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WHO’S THE BOSS?

1 John 3:4-10

A woman named Rhonda Mony who lives up in Lake Elsinore wrote into a Christian magazine and related a story that happened at her house. Her husband, Mark, and her pre-school daughter Krystal, were sitting on the sofa in the living room and talking. Krystal said, “Daddy, you’re the boss of the house, right?” Mark said, “Well, yes, I am the boss of the house.” Then Krystal said, “Because Mommy put you in charge, huh Daddy?”

I guess that question shed light on who was really in charge, at least from the perspective of a pre-schooler. Woody Allen said, “In my house, I’m the boss, my wife is just the decision maker.” That raises the question of who is the boss. But what I want to talk about today is not who is boss in the home, but who is boss in our lives. Who decides what we should do? It turns out the answer to that question has direct bearing on the quality of the lives we will have. The question is considered in 1 John 3:4-10.

LAWLESSNESS IS THE ISSUE

In these verses John says some things that can cause confusion and even might seem to contradict things he has already said. The Greek text that he wrote sounds even more confusing than our English translations. Here are a few parts of this passage that I refer to. Verse 6 says, “No one who lives in him (Christ) keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.” Then in verse 9 John wrote, “No one who is born of God will continue to sin.”

The problem with these verses is that the translators have introduced some interpretation of John’s actual wording that isn’t necessarily what John intended. Literally, the most straightforward translation of verse 6 says, “No one who lives in him sins. No one who sins has either seen him or known him.” Verse 9 says, “No one who is born of God sins.” When I learned Greek, the first book of the Bible I translated was 1 John. When I came to this passage, I translated it the way I just mentioned because that is the normal way to read it. That is basically how the old King James took it. The Christian Standard version says, “Everyone who remains in Christ does not sin.” Well that’s a problem because it sounds like John is saying if we know God, if we live in Christ, we won’t sin. But in the first chapter John said that a person who says he has no sin is a liar and is calling God a liar, because God says we do sin.

This is a problem for me personally, because as much as I wish it were not so, I know I sin. These verses seem to set up a condemning logic. Every human being sins. But those who sin do not know God. Therefore, no human beings know God. But that hardly seems like something John meant to say.

The translators tried to solve this problem by picking up on the fact that John used present tense verbs when he wrote about sinning. The Greek present tense could be translated “keeps on sinning” or “continues to sin” as we see in our translation. Other translations have it “practices sin.” My problem is that’s not the way one would normally translate these words, and it feels like this is grasping at straws, coming up with a grammatical fine point to make the translation fit our theology. It is not good practice to determine how you will translate something based on your existing theology. I think we can better resolve this dilemma by remembering the historical context and paying careful attention to what John actually says in the passage.

The false teaching that John was combatting claimed that what one did in this physical world was not important. Only the spiritual matters. The false teachers asserted that having their supposed superior secret knowledge was what made them right with God. While Jesus taught that how we act, the way we treat one another, was important, these people claimed it was irrelevant. They denied that God cares about any of the commands one finds in the Scripture. This allowed them to live with total disregard to God’s laws. In other words, they were lawless.

What John says in verse 4 is key to this whole passage. “Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness.” Sin is saying God’s law doesn’t rule over me. I decide what is best for me to do. I do what I want to do and no law, not even a command from God, determines what I can or can’t do. Every time we sin, every time we choose to disobey God, we are being lawless. The false teaching John was combatting said there was no such thing as lawlessness because God doesn’t give commands about what we do in the physical realm. The issue, in John’s mind, was this attitude of lawlessness.

It will help us understand what John was saying in these verses, then, if we remember that as John says in verse 4 sin is lawlessness. Sin equals lawlessness, so you can substitute lawlessness for sin. It becomes clear then when we substitute the word “lawlessness” for sin in these verses. Verse 6 then says, “No one who lives in him (Jesus) is lawless. No one who is lawless has either seen him or knows him.” Verse 9 would read, “No one who is born of God will be lawless, because God’s seed remains in them; they cannot be lawless because they have been born of God.” John was specifically referring to those opponents of Christ who lived and promoted lawlessness. That clears up how this relates to us.

There is a man who has recently been a source of problems and irritation for some members of my family. Laurie and I were talking about him recently and I told her that he thinks he’s very clever but in fact he’s not smart at all. In fact, he’s foolish. Even worse, he’s a jerk. I’m pretty mad at him. Now listen to what Jesus said in Matthew 5:22. “I tell you that anyone that is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says, ‘Raca’ (which was a word of contempt) is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.” I was angry with this guy, I said he is a jerk, an expression of contempt, and I said basically that he is a fool. Strike one, strike two, strike three. You’re out. Guilty on all counts. I have to confess, my attitude and my words were sin. But here’s the thing. I admit that it is sin, and I don’t want it. I don’t want to justify it, I certainly don’t want to ignore what Jesus says and do what I choose without regard to his command. In other words, I want to do what he says. His law rules over me. I don’t excuse my sin and just keep living in it. That means that while at times I do sin, I am not lawless. I acknowledge that God’s commands should rule in my life and I want to obey them, even if I don’t always do it perfectly, or even approximately.

No one who is born of God is lawless. If we are born of God we have his Spirit within us. His Spirit does give us a new heart, one that wants to do what God commands us. Ezekiel 36:26-27 says that explicitly. It is not possible to be born of God and be lawless. We may fail, but we won’t want to fail. We won’t live in rebellion against God.

Lawlessness is prevalent today, especially in our culture. A uniquely American trait is represented by that familiar flag from the time of the American Revolution that depicts a coiled snake and bears the legend, “Don’t tread on me.” You try to rule me and I’ll strike back. That is a natural human trait, but our culture has elevated it to iconic status. It is practically an art form here.

Rock and roll music had its birth in our culture. It is interesting at its core is angry. In fact, the essence of rock and roll is rebellion. It is rebellion against anyone telling me what I should do or be. Do you see what that is? It is lawlessness. As I said, though it is widespread in our culture, it is not unique to us. British musician Sir Elton John, a rock and roller, said in a magazine interview, “I’ve got enough money, don’t have to follow any rules, don’t have to be in the office from nine to five and take the kids to school in the morning. It is simply a fantastic life when you don’t have any parameters. It’s brilliant.”

Do you hear what he is saying? The fantastic life is the life where you don’t have to follow any rules, where you have no parameters, in other words, no limits. You do whatever you want, whatever you feel like, no one tells you what to do because you don’t have to obey anybody. You have nothing constraining you in any way. That appeals to something in the fallen human heart. I don’t want anyone telling me what to do, limiting my freedom in any way. That is a pretty good picture of lawlessness.

Writer Philip Yancey related a story of a friend of his named Susan. She was married, but had decided her husband was unsatisfactory and was actively and openly looking for other men to meet her desires for intimacy. Yet she insisted she spends an hour every day with God, the Heavenly Father. Yancey says he asked as gently as possible, “In your meetings with the Father, do any moral issues come up that might influence this pending decision about leaving your husband?” She bristled, and said, “That sounds like the response of a white Anglo Saxon male. The Father and I are into relationship, not morality. Relationship means being wholly supportive and standing alongside me, not judging.” Those words put Susan right in the camp with the antichrists that John was arguing against. God doesn’t care about things like morality. He only cares that I have spiritual knowledge. It also reveals an unbending lawlessness in that woman. She wanted no one telling her what is right or wrong, not even God. She is lawless. This shows, according to John, that she is not “born of God.”

A few weeks ago our granddaughters spent the night at our house. They had a very active day and as we neared bed time Ella, though she insisted it was not true, was experiencing near terminal exhaustion. As a result she was not in the best of moods. At one point when I told her not to do something she said, “Yapaw, you’re not the boss of me.” Laurie quickly corrected that misconception for her. But that experience made think about the fact that we all deal with the question of who is the boss of me. The human default and desire is I am the boss of me. No one else is the boss of me. The biblical claim is God is the boss of me, and what he says should rule even over my own desires, opinions and choices. Who decides about my priorities, my treatment of others, my marriage, my sexuality, the use of my money? Is it God, or me? The Bible says it should be God. If we reject that truth in favor of “I am the boss of me, nobody tells me what to do,” we are putting ourselves in the lawless category, and that is evidence we do not know God.

LAWLESSNESS IS A DESTRUCTIVE LIE

Lawlessness feels good to us. Elton John’s description of his life sounds ideal to us. I don’t have to obey any rules, don’t have to listen to anybody, don’t have anyone or anything limiting my freedom to do what I please. That sounds like real freedom, and it feels to us like the life anyone would aspire to have. But the truth is that lawlessness is a devastating lie. As with so many things, so many occasions, we can go all the way back to the beginning to get the best example of this. In Eden the first humans were confronted with the question, “who is the boss of me?” God had given them a law. Don’t eat the fruit of one particular tree. Was there something evil and corrupting about that fruit? No, the fruit was just fruit. God simply gave them an easy to obey law. There was a world of trees and abundant fruit of all kinds. How hard was it to just pass on the fruit of one tree? I’m pretty sure there were other trees with the same fruit. Don’t eat the figs from this one tree. The figs from all the others were fine. They weren’t being deprived of anything. So that “law” should have been no problem at all to follow. The question was would they obey it, or would they be lawless, rebel against God and choose their own way? That second option seemed to them to offer the possibility of true freedom. Throw off the bonds of authority, don’t let him be the boss of you. Don’t let anyone tell you what you can do. They chose lawlessness. Did it bring freedom? Did it bring life? No, it brought just the opposite. It resulted in death. I can assure you that in very short order they deeply regretted their choice and knew they had made a terrible bargain. That is always what happens when one chooses lawlessness.

Let’s think about what lawlessness produces. Suppose you go to see a dentist. After an unpleasant session the dentist tells you that you have had very poor dental hygiene. It is clear you have not been brushing and flossing regularly and you have not had regular visits. One result of this is that x-rays show you have cavities in 3 teeth that need to be filled. He instructs you on brushing and flossing regularly, tells you to cut back on foods and drinks loaded with sugar, and instructs you to make appointments to have those cavities filled. But you are lawless. You go away saying, “That dentist is not the boss of me. He’s trying to limit my freedom and control my behavior. He’s trying to make me do things I don’t want to do. I hate flossing, I want no part of him drilling on my teeth and I will eat and drink whatever I please.” What will that do? Well, it will have an immediate reward, because it will save you from some unpleasantness, to be sure, because episodes in the dental chair are typically no one’s idea of a good time. And for most of us flossing is not something we look forward to all day. It will save you some time and money, and it will give you the enjoyment of eating and drinking all the things you love. In the short run it seems like that is the path to glorious freedom and happiness. Unfortunately, it will also mean that your gums will become diseased, your teeth will rot and some will either fall out or have to be pulled. In short, it may feel like you get a pleasant reward in the near term, but in the long haul it will be an utter disaster.

That’s pretty much how lawlessness goes. Think about sports. I love sports. In order to play a sport and enjoy it, you have to allow your freedom to be limited. You have to play by the rules. You have to let someone be the boss of you. I think it interesting when I watch an NFL game on TV to see a referee, who may be in great shape, but is much smaller and often older than the players, telling the players how things are going to be. It’s interesting to see a 45 year old, 5 foot 10 inch, 180 pound man, telling a 6 foot 5 inch, 280 pound behemoth defensive end that he just committed roughing the passer because he hit the QB in the helmet when he sacked him, and that’s going to cost his team 15 yards and a first down. What if that monster of a human being jumps up and screams, “You’re not the boss of me,” and refuses to let the referee march off the penalty yardage? Well, he’s going to get another 15 yards tacked on for unsportsmanlike conduct, and if he persists, he’s going to get thrown out of the game.

In the end one can only enjoy playing a sport by refusing to be lawless. I was reminded of the problem of lawlessness recently when I watched a World Series game. The announcers began talking about the 2017 World Series in which the Houston Astros defeated the Los Angeles Dodgers, in part by being lawless. They did not obey the rules of the game. They cheated. They appeared to get away with it. One might say they did, because they won that championship. But in fact, I guarantee you that those players now regret what they did. When the facts came out, their manager and their general manager were fired, and all of their accomplishments were tarnished. All those players are viewed with skepticism and scorn, and if there are ever fans back in stadiums, they will be routinely booed. Their “championship” is not celebrated by anyone. Yes, lawlessness seemed to reward them in the short term, but in the long haul it has, as is always true, turned out to be a disaster.

Here’s one more example. You might remember the name of Timothy McVeigh. McVeigh was the perpetrator of the worst domestic terror attack ever to occur in our country. He attacked the federal building in Oklahoma City with a bomb, killing 168 people and injuring more than 600. It was a horrifying, despicable act. For his actions he was tried, convicted, sentenced to death and executed by lethal injection. He didn’t have any last words to say, but he did write a final statement. In it he quoted a poem that was kind of his inspiration. The poem was *Invictus*, by English poet William Ernest Henley. McVeigh quoted, “It matters not how straight the gate, how charged with punishments the scrolls, I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul.” That could be the theme song for lawlessness. I decide, I am the master, the captain of my soul, no one is the boss of me, no one tells me what to do. How did that turn out for McVeigh? It produced horror and death. There was immense tragedy and sorrow for so many innocent families. And as for McVeigh, he ended up despised, reviled, and put to death as an enemy of humanity. Yes, he was the master of his fate, and what an awful fate it was. Lawlessness produced horror and death. That’s what it always does in the end.

CHRIST CAME TO DESTROY THE DEVIL’S WORK

Verse 8 says, “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work.” What is the devil’s work? In short, it is to promote lawlessness. His motto is “No one is the boss of me.” It occurred to me that one of the great popular singers of the 20th century, Frank Sinatra, old blue eyes, was probably best known for two songs. One was *New York, New York*. “Start spreading the news, I’m leaving today.” But the other, maybe even more iconic, was *My Way*. In it he sang that the end was near, he faced the final curtain, and when he summed up his life this is its theme, “I did it my way.” Have you ever thought about how utterly stupid that message is? Let’s imagine a person who has an electrical problem in his house and he decides that he can fix it himself. He’s sure he is intelligent enough and is good with solving problems. So he goes to work and thinks he has fixed the problem. He is proud of his work. But it turns out he did it wrong, with the result that it shorts out, starts a fire, and his house burns to the ground. Does he stand there looking at the sad remains of his house, now just a pile of smoking ashes, and say, “Well, this could have turned out better, but what matters is, I did it my way”? If he does, he’s an utter fool. Isn’t what matters that we do it the right way, not that we do it our way, and that we don’t burn down the house? Satan loves that song. He uses its message to absolutely destroy lives.

Satan seeks above all else to tear human beings away from God. And one of his primary tools is to promote “do it your way, not God’s way.” He is the origin of the idea that no one, especially God, is the boss of me. He is the one who says, “I choose, I decide, not God.” That is the line that he sold to the first humans and he has never stopped selling that toxic trash.

As we have seen, that premise is guaranteed to produce horror, loss, sorrow and death. So Jesus came to destroy that work. How did he do that? John 12 occurred the day before Jesus would be arrested and eventually executed. In verse 31 Jesus said, “Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out.” He said what was about to happen would defeat Satan and his work. But what was about to happen was Jesus was killed. How did that help?

In Colossians 2:13-15 Paul wrote, “When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive in Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled out the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” The powers and authorities he refers to are Satan and his fellow forces of evil. Paul said Jesus triumphed over them by the cross. He defeated them, ultimately destroying the devil’s work by dying on that cross and rising from the dead.

Satan’s work is to separate us from God. But the cross defeats that work by reconnecting us to God. Notice that the point of the passage in Colossians tells us Christ’s death on the cross takes away that which convicts and condemns us before God, our guilt. It brings us forgiveness. Notice that in 1 John 3 there is a similar statement. In verse 5 John said that Christ “appeared so that he might take away our sin.” Then in verse 8 he said, “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work.” So twice he tells us the reason Christ came into the world. It is one reason, but it sounds like two different things. Once it was to take away the sin of the world, and once it was to defeat the devil’s work. That sounds like two things, but John said they were both the reason Jesus came. He’s equating them. In other words, they are the same thing. He defeated the devil’s work by forgiving our sin. The devil had succeeded in separating us from God, Jesus took the thing that separates us from God out of the way, thus reconnecting us to God.

But the way that Jesus won this victory is also important in defeating Satan. Philippians 2:8 says, “being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.” In other words, he said, “The Father is the boss of me.” Instead of “I did it my way,” he sang, “I did it the Father’s way.” He humbled himself, he chose not to do what would be the normal human thing, to watch out for himself and do it his way. Instead, he chose the way of doing what the Father said even to the point of the most painful, humiliating death ever devised by human beings. The cross said NO to “my way.” It was the antithesis of it.

I mentioned the person who has caused problems for members of my family and who has provoked some real antipathy in me. He’s not Satan, but Satan is at work in that situation. How do I destroy the work of Satan in that situation? I do it by the cross. Like Paul I say, I am crucified with Christ. I apply the cross to that situation, to my thinking about that person, and Satan will be defeated.

APPLICATION

REMEMBER THE RESULT OF LAWLESSNESS

The human default is to always lean toward lawlessness. It is to chafe under commands by someone else. We don’t want anyone to be the boss of us. That includes God. We need to remember that trait has been the cause of immeasurable suffering and death. It’s what it always produces. Yes, lawlessness might get you something in the short run, but in the bigger picture it will always end up being an explosion of thermonuclear proportions.

But we need to not only believe it, we need to remember that in the heat of battle. When there is something we strongly want to do, when there is a battle we can’t bear to lose, our tendency is to forget that truth about where lawlessness always goes. We need to keep it in our consciousness and acknowledge the disaster it will be if we give in to the temptation to be the lawless one.

SING A NEW THEME SONG

The natural human desire is to have as our theme song, “I did it my way.” We think there’s something admirable and free in being strong in doing it our way. But we need to ask if what Adam and Eve did was admirable. It was not. Did it free them? It absolutely did not. It was foolish and it was deadly. It will be the same for us.

So we need a new theme song for our lives. I believe the song we need to be singing is “I do it God’s way.” Wouldn’t it be awesome if when as the song said, we face the final curtain, we could sum up our lives by singing, “I did it God’s way.” Who is the boss of me? It is God. I am not the captain of my soul, God is, for that is the only way to find life. So our job, the path to life, is to salute the Captain and say, “Aye, aye, Sir.”

GO FOR THE WIN

Do you want to have victory in life or do you want to be defeated? I have never been very fond of losing. I don’t know many who are. But we need to ask how we win in life. In the end, life will come down to either being defeated by Satan or beating him in a glorious victory. But how do we defeat him? We do it the same way Jesus did. We do it by the cross. Galatians 2:20 says, “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” He’s the Boss.

I want to tell you a story about my maternal grandfather. His name was Eugene Wood, and he was a pastor. You are probably thinking, “Oh, so being a pastor is like your family business.” In a sense I guess that’s true. But the truth is that my mom’s father died when I was a boy. He really didn’t play much of a role in my life, I have almost no memories of him. I certainly don’t recall ever being much aware that he was a pastor when I knew him. He has almost no direct role in my life. I absolutely never desired to be like him or follow in his steps. But indirectly he has had an effect. He served in a denomination where pastors were assigned to churches by the denomination officials. They went where they were sent, but the pastors were up for re-election every year. Each year the congregation would vote on whether the pastor should stay another year or be traded in for a newer model. My grandfather was by all reports, a godly, humble, gentle and faithful man with a true pastor’s heart. But he was not especially dynamic. He wasn’t a charismatic leader nor was he a terrific speaker. That meant that in too many cases when the vote was taken after a year, he was sent packing. At one point he was assigned by the denomination to a church in Texas. The church had gone through an ugly split. The larger group of the congregation left and started a new church. Grandpa was sent to the wounded small remnant church. It was not an enviable or desirable assignment. He began working to reconcile the broken relationships between people in the two groups. It was not easy. At one point he visited a prominent member of the large splinter group. The man threatened to kill him with a butcher’s knife. But he did not give up. He kept caring for people, trying to build bridges. Amazingly in the course of a year he was able to accomplish the seemingly impossible. Despite a lot of hostility and opposition, he was able to break down walls, bring about true reconciliation. Relationships were healed and restored, and the two churches came back together as one. To thank him for his godly courage and his perseverance in accomplishing this miracle, the church voted him out. Because of this kind of thing his family was often uprooted, having to move to yet another church in yet another town. His son, my Uncle Merle, went to 3 different high schools in 4 years. All three of my grandfather’s children grew up wounded and resentful of the church. All of them had significant issues with God, because they had seen up close and personal what his people were like, and they wanted no part of it. Amazingly, all of them eventually ended up as faithful followers of Jesus, all deeply involved in the ministry of the church. It took years for that to happen, for some healing to occur, but it did happen. And there was one main reason. They had seen their father’s example. He lived by the cross of Jesus Christ. He never did it his way. He was humble, he was never bitter, he was never ugly, he never joined those in the church who were doing Satan’s work. He stayed faithful, godly and good through it all. He let the Spirit of Jesus rule in his life no matter what others did. Yes, he appeared to lose many times. But in the end, he defeated the work of Satan by the way of the cross.

Francois Fenelon wrote, “Everything in you that is not already part of the kingdom of God needs the cross.” In our personal choices and lives, in our marriages, in our families, in our neighborhood, in all our interactions, we will have the chance to either be lawless or to live by the cross of Christ. It is only when we live by the cross, applying it to everything we are and do, that we win.