

The Sermon on the Mount: Rules, Rules, Rules!
Matthew 5:21-37
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Rules, rules, rules! We all grow up with rules, and no matter our age we still live with rules. We have rules at home and rules at work; rules at school and rules on the road; rules in sports and rules on our devices. We like rules so much that we even elect people to do nothing but make up rules for us which we then agree to live by! You might say, “rules rule.” So, it should come as no surprise that in God’s world, we’re going to find some rules, too.

In the Beatitudes Jesus gives us a picture of what kind of person God is seeking to live and work in God’s realm. The Beatitudes describe the internal character of kingdom people. A couple of weeks ago we saw Jesus begin to turn the focus outward when he described the impact we will have as God’s people, namely that we will be like salt and light in our world. But, how will we know if we’re getting it right? What does this kingdom life look like in practical terms? Another way to ask the question is what are the ethical implications of living the life of God’s new world in the present? To answer those questions, Jesus gets specific by talking about rules.

We were still in onesies or doing the “furniture walk,” when we first knew that some things were off-limits, out of bounds, “no-no’s.” In fact, “no” is one of the first words a toddler learns. Perhaps it not coincidental that this would come up on Mother’s Day, since it is often Mom who issues many of a child’s first “no’s” as her darling son or daughter is painting the wall with strawberry jam or on the floor eating the dog’s food.

“No” is a word that establishes boundaries, and those boundaries are first established at home. No, you can’t bite your baby brother. No, you can’t run into the street. No, you can’t eat 6 cookies before dinner. Later, when the child goes to elementary school and learns to read, the rules get more extensive and are usually posted on the classroom wall. The child soon learns that there are also exceptions and loopholes in the rules, as well as various interpretations. A rule like, “No chewing gum,” for example, can be legally interpreted by a 5th grader to mean, “I can have gum in my mouth as long as I don’t chew it.” By the time kids get to high school they have the legal acuity of lawyers who know the rules and all the ways to get around them. Even after graduation, when the young adult goes to the

workplace, there will be rules or codes of conduct that must be followed in order to remain employed.

None of this is to imply that rules aren't important; it's just that rules alone aren't enough. An ethical person not only understands and obeys the rules, he or she also knows—and embraces—the *purpose* behind the rules. When Jesus wanted to lay out the ethical agenda for God's kingdom, he didn't ditch the rules that were long ago written down by God on tablets of stone and handed to Moses. Instead, he “fulfilled” those rules by embodying them and teaching them with authority. For Jesus, the rules were still important, but the principles behind the rules were even more important. He wasn't just concerned about what was written in stone; he was concerned about the character and law of God written on the hearts of God's people.

The scribes and Pharisees knew the law backward and forward, and as the self-appointed legal conscience of Israel, they were bound and determined to make sure everyone obeyed the law *to the letter*. The scribes acted as lawyers for the Mosaic commandments, in part because they believed that God's kingdom would come only when the people of Israel obeyed the law perfectly. The problem with that approach, as we saw last week, is that focusing on the law alone imposes limits on obedience since I only have to comply with the law and nothing more. A Pharisee evaluated himself and others based on compliance to the rules, not on the basis of compassion toward others or the needs of the community.

That's why verse 20 from last week is such a bombshell: “Unless your righteousness *exceeds* that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” If the people thought the scribes and Pharisees had it all together because they obeyed the law to the letter, then they were missing the point. The law points to something bigger, Jesus says. It points to a way of life, how life is to be in God's kingdom. Jesus is telling us what it means to live in a world of divine authority, and he wants us to begin living that way now.

Jesus takes the old law and radicalizes it, shaking it down to the root of the law's intent which is actually what the word “radical” means—the base word, “radix” means “root.” Jesus is rooted in the law but he calls his disciples to live a life of a much deeper rootedness than the legalism of the scribes and Pharisees. The Pharisees were concerned with what people did or did not do with their hands. Jesus is more concerned about what people had in their hearts and how that translated into their relationships with others as a sign of God's kingdom.

So, in the first antithesis, Jesus agrees with Moses—murder is bad; don't do it. But, he goes much further, getting down to the root, the intent of the command. Jesus understands that the dehumanizing act of murder has its roots in the dehumanizing of another person through anger. And, not only does anger dehumanize the other, it dehumanizes us, too. Every time we decide to allow anger to smolder inside us, we become less than fully human, less than the person God created us to be. Instead of merely avoiding murder, the kingdom asks us to embrace reconciliation which leads to community. It's the difference between following the rule and engaging a relationship—the difference between just avoiding doing something with the hands and doing something with the heart.

In the second antithesis, Jesus identifies lust as the dehumanizing attitude of the heart, because lust reduces people to objects to be used for selfish pleasure. We might be able to avoid the physical act of adultery and thus technically obey the law, but we forget that the emotional and psychological attachment of lust is also destructive to trust and intimacy. Jesus is holding up the fidelity of covenant relationships which supports community, trust and love—the kind of fidelity that Christ himself has with the church. It is a picture of the kind of faithfulness that is characteristic of God's kingdom, and we are to practice it now in all our relationships.

The third antithesis, having to do with divorce, gets to the same core issue as the one before it. The root of marriage is faithfulness, community and love. If our hearts are committed to kingdom living, then fidelity to God will translate to fidelity in our relationships. If our hearts are in the right place, in right relationship, then our hands will be less quick to sign the dismissal papers.

And, then there's the fourth antithesis about making vows. Under Jewish law, as in our law courts today, swearing something under oath by sealing it with words like, "so help me, God" was common. If you swear an oath in court, then what you say has to be true or you are committing perjury. The implication is that when you are not under oath, you don't have to be as careful or truthful in what you say. Jesus takes the law and once again goes to its root. We shouldn't just be truthful under oath; we should be truthful all the time. Telling the truth is the basis of community. Lies and falsehoods tear a community apart.

In these verses the ethical pattern for the people of God's kingdom emerges. It is a pattern that goes beyond the letter of the law, to the spirit of the law. It goes beyond what we do with our hands, to who we are in our hearts. It recognizes that external behavior is intimately connected to our internal character. The ethics of

God's kingdom are in some respects the same as the ethical structure of ancient Israel. Murder is still forbidden, adultery is still forbidden and so on. But, Jesus establishes here that his followers are called to a higher standard. We are more than people who refrain from promiscuity, murdering and being truthful only when it's convenient or required.

Kingdom people follow an ethical program that requires a purity of intention beyond anything people to this point in human history had been taught. One's ethical deeds must come from clean hands and a pure heart. Jesus is inviting us to look inward, not outward. This leads me to a note of caution that I want us to bear in mind as we work through the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus raps the scribes and Pharisees on the knuckles over and over again for their legalistic use of the law to elevate themselves over and against others. Look how much better they are than everybody else who simply doesn't measure up. Isn't it ironic that this passage has been used to do tremendous damage by the same kind of simplistic, legalistic interpretation? I have a friend who hasn't darkened the door of a church in over half a century because of how these verses were used by Christians to shame and ridicule her mother who went through the trauma of divorce. That's not what these verses are saying, and they are never to be used to point the finger at someone else. Jesus is speaking to you about the condition of your heart. He wants you to be honest about your anger, about your manipulation of the truth, about the relationships in your life where you are harboring resentments and are refusing to forgive. I am not the Holy Spirit for anybody else's life, and neither are you. If we are really listening, we'll have a full-time job just taking care of our own wayward thoughts and motives, attitudes and actions. We're not going to have any time or energy left to worry about how God is or is not dealing with anyone else.

Guard your heart, scripture tells us. It is there, in the heart's deepest recesses that we will come to the root of what it means to hear and obey God's rules so we can live as followers of Jesus in the kingdom of God. Amen.