

"ARE YOU TOO HARD ON YOURSELF?"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

Whenever I read a book I keep my eyes peeled for typographical errors. The more expensive the book, the more prestigious the publisher and the greater my joy in finding the error. Sometimes I'll have a pencil in hand as I read a book. Some think I'm underlining important lines or passages for a sermon, but that's just a cover. The real reason that I read with a pencil is so I can circle the mistake. I do this, I'm convinced now, for some crazy kind of revenge.

Which reminds me that many years ago we had a man here in our Church who would often greet me at the door following the service with the Sunday bulletin in hand, with misspelled words and typographical errors circled. He would pencil in editorial comments. Mistakes were his favorite target and he loved to point them out to me. In fact, that man came from a tribe - a hunting, gathering, nomadic, ubiquitous tribe....members everywhere. They hunt and gather the mistakes of others. They passed the word around town, "Go to Clarke's Church...he makes a lot of them...mistakes, that is".

Maybe this is why I delight in finding typographical errors in the writings of other people. It's something like revenge. It helps me to live with the evidence, produced daily, that I am not perfect.

PROJECTION AND THE LAW

Psychologists call that "projection"...putting on to others what we don't like about ourselves, what we have trouble living with in our own lives.

The New Testament says that projection - it calls it hypocrisy - is the temptation of the righteous, of those people who hold high standards for themselves, a standard of perfection. If you seek perfection you're not going to reach it. If you seek perfection you are going to be obsessed with imperfection. You're going to see imperfection everywhere, especially in the lives of other people. You're going to be an expert in other people's mistakes. And that's why Jesus said of those artists of perfection, the Pharisees, "Why do you point to the speck in somebody else's eye and can't see the big log in your own eye?" That's what all perfectionists tend to do.

The New Testament says that the culprit in all of this was what they called The Law. It was the guide to perfection in the time of Jesus. It was all outlined, clearly defined, a set of rules you could follow in order to be made perfect before God. Since God was holy and righteous and perfect, the reasoning was, that you had to prove yourself to be holy and perfect and righteous before you could stand before God. So it was all outlined. And all you had to do was follow the Law.

In the Old Testament the Law was referred to as a yoke - that wooden brace that is placed on the shoulders of work animals, of oxen, so the farmer can lead them where he wants them to go. That's a perfect metaphor for the Law. The purpose of the Law is to lead us to God. The Law is a discipline that leads you down the right path, down the straight and the narrow. It's a discipline.

We all know that if you want to reach a goal in this life you've got to have that...you've got to have discipline. You can't achieve anything in this life that is worthwhile without discipline. And if you want to reach God, said the Old Testament, then take on the discipline, the yoke of the Law. It was a good idea; it made sense, but it just didn't work. That was the message of the New Testament.

THE LAW AND THE YOKE

There was not only the yoke that led animals along the straight path; there was also the yoke that conquering generals put on prisoners to hold them in bondage. The New Testament says that the Law was that kind of a yoke. It isn't a yoke of discipline that will lead you to God; it's a yoke of bondage that holds you captive. The Law, they said, had become a prisoner's yoke. Paul even goes so far as to call the Law a curse. The Law, said Paul, can't do what it's supposed to do. It does the opposite. Instead of freeing us, it binds us. Instead of leading us to a life of love, it leads us to hate ourselves and to hate other people. Instead of freeing our consciences, it leads us to feel guilty all the time. The Law is a curse, said Paul.

The Law promised to lead you to God, to make you feel good about your life, to make you feel acceptable to God, to give you peace of mind. That's what it promised and that's why Paul was following it, but it did just the opposite. It didn't give him peace of mind. It made him worry about where he stood. It gave him anxiety. How am I doing? If my status before God is dependent upon my merits, what if I fail? And failure, under the Law, meant condemnation. And if you feel condemned, then you're going to hate yourself and that hatred will soon be turned toward others. And that's what projection does and Paul had a giant dose of projection. He turned it on Stephen and helped to kill him in that stoning scene. That's when it began to hit him. The Law wasn't doing what it promised to do. He was a walking, living "civil war" on the inside.

It was a little later on that it finally hit him, when he was walking down the Road to Damascus. I think Paul was like those old cartoons in the Saturday matinee that many of us use to see when we were kids...where some character gets hit and then walks away as if nothing happened for about twenty steps - then WHAM! It hits him. He goes flat down on his face. I think it was like that with Paul. The stoning of Stephen was when he got hit, and it enabled him to see that the Law does not do what it promises to do. It does just the opposite. If the purpose of the Law is to enable us to be acceptable to God by loving God and loving our neighbors, then why is it that I have these feelings of hatred toward other people. The Law is no longer a discipline. The Law had become a yoke of slavery. It was a good idea, but it didn't work - for Paul and for us.

TRUE TODAY

Yes, it's true today. We don't live under the Jewish Law.

Even our Jewish friends today don't live under that old Jewish Law as it was interpreted in the First Century. But we all live under a law.

The Law is a metaphor for that life that believes that we have to achieve something in order to be loved. Or for that life that believes that you have to measure up to some absolute standard before you are somebody. Or the life that thinks that failure in your life is some sort of condemnation upon your life. That's the realm of Law. And it's always the same. It always begins by starting out with a yoke of discipline and ending with a yoke of slavery. It was true then and it's true today. Here's an example that may shed light on this.

Alberto Salazar is one of the world's great distance runners. Some of you have seen him run at the Marathon. At the age of 24, he was the American record holder for 5,000 and 10,000 meters. That same year, incidentally, he was the record holder for the Marathon. It's an amazing accomplishment for a young man of 24. He was on top of the world at 24. He had just gotten married and was soon to have a child. Then his world began to crumble about him. He said:

"I don't know what was the matter with me. I'd go out for a

run. I'd feel exhausted. I couldn't sleep at night. I was always on the verge of tears. I'd go out driving, some guy would cut in front of me, I'd honk the horn, yell and curse at him. I'd be at home trying to fix something. The piece wouldn't fit. I'd take the piece, throw it across the room in anger. I was about to go crazy".

The diagnosis? He's living under the Law. The same drive that made him a success was now driving him crazy. He didn't run races to win. He ran races not to lose. He couldn't bear to lose. If he were to lose, he'd be a failure. And when he won there was no joy in winning. It was a law. He had to win. It was accepted, just accepted - you had to win.

And then the day after the race the panic would set in. He'd start thinking about the next race. "Maybe in the next race I'm going to lose". So he trained all the more diligently. He ran more races than he should have run. He wore himself out. The tension mounted...the anger grew up inside of him...he became surly. He was sort of the running world's John McEnroe is the way someone put it. It may give some insight into John McEnroe's problem. And then one day the inevitable happened. He lost. He lost a race. And then he lost again. And again. Each time he lost, he lost worse. Finally, in 1983, in the 10,000 meter World Championship race at Helsinki, he finished dead last!

That's the Law. That's exactly the way Paul described it. It is supposed to be a discipline that enables you to reach a goal in this life, and ends up condemning you as a failure. That's the Law. It's the Law if it says that you're not somebody until you measure up and then tells you you never measure up. I tell you, if it does that, it's not a yoke of discipline that helps you achieve. It's a yoke of punishment. It convinces you that you're a failure.

I think we all know about that. I think we all know what it means to live under the Law. What Paul talked about, you see, was not his peculiar problem. Nor is it a Jewish problem. It's a human problem. We all have to live with it. We all know what it means.

And if we know what it means, then we're ready to hear our text from the 11th Chapter of Matthew's Gospel:

"Come unto me, all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

Jesus is putting it to us. He's asking: are you going to live by the Law or by Grace? The Law says you have to be perfect before you're loved. And grace says that God loves you even though you are imperfect. Which is it going to be? Are you going to labor under the Law, or are you going to take "My yoke upon you and learn of Me."

FAITH AND FREEDOM

I came across a helpful insight from the writings of Newton Malony, a psychologist out in California. He wrote:

"Persons do not discover who they are by reason. They are told who they are...and accepted by faith..."

That's amazing. It almost seems to simple, but I think it's true.

We are who we are as an act of faith. If we think we're worth something, then we'll prove it. If we don't think we're worth very much, we'll prove that, too...no matter how much talent we have. And that's why the Law doesn't work. If we try to be "somebody" by living up to a standard, then we live with anxiety because the jury is always out. The jury is always out...and we're always waiting to hear what the verdict will be. But if we are told, "You're somebody!" and we trust that word, even in spite of our doubts, we are free!

I ran across some interesting support of this claim in the best seller, In Search of Excellence. There was a report in the book on a study of motivation. The conclusion of the test was that motivation is a matter of self-perception. You are what you think yourself to be. If you think that you are capable, you will be capable, no matter how you measure up against some absolute standard of capability or comparison with other people. And this is how they proved it.

In one experiment ten adults were given puzzles to solve. All the puzzles were alike. Everybody had the same puzzle. They worked on them, turned them in, and then got the results. Now the results were all fictitious. The examiners made them up. The examiners didn't even look at the puzzles; they just made up the results; they simply told one-half of the people that they had done well and they told the other half of the people that they had done poorly. Now get this. Then they were given ten more puzzles, each one the same puzzle. This time the results were judged. The half who were told that they had done well the first round really did better the second, and the half who had been told that they had done poorly the first time failed the second. I tell you, we don't discover who we are by reason. We are told who we are and accept it by faith.

In a book called Why Leaders Can't Lead, they reported on a study of school teachers. It turned out that when school teachers held high expectations of their students that alone was enough to cause an increase of twenty-five points on the scores of their IQ tests. We are told who we are. We accept it by faith.

I heard the other day about a woman who applied for a job, went in for an interview. The boss read her Letter of Reference and then he commented, "This is an outstanding letter of recommendation". She said, "I know it. I wrote it myself". Well, you can't do that. That's not acceptable, but I like it anyway. I think those who try to prove their worth live under a Law. Those who accept their worth on faith are free. Jesus came to tell you who you are. He said, "You're not a defendant that has to make a case against a Judge to prove your worth. You are a child, loved by the Father....and you don't have to prove anything. All you have to do is trust that He loves you". "He loves you...and you....and you...."

HOW CAN IT COME TO ME

I think one of the most common questions asked of pastors is, "How can I experience that? How can it come to me? How can I know that I am loved just the way I am?" Contrary to some, I don't think that it can come by following some formula - that's like following another Law. It comes to us in different ways, because we're all different, but there are some guidposts, some experiences that have happened to enough people across 2000 years to serve as good lessons and good lights for us.

The first is confession. It's admitting who we are, admitting our humanity. It usually comes after an experience similar to finishing last at Helsinki, or doing something, or saying something, something that reveals the side of us that we don't like very much. Or falling on your face and discovering that you are a human being after all, that you're not perfect, that you've got faults. As Pogo

used to say, "We have faults we haven't even used yet". And I think it's true of all of us. Confession....is self-revelation, not self-flagellation. It is simple honesty about who you are. Did it ever occur to you that you confession to somebody else was already known by them. They said, "I knew that". And they liked you still. Confession. It's like looking in a mirror and being honest about who is really there.

And the second experience is repentance, and that, too, is misinterpreted. I think most people interpret repentance as another kind of punishment for not living up to a Law. They think that repentance means "penance". It doesn't. The word for repentance in the New Testament is "metanoia", and "metanoia" is not a feeling of remorse for failure. In fact, "metanoia" is not a feeling at all; translated literally, it means "change of mind". "Metanoia" - repentance - means re-arranging your mind, changing your values in life...thinking what your life is all about and who you are.

Alberto Salazar went through something like repentance when he retreated into the woods in Oregon with his family. And when he came out of that experience he said this,

"Winning isn't important. Molly is. Gold medals aren't important. Antonio is...."

That's repentance. It's a change of mind. It's a change of values in your life. It's a re-thinking about what is really important in your life. And those who go through confession and repentance are no longer certain now who they are. They're kind of like Paul....who ran into that wall....dazed. He doesn't know who he is, walking down that Damascus Road. They've run into the wall, but they're still on their feet, still moving. It hasn't hit them yet, but they are ready now, for the first time, to hear the word. Maybe for the very first time in their life they can really hear the word. Here it is:

"God loves you as you are. Failures and all!"

They've always believed that. They've heard it all of their lives. And now they are ready to listen to it. They have always known it was the Truth. Now they know it is the Gospel Truth.

It's a question, you know, this passage out of Matthew. Jesus puts it to us. He says, "Brother, sister - you have a choice". "Are you going to live under the Law, or are you going to live by grace - the grace that comes from God?" And then this word:

"Come unto Me, all who labor and are heavy laden.
And I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you
and learn from Me. For I am gentle and lowly in
heart, and you will find rest for your souls.
For My yoke is easy and My burden is light".

One of the great verses of the New Testament. Take it home with you today and live with it.