

## **Rules or relationship**

Readings: Galatians 2:15 – 21, John 10:1 - 10

Some years back I heard about a school that removed its perimeter fences. A study apparently showed that the children played in a much smaller area when there were no fences. When the fences were there, the children would play right up to the boundaries. The inference was that children are more secure with rules; they need to know exactly what they are allowed to do and what they aren't.

I tried to find that ancient research but couldn't. I did find a more recent study done in Taiwan where security for schools was a major issue. High concrete fences were common there to keep the children safe. The effectiveness of those fences was being evaluated.

Here is what the researcher said about the old fences:

Their endless, rigid appearance prevented outside interference, but they often created an imposing or negative impression. ... Moreover, this type of fence, with a strong protective function, isolated schools from the communities in which they were located. These school campuses lost opportunities to interact with the neighboring (sic) communities.

The researcher recognised that people wanted to keep the children and staff safe. The recommendations included a variety of ways to do this without creating an atmosphere of fear and exclusivity. The recommendations didn't include doing away with the fences entirely but they did suggest major reductions in the size, using plants and having fences that people could see through.

Now fences are not identical to rules but there are some similarities. Fences offer protection. That is good. But fences can become confining and restrictive. They can define who is in and who is out. They can be divisive. Some years ago I referred to the Palestine/Israel wall in this way and I got into trouble for it but I hold to my position - one person's protection leads to others being penalised.

The need for protection is a natural one. But is it a Biblical one? Very often self-protection comes from fear. That fear is usually not only about personal safety, though it often includes that. Fear often comes from insecurity or anxiety. When we are afraid we protect ourselves. We also shut out others and want to control them.

But that doesn't need to be the case. Jesus doesn't control us but invites us into a relationship of love. Jesus always saw through the rules to the purpose behind them. When that purpose wasn't being fulfilled he ignored the rules. Jesus came to bring life and that life abundantly.

Has anyone ever called you a control freak? I confess to having been called that more than once. Other people call me a 'permission giver' though. Maybe some of it comes down to one's perspective and also what space I am in at any given time. If I feel secure with someone I probably am more trusting and likely to give wider parameter.

Have you noticed that when we feel afraid or anxious we make more rules? We become more controlling. We want to get rid of the unpleasant anxiety or fear within us whether we are aware of it at the time or not. So we try to control others. Can you remember a situation that was like that for you?

I can recall a work situation where I was promoted above one of my colleagues. It was an honour for me but my colleague hated the fact that I was now her boss. Relational people like me do not enjoy conflict and so my insecurity grew. The more insecure I became the more controlling I became. The more she kicked against my oversight the more I tried to rein her in. It became a vicious circle.

After much prayer we both realised how we were reacting and sorted it out. My point is that we were both insecure and so we both tried to make more rules. It didn't work.

I wonder if this is a similar situation to which Paul and Peter found themselves in when they argued about circumcision for the Gentiles?

Peter was one of the original twelve disciples of Jesus. He had served his time during Jesus' time on earth. He'd made mistakes and grown from them. Peter's ministry was successful and well known. Then, along comes Paul or Saul as he was known.

Saul had not been with Jesus on earth. He had not gone through the emotional upheaval and bewilderment of Jesus' trial, crucifixion and resurrection. Yet Jesus chose Saul for a dramatic conversion.

Saul sees a vision of Jesus and is instantly turned around!

Peter continues on in ministry and then all of a sudden this brash young man called Paul turns up. Paul hadn't sought wisdom and teaching from Jesus' disciples. He didn't ask about their ways of doing things. But clearly the Lord was with Paul. People were coming to know the Lord all over the show.

Scripture tells us that the apostles praised God because of what was happening through Paul. But was Peter secretly jealous of Paul? Maybe or maybe not. It would be a fairly human response but we don't know if it is true or not.

We do know that Peter had initially said that Gentiles converting to faith needed only to avoid eating meat that had been offered to idols. Then some other Jews insisted on more rules, just little things like circumcision. Peter caved in to their wishes and he and Paul battled about that. Paul argued fiercely that the only thing that was really important was a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Paul was very clear that too many rules were not only unhelpful; they would lead the new Christians back into bondage:.

... we, too, have trusted Jesus Christ, that we might be accepted by God because of faith—and not because we have obeyed the Jewish laws. For no one will ever be saved by obeying them.

His letter to the Galatians continues

... we are sinners if we start rebuilding the old systems I have been destroying of trying to be saved by keeping Jewish laws, for it was through reading the Scripture that I came to realize that I could never find God's favour by trying—and failing—to obey the laws. I came to realize that acceptance with God comes by believing in Christ.

I can understand Peter being tempted to go back to the rules and even to expect others to obey the rules. Rules do keep us safe. Not to have any rules is very scary. I don't think any of us would say we don't need any rules. But the kinds of rules, and the sheer abundance of rules, that the Jewish people had lived by, had led to grief and condemnation and spiritual death. They just couldn't keep them and so they rebelled.

Most of us are not good rule keepers especially when we can't see a reason for them. Even when we can see the purpose behind the rules we still struggle. And when we fail we beat ourselves up.

Who grew up in a family where you were smacked if you broke the rules? Rule breaking always led to punishment of some kind in my childhood anyway. Perhaps our parents withdrew their love or were sarcastic or stopped speaking to us or yelled at us.

The effects of those things carry on into adulthood and into our Christian lives also if we let them. But the Bible tells us that the punishment we deserve is not ours at all. The amazing thing is that Jesus took the punishment we deserved. And ..... he keeps on taking it for us by offering us forgiveness through his cross.

He promises forgiveness without cost, without penalty, without punishment. He does this through relationship. And many of us struggle to really receive that.

I love it that Paul is able to say:

I have been crucified with Christ: and I myself no longer live, but Christ lives in me. And the real life I now have within this body is a result of my trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Paul's relationship with Jesus is such that his old life has totally gone and now all he knows is Jesus.

What about us? Can we say that our real life is totally in Christ or are we tempted to add things to our relationship with Jesus? Do we follow Jesus and the rules? What rules do add? What rules do we especially fear breaking?

Jesus didn't actually give us any rules.

Jesus doesn't exert control over us.

The only rule if you want to call it that is a rule of love – love for God and neighbour.

Yes Jesus is our Lord as well as our Friend. But his Lordship is nothing like what we think or expect.

Sure he does know what is best for us and it is sensible for us to do what he says even when it is far from comfortable to do so. But he won't force us to do it. Jesus never forces us to do anything.

Perhaps you think the Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' list of rules for us?

Not at all.

Jesus describes attitudes and behaviours that will follow from our relationship with him. When we are so close to him that we can say "It is no longer I that live but Christ that lives in me" our attitudes change and loving behaviour follows on naturally. It takes a while but that is ok.

Danny Silke, author of Culture of Honour, puts it like this:

... we do face challenges in learning to walk in the Spirit, but these are not the challenges we face when we are trying to keep the rules. They are the challenges of dying to ourselves and exercising our self-control so that we stay connected to the flow of God's grace that enables us to live sin-free lives.

Not having a detailed list of rules is not the same as simply going with the flow. Our relationship with Christ does depend on what he has done and is doing for us. That relationship doesn't depend on us. However it goes more smoothly for us if we do actually want to maintain and develop that relationship with him.

In the past the church has been about following rules. However whenever the church is true to itself it is about promoting a relationship with Jesus Christ not a series of rules that must be followed.

Rules kill; relationship brings life! Do we believe that? What does the church do with someone else who doesn't follow the rules? What do we do? Do we return to the rules and even make up new ones?

Danny Silke says that if we panic in the presence of sin, it indicates how important the rules are to us.

As a church we have a choice. When someone stuffs up we choose how to react. Will we lovingly point them to Jesus, the Good Shepherd, the one who loves them still; the one who brings abundant life? Or will we impose rules?

As a community of faith we endeavour to follow the voice of our Shepherd and to live abundantly and freely in relationship with him.

In John 10:15: That Shepherd has other sheep too. There is only one Shepherd but there are many sheep. We may disagree with the way some of the other sheep behave but one day we will be one flock.

So we might as well sort out our disagreements now and move forward in love together. Jesus tells us he is the Shepherd. He also tells us he is the Gate and that the sheep move in and out of the gate –they do that freely without restraint. They know when to go in and when to go out because of their relationship with the Shepherd. They aren't held in by high concrete walls.

As we work through this preaching series entitled A Culture of Honour, I pray that we will learn more about recognising the voice of the Shepherd and that we will care less about following rules – even the good ones. I pray that Christ will live more and more through us and that many will be drawn to a relationship with him where they and we can truly experience his love and mercy.