really nice to me. I felt that she actually accepted me for who I was. Then, in an instant, all the years of resentment washed entirely away. I was and am filled with love for her. She hasn’t changed; what has changed is my heart.

This is what happened to Zacchaeus. Because of it he gave away half of all he had. Jesus, because he has come to seek and save the lost, gave away all he had – his final breath, his last drop of blood. He knew, as Luther says, that the only thing we sinners contribute to our salvation is “sin and resistance.” But He loves us still. He loves you still. He seeks and saves you with the only love powerful enough to really change a heart. Amen.