

Sermon: Rules for Making Life Easier

Year C, Proper 8

[2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20; Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62](#)

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Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem. The Greek underlying the English word “set” is almost a structural term, like setting concrete or setting a bone. This journey that Jesus is on, from the Galilee in the north to Jerusalem in the south is changing the way Jesus is built. Luke presents this moment as a key one, when the crucifixion that will come on Good Friday begins to materialize out of the haze of possibilities.

This is also a moment when things begin to change for the disciples, for those following Jesus. They come into one town and aren’t welcome. With their faces set toward Jerusalem, I can imagine that the locals took one look at Jesus and his crew and thought, “Those people are nothing but trouble. Let them roll on through.” James and John want to know if they’re supposed to call down fire from heaven (Luke 9:54). Which had to make Jesus wonder if they’ve been listening to that love God, love your neighbor thing.

They pass by one guy and Jesus invites him to follow. The guy just wants to bury his father, to be a good son. Jesus says “no” (Luke 9:59-60). They pass by another who simply wants to say goodbye to his people before he follows Jesus. Jesus says “no” (Luke 9:61-62). The guy who said he wanted to follow Jesus wherever Jesus went, Jesus says “*Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.*” (Luke 9:58). Following Jesus is not an easy thing to do. And Jesus can say it’s tough, but how does he describe a gig so tough that his followers are signing up to be crucified with him? Or to bear his cross with him? How hard is life when you have no place to lay your head? How hard is life when you can’t even do the decent thing and bury your father? How hard is life when you can’t even say goodbye to the people who love you? That’s how hard it is to follow Jesus.

All of them, James and John who want to call down fire, the two guys on the road who just want to take care of a couple things before following Jesus, all of them are asking the same question. What are the rules? What am I supposed to do to be saved as a follower of Jesus? It’s not a bad question. It’s a question we just promised KJ we’d help him answer. So we should probably get working on it, because it’s not an easy one.

At first blush it looks like Paul is laying out a set of rules to the church in Galatia. Avoid *fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these* (Galatians 5:19-21). It’s not a bad list. Plus one of those words, sorcery I think, literally translates as the taking of drugs.¹ So some of our modern day terrors are in there under another name. Not to focus on the negative, Paul also lays out a bunch of things we should pursue: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). Another good list.

But they’re not really rules. Because where does my joy in soft-serve start to bleed over into carousing? Sitting on the side of Route 13 on a June day with a cone with crunchy topping, it’s

¹ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 47.

not obvious where one starts and the other ends. Plus the joy of a small cone that's the size of my head pulls against the idea of self-control.

That was Paul's point. Christ has set us free (Galatians 5:1). And set us free not to be selfish, greedy, taking a bite out of everyone else (Galatians 5:15) to get as much as we can. Christ has set us free for freedom. Liberty is not license. A life as a follower of Jesus is one where you are free to love your neighbor, to care deeply about the well-being of another. As much as you care about your own well-being. You are loved so much by God that you have been set free for freedom. What do you have to do to be saved as a follower of Jesus? Nothing. It's already done. God has already done it.

There are no rules. More than that, Paul would argue, setting up rules shows that you don't get it. If you want to set up rules that say dress like this, say this prayer in this building at this time, don't eat with those people, then you are saying that you can save yourself. That if you comply with some list of rules, you can save yourself and God doesn't come into it. And that is not what being a follower of Jesus is about.

In a way we know that. We know there's a commandment out there, that says *honor thy father and thy mother* (Exodus 20:12). For a good chunk of our lives, there's a whole bunch of rules about not interrupting them, about doing what they say, about behaving in a way they would approve of. Taking our nap when we're supposed to, not pouring all the crayons all over the floor when Mumma is making an announcement in church. And then there comes the day when the only way to honor them is to take the car keys away, even though that is not what they asked for or what they approve of, at all. We know that loving our parents looked one way when we were KJ's age and another way later on. It looks different as we age and our parents come to the end of their lives. But the love is the same. That's Paul's point. The rules change; the love remains the same.

So in one way, we know there aren't rules to follow or that the rules have to change over time. Sometimes they have to change so much they can't really be rules.

But in another way, we're longing for rules. Just tell me what I have to do, Jesus. Don't make me figure it out. Don't make me figure out how to love people who are so different from me. Don't make me figure out how I should love people who are doing things that I disagree with to the bottom of my heart. Don't make me figure out how to love myself enough to walk away from people who are damaging me so profoundly that I will no longer be created in your image. Just give me the rules Jesus and make this hard life a little easier.

Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head (Luke 9:58). Following Jesus is hard. It's hard for so many reasons. And one of the many reasons is that there aren't any rules. There aren't any recipes you can follow to assure your salvation. It's hard to feel like it's already done, especially when the world seems headed somewhere in a handbasket at breakneck speed. In your baptism, you agreed to witness to the work and word of Jesus Christ as best you are able. You accepted the tremendous gift of love you have been given. So help KJ, help all of KJ's friends and family, help all of us *live by the Spirit, be guided by the Spirit* (Galatians 5:25). Because the love that underlies everything has already saved you. No rules required.