

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Jul 27th 2013

The Hebrews cry out “We will do everything that the Lord has told us.” “All that the Lord has said, we will heed and do.” Good intentions – and yet we know that much of the Old Testament narrative is the constant recitation of the times when the Hebrews failed to do everything, and as a result suffered greatly and often at the hands of their enemies. Their theological understanding was that they had sinned (for not doing everything they agreed to do) and thus were punished by their enemies, who were an instrument of a retributive and judgmental God.

Jesus tells of a farmer who takes a practical solution to a vexatious problem – how to deal with (what we would call today) sabotage from an enemy? The field workers recognize that harm could come from addressing this situation, and that it is not their responsibility, but that of the farmer, to decide what to do. The farmer realizes that trying to fix the problem at the wrong time could do more harm than good – better to wait until the right time and then separate the good from the bad.

In US income tax law there are provisions that allow organizations to receive tax-exempt status.

Broadly speaking, tax exemption is based on having good intentions (i.e., an expression of the public good that the organization will do and that it won't engage in inappropriate activities) and then having good actions that are consistent with the intentions (activities that fulfill the exempt purpose and which avoid prohibited areas, such as engaging in political campaigns). The IRS is the first arbiter of whether an organization has properly stated good intentions and has demonstrated adherence to its purpose through good actions. Problem organizations consistently fall short not in failing to articulate good intentions, but in failing to live up to those intentions by engaging in good actions, i.e., engaging in bad actions.

What lessons can I take from juxtaposing these readings and thinking of the practical example of tax-exempt organizations as well as scripture (hey, I AM a tax guy after all!)? They seem pretty obvious:

Most/all of us can and do make statements of good intentions, but, like the Hebrews, we fall short and fail to “do everything the Lord has told us.”

Our failure to match our actions with our good intentions can have some serious consequences.

Trying to solve the problem at the wrong time can do more harm than good.

We need to acquiesce to the right person to make the call, and let that person make the decision about consequences.

I control what I do, and whether my actions match my intentions. Tax-exempt organizations control what they do, and whether their actions match their good intentions. Tax-exempt organizations don't get on the wrong side of things with the IRS if they have good actions to go with their good intentions. And I won't get on the wrong side with God if my actions are consistent with my intentions.

Easy to say, but hard to implement. Every day we each have decision points about actions that can pull us away from our good intentions, some obviously and some in such subtle ways that we easily fail to perceive the direction we are heading. We have natural times when we are called to consider our good intentions, such as Lent, Advent, New Year's, etc., but we don't have periodic times when we assess whether our actions are consistent with those intentions. In the ideal setting, the Sacrament of Reconciliation would call us to do so, and the Daily Examen of Ignatian Spirituality also would evaluate what we are doing. But it is harder to do these assessments than it is to make well-intentioned resolutions to ". . . do everything that the Lord has told us."

And so my prayer today is for the strength to make regular, honest assessments of my actions so I can better align them with my good intentions to heed what the Lord has called me to do.

Tom Purcell