

Prompted by Spill, Proposed Laws May Yield Unintended Consequences

The Wired Word for July 11, 2010

In the News

In response to the ongoing oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, Washington lawmakers have proposed several pieces of legislation to clarify legal and financial responsibility for the occurrence. The proposed changes are aimed at companies like BP and Transocean, the operator of the Deepwater Horizon drilling platform that sank in April and resulted in the catastrophic oil leak. But changing the laws to fit the situation in the Gulf could have significant consequences for maritime companies and other businesses related to the oceans.

One of the Senate bills intended to make it easier to award damages under the Death on the High Seas Act could also impact the cruise industry, when deaths occur related to their activities.

Bills in both houses of Congress to repeal a law Transocean has cited to limit its liabilities would also affect companies that operate fishing boats, container ships, tugboats and inland barges.

Still other proposed changes would amend the law that applies to injury and death claims by seafarers, but would also undo the Supreme Court decision in the Exxon Valdez case that allows juries to award large punitive damages against companies involved in maritime disasters.

While some of the proposed changes are clearly warranted and needed, all of the possible consequences need to be sorted out to ensure that the new laws do not create unwanted outcomes. With the surprises life brings, however, not all possible consequences can be perceived in every case.

In an unrelated story, but one still connected to the spill, some churches and nonprofit groups in the Gulf states are experiencing significant drops in donations. The affected groups say the decline is because their constituents and donors have lost income because of the spill and no longer can support their churches and charities at the level they had previously. One Alabama pastor has filed a \$50,000 claim with BP on behalf of his church -- the amount he estimates will be lost this year in offerings. Giving is already down by \$12,000, and he figures that by year's end, the collections will be smaller by an additional \$38,000. The church has not yet heard whether its claim will be paid.

Secular nonprofits are experiencing drops in membership renewals. Some are continuing to operate only because the news of the spill has brought in donations from outside the area, but they worry about a long-term loss of revenue once the immediate crisis is out of the news and their local contributors are still struggling to get by.

The plights of the Gulf's churches and charities are examples of unconsidered consequences of decisions made about procedures and fail-safe mechanisms for off-shore oil drilling.

More on these stories can be found at these links:

[Calls to Update Maritime Laws. *New York Times*](#)
[Churches, Nonprofits Fight for Survival amid Spill. *Google News*](#)

The Big Questions

1. When making decisions, most of us consider what we think will be the likely consequences, but how can we widen our perspective to recognize what else or who else will be affected when we pursue a course of action?
2. Unintended consequences often particularly burden those who live on the margins of society. Typically a particular goal is in view when legislation is adopted or action is taken, and there are often powerful constituencies that have a voice in that: industry and local government, say, and other groups that have the power to make their voices heard. Each of these is likely to know about the issue, to think through the consequences (thus reducing the risk of unintended consequences that might affect their interests), and to have the resources and platform to make their voices heard. Thus those most severely burdened by unintended consequences are likely to be the people who are most without voice and resources: the poor, the marginalized, etc. How can we as Christians help to be the voice for those people, thinking about and speaking on behalf of those who will bear the unintended burden of a plan that looks, on the face of it, like progress toward an important goal?
3. How are unintended consequences related to the will of God? Does God's will sometimes get carried out by unintended consequences? Does what appears at first to be God's will sometimes appear in a different light once the unintended consequences emerge? Explain your answers.
4. Not everyone suffers the bad consequences of his or her decisions. Likewise, not everyone receives the good benefits of them. How do you explain that in a world that is in God's hands?
5. Given human imperfection, should we always be held responsible for the unexpected results of our decisions? Why or why not?

Confronting the News with Scripture

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion.

Acts 26:32

"Agrippa said to Festus, 'This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to the emperor.'" (For context, read 26:24-32.)

This is a classic example from the Bible of unintended consequences. Paul had been falsely accused by some zealous opponents of being an agitator of the Jews and "a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes" (Acts 24:5), implying that Christians were a seditious group. Both charges concerned Rome, for, if true, it could mean they would eventually have an insurrection on their hands. But Paul was not trying to stir up trouble for Rome, and Christians were not seditious.

In any case, Paul ended up in custody in Caesarea and was brought before Felix, the Roman governor, who stalled his case for two years. Then Felix was replaced by a new governor, Festus, and when Paul's opponents renewed their charges, Festus gave Paul a hearing. While Paul's enemies could not prove their case, Festus wanted to keep the peace, so he asked Paul if he wanted to go on trial before him, but in Jerusalem. Paul, however, asserted his right as a Roman citizen to be heard by the Roman Emperor, and Festus granted Paul's request (Acts 25:6-12).

Later, when Agrippa, another regional functionary of the empire, was a guest in Festus' realm, the governor invited Agrippa to join him in hearing Paul's defense. Paul did defend himself, and testified about Jesus. When the hearing was over, Agrippa made the comment above, which suggests that had Paul not requested a trial before the emperor, he could have been released. But at the time he made the appeal, he was under threat and had no way of knowing that this request would later prevent his release. In other words, as his circumstances unfolded, Paul's appeal had just the opposite effect from what he wanted.

Questions: While Paul did not want the outcome that resulted from his appeal, is it possible that God did? Is it possible that Paul's appeal obstructed God's will? Explain your answers.

Genesis 50:20

"Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today." (For context, read 50:15-21.)

When Joseph's brothers had betrayed him and sold him into slavery, they never imagined that their act would result in Joseph becoming highly placed in the government of Egypt. That was an unexpected consequence. But Joseph interprets their deed as a means for God's will to be accomplished.

Question: How does hindsight figure into our understanding of God's will?

Ecclesiastes 11:1

"Send out your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will get it back." (For context, read 11:1-6.)

This verse is often interpreted to promise a pleasing return upon the investment of good deeds or generosity. In fact, it sounds like a guarantee: Do good and receive good in return. In context, however, it may have been advice about the investment of one's money (verse 2 even sounds like advice to diversify one's investment portfolio). But assuming the usual interpretation is correct, it suggests that we can expect beneficial outcomes from doing good deeds.

But that is not always the case, which is why we have the common saying, "No good deed goes unpunished."

Questions: Have you experienced times where your "good deed" was not perceived positively by its recipient? How can we broaden our perspective to see the potential downside of our well-intended actions?

Matthew 24:43

"But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into." (For context, read 24:36-44.)

In Matthew 24, Jesus talks about the end of the age and the return of the Son of Man. Jesus goes on to stress the need to be ready for his return because it will come unexpectedly, the way a thief comes to a house in the night. In the verse above, Jesus is alluding to the idea that if the time of his return were known, everyone would be ready, but that is not how it will be.

We can imagine the homeowner in the verse above, after his house has been robbed, saying, "If only I had known the consequences of not being on alert last night!"

Questions: How do predicted consequences that are not tied to a specific timeline affect you? Do you not take them seriously? Do you put off preparing for them? What helps you to prepare?

1 Corinthians 13:12

"For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known." (For context, read 13:8-13.)

One of the promises of God's kingdom, as Paul here notes, is that when we are in it, we won't have to worry about unexpected consequences. That's because we will see clearly and "know fully."

Question: In this life, sometimes even when we are quite sure that certain actions will result in undesirable consequences, we do them anyway. Why is that?

Questions for Further Discussion

1. The 19th-century author Robert Louis Stevenson once wrote, "Everybody, sooner or later, sits down to a banquet of consequences." Do you agree? Why or why not?
2. In Alabama, the 110-church Mobile Baptist Association isn't even thinking about a claim against BP, despite a sharp decline in revenues both for the organization and for its 25 member churches in the coastal region, according to C. Thomas Wright, executive director of missions. Churches that abide by biblical stewardship principles don't need help from BP because they often find "miraculous provision" for their needs, he said. Do you agree with their thinking? Why or why not? Might money from BP be the way God sends miraculous provision?
3. The prophet Hosea wrote about people who "sow the wind, and ... reap the whirlwind" (Hosea 8:7). Do you think most people really expect a "whirlwind" when they "sow the wind"? What causes some to think there will be some special dispensation or escape from consequences for them?
4. React to this: One "unintended" consequence scenario that relates to the oil-spill disaster has to do with the ban on ongoing drilling. Some people who thought the president did the right thing with the six-month ban on offshore drilling have since reconsidered because of the consequences to the people who depend on those offshore drilling jobs. Those people now face the double whammy of the effect of this spill and the impact of these jobs being moved elsewhere. To follow that logic further, what will likely happen is that offshore drilling will be moved to other parts of the world where there are fewer regulations and restrictions (and therefore fewer protections), which means that the unintended consequences of this ban could be that people in other parts of the world will be more likely to be exposed to these risks.

Responding to the News

This could be a good time for discussion in your congregation about how to discern the will of God. Here are six ways that are often considered helpful in determining God's will:

1. Do the obvious. Some principles Jesus made clear for us. For example, if one direction is obviously in line with the idea of loving our neighbor and another is not, then the one that shows love is the one most likely to be God's will.
2. Do what is clearly at hand. God may be calling you to work for him on the other side of the planet, but if the needs you keep seeing are the ones in your own community, those are ones to which God is most likely directing you.
3. Consider your abilities and talents. Some things we can rule out because we are not capable of doing them.
4. Test your call by the Christian community. There is always wisdom in checking out with a few fellow Christians what you think might be God's will for you. Ask them to listen objectively and probe your motivations.
5. Use your best God-given judgment and pray for clarity as you proceed. God sometimes directs us through our common sense.
6. Allow for the direct workings of God. Sometimes God speaks to us "loudly."

Other News This Week

One of our subscribers pointed us to a news item about a billboard with an atheist message that someone vandalized. It provides the opportunity to talk about respect for property, defense of the faith, and whether and how to respond to messages with which Christians don't agree. See [Atheist Billboard Vandalized. Ledger-](#)

Enquirer.

Closing Prayer

O God, we often cannot know the consequences, good or bad, of the decisions we make. But help us to do our best to make the choices that result in good things. Speak to us of your will, and make us good listeners. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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