

BBC Essex Reflection

Sunday

15th September 2019



Good Morning, I was at a meeting the other day as an observer, on behalf of someone else. On side were a group of people unhappy with the service they had received from a company, whose representative was present. The people wanted to express concern about the way things had happened and especially wanted reassurance that they would be listened to in the future. The company representative kept saying, “But we are only contracted to do this” and “we are keeping to what is legally required”. Whilst this was true technically, the representative had missed the point. The meeting was about the people feeling listened to then and an assurance that they would be listened to in the future, but instead all they got was a lecture on legal responsibility. The opportunity to listen and to resolve the relationship and then move towards reconciliation was lost.

There is always a tension in any relationship between law and grace, especially a commercial relationship. Sometimes we just rely on law, and have little interaction, such as when we go into a supermarket and use a self-service till. We put the goods through the till, a price is given to us and we pay it -and there is little or no human relationship needed. But in the vast majority of relationships we have to use our social skills in interacting with people- where the tone of our voice, our body language, our manner convey how much we value the other person, and how much we want to have an ongoing relationship with them in the future. If ever we need to move towards litigation in a commercial relationship, it is often a sign that the relationship has broken down and will not be re-established.

When we look at this principle in terms of our human relationships, we know how good it is when someone treats us sensitively as a responsible adult. Even if we end up disagreeing with them, we are still in relationship with them as we feel we have been listened to and treated respectfully. However, we are all too aware of those who treat us like naughty children who need to be told off, who make us feel very small. Even if such people are “In the Right” technically, there is sometimes a “wrong way of being right” in that the person has come over as overbearing, arrogant, insensitive and patronised. A writer on family matters- Dr. James Dobson has even said that Christians are more in danger of sin when they are ‘in the right’ than when they are ‘in the wrong’, because when they are ‘in the right’, they are tempted to show how morally superior they are to the person they consider ‘in the wrong’.

Jesus has a lot to say about our attitudes when we consider ourselves ‘in the right’; warning us about seeing specks but not noticing logs, rebuking someone who wanted Jesus to tell his brother off for not sharing his inheritance, rebuking the disciples for wanting to be seen as ‘the greatest’, and telling the adults, who considered themselves to be intellectually ‘in the right’ that they had to humble themselves and become like a little child. St Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 3:6 that **“the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”**, meaning that applying the legal definition of right and wrong kills relationships, but loving wisdom, especially carried out in the spirit and grace of Jesus Christ, brings life and nourishes relationships.

Christians are in the relationship business- we follow Our Lord Jesus who summarised the law as “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your heart and with all your strength, and love your neighbour as yourself.” Sometimes it is right to insist on our ‘rights’ but in my experience, far more ‘good’ is done when we think instead of our responsibility to love, and even keeping silent over our ‘rights’ for the sake of preserving a relationship with others . Learning that **‘the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life’** is a timely reminder that we all can learn from. Dare I say it, it is a lesson that our politicians today could do with hearing too!

Rev Paul Greenland.