

Rules for Living

Exodus 20:1-17, Mark 12:28-34

When God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden there was just one rule – don't eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, found in the middle of the Garden. One rule, that was all. And they still managed to mess things up! The serpent beguiled Eve and she and Adam ate from the forbidden tree. When confronted by God, Eve blamed the snake and Adam blamed God for giving him Eve! Both were escorted out of the Garden and barred from returning. A major blow up over just one simple rule and the course of history was forever altered.

Centuries later God led the Israelite peoples out of Egypt into the desert and there he gave them 10 rules to follow. Two stone tablets – the first tablet contained rules about how to relate to God and the second tablet contained rules about how to relate to others around you. Do you ever wonder what he was thinking? If two people couldn't handle one rule, how were a million, often rebellious people, supposed to handle ten? The Bible has numerous stories that let us know how well that worked out.

Fast forward a few more centuries. The Israelites survived captivity in Babylon, which was the punishment for not obeying the rules that Moses handed down to them in the desert. Following the Babylonian captivity

they had pretty much gotten over the idol-worship thing that was in direct rebellion to the first four commandments. The other six commandments, however, had grown to over 300 do's and don'ts that had been established by the religious leaders. So, we've gone from two people who can't obey one rule, to over a million who can't obey 10 rules, to the time of Jesus when millions of people are trying to keep over 300 daily do's and don'ts straight. Can you see where the struggle lies?

During his ministry Jesus was constantly being questioned – challenged - by the religious leaders of his day, mostly in regard to those 300 rules. In our reading from Mark this morning, Jesus is once again being questioned by the religious leaders. He tells them the story of the vineyard owner who sends his son to collect the rent on the vineyard, and the workers kill the son. He is then questioned about paying taxes to Caesar, understanding this is an attempt to trap him he replies, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.” The last question has to do with marriage in heaven as it related to the custom of brothers marrying the same woman until an heir was produced. Jesus was asked about whose wife she would be in heaven after being married to seven brothers. We are told that one of those leaders felt Jesus' answer, that there is no marriage in heaven, was a good response.

This same teacher, impressed by Jesus' answers to the questioning, asks one of his own:

“Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

Jesus knows the people have been struggling under all the man-made rules that the religious leaders have used as leverage to maintain their status. He takes this moment to simplify God’s rules – love God and love your neighbor as yourself. The teacher agrees that what Jesus has said is true and gives just a little more clarity by saying:

“You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. ³³ To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

The teacher brings out the words of the prophets that a heart for God and neighbor is more important than burnt offerings and sacrifices. This exchange ends with two significant events: Jesus affirms the teacher for his response and tells him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God,” and it is noted that no one asks him any questions after this. Jesus had managed to shut down all the testing with such a simple answer: follow God’s rules for living and the kingdom of God will be at hand.

Jesus spoke these words over 2,000 years ago, yet mankind is still struggling to follow two simple rules for living. The reason? The God of Heaven is not the god that many bow down to today. The gods of consumerism, self-aggrandizement, domination by (here you can enter whatever group or measure comes to mind), and others, are the gods that

hold sway over much of society. When these lesser gods take over it is harder for people to love their neighbor. Unlike the true God, these lesser gods cannot pour love, hope, and grace into the lives of those who are beholding to them. Without the love, hope, and grace found in God through Jesus, people struggle to have the love needed to give to others, as well as to themselves.

On this World Communion Sunday, we are once again reminded of the need to embrace and embody the two simple rules for living Jesus shared – to love God, creator of the universe and lover of our souls, with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. When we truly love God wholeheartedly, we are filled with the love we need in order to give love to our neighbors, whether they are the person sitting next to us in the pew, in our families, our co-workers, people in our community, or even people who don't agree with us!

Even all these years after Jesus' earthly ministry ended, it is still just two simple rules for living that we need to remember – love God and love our neighbors. AMEN