

Children's Talk and Sermon Notes for Sunday, 4 September

Children's Talk: More Than Just Rules

What is a rule? What are some of the rules that you have to follow? Who here is good at following rules? Who here wants to get a reward when you follow the rules?

There was a man who came to the Lord and wanted to know how he could get the best reward of all: heaven, or eternal life. He thought maybe he could get this reward by just following all the rules, but the Lord told him he had to do something more than just follow the rules:

Now a certain ruler asked Him, saying, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

¹⁹ So Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. ²⁰ You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not bear false witness,' 'Honour your father and your mother.' "

²¹ And he said, "All these things I have kept from my youth."

²² So when Jesus heard these things, He said to him, "You still lack one thing. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."

²³ But when he heard this, he became very sorrowful, for he was very rich.

²⁴ And when Jesus saw that he became very sorrowful, He said, "How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

²⁶ And those who heard it said, "Who then can be saved?"

²⁷ But He said, "The things which are impossible with men are possible with God." (Luke 18:18-27)

So this man thought that if he just followed all the important rules, like don't steal, don't murder, honour your parents, and so on, that was enough. The Lord told him that that was a good start, but that life is not just about following the rules: we also have to give something up to go above and beyond the rules to serve other people. When they man heard that, he became very sad. He was good at following the rules! He didn't like to hear that there was more to life than just following the rules. But the Lord said that even though it is hard, with God's help, it is possible.

So now think back to all those rules you mentioned at the beginning. If you follow all those rules that is a great start! But can you do more than just follow the rules? Instead of only cleaning up when it is your turn, can you clean up when you don't have to? Instead of just not irritating your younger brother, can you actually play with him nicely? Instead of going to bed exactly on time, can you help make bedtime a pleasant experience for your parents? It is hard when we realize that life is about more than just following the rules; but with God's help we can do it, and it will make the world a much better place. *Amen.*

Spirit of the Law

A Sermon by Pastor Joel Christian Glenn

4 September 2022

Human beings like rules. That doesn't mean we like it when other people impose rules on us. But when there are rules that other people have to follow it makes it easier to judge them as right or wrong, good or evil, and who doesn't like doing that? You know someone is a bad driver when they speed and weave in and out of traffic and generally ignore the colour of the traffic robot. Without the rules of the road we'd still be able to identify the bad drivers, but the rules give us something concrete that we can rely on and point to. Now that isn't why the government makes rules for the road: the rules are there to keep drivers safe. It's just an added bonus that we can use them to judge other people.

The most important rules that we have are rules for life: the rules about how we treat each other with love, respect, and dignity. These rules are taught to us by the Lord because of His love for us. Just as the government makes rules for the road to keep drivers safe, the Lord gives spiritual rules to keep us spiritually safe. Yet as with any set of rules, we human beings tend to use them for other things, primarily as a way of judging other people and assessing how bad they are compared to us. If we think religion these days falls into this habit (and it does), we've got nothing on the state of things during the time when the Lord came into the world. The Lord had to contend with religious authorities who liked nothing more than to trap people in religious technicalities. While we are better off today, we can still learn something from the Lord's response.

The two examples we will look at have to do with the Sabbath law. The Ten Commandments state that no work is to be done on the Sabbath, as it is a day of rest. That rule had been taken to an extreme, to the point that anything even resembling work was strictly regulated. Here is the first example:

Now it happened on the second-first Sabbath that He went through the grainfields. And His disciples plucked the heads of grain and ate them, rubbing them in their hands. And some of the Pharisees said to them, "Why are you doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath?" But Jesus answering them said, "Have you not even read this, what David did when he was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he went into the house of God, took and ate the showbread, and also gave some to those with him, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat?" And He said to them, "The Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath." (Luke 6:1-5)

Even wandering through a field, casually plucking grain and eating it, was considered too much work for the Sabbath. So the Pharisees, the experts in the law, questioned the disciples. It might have been an innocent question, asked out of mere curiosity, but the implication is that there is more to it: how dare you violate the law! How unfair that you are doing what is against the rules! Why should you be allowed to work on the Sabbath? They have become so devoted to the minutest details of the law that they fail to see anything beyond the violation of it.

Don't we do the same thing? Maybe even with honouring the Sabbath? Humph, so-and-so walked into church late *again*. And how can she think that is something appropriate to wear to church? Children do this sort of thing all the time:

think of kids on a long car ride, who have been forbidden to touch each other after fighting too much. The car goes over a bump, one child sways and lightly brushes the other by accident, and immediately he is crying bloody murder because the no-touching rule has been violated. It is especially easy to fall into this way of thinking when we ourselves meticulously follow the rules. How come he gets a pass when he is rude, when I make a point of always being polite? When she is going through drama all the friends rally around her and accommodate her, when I never impose my drama on other people. There is an inherent sense of unfairness when someone gets away with breaking the rules. I suspect the Pharisees felt some of that when they saw the disciples happily plucking grain and eating on the Sabbath when they themselves were holding off from that kind of enjoyment because of the rules.

Now the Lord did not respond by saying breaking the rules is fine. When we break rules it is right that there should be consequences. But the Lord did try to raise their minds above the mere technicalities of the law. He reminded them of King David, who, when he was on the run and starving, ate the holy bread from the Tabernacle. Technically, that was against the rules. But the Lord has other rules that are more important: His care for David's life, for example, and the life of His men. The Lord then claimed His own authority to do this kind of prioritization of the rules: He said, "The Son of Man is also Lord of the Sabbath." In other words He, the Lord, as the one who made the Sabbath rules, could also alter the Sabbath rules for a higher purpose. He gives us rules so that we can serve others; and at times, he leads us to neglect superficial rules for the sake of serving higher ones.

The question for us then should never be, "are other people doing something that is technically against the rules?" The question should be, "are they doing what the Lord wants them to be doing in this moment?" Sometimes someone is late to church or misses church altogether because they are exactly where the Lord wants them, looking after their family. Sometimes someone is accidentally rude because they are so focused on processing issues that are arising in their life. Sometimes love and support is exactly what someone needs when they are going through a drama. Anytime we find ourselves thinking that it is unfair that someone has broken a rule and gotten away with it, we should pause and ask ourselves if they broke that rule because they were focusing on something that the Lord cares about more. It will not always be the case. We all break rules just because we feel like it. But we should at least give other people the benefit of the doubt when they do.

Our devotion to the rules can also go a step farther and become malicious. Jesus faced that reality, as told in the passages immediately following the one we just read. Again, Jesus violates the Sabbath law. But this time the Pharisees do not just seek clarification; they actively try to attack and trap Jesus in His violation of the rules:

Now it happened on another Sabbath, also, that He entered the synagogue and taught. And a man was there whose right hand was withered. So the scribes and Pharisees watched Him closely, whether He would heal on the Sabbath, that they might find an accusation against Him. But He knew their thoughts, and said to the man who had the withered hand, "Arise and stand here." And he arose and stood. Then Jesus said to them, "I will ask you one thing: Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy?" And when He had looked around at them all, He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he did so, and his hand was restored as

whole as the other. But they were filled with rage, and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus. (Luke 6:6-11)

The malice of the Pharisees comes across here. They actually wanted Jesus to violate the Sabbath by healing so that they could bring an accusation against Him. This goes beyond sensing the unfairness of others getting away with breaking rules and speaks to the times when we actively use technicalities to gain power over other people.

A mundane example of this shows up quite frequently, especially in social media. In listening to an opposing side's argument people consistently get caught up in listening for minor errors, such that you might find someone listening purely to how bad the grammar is rather than actually trying to understand a person's point. As if somehow because they wrote "there" with "eir" instead of "ere" it in anyway invalidates their argument. Listen for what they are trying to say, not how well or how poorly they say it.

We use rules like this on a deeper level as well. Someone may use the Lord's commandment that we are to turn the other cheek. Someone could hurt someone else, and then immediately insists that for the other person to retaliate would be to violate the Lord's rules. Yet we know that turning the other cheek does not mean putting up with evil; it means not reacting with hatred. We must give consequences for evil behaviour. Or take someone who puts no effort in to turning his life around and relies entirely on the kindness of his family. At some point they might cut him off for his own good. He could then accuse them of violating the rule that we are to always serve the neighbour, even though they might be looking to the greater good by allowing him to fail. If our relationship with the rules devolves to finding moments when we can say to someone, "aha! You didn't technically follow X rule so now I have power over you!" then we do not understand the rules.

At its core following spiritual rules means focusing on what is best for others and not getting caught up in selfishness. A very superficial reading of spiritual truth will always tends towards selfishness. This is how the teachings of the New Church describe it:

A man gives to the poor; relieves the needy; endows places of worship and hospitals; has regard for the church, his country, and his fellow citizen; is diligent in his attendance at a place of worship, where he listens and prays devoutly; reads the Word and books of piety; and thinks about salvation; and yet is not aware whether he is doing these things from himself, or from God. He may be doing the very same things from God, or he may be doing them from self. If he does them from God they are good, if from self they are not good. (*Doctrine of Life* §9)

It all goes back to what Jesus said to the Pharisees when He knew they were going to use the Sabbath laws against Him healing someone: "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy?" If slavishly following the rules means doing harm, then it is not the rule you should be following. The rules exist to do good. Use them that way. Certainly stop trying to find ways to get power over people by catching them breaking some rule. It may be at times that we need to call people out. But that should not be our goal.

That brings me to my final point, which is a caveat. I've talked about how we need to look beyond the letter of the law to see what the Lord actually wants us to be

doing in the moment and to apply the law in ways that actually does the most good. We are supposed to focus more on the spirit of the law than the letter of the law. That being said, we also need to make sure that we do not end up using that as an excuse to neglect the law altogether. At another point in the Gospels the Lord admonished the Pharisees for sticking too closely to only the literal meaning of the laws, but made clear that He did not mean to negate the letter of the law either:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!
(Matthew 23:23-24)

The Pharisees had been keeping the letter of the law without attending to the spirit of the law: justice, and mercy, and faith, the things that they should have focused on. Yet at the same time, Jesus said that they should have done these things without leaving the others undone. We need to keep this caveat in mind as we look to the spirit of the law. Skipping church because we are supporting a friend in need is a way of keeping the Sabbath. Skipping church because we partied too hard yesterday and stayed up to watch a rugby match is not. So do follow the Lord's rules. But when other people break them, stop, and before you judge, ask yourself: could that person be doing exactly what the Lord wants them to be doing in this moment? And instead of using rules as a bludgeon, see what you can do to use them as a guideline for loving others. After all, that is why they exist in the first place. *Amen.*