

Jewish thought generally seeks balance in its approach to the law. Christians generally understand that all of the commandments are of equal importance. The rabbis during Jesus' time "weighed" the laws so that where two laws conflict with each other, a person knew which one to follow. The command to circumcise on the eighth day took precedence over the Sabbath. (John 7:22) This "weighting" came out of an effort to live by God's laws in all situations, rather than arbitrarily ignoring some and doing others. They would describe the laws in terms of being "light" (*kal*) and "heavy" (*hamur*). Principles derived from the Bible were used to organize laws relative to each other.

One rabbinic principle is "*Pikuach Nephesh*", which is the preservation of life. The rabbis saw that Leviticus 19:16 says, "*Do not stand by while your brother's blood is shed*". That means if someone's life is in danger, you must intervene. The Torah says that the law was given in order to bring life, (Exo. 30:15-16), so they concluded that all laws, except for a very few, should be set aside to save a human life. For this reason Jewish doctors and nurses go to work on the Sabbath, because they may potentially save a life. If a person is ill, he or she is supposed to eat on Yom Kippur, the day when eating and drinking are strictly forbidden. Even the possibility of saving a life is enough to use this principle. The rabbis would disagree with any policy of refusing blood transfusions in a medical emergency, because of the prohibition against drinking blood in Genesis 9:4, but the weightier law is to save life.

Imagine you lived in Europe during World War II and were hiding Jews in your home, and a Nazi came demanding to know where they were. Should you lie or tell the truth? According to the principle of *Pikuach Nephesh*, you should lie to save their lives. When the midwives lied to Pharaoh rather than to kill the Israelite boys, and God rewarded them (Exo. 1:19-21).

Christians have sometimes come to the opposite conclusion. The theologian St. Augustine actually stated that; "Since, then, eternal life is lost by lying, a lie may never be told for the preservation of the temporal life of another." It appears that in his thinking, all rules are absolute. This kind of logic forces one to conclude that law to intervene to save life (Lev. 19:16) and the law against lying (Lev. 19:11) are irreconcilable. By "weighing" the laws on the side of human life they become reconcilable and all confusion is removed.

Jesus used the principle of *Pikuach Nephesh* when he argued on what may be done on the Sabbath in Luke 6. When he said, "*I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?*" Both of the activities in that chapter were an effort to preserve life.

The point was not that Jesus was throwing out the Sabbath command as unimportant, because the whole Torah taught that keeping the Sabbath was extremely important. It was the "*sign of the covenant*" and symbolic of a Jew's commitment to all of the Sinai covenant (Ex. 31:13). Jesus was saying that as important as it is to honor the Sabbath, human life is even more important. He was teaching that, "*The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath.*" (Mark 2:27)

How then do we prioritize our obedience? The idea of "weighting" the laws of the Torah was likely the rationale. The question, "*Of all the commands, which is greatest?*" (Mark 12:28-30) The lawyer was asking a legitimate question. "What is our ultimate priority as we try to obey God?"

Jesus' answer, of course, was to quote the commands that said that we should love God first, and then to love our neighbor. Everything we do should be towards that end.

The parable of the Good Samaritan points out the wrong priorities of the two who regarded ritual purity more than helping the dying man. Of course, the right thing to do in this case was to attend the needs of the wounded man, showing him the love of God.

Does this mean we can ignore God's standards altogether? *Not at all!* In Mat 5, he said that he didn't come to destroy the law, but to explain it.

When he said that anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments would be called least in the kingdom of heaven. He was emphatically stating that we should aim to be obedient in all ways, but that we should always aim to love, and that sets our priorities for how we should obey. *On the one hand*, be obedient, *but on the other hand*, choose to love! This is a very wise word for us in terms of discerning what to do when two commands conflict with each other. If we must choose one over the other, choose the one that shows the most love. If your family celebrates holidays with a tradition that you don't embrace, seek to do what is loving rather than dividing the family over it.

**When in doubt choose the most loving path.**

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