

LIVING BY THE RULES

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Acts 16: 9-15

Psalm 67

Revelation 21: 22 – 22:5

John 14: 23-29

I enjoy playing chess with one of my great-grandsons, Anthony. He's six years old now, so he's at the age where kids absorb things like sponges, and so it's not surprising, I guess, that he fairly quickly acquired a basic familiarity with the fundamentals of the game, what the object of the game is, how to capture the enemy pieces, and how each of the different pieces can move.

The one piece that gives him trouble is the knight, and those of you who play chess will understand why. All the rest of the pieces move in straight lines, but the knight is different. Every move of the knight involves going a square or two in one direction, then a square or two in another direction, either ninety degrees to the left or ninety degree to the right.

When Anthony asks why the knight is different, the only correct answer I can give him is: It's just the rule. When he was still learning the game, he'd move the knight a couple of squares and then just leave it there, then look up at me to see if that was okay, and I'd have to shake my head and say, "No, you have to go either here or here," and then show him the alternatives. If he'd ask why, again the only answer would be, that's just the rule for how a knight can move.

And that's basically the story with all games. Games have rules, and if you want to play the game, you agree to play by the rules. If a batter takes a third strike in baseball, sometimes you'll see him turn and scowl at the umpire, or maybe even start an argument. But the argument is always that that pitch should not have been called a strike; it's never that, just this once, the batter should be allowed four strikes.

Another way of putting this is that rules of games are, so to say, artificial, even arbitrary.

And so it's possible to change the rules, if everybody agrees. If we wanted to, Anthony and I could agree to play a game where we allowed the knight to move in a straight line without having to make that ninety degree turn. It wouldn't be regular chess, of course, but it would still be a game with rules, because, when it comes to games, the rules depend on us. We can change them, if we want; we can make up our own rules.

Rules of games are different in this respect from the kinds of rules that we call laws of nature. We all know the story about the scorpion standing on one side of a stream trying to persuade the frog to give him a piggyback ride to the other side. "No way!" the frog says. "If I carry you on my back, you might sting me!"

"That's crazy," the scorpion says. "If I sting you, we both drown."

The frog recognizes the force of that argument, and agrees to let the scorpion climb on his back. Halfway across the stream, the scorpion stings him, and as they are both sinking, the frog says, "Why did you do that? Now we're both going to die!"

"I couldn't help it," the scorpion says. "It's my nature."

And that's how nature's rules are different from rules of the game. Nature's rules just are what they are, no matter how we feel about them, and they don't change even if we decide we'd like to try something different. If I toss an apple into the air, I'd better get ready to catch it, no matter how much I wish it would stay up there – or even if I order it to stay up there. Why? Because what goes up must come down, and that's the end of the story.

In our gospel reading from John this morning, Jesus is giving us three separate rules for the Kingdom of heaven. How does Jesus happen to know the rules? Well, the answer to that is easy. He established them in the first place. In the opening verses of the Gospel we learn that all things – including the rules – were made through Christ. And who's a better person to tell you how something works than the person who created it in the first place?

But the main point is that these rules – Christ's rules – are established as rules like laws of nature rather than rules of chess, than rules of a game. They simply are what they are, no matter what we may feel about them. We may wish they were different or that we could change them, but we can't; changing them isn't an option. That's why it's very important that we be clear what they are, and why Christ here at the very end of His ministry points them out for his disciples and, through them, for us. This is life, after all, this is real life. It isn't a game.

So what are the three rules Christ reveals to us in our passage for this morning? Here they are.

Rule number one: The Father loves those who love and honor the Son. Rule number two: Loving and honoring the Son means obeying his word. And finally, rule number three: The Spirit of God within you will reveal Christ's teaching to you. Let's consider each of these in turn.

Verse 23 in our passage for this morning reads as follows: "...Whoever loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love him..."

That's pretty simple and straightforward, isn't it? The Father will love the person who loves Christ.

Now of course we know from elsewhere in the Bible that there is a sense in which the Father loves all of His children, including presumably those who do not love the Son.

But remember that here in these late chapters of the gospel of John, Christ is not speaking to the world any longer, he's speaking to those who have committed themselves to Him, to his disciples. And he's communicating to them the rules of the kingdom that apply specifically to them. In other words, he's talking to Christians like you and me, and he's telling us that there is a special place in God's heart for those Christians who love and honor the Son. That's the rule.

What does that mean, to love and honor the Son? Let's think about it from the context of a Christian church rather than a Christian individual.

Look at that stained glass image of Christ on the wall behind me. Notice where it's located. It's right in the center of everything, and it's above everything. It's above the congregation, it's above the pulpit, it's even above the Cross. What does that symbolize?

It symbolizes that our primary focus here in this Christian building is not on each other, it is not on whoever is standing at the pulpit, it is not even on the deliverance provided by the Cross. Our primary focus is ever and always on Christ himself. Just as you see in the stained glass image that Christ's own gaze is directed towards the Father, so our gaze is to remain ever and always focused on the Son.

That's what we emphasize in our statement of faith, and that's why we put it right at the beginning. Let's read the opening sentences together:

"Our church is Christ-centered and welcoming. Our welcome goes out to all who are seeking the love of God, and we extend that love in Christ. We believe we are all children of God, brothers and sisters with one another. Our focus is on forgiveness and relationship, not judgment. We believe in the universal reconciliation of all to God through the saving grace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ."

God loves all of His children, but there's a special place in His heart for those who love His Son. God loves all His churches, but there's a special place in His heart for churches that honor His Son. And that's what we intend to do, because it's rule number one.

Rule number two is that loving Christ means obeying his teaching. vv. 23-24: "Whoever loves me will obey my teaching...Whoever does not love me will not obey my teaching."

Once again, what could be more straightforward than that? There's nothing complicated, nothing difficult, nothing hard to understand. If we want that special place in God's heart, we do what his Son teaches us to do.

And where do we find out what the son teaches us to do? Again, the answer is simple. It's right here, in this book.

What does that mean in practical terms, for us as a church? It means that we have a right to expect to hear the Gospel proclaimed and the Scriptures expounded when we gather together to worship the Son. And that's why we conclude our statement of faith with a commitment to keeping our focus on the Bible, on the Word of God. Let's read it together:

"We are a church of hope rather than of hardened doctrine. The foundation of our faith is the Bible, and we preach the Bible as God's living word, speaking God's personal message of hope to each individual."

If we are to love Christ, we must obey his teaching, and the Father will love us. Where do we find his teaching? In the Bible. Therefore we read and study and preach the Bible. Isn't Christianity simple, when you get down to the basics?

But wait, someone might object. You make it sound so easy, but I don't find it easy at all. To me the Bible is a real chore when it isn't a real bore, and most of what the preacher says goes in one ear and out the other while not leaving much of an impression between them. I'm afraid I'll never be able to understand what Christ is teaching, so I'll never be able to show my loving obedience to him, and so I'll miss out on occupying that special place in our Father's heart.

If that's how you feel – and I know many people do feel that way – let me remind you of rule number three: “The Spirit of God within you will reveal Christ's truth to you.”

Let's read together vv. 15-17 from the same chapter of John: “If you love me, you will obey my commandments. I will ask the Father, and He will give you another helper, who will stay with you forever. He is the Spirit, who reveals the truth about God. The world cannot receive him or know him. But you know him, because he remains with you and is in you.”

The same point is repeated a few verses later in our Gospel passage for this morning: “I have told you this while I am still with you. The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything...” (vv. 25-26)

Child of God, the Spirit of Christ is alive and active within you, and is there to help and to teach you. But the part of you that is the Spirit's student is not your brain, your intellect, what Hercule Poirot would call “the little gray cells.” The student part of you is the heart, and the conscience, which is part of the heart. It's in the heart and conscience that all true education happens, that's where the miracle of germination and new life takes place. And once the heart acquires its understanding, then – sometimes, at least - that understanding trickles up to the little gray cells – and a flower of thought appears between your ears. But even if that never happens, you will have been changed, you will have been made better, you will have come closer to your God

Elsewhere in the Gospels, Christ has taught us that unless we become as little children, we cannot enter the Kingdom of God (Matt. 18:3). At least part of what he means by that is what we're talking about now. The Spirit is there to teach us as we are, not as we will be some day. And we are all of us only at the very beginning, taking the very first baby steps on the endless journey towards Christ.

Children of God, may we strive to be obedient to Christ in all things, but first and foremost in this most fundamental way: that we hunger and thirst after

righteousness; May we always keep ourselves open to Christ's teaching, as he has revealed it in His word, the Bible. May we listen with receptive hearts when other followers of Christ share their thoughts with us about our Lord and Savior, even if they don't echo our own thoughts. May we come to Christ the way Mary, the sister of Martha did, when she sat at Christ's feet to listen to him, and heard him say of her, "She has chosen the better path." Children of God, may we learn to trust Christ's promise that his own Spirit is in us and will be in us forever, to teach us, to help us, and to comfort us. May we love Christ, and find our love reciprocated in God's own deepest heart. Amen.