

## Rules and Rights

Year B, Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Deuteronomy 4:1-2,6-9; Psalm 15; James 1:27-27; Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

Rules and rights are all the rage right now. There are public rules that impact individual rights. There are private rules that reshape communal life. Some rules seem oppressive. Some rights seem fickle or selfish. Some rules are well-considered. Some rights are worth exercising. Viruses, vaccines, saliva tests, quarantines, mask mandates, health care, and hospital beds are all in the swirl in this conversation around rules and rights.

But rules and rights aren't just pandemic matters, they are political as well. Recent legislation around casting ballots and how these new rules effect the right to vote are also at the front of public discourse. And it doesn't stop there.

The tension between rules and rights shows up in our own homes. Rules around screen time, house duties, and media on Sunday mornings can bring great offense to our right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of Fortnite or Minecraft.

Today's lessons all touch on this theme of rules and what it looks like to live well. But in place of "rules," today's texts instead use words like "statutes," "ordinances," "commands," "charges," "law," and even "religion." The idea behind these holy rules is that they're from God, and they are for our good. Our lesson from Deuteronomy states that by observing God's statutes, the Israelites "will live to enter and occupy the land" the Lord is giving them (Deut 4:1).

Our lessons today teach us that God's rules are to help, not harm us. They are to set us free, not hold us captive. God's commands are wise and just, and by following them, we become a community of wise and just people. Listening to God's teachings makes us people who are discerning even when the world around us is confused. While God's rules are not coercive – God will not force us to follow them – God's rules are quite literally a matter of life or death. And God, as the author of Deuteronomy later reminds us, wants us to choose life!

What I'd like to do today is focus on three rules that help us choose Life. But before we drill down on three distinctive features of Christian living, I'd like to state that the fundamental claim in our lesson from Deuteronomy is that God's rules are wise and just. The idea is that by following God's rules they will in turn make us wise and just. God's rules make us a different kind of people; people who speak well of others, do well by our friends, and are kind to our neighbors even when they've wronged us. God's rules make us different. They enjoin us to do things like keep our promises even when it hurts us.

I used to think that wisdom and justice were things that all people could agree upon, regardless of who or what they worship. Afterall, wisdom and justice are cardinal virtues. The ancient Greeks talked about them long before Christians ever hit the scene.

But Christian wisdom and justice are actually a good bit different from how the world sees things. As Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon remind us in their book, *Resident Aliens*, words like justice require content; we do not really know what justice means “apart from the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth. After all,” they note, “Pilate permitted the killing of Jesus in order to secure both peace and justice (Roman style) in Judea” (38). The content of our faith makes our wisdom look like foolishness to the world and our justice strange to those who do not know Jesus. When Christians speak of wisdom and justice, we have a different understanding of what it means to be truly wise and just.

So with this in mind, *that God’s rules are wise and just but utterly different from the wisdom and justice of the world*, let’s explore three holy rules today that help us live into the abundant life God wants for us.

The first is this: **be generous**. Generosity can take many forms, but this morning I’d like to focus on financial generosity because our Psalm, Epistle, and Gospel lessons all speak to money and holy living. Right now I’m reading a book called *God and Money*, written by two Harvard MBAs named John Cortines and Gregory Baumer. Cortines and Baumer agree with Randy Alcorn who maintains that “God sees our finances and our faith as inseparable” (quoted in *God and Money*, 40-1). In their book, Cortines and Baumer make the case that generosity is the most distinctive calling of Christians in Scripture. This generosity is not a matter of giving out of abundance. Rather it’s a quality of character that pays no mind to what you have or have not. And what they suggest is that the most practical way for Christians to become generous is tithing. They cite Randy Alcorn again, who describes tithing as “the training wheels of giving.” (quoted in *GM*, 37).

In their examination of biblical support for tithing, Cortines and Baumer determine that Christians are not commanded to tithe (38), but tithing is a great place for Christians to learn generosity. [On a side note, I learned that according to the Old Testament, the average Israelite was actually commanded to give three distinct tithes that amounted to about 23% of their income every year rather than 10%.] So while tithing is not one of God’s rules for Christians, God’s rule to be generous actually finds a helpful companion in tithing. Tithing practices us, it habituates us, in letting go of our money. Tithing helps us become a people who are generous.

Being generous helps us understand the prohibitions found in today’s Psalm against lending money at interest or taking bribes against the innocent. These are holy rules that keep us from money’s grip. And to be sure, money’s grip is powerful. It’s no accident that Jesus talks about money as often as he does or that he explicitly names greed in his list of evil intentions that destroy us from the inside out. The grip of money is so powerful that we should see tithing as a great gift from God. This is why I encourage college students to tithe right now, even when they don’t have much money. It’s why our boys have been tithing since the day they earned their first dollar doing a chore or mowing a lawn. Tithing is a holy rule that helps us become generous and genuinely free people.

A second rule we receive this morning is the statute to **care for those in distress**. For James, those in distress are orphans and widows, a group in the 1<sup>st</sup> century with few rights or protections, which made them not only powerless, but extremely vulnerable. James's attention to orphans and widows is a common concern and care in the Old and New Testament. And they should remain a concern for us today.

There are many other people and groups who are in distress today in ways that would be similar to orphans and widows in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. The unemployed, struggling to make ends meet. Refugees from Afghanistan. Immigrants detained at the border. Asians in America who have been harassed during the pandemic. The poor in Bond County. And the list goes on and on. Pastor Ayebale's invitation to provide meals for Core Community on the Mondays of September is one opportunity to care for those in distress. Our preparation and provision of these meals actually becomes means of grace for us. What if we saw care for all people in distress as a holy mandate, a divine rule, for Christian living?

The danger in giving a sermon like this is that we could confuse rules with faithful discipleship. But if James is willing to take this risk, I will follow his lead. I would like to make clear, however, that what I am calling God's rules are really better understood as God's loving guidance for living lives that flourish. You might think of rules in the monastic sense of "rule," a kind of way of life. Or it may be helpful to think of the word "guidance" rather than "rule." God's statutes or ordinances or commands are really, after all, God's ways of guiding us into the kingdom of heaven, showing us how to become God's friends. So the rules of generosity and caring for the distressed are really just guides for how to live happy, holy, and whole lives.

One fascinating dynamic, in fact, of people who are not generous and so don't care for those in distress is the recent finding by Paul Piff, a psychologist and professor at University of California, Irvine. Money, it turns out, makes us mean. In every experiment Dr. Piff administered in his studies on how money influences relationships, he found that "higher incomes were correlated with 'mean' behavior!" He explains, "'What we've been finding ... is that as a person's level of wealth increases, their feelings of compassion and empathy go down, and their feelings of entitlement, of deservingness, and their ideology of self-interest increase'" (quoted in *GM*, 50). Here we see not only how God's rules support and reinforce each other, but also how generosity and caring for others make us people of compassion and so more likely to be generous and caring. It's a virtuous cycle.

And so with this in mind, a third guidance for living well is **keeping our hearts set on God**. This is what is at the root of the well-meaning kosher laws of the Jews. In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus clarifies that holy living has far more to do with where our heart is set than how we wash or what we eat. But in case we get this mixed up and think that holy living is all about our inner disposition, Jesus clarifies that keeping our hearts set on God has concrete implications. The long list of "evil intentions" Jesus gives are not really intentions at all, if by intentions we are to understand "purposes of mind." Rather, Jesus here names several actions that make for deadly living.

And here is where the Gospel breaks through. Jesus tells us today that it's not about the rules after all, it's about God! The rules are just hints, signposts, directions for loving God and our neighbor well. Holy living is about not wronging people's bodies, not stealing from people, and not killing people. Holy living is about being faithful to our spouses and honoring other marriages. It's about sharing our stuff, living in the light, telling the truth, honoring our bodies, celebrating others, and humbly serving God in all things. Holy living is true freedom because by following God's guidance we are set free from the stranglehold of sin to live in love and peace with God and our neighbors.

And now we see that God's intent all along was not only to make us holy and happy, but also to make us like God.

And **that** is what these rules are about: they help us become like God. By being generous, caring for the powerless, and setting everything we do in service to God, we become people fit for friendship with God. James is clear on this: "Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above" (James 1:17). We are generous because God is generous.

What we learn today is that by observing God's rules, we become friends with the God who is already near us. God desperately wants to be with us and so gives us rules that are for our highest flourishing: friendship with God. When we see that God's rules are for us, we may even forget about our rights, which as it turns out, can keep us from living the full life God wants for us anyway. God's rules or law is not the opposite of God's grace. Rather, God's rules are instruments of grace, they are training wheels, that prepare us for the adventure of life with God.

Thanks be to God who shows us the way to true freedom and true religion, which is nothing less than friendship with God and abundant life in the Kingdom.