

Epiphany 6A 2023

Throughout Jesus' ministry, he consistently criticized three things: hypocrisy, literalism, and legalism.

You will remember, for example, that he calls out the hypocrisy of the scribes and pharisees, who drag before him the woman caught in adultery.

“Let he who has not sinned cast the first stone,” he challenges.

Notice that, after they withdraw, Jesus, too, does not condemn her.

““Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you.”

In other words, everyone needs to worry about his or her own life and avoid the hypocritical pointing of the finger.

This message is repeated throughout the gospels.

As for literalism, a consistent plot device in the gospels is that Jesus speaks, his disciples misunderstand because they take him literally, and he corrects them, sometimes with a sad yet humorous effect.

When they are in the boat together on the Sea of Galilee, for example, and he tells them to beware the yeast of the Pharisees, his disciples worry that he is upset with them for not bringing bread.

Jesus replies in exasperation, ““Why all these worried whispers about forgetting the bread? Immature believers! Do you still not understand? Don’t you remember the five loaves of bread and the five thousand people, and how many baskets of fragments you picked up? Or the seven loaves that fed four thousand, and how many baskets of leftovers you collected? How could you fail to understand that I was not talking about bread? The problem is yeast, Pharisee-Sadducee yeast.’ Then they got it: he wasn’t worried about eating, but teaching—the Pharisee-Sadducee kind of teaching.”

In other words, bread was a metaphor.

The disciples had misunderstood once again because of their literalism.

Today, we have an example of Jesus dealing with the third frequent target of critique—
legalism.

In his sermon on the mount, he criticizes the idea that blindly following the law suffices.

He explains that merely not murdering does not make one a good person.

The point is much larger.

It is not hating.

The law, in other words, is not an exhaustive list of all the possible bad things in the
world.

It merely provides *examples* of the kinds of things we are to avoid.

Yes, do not murder, because that would be an example of treating people as expendable, treating them with hatred, viewing them as objects.

We are not to dismiss people's importance by saying things like "You fool."

Incidentally, when I was growing up, that, too, was take literally.

You could call people all manner of things, but never fool.

Jesus is telling those gathered that the point is how we treat others.

Do not murder or otherwise deny the dignity of others as children of God.

Have integrity and respect the integrity of others.

Therefore, do not swear by things, but simply say yes when one means yes, and no when one means no.

In other words, if one is honest with others, that is sufficient.

Swearing implies that other things one has said might not be true.

"This time, I swear it. I'm really telling the truth, by the throne of heaven."

Jesus is saying, just tell the truth all the time and there will be no need for swearing.

If we respect others, if we treat others as we would want to be treated, we will follow the law naturally.

It would never occur to such a person to murder people or to call them a fool or to manipulate them with words like, "I swear by heaven that I would never cheat you."

In fact, the more people protest, the less one can trust what they are saying.

Those who are trustworthy, on the other hand, will follow all the laws and do much more, which is why last week Jesus said that our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees.

Conversely, one could follow all 613 laws *religiously* and still be a jerk, still be far from God, unloving.

The point of the law is to give us examples of the kinds of things that we are to avoid so that we might grow in grace and humility.

The law restricts, but only to set us free.

When we correct a child who has lied or stolen, it is not in order to decrease the child's potential, but to increase it.

The law does not limit, but fosters freedom.

When we limit that which harms, it is like removing a tarp from the ground so that light and rain can penetrate and promote growth.

A strange notion of freedom has crept into our culture.

For many, it means doing whatever one wants whenever one wants.

The reality is that, if we behave in such a manner, we will destroy our relationships and limit our growth.

Freedom is not living utterly without restriction or responsibility.

It is being set free from that which hinders the spirit, from that which prevents us and those around us from thriving.

It is becoming fully ourselves by using our gifts in ways that are fulfilling and meaningful as a part of something larger.

We are not free when we have to spend our lives manipulating, evading, hiding who we are, scheming.

No one will trust us.

We will have no true friends.

We end up alone for all intents and purposes, without community, without the mutually supportive relationships that are a primary source of joy.

I always tell people that they do not have to believe me.

Try being a part of a group who respects you for who you truly are, warts and all, and allows you to respect them.

It is one of the richest experiences one can have.

A friend who frequently reads my homilies said that what I say is very difficult to accomplish.

The Christian path is indeed challenging, but is also full of grace.

We do not have to arrive tomorrow.

We make a few steps at a time, sometimes fall backwards to be lifted up by others, get up and keep going.

The point is that we are going in the right direction.

Realizing that setting some limitations can actually create greater freedom, some choose to write a rule of life.

This is a list of things that we want to do in order to help us to be the person we were created to be, in order to bring more light into our lives.

It sets us free in the same way that Jesus says the law sets us free, but focuses more on our own specific limitations.

A rule of life contains things that one can actually achieve, like praying through the news or engaging in frequent conversation with God or attending more church functions, or volunteering.

It also includes things for partnering with oneself like taking walks, enjoying quiet time, or engaging in a hobby.

It is not like New Year's resolutions where people set up unreasonable goals that are bound to fail.

We know we are not going to change our diet, not going to go to the gym regularly, not going to keep all our closets organized.

A rule of life should be realistic and freeing, not onerous and impossible.

I know some of you walk regularly on the beach.

That is the beginning of a rule of life.

Hypocrisy, literalism, and legalism were the frequent targets of Jesus' criticism.

Humility, compassion, and joy were his goals.

Limiting the practices and attitudes that harm us or prevent our growth allow us to thrive

in the light of God so that we eventually exceed any rules that we impose.

(If you want guidance writing a rule of life to help achieve those goals, I am available.

If there is sufficient interest, we can have a seminar on how to do it.)