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Putting People Before Products

Matthew 12:1-21

“Rule of law” can make for an orderly society or a tyrannical one. It all depends on the rules (and who has made them) and how they are interpreted and enforced.

A chemical called *tris*, which was used in children’s pajamas as a flame retardant, was found to cause cancer. It was outlawed in the United States. However, companies making the pajamas (with tris) began exporting them to Third World countries. A law, which had been made for the good of people, was being narrowly interpreted so that it applied only to people living in the United States. The United Nations sought to make a ruling that items outlawed in a country could not be exported to another country. The United States voted against the resolution. The concern expressed was that laws that interfere with the free market should be kept to a minimum or else the right to buy, sell and own property could be curtailed or even lost.

GROUP DISCUSSION. Watch a few commercials together. Notice the motives that are being played on to sell products. Also notice the claims made about the products—both specific and implied. What is being valued? Why?

How does commercialism (the desire to sell products and make a profit) affect both the kind of laws that are made and the ways they get interpreted?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. What would you do if you worked for a company you knew was exporting harmful products to other countries? How do personal ethics intersect or inform business ethics?

Jesus constantly emphasized the value and importance of people, and his interpretation of the laws of Moses consistently demonstrates that he believed the laws were for the good of people, not arbitrary laws to demonstrate sacrificial obedience to God or religious institutions. For instance, he insisted that the Sabbath was made for people and not the other way around. As in our own culture, the culture of his time often placed more value on property than people and had interpreted the laws of God accordingly. In this passage Jesus challenges that way of thinking and proclaims the power of God to change the values of society. *Read Matthew 12:1-21.*

1. What started the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees (vv. 1-2)?

2. How did Jesus respond to the Pharisees (vv. 3-8)?

3. What does it mean to “desire mercy, not sacrifice” (v. 7)?

4. Why do our religious practices sometimes seem more important than showing mercy?

5. In verse 9 the scene changes to the synagogue. Why did the rulers ask Jesus if it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath (v. 10)?

6. What was Jesus implying by saying that any of them would rescue an animal from a pit on the Sabbath (vv. 11-12)?

How does his statement expose their values?

7. What are some ways in which our religious practices put property before people?

8. How do our business practices do the same? (Be specific about your work.)

9. Why do you think Jesus' response so angered the Pharisees (vv. 13-14)?

10. What is the message of the Isaiah passage quoted in verses 18-21?

11. How had Jesus proclaimed justice in that situation?

12. As you've worked through this study, what other ways that our society puts things before people have come to mind?

13. How can God's values reverse this trend—in our religious and business practices and in society at large?

How can we live out values that prioritize the well-being of people?