

Jesus Teaches About Rules

A healthy and necessary exercise for any Christian is to periodically trace the history of your faith journey: the people



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who influenced you, the experiences that challenged and blessed, and the obstacles that formed your present beliefs.

I was influenced by a family of strong faith, varied denominational backgrounds, and a respect for differences. When I trusted my life to Christ it was alone in my room at night, with my Bible open and a voice that seemed almost audible saying, “Know that I love you ... say yes to my grace,” I have preached in many settings: youth camps, churches of many denominations, state conventions, retreats, revivals and overseas. In spite of doctrinal differences I have found blessings in many settings because I was with people who loved Christ above their differences.

God is not about labels, doctrinal statements, denominational endorsement, rituals or traditions. Israel was chosen by God to be his testimony before the world, to embody his love and grace in every dimension of life. Their tragic mistake, which all of us can make, was to think God belonged to them and that legalism is the way to gain God’s love and power.

Jesus, God’s Son and the only Savior, was not willing to play the game of legalism, so it was inevitable when he acted out God’s love and grace he would be attacked by the religious establishment. Matthew 12 offers clear examples of Jesus’ disagreements with the Pharisees, cautioning us to avoid legalism that accuses and condemns rather than offering hope.

The ever-vigilant Pharisees catch Jesus’ hungry disciples breaking God’s rules by plucking grain to eat on the Sabbath (vv. 1-8). Harvesting was clearly a violation on the day of rest. The accusers may have also considered rolling the grain in the hands to remove any hulls as threshing or preparing food for consumption. All of this was forbidden as work. But, is this rule-breaking really so important to God that he would close the gates of heaven against anyone? Does this infraction belong on a list that includes murder, rape, violence and the rejection of God?

The Sabbath is definitely important

because after God spent six days creating our world he rested on the seventh to enjoy the fruits of his labor (Genesis 2:2). When God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses, God was giving his people rules for a balanced life, blessings and an awareness that God cares about every dimension of our living. By the first century AD, scholars of the Law had developed such a complex expansion of the rules that ordinary people could not hope to keep them all. Is how we live more about earning spiritual points, or celebrating the goodness of God and honoring him?

Jesus responds to the Pharisees’ angry judgment, not by arguing legal details or traditions, but with stories from their cherished history, suggesting Sabbath law is not absolute. Jesus tells of when David and his friends were in serious need of food, and because David’s life was in danger, they ate the bread which was dedicated to God in the house of God (1 Samuel 21:1-9). The question is: do religious rules take precedence over human need? Is this God’s purpose?

Next, Jesus reminds his accusers of the accepted practice of priests serving or working in their Temple on the Sabbath (v. 5). Are the priests exempt from the Law? Then, perhaps because the priests were responsible for the rituals of worship and sacrifices, Jesus references Hosea 6:6: “I desire mercy and not sacrifice.” Jesus offers a startling statement about himself to these men who see themselves as God’s chosen judges for the Law: “For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath” (v. 8).

The arrangement of the text suggests that the next encounter is later that same day. It is still the Sabbath when Jesus meets a man with a withered hand in the synagogue. The Pharisees are building their indictment against Jesus as they ask their clever question: “Is it lawful to cure on the Sabbath?” (v. 10). In fact, medical treatment on the Sabbath had been deemed a violation because it could involve mixing compounds, binding wounds or even travel to and from the patient’s location! Jesus offers a simple no-nonsense answer that they would think nothing of rescuing a sheep that had fallen into a pit on the Sabbath. “How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep?” (v. 12). Before the Pharisees’ eyes Jesus heals the man! The Pharisees are enraged by Jesus’ words and actions. They “went out and conspired

Formations

March 11, 2018

Scripture: Matthew 12:1-14

against him, how to destroy him” (v. 14).

We are quick to judge the Pharisees for their religious pride and judgmental theology. In fact, they were judged by God in the continuing story of Jesus as he went to the cross and won the victory over sin and death. But as we judge, it would be good to examine ourselves.

I have been accused of heretical beliefs by some who demanded that I agree with their theory of biblical inspiration, their chronology of the Second Coming, their ideas about miraculous healing, or fullness of the Spirit, or – on the list goes. These accusers saw me as a threat ... to God ... to the Bible ... to their church?

My life has been spent studying God’s Word, seeking the Holy Spirit’s leading, and sharing God’s grace. Years ago when I was preparing for the official examination by the ordaining council of my rural church, my mentor advised: “Share your conversion and call to ministry, clearly express the gospel, and when they ask you about your theology of the Second Coming say simply that in God’s time he will call the dead from their graves, then we will rise to meet them, new heavens will be opened before us, and we shall all worship at the eternal throne. That will satisfy them and avoid any debate!” So it was.

We all have cherished traditions and learned ideas. We must remember the foundation of our faith is Jesus Christ, his teachings and example. Traditions may be important, but they are not our spiritual foundation. Labels can never substitute for truth. Sabbath should still be important to Christians, not as integral to our faith, but as an expression of God’s gifts of this world and time set aside to rest and refresh spiritually. God’s healing grace is not only available on certain days just as his love is not seasonal.

As we live each day there are questions we must ask ourselves: Do my words and actions offer the love of God to others? Am I honoring a tradition or celebrating God’s grace? Am I able to separate tradition and the familiar from the urge to help another experience faith in God? Is who I am defined by a denominational label or by a Spirit-empowered living testimony? When God’s love fills your heart, you want others to have the same experience.

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques. Formations is a curriculum series from Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. through NextSunday Resources.