

They say, “All things are lawful for me.”

That’s one explanation for the quotation marks at the beginning of today’s reading from Paul’s letter to Corinth, that he’s quoting the ubiquitous “they.” You know . . . they . . . everybody. As in “everybody says it.”

Another is that he is quoting himself, from something he said in a previous speech or sermon.

Another is that he is refuting something the Corinthian Christians themselves have said.

Yet another explanation—and each of these is held by one biblical scholar or group or another—is that there is no explanation for the quotation marks. This one holds that some early translator or scribe merely thought they should be there and placed them there and they’ve been in most translations since that undetermined moment.

It’s safe to say that nobody knows definitively why the quotation marks are present. There are no punctuation marks in Koiné Greek, the language of the earliest New Testament manuscripts.

Neither are there capital letters nor period, and so on. It makes one appreciate the work of Bible translators from the earliest times until now. It's true that context and construction can sometimes clearly indicate the need for quotation marks, for example, but this is not one of them.

Okay, in the way I print out my sermons, it's taken me a page to say, "Oh, the quotation marks in that second reading caught my eye this time around." So I did some poking around, and that's what you've just suffered through. Each of the arguments appeals to me in a certain way, but in terms of Paul's essential point here, we don't need to know which is the best theory.

Jesus himself was the source for the sentiment. On various occasions he was confronted by the Pharisees, the original law-and-order types, for his failure to conform himself to the extant 613 laws, or mitzvot, in the Torah. He healed on the Sabbath! He ate with publicans! His disciples failed to wash their hands according to purity rituals before eating! He and they plucked grain to eat on the Sabbath!

Two of Jesus' most pertinent pronouncements on legality versus morality are "Love God with all your being and your neighbor as yourself; everything else depends on this, all the

commandments hand on these two.” And, a bit more expansively, the parable of the good Samaritan.

Yes, he also said that he had not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. There is really no disconnect here. Fulfillment of the law means acting on it according to the love of God for us, and our love for God and our neighbor.

When there is a conflict between legalism and love, Jesus repeatedly shows us that we are to follow the law of love. God’s love has come to us through grace, not through our ability to follow the letter of the law, because, as those same Pharisees demonstrated again and again, we will find ways to use the law to abrogate the responsibilities dictated by true love.

It’s not enough for us followers of Jesus to look up the action we’re contemplating to see whether it appears on the “to do” or “not to do” list. We are enjoined to consider what is the most loving action to take in the many events that assail us in life.

The responsibility placed on us by love of God and neighbor is the very point of our passage from First Corinthians.

I’ve pretty well skirted much commentary on the events in our capitol a week and a half ago, but suffice it to say for now that

whatever laws and ordinances were violated by the rioters, one thing was clearly lacking: regard for the greater good or the consequences for others or our nation as a whole.

True freedom, Jesus both told and showed us, means that we are loved by our Creator God more fully than we can know. More fully than we are capable of understanding the depth of that love. We are free from the obligation to earn God's love, to prove to God that we are worthy to be called God's children. Not only freed from that obligation but also entirely incapable of leading the blameless life implied in that kind of deal. That ship has sailed, that battle has been won by Christ at his crucifixion and resurrection.

And we see the concomitant difficulty here, don't we. I mean, if it's done for us, why do we need to watch what we do or say?

That difficulty or confusion, regardless of who voiced it, pretty clearly prompted Paul to say "all things may be lawful for me, but that doesn't give me license to trot out ("dominated by," to use his words) my lust for power or sex, my greed, gluttony, or anything else."

His argument and Jesus' ministry show us that our one guiding law is love. How, we are called to ask ourselves, in this

particular situation, do I show forth my love of God and neighbor, or, more pointedly: how will my actions best show God's love for all of us?

That is the Epiphany, the shining forth, we are called to live out in our time, in our place in God's world.

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