

Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
November 4, 2018

Text: Mark 12:28-37
Theme: "Love Rules"

Rules, rules, rules, just where would we be without rules? If there were no rules in football it would only be a bunch of bodies struggling for control of an oddly shaped ball. We would never know who was winning or losing. What would be the point? Maybe the goal would be just to survive the melee if you were on the field. What if there were no rules of the road? How would that be if everyone was trying to go in whatever direction he felt for the moment at the speed that suited his fancy? What we would have would be the survival of the fittest. I think I've witnessed a bit of this in Kenya (Nairobi) and India, not so much in Bor South Sudan simply because there aren't nearly as many vehicles. But there you do have cattle and goats to contend with.

Rules, rules, we don't always like them. They can be more than a little burdensome. They can be quite limiting. Take tax code. It's millions of words on thousands of pages. Who can really understand it all? Could it not be made simpler? The problem is those who make the rules find this to be a very difficult process. Lawmakers can be moved by the rules for re-election or the rule of disagreement as to what is the best thing to do.

Rules, rules, rules, no escaping them. But what is the motivation behind the rules? A lot of that is centered in who is making the rules. Is it a loving parent or is it a self-centered tyrant? In our text for today Jesus is

asked a question about the rules. He readily gives an answer. He is in a position like no other as the One who is David's Son, but also David's Lord. He has been living by the rules while at the same time being the Giver of the rules. He answers with "love rules."

All this takes place in the temple courts. The Lord the people had been seeking had come to His temple, but most, almost all, were missing this fact. They saw a man, an amazing man, a great teacher, but a man none the less. God has actually come down and most were missing it. He speaks of rules, His own. God had come down to speak rules once before. It was a frightful day. He descended to Sinai in fire and smoke with the shaking of the whole mountain. That day He did speak the rules (Exodus 20). It's not millions of words and thousands of pages. It's Ten relatively simple statements, the Ten Commandments. As you can see on this piece of paper they don't take up a lot of space. God wrote them down Himself with a bigger font and a thicker medium. The Ten Commandments were written by the finger of God on the two tablets of stone.

It was a frightful experience for those present, yet these were given in love. The Creator knows best knows the way of life for His creatures. The law written on the heart is now written on stone. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One (vs 29, Deuteronomy 6:4) Israel did hear loudly and clearly on that day. Moses would go up on the mountain and received more, all the statutes and commandments Israel should follow as God's people. Statutes that would make them stand out from all the other nations. Yes, they were given in love. There were not give as hoops for

the people to jump through for God's entertainment. To walk in the commandments would bring life instead of death (Deuteronomy 30:13-15). These were God's rules.

The keepers and teachers of the law in Jesus' day had a longer list of rules. Here, take a look. These are numbered from 1 through 613. A lot of these would have been unwritten rules in Jesus' day, part of the oral tradition. If some were written down, likely not the same numbering. They would be written down a couple of centuries later in the Mishnah. The scribe on that day may not have been in the position to say, "of the 613, which commandment is the greatest," yet some, maybe most of these were well known. Like 90 on this list, one is not to walk more than 2000 cubits outside the city boundary on the Sabbath, or maybe 317, the Kohen (priests) work shifts must be equal during holidays. There were a lot of rules, many more than ten to be observed in day to day living.

Jesus is asked about the greatest and He does not hesitate to give answer. He gives the One and the Two, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.'³⁰ And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'³¹ The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' The inquisitor agrees that these two love rules rule, "There is no other commandment great than these." (v 31)

A few weeks back we saw a man come to Jesus with a question calling Him "good teacher," and Jesus called the good address into

question. Now this man, a teacher says to Jesus, ‘good answer.’ Do these words indicate he thought he was in a position to judge the quality of Jesus’ answer? It is not far-fetched to assume this particular teacher of the law was held in high regard by the others, why else would he be the one doing the asking on this day? Jesus commends him for his commending. After the man says to love God with your whole being and to love your neighbor as yourself was much more than whole burn offerings and sacrifices, Jesus says, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” (vs 34) What was Jesus’ getting at? Whole burnt offerings and sacrifices had been commanded by God through Moses. They were a means of grace really, a way of receiving forgiveness from God for a repentant sinner. But some had seen them the way pagans see offerings. They were a way to appease God, to get him off your back so you could do what you pleased. Now you could do what you loved whether it pleased God or not. To point to love God and love neighbor certainly was looking to the right motivation. It was about a sacrifice of service, not a serving of self.

He was not far away, but he was still wide of the mark. Jesus gives the love rules and the Pharisees really did love rules. Remember the context of the events. This is taking place during Holy Week. Jesus is being challenged and tested in hopes of being discredited and/or entrapped. In this chapter we have the paying taxes to Caesar test, the whose wife in the resurrection test (Sadducees) and now the greatest commandment test. The Pharisees are having their shot. Yes, the Pharisees certainly loved rules. They could use their rule keeping as an

occasion to say, “look at me!” This included the instruction in Deuteronomy 6 to bind God’s Word “as a sign on your hand, and...as frontlets between your eyes.” Jesus says of the Pharisees in Matthew 23, “They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long (Matthew 23:5). As whole burnt offerings and sacrifices could be seen wrongly as a way merely to appease God so the keeping of their rules could be a way to flaunt your righteousness before your neighbor. That’s far different than loving your neighbor. The Pharisees loved keeping God’s rules according to their rules.

Are we not tempted to do the same thing? Are we not tempted to put a personal spin on the commandments, to stretch or bend them a bit to better fit our wants and desires? Rules are fine but why should they be final for me? The old nature is always pulling us this way.

But back to the not far from the kingdom man. We read in Luke 17, Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed,²¹ nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you." (vs 20-21) The Kingdom was right there in the midst, standing among them, had come in Jesus. The Kingdom was right next to the scribe who commended Jesus in Jesus. The scribe knew the rules for living in the Kingdom but he didn’t know the King. He was not far, but not in, and never would be if he didn’t realize something, his helplessness. To love God and love neighbor was

unreachable, and unkeepable. He was always falling short and so do we. This is because of the rule of sin.

But love rules, a greater love than the love of sinning. As said before God had come down before, on Sinai, come down in just a little bit of His glory. But He had come down again in a whole new way. "How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David?

³⁶ David himself, in the Holy Spirit, declared, "'The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.' ³⁷ David himself calls him Lord. So how is he his son?" The angel Gabriel knew the answer. We read in Luke 1, "³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

God lays aside His glory, humbles Himself, takes on our human flesh. He came down not in glory to judge, but in love to save. Love rules. He loved God with His whole being. It's the wholeness of God in man loving God and man, loving neighbor as no one else ever had. He would not be discredited or entrapped on this day, yet He knows what will soon take place. He comes to lay down His life and to take it up again. That time of laying down is close at hand. He demonstrates, even defines love. "This is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and gave His Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sin." (1 John 4:10)

He is the way to the Father, the only way. The man is not far, but not in. You are either in or out. Out is the place of anguish, weeping and gnashing of teeth. In is a place at the banquet reclining with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, a place at the wedding feast of the Lamb (Matthew 8:11). Would the scribe one day be in? Perhaps he would be among those on the day of Pentecost who were cut to the heart by Peter's words, repenting of his sins and being baptized for the forgiveness of those sins and receiving the Holy Spirit. Then he could begin to walk by those two greatest commandments.

Love does rule. Those who believe, trust in the One who laid down His life and took it up again are reborn, pass from death to life, from darkness to light, from slavery to sin, to freedom to serve, a serving in love. The direction of that love is from God to us, and then through us out to those around us.

Love rules. Jesus will give a new love rule very shortly. In the upper room He will say, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another." (John 13:34) God's love was not meant to be carried in a box or kept in a box (phylactery that contained Exodus 13:1–10, 11–16; Deuteronomy 6:4–9, 11:13–21). These are words to be lived out by the power of the Spirit. As we sang just a little while ago:

Breathe, O breathe Thy loving Spirit
Into ev'ry troubled breast;
Let us all in Thee inherit;
Let us find Thy promised rest.
Take away the love of sinning;

Alpha and Omega be;
End of faith, as its beginning,
Set our hearts at liberty. (LSB, Hymn 700, stanza 2)

Love rules. It's the love of God for us, to us, and through us. For Jesus'
sake. Amen