

**Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20**  
**Psalm 19, Philippians 3:4b-14**  
**Matthew 21:33-46**

**William Tarter**  
**10/2/2011**

### Rules, Rules, Rules

Here is a story from one of my very precocious kindergartners: He had come to school for the first week or so and learned how to stand during the Pledge of Allegiance, walk in a straight line, raise his hand, give others a turn, and wait to be served lunch. When asked what he thought about school he said, “There sure are a lot of rules around here.”

Having worked in elementary schools I am familiar with how rules are made and broken. Rules tell us a lot about ourselves. Hopefully rules give us an idea of what is important: our values and goals. At school we try to have a direct link between a rule and a value. Kids learn to not cut in line because it is disrespectful. Our value is respect. This linkage helps kids develop a context for both rule following and rule breaking. When rules are broken then we have a way of making amends: if I have been disrespectful then I need to apologize and not repeat my trespass. Apologies are not enough – change of action must also follow. Good rules help us grow. One of the best rules is The Golden Rule: treating others as you would like to be treated. We would like to be people of the Golden Rule: respectful, kind, fair. This rule and others reflect who we want to be and what we shouldn't be.

God's rules tell us something about God and ourselves. The commandments were given to us so that we would not sin. Sin is where we were separated from God. This means that the commandments are given for us to stay with God, in relationship with God.

God commands us to know no other God, for there is but one. That commandment indicates our relationship with God. (1) It is echoed in our baptism. We are God's people. It only follows that when we say things of God (2) our words are always influenced by that relationship. God is not to be spoken about, or thought about, or felt about vainly. We do not take the name of whom we love in vain. The Name is Holy, Wonderful, Love itself. And we honor and imitate God's ways: God rested on the Sabbath (3) to enjoy creation which includes us. Another way of saying this is we are recreated on the Sabbath when we sink deeply into the mystery and love of God. We rest and recreate on the Sabbath to enjoy God amid all life and love that flows from this creation.

We turn to what guides us in relating to each other. God shows us to give honor (4) to those who give us life – not just our parents, but all who have passed on wisdom, gentleness, patience, joy. All life is precious (5), all love honorable (6). We must respect what belong to others (7) knowing that what we have is enough for what we need. We have our word which should be truth (8) just as God give us the Word of Jesus. When we speak we are joined with God in the act of creation. We respect others property and relationships and do not seek to undermine them. These are honorable rules and flow from common sense.

The commandments show us that we are a curious group. We like to explore creation, to see what is beyond the next horizon, lift up the rocks to see what is beneath. My kinder children show us this curiosity. Everything in their world needs to be explored. No one would ever think them mean when they ask the principal if his bald spot hurts, or want to eat a banana slug. Good rules are developed for safety and respect. The preserve life and provide for harmonious living.

As well as being curious we can also be insecure and fearful. We can make rules because we have been hurt, or disappointed, or rejected. Rules can become twisted and an end to themselves. Paul shows us this in the letter to the Philippians. He was a rule follower. He loved the law and thought that it was enough. Rules are funny in a way: even if we follow them to the letter we might just miss the point of the rule. Take the Sabbath. One simple rule blossomed into hundreds that regulated every action on the Sabbath. The focus of the rule – honoring God and imitating God’s ways – morphed into a complex code of restrictions. Do you remember how much trouble Jesus got into when he healed and brought new life to someone on the Sabbath? Doesn’t healing sound more in line with God’s benevolence in creation? Sabbath rules lost the point of honoring our relationship with God. What couldn’t be done crowded out what must be done. Paul realized that the most diligent following of the law became garbage when he met Jesus. He finally fell into relationship with God which is so much different that relationship with a thing.

It isn’t that the law was bad, but it had become an end in itself which is idolatry, a false god. Paul realized when he met Jesus, all law surrenders, points to, directs, guides people to know the law giver. Paul understood the purpose of the law was to keep us in relationship with God – not to give a list of all the ways we can be separated from God. God gave commandments to strengthen our relationship with him, not just so we can have law.

Jesus presses this point to another group of law-for-laws-sake people: the Chief Priests and Pharisees. These folks loved the law because it gave them power and status in the community. But did they love God? That really is Jesus’ question to them and to us. We can take God’s law and

through our curiosity, insecurity, fear twist those life giving laws into a set of false laws that imprison us and hold us captive. Do you remember those rules for who could drink at the water fountain? These were rules of fear, separateness, injustice, and disharmony.

Jesus calls us forward from all of that. We need not fear for we are loved by God. Jesus calls us to join together in a dance in joy, to love with passion and abandon, even on the Sabbath. He calls us to not be so blinded by our insecurity that we become judgmental of others and ultimately ourselves. He calls us to remember that we are to be in relationship with God, for this is God's will, desire, dream. The commandments make us the people of God and we are God's presence in the world. If the ten commandments got twisted Jesus again gave us freedom: To this end we know that we must Love God with our whole hearts, souls, and minds. And we must love our neighbor as ourselves. Very simply stated and it takes a lifetime to live out. Love neighbor. Love self. Love God.