

"THE RULES ALLOW THE GAME TO BE PLAYED"

INTRODUCTION It's in the fourth chapter of Luke's Gospel that we read about the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus and the first sermon preached in His hometown of Nazareth. The summary of that sermon recorded by Luke says that Jesus has come to set us free. And Luke notes that right from the beginning that understanding of His mission was resisted. The good people of Nazareth ride Him out of town on a rail, and soon the man possessed of a demon at Capernaum says, "Let us alone, Jesus of Nazareth". And even Peter himself says a few lines later, "Depart from me". He has come to set us free and everybody resists Him!

And now in the fifth and sixth chapters of Luke, it is the Pharisees turn to encounter Him. The issue now is what does this freedom Jesus brings have to do with the rules of religion? Religion has the reputation of being preoccupied with rules. Wasn't it H. L. Mencken who defined a religious person as "somebody who is always snooping around under the suspicion that someplace, somebody is having a good time and he has to stamp it out". And Nietzsche characterized Christians as those who follow the pale Galilean who has stripped life of all its joy. And unfortunately that is the caricature so many people have of Christianity, and unfortunately many Christians provide evidence for it. Followers of Jesus have often been guilty of defining Christianity as a list of "Thou shalt nots".

DEVELOPMENT An article from the Ocean Grove, New Jersey newspaper recently found its way to my desk. Ocean Grove was founded in 1869 by a Methodist Camp Meeting Association for the purpose of creating a seaside resort that was "free from undesirable amusements".

Methodists, back then, were more straight-laced than their 20th century descendants, but evidently not sufficiently straight-laced for some other Christians. The article reported that there was a convention of the WCTU in Newark in 1904. Before the convention some of the delegates visited Ocean Grove to check up on the Methodists as well as to get some salt air. They were shocked. A woman from England later addressed the convention and said,

"When I saw men and women tumbling in the water like hogs without any sense of decency I had such a shock I've never gotten over it...."

What she was referring to was what she called "mixed bathing" which means men and women bathing in the same ocean. She went on to say, "There is nothing so horrible in England as all that. Two-thirds of the girls that paint their faces are sent on their way by that kind of sea bathing." She sat down and another woman got up to share her first-hand account of all the sinning down there at Ocean Grove. She said,

"When I first came to Ocean Grove they told me that it was a good place, that there was no sin there. But the bathing was the most disgraceful thing I've ever seen in my life. To see boys and girls out of the water, throw themselves down on the sand and lie there reading a novel...why it's disgraceful!"

And she saved the worst for last. "There was another thing I saw there that shocked me. In the tent right across from us was a minister's family. The minister had two daughters who spent the whole of the Sabbath Day reading a novel. It's wrong," she said, "Wrong, wrong and as an organization we ought to protest!"

PROTESTING FUN

Protesting fun...that's the reputation that religious people sometimes have in the minds of many people, and not undeservedly, for so often religion has presented itself as being concerned with rules. Back to Luke..

Jesus encounters this kind of religion in the Pharisees. His Disciples are walking through a grain field on the Sabbath Day and they take some grain and eat it. The Pharisees say what you are doing is not lawful on the Sabbath. All they were doing was picking a head of grain, rubbing it in their hands to get some kernels, and eating them. The Pharisees reasoned, it was not lawful to work on the Sabbath, and harvesting was considered work, and therefore what the disciples were doing was unlawful.

And this is followed by an incident that begins, "And on another Sabbath there was a man with a withered hand, and Jesus healed him." The Pharisees said, "There He is...doing it again...flagrantly breaking all the rules."

And in the Fifth Chapter, in the story immediately preceding these two, Luke records the incident of Jesus eating with the tax collector, Levi and all his cronies from the IRS. Luke says the Pharisees were outraged because Jesus wasn't following the rules. He was disobeying the rule that says that you are to ostracize sinners. (Luke 5: 27 - 32, page 894.) Take out the tax collector and update it by putting someone else in from our time who we don't want around. ...someone we And there's Jesus, smack dab in the center of the group, talking to them. Freeze out. u.

The response of Jesus to all of this was to say, "The Son of Man is the Lord of the Sabbath". The Son of Man is a title meaning the Messiah, so He is saying that the Messiah has come to judge the laws. And in the Gospel of Mark He gives us the criterion for that judgement. "Man was not made for the sabbath, but the sabbath was made for men". That is to say, look the rules are here to make the good life possible. The rules are here so that life can be enjoyed; the rules are here so the game can be played.

A GOOD CASE FOR THE PHARISEES

Now you can make a good case for the Pharisees. There's an awful lot of sentimental thinking about what would happen if people were simply allowed to follow their impulses without rules. There are libertarians who believe that there is some mystical law or invisible hand that will make everything come out right, if only the restraints on society and on individuals were taken away.

The Pharisees believed that if all the restraints were taken away, human nature being what it is, the world would become a chaos, not a paradise. And you know something, I believe that the Pharisees are right. Every so often someone comes along saying that Jesus has freed us from all law. This was common enough that there's even a name for it in church history. They're called "Antinomians" which means above the law. They say Christ has set them free. But instead of creating a paradise, where the best in human nature flourishes, the antinomians created communities where the worst in human nature ran rampant.

So the Pharisees are right. Laws are necessary for life to be good. They based their thinking on the story of Noah and the flood. That story was what the Constitution is for us. It was the event that established the rules for a good life in a good land. They believed that the flood wiped out the old life of injustice and corruption, cleansed the whole world, and gave mankind a whole new beginning.

And the most important part of the Story of Noah was the covenant God made with Noah, and the most important part of the covenant was the law that God gave to Noah. The law guaranteed that the chaos would never happen again. That's the purpose of laws. The Pharisees believed that laws hold back the flood of chaos that occurs when human sin runs rampant.

A good case could be made for the Pharisees. They are realistic about human sin and human nature. And about the human condition and the human community. They know that all life is a web. That know that what I do affects you, and what you do affects me. They know that what a person does is never their own business, because we're not atomistic cells living in some moral vacuum. We're all part of communities and the health of the whole community is dependent on the moral health of each individual. So what parents do affects the children. What neighbors do affect the quality of life in the neighborhood. What businesses do is never their own business. It can add or detract from the life of the whole community. There is a fundamental inter-relatedness to all of life. You touch the web at one point and the repercussions can be felt throughout. And in the human community the strands of that web are called morality. If the strands break the whole society is in danger of collapsing.

~~So you see, in a way these Pharisees were right; rules are important. They allow the game to be played. They create order in the world so that life will be good and just. Without rules human sin would run rampant. Rules are still important. We've haven't outlived the need for the Ten Commandments. And when God gave them to Moses he didn't say they were the Ten Suggestions either. They were Ten Commandments.~~

PHARISEES ARE ALSO WRONG

having said that,
But, the Pharisees are also wrong. Sometimes the rules are unimportant. Let me come at this in this fashion...

Have you ever played with someone who concentrated on the rules? They weren't playing to have fun. They were playing to win. The rules became a weapon that they used to humiliate you. I've played with people who didn't tell me the rules until I broke one and then they'd tell me. "Now that's a rule. You have got to move back 20 spaces". "But I didn't know the rule". Well, ignorance of the law is no defense" they might say. "You lose". "Too bad"

Rules for them are not there for the game to be enjoyed. They are there so they can use them to elevate themselves and to humiliate you. And the New Testament reveals that's what rules became for the Pharisees, and that's how they are used by the Pharisee in each one of us. They are a means of becoming superior, a means of separating us from other people, of making others feel a bit uncomfortable in our presence in order to boost ourselves a bit.

Did you ever hear that poem:

"The meanest man I ever saw,
Always kept within the law."

We have a biography of a man like that in the New Testament. You know who it was? His name was Paul. He said he was like that; he was a Pharisee. In fact, he called himself the Pharisee of all Pharisees. He knew all the rules, but, he said, he used the rules to make himself superior. To earn his salvation was the way he put it. He also discovered that though his preoccupation with rules did not earn him his salvation, it was a perfect instrument to prove to himself that he was doing better than others. We've all known people like that. What a pain they can be!

So the rules became for him the very means to elevate himself above other people, and to cloak the meanness inside him. When he was offered a job to persecute the Christians, who were not obeying the Law, he jumped at the chance. And on his way to Damascus to do that, he discovered that his preoccupation with rules blinded him to what life was all about. And when he regained his sight, he said, "The law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has freed me from the law of sin and death." (Romans 8)

So Paul was able to see the times when rules are unimportant. How do you know when that is? This is dangerous stuff, you know, saying that you are free from the Law. How do you know? Well, you have got to see who Jesus is talking to here. He is not addressing libertarians. He is not telling them they are free of the law. He's counselling the Pharisees. His teaching is not license to do whatever you please. He said in another place that He did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. So if you are tempted to do whatever you please then you read something else. Don't read this. Read the Sermon on the Mount. There is a demanding moral code for you. This teaching is addressed to the Pharisees and to the Pharisee in each of us, who is tempted to cloak a little meanness with rules. Are you guilty of it? At times, I suspect we all are.

CLOSING "The meanest man I ever saw / always kept within the law". Jesus revealed that meanness is so insidious that laws don't always stop it. Sometimes laws will even encourage it. Sometimes a whole society will hide behind laws in order to oppress other people and to deny them basic rights as human beings. Jesus said any law that does that is unimportant.

Those laws are pretty much gone now. Most of them. The laws are gone now but they are still around as unwritten rules, and most of those rules continue to encourage the Pharisee in each of us. Next time you go to the cafeteria or to a church supper, I've seen him there too, look for Levi. He'll probably be sitting there and eating all alone.

"Well, what did you do, Levi, to deserve this ostracism?" "Well, I guess I'm not attractive." "So they sentenced you to isolation, did they?" "Yeah, I've got to eat alone"

"Well, Levi, how come you never get invited to parties?" "I guess I'm too old". "So they sentenced you to solitary confinement then."

"Levi, how come the family never visits?" "They don't approve of the person I married." "That's a terrible crime, Levi. Lifetime banishment."

"Levi, how come nobody calls anymore?" "Well, I had this trouble, you see, all the neighbors know about it." "Well, the punishment for that, Levi, is silence. Nobody will speak to you".

You see, the laws are gone now, those laws that segregated society and made some people better than others, they are gone now. But the rules are still there. Unwritten, but they are still there. You know what they are, and you know that Jesus broke every one of them. He said they are unimportant.

The purpose of rules, He said, is to allow the game to be played, by everybody. So when Jesus saw Levi stracized, punished, isolated - He went over and sat at with him. And if you can't do the same then He has come to set you free. free from some of your hang-ups, and prejudices....some of those feelings that make you feel you're a bit better than the next person.

PRAYER

We thank Thee, O God, for the joy that has come into our lives through Christ Jesus. May we never forget that religion without that joy is not His religion; and as we live and grow in it, may we not forget that ours is the privilege of taking that joy into the lives of other people. We ask this in the spirit and in the name of Him who came to break a few rules if they helped to set people free from those things that pin them down and hold them back from growth as Your children. Amen