

Sermon on the Mount 4: The Four 'R's (Rules, Religiosity, Reverence, Respect)

(Matthew 5:17-42)

Ridiculous Rules

These are the top ten most ridiculous British laws, as voted by a public poll, reported in the Daily Telegraph last month:

1. It is illegal to die in the Houses of Parliament
2. It is an act of treason to place a postage stamp bearing the British monarch upside-down
3. In Liverpool, it is illegal for a woman to be topless except as a clerk in a tropical fish store
4. Mince pies cannot be eaten on Christmas Day
5. In Scotland, if someone knocks on your door and requires the use of your toilet, you must let them enter
6. In the UK a pregnant woman can legally relieve herself anywhere she wants, including in a policeman's helmet
7. The head of any dead whale found on the British coast automatically becomes the property of the King, and the tail of the Queen
8. It is illegal not to tell the tax man anything you do not want him to know, but legal not to tell him information you do not mind him knowing
9. It is illegal to enter the Houses of Parliament in a suit of armour
10. In the city of York it is legal to murder a Scotsman within the ancient city walls, but only if he is carrying a bow and arrow

But in case we think Britain holds the monopoly on daft laws, here are some from around the globe. In Ohio, it is illegal to get a fish drunk .

In Switzerland, a man may not relieve himself standing up after 10pm

In Alabama, it is illegal to be blindfolded while driving a vehicle

In Florida, unmarried women who parachute on a Sunday could be jailed

In Vermont, women must obtain written permission from their husbands to wear false teeth

In Milan, it is a legal requirement to smile at all times, except funerals or hospital visits

In France, it is illegal to name a pig Napoleon

In Jesus' day there were some pretty odd ones too in Jewish law

For example:

No work can be done on the Sabbath, including carrying a burden, where a burden is 'food equal in weight to a dried fig, enough wine for mixing in a goblet, milk enough for one swallow, honey enough to put upon a wound....' etc

To write is classed as work on the Sabbath. Writing is thus defined: He who writes two letters of the alphabet with his right or with his left hand, whether of one kind or two kinds, if they are written with different inks or in different languages, is guilty. Even if he should write two letters from forgetfulness, he is guilty, whether he has written them with ink or with paint, red chalk, vitriol, or anything which makes a permanent mark....'

But if anyone writes with dark fluid, with fruit juice, or in the dust of the road, or in sand, or in anything which does not make a permanent mark, he is not guilty...If he writes one letter on the wall of the house and one on the ground, or on two pages of a book, so that they cannot be read together, he is not guilty'. (Barclay, p148-9)

Religiosity

Ridiculous rules.

It really was a case of religion gone mad. But how did it happen? How did all these rules come about?

Well, over time the people, God's chosen nation, had taken what were great, broad principles found in the Old Testament, the ten commandments, and argued that out of this God-given law it must be possible to deduce a rule and regulation for every possible situation in life. And so 'Scribes' made it their life's work to reduce these great principles to literally thousands and thousands of rules and regulations. And they got themselves in a right old pickle in the process. Hence reaching the point where it was okay to write on two different pages of a book, but not one.

The Conundrum

So today we've reached that point in the sermon on the mount where Jesus tackles the Law, where he addresses a hot potato in Judaism, and instructs the disciples on their attitude towards it.

And here's the puzzling thing. We know that Jesus showed utter contempt for these nit-picking laws. He broke them very publicly on a number of occasions, for example he didn't observe the ritual handwashing, touching people who were unclean. he healed sick people on the Sabbath and yet here he is recorded in Matthew's gospel as saying 'do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them' v17

Isn't that a rather odd thing to say given his blatant law-breaking?

Isn't this one of those cases where the Bible seems to contradict itself?

So what *was* Jesus talking about?

Well it all seems to be about different uses of the word 'the law'

Jews used the expression 'The law' in four different ways....

1. They used it to mean the ten commandments. Those broad principles given to Moses on Mount Sinai
2. They used it to mean the first five books of the Bible (the pentateuch) literally 5 scrolls. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy
3. They used the phrase 'the law and the prophets' to mean the whole of scripture (what we would now call the Old Testament)
4. They used it to mean the oral or scribal law.

In the time of Jesus it was this last meaning that was most common. So 'the law' usually meant oral or scribal law – those minute details and petty rules - and it was this that Jesus and also the apostle Paul so roundly condemned.

By saying I have come to fulfill the law and the prophets Jesus is saying he has come to fulfill the Old Testament.

Jesus came to bring out the real meaning of the law.

The principle that lies behind the whole law is not rules and religiosity, but rather reverence & respect. Reverence for God and respect for our neighbours and ourselves.

Hence Jesus sums up at another time by saying the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and secondly to love your neighbour as yourself.

Reverence

These nit-picking, excruciatingly detailed laws had completely missed the point. They had lost the idea that behind all our behavior should lie a reverence for God. Jesus points us towards that reverence.

Respect

And this leads us nicely onto another 'r'. Respect. Loving God automatically leads to a respect for people. Our reverence for God leads to respect for others. It was St Augustine, many years ago who coined the phrase 'love God, and do what you like'.

Because it follows that if we love God then our actions will be loving.

Underlying attitudes matter, and Jesus goes on to tackle that from verse 21 onwards.

Our actions simply cannot change unless our attitudes do.

Its about transformation from within.

You know the Mr Men story Mr Messy? Mr Messy is drawn as a pink ball of scribble basically. His hair (or fur, or whatever Mr Men have) is messy. His house is messy. His garden is messy. His life is messy. Into Mr Messy's life come two perfect characters: Mr Neat and Mr Tidy. 'Neat and Tidy, Tidy and Neat.' They radically change Mr Messy's life, sort out his home, his garden, put him in the bath and scrub him until he doesn't look like mr messy anymore. In fact he looks like a pink ball of fluff. And that's the end of the story. Mr Messy is a reformed character.

Except that I imagine how it is if that story carries on.....after a while Mr messy thinks, oh it's too much bother to scrub myself so vigorously in the bath, and I really can't be bothered to tidy up – I'll do it tomorrow. And d'you know what? Within a month or two he's well and truly back to being a very messy Mr Messy. Because it was Mr Neat and Mr Tidy that wanted him neat and tidy. It didn't actually come from Mr Messy.

Change, transformation has to come from within, otherwise it's destined to fail. Following rules simply isn't enough.....Jesus knew that. Changes in behaviour begin with changes in attitude. Not the other way round.

Jews aimed to satisfy the law of God. No more, no less. But Jesus wanted to show that there was a new way. And that was to show gratitude for the wonderful love of God, and to respond accordingly.

As so we find that there was a new standard. One in which Jesus raised the bar to a shockingly high level. Where anger became on a par with murder; lust with adultery, and so on.

It wasn't about keeping to a set of rules so much as attitude and motive. Therefore you might not have killed someone, but if you'd been angry then you hadn't been all that you should....

The way to God is never thru rules and religiosity, but always through reverence and respect. Jesus demonstrated that in his own life and death.

Jesus calls us to a change of heart. To change from the inside out. For outside in is always destined to fail.

Let's invite the Holy Spirit to work in our lives and bring change from within.

House Group Notes 16th May 2010

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Jews used the expression 'The law' in four different ways....

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Rules & Religiosity

Over a period of time God's people had taken what were great, broad principles found in the Old Testament (the ten commandments) and argued that out of this God-given law it must be possible to deduce a rule and regulation for every possible situation in life. And so Scribes made it their life's work to reduce these great principles to literally thousands and thousands of rules and regulations.

Eg. To write was to work on the Sabbath. Writing is thus defined: He who writes two letters of the alphabet with his right or with his left hand, whether of one kind or two kinds, if they are written with different inks or in different languages, is guilty. Even if he should write two letters from forgetfulness, he is guilty, whether he has written them with ink or with paint, red chalk, vitriol, or anything which makes a permanent mark....' Barclay,p148-9

Jesus, and also the Apostle Paul, were scathing of this scribal law. Jesus regularly and publicly broke these laws, particularly with regard to cleanliness and hand washing, and healing on the Sabbath.

Reverence & Respect.

The excruciatingly detailed laws had completely missed the point. They had lost the idea that behind all behaviour should lie a reverence for God. Jesus pointed his disciples towards that reverence. And reverence for God should lead to respect for others.

St Augustine wrote 'love God, and do what you like'. It follows that if we love God then our actions will be loving.

Underlying attitudes matter. Jesus speaks about particular situations (v21 onwards).

Our actions cannot change unless our attitudes do.

The way of following God is never through rules and religiosity, but always through reverence and respect. Jesus demonstrated that in his own life and death.

For Discussion

1. What experience do you have of ridiculous rules (secular or religious)?
2. Jesus said that he came to fulfill the law and the prophets. In what ways is the New Testament a continuation of the Old? In what ways does it break with the past?
3. What are the benefits and drawbacks of broad principles? Are you more comfortable with specific and detailed laws? Why/why not?
4. 'Love God and do what you like' (St Augustine). Is this a helpful way to approach discipleship? Why?
5. Look again at v21-42. Is there any of this teaching that you find particularly difficult? Why?