

Proper 9 Sermon
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Considering the area that we live in, most of us are probably pretty close with at least some people who follow a form of Christianity that lays down a pretty specific code of ethics—people who follow a faith tradition that tells them not to drink, not to ever leave their spouse, not to ever skip a day of church. Their tradition also may tell them what they may or may not wear, or how they can keep their hair or their beards. Some traditions may even lay out what they may or may not eat. These traditions don't enforce these rules arbitrarily, but teach that all of these guidelines are put in place so that people will avoid sin. Follow the rules and God is pleased with you—don't follow the rules and God will be angry. We ourselves, as Episcopalians, do not have these types of rules in place in our churches, and most Episcopalians are glad to not have such strict and sometimes strange regulations imposed on us. However, it's not so hard to see what motivates the kinds of Christians who prefer to be a part of a community with a set code of conduct.

I think most Christians genuinely want to live their lives in a way that would please God. And that goal seems a bit easier to achieve if you're able to sit down to a list of rules that you can follow in order to know whether the way you're living is acceptable to God. "I never drink alcohol, haven't left my spouse, and I'm in church every single Sunday. I must be doing ok." But the problem is, living in a way that is pleasing to God is not so simple. Even if we do try to come up with some basic rules to help guide our lives, if we actually get really specific, it can become almost impossible to be able to appropriately apply those rules in every situation. We can easily get stuck in a cycle of trying to figure out which rules we should follow when, to the point that the rules become meaningless. It's this very issue that Jesus points out to the crowds in the Gospel reading for today. The people had so many rules to follow about when they should fast versus when they should feast that when they encountered John and Jesus, they ended up condemning them both for doing completely opposite things. "For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'"

As much as we'd like to think we can somehow figure out the system in a way that gives us clear-cut answers, that's just not the case. Because faith is not simply a matter of the mind, it's also a matter of the heart. The fact of the matter is, we're not perfect. Even if we intend to do good all of the time, in certain situations we just fail. Even if we were somehow able to come up with the perfect set of rules to follow in order to live how God would have us live, we'd break at least some of those rules at least some of the time. We curse at the guy on 422 who cut us off—we yell at our spouse for no good reason because we've had a stressful day—we ignore the person outside the store asking for donations because we feel so busy we just can't be bothered right now. As Paul says, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate....I can will what is right, but I cannot do it."

But the biggest problem with our trying to come up with the right rules to follow isn't that we wouldn't be able to follow the rules even if we were to perfect them, but that trying to live in a way that pleases God isn't a matter of knowing all of the right things. It's about having our heart in the right place. Christ points out God has "hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants." The most educated theologian is not more able to follow God's will in their lives than the average cashier or mechanic. Being a Christian is not so much about knowing the right things as it is knowing what is the right thing to do in our everyday lives. Our collect today reminded us of the two great commandments upon which all of the laws of guide hang—loving God and loving our neighbor. And there is much more to those commandments than following a certain set of rules or guidelines.

Take the story of Rebekah. We know because we have the benefit of being able to read the scriptures that Abraham's servant had come to the well looking for the woman whom God had chosen to marry Abraham's son Isaac. And we know that the servant came to the well to wait for the woman who would offer him a drink of water, but also offer to water his camels. However, Rebekah did not have the benefit of knowing what we know about Abraham's servant. When Rebekah came to the well that day, it was probably with the intention of getting enough water for her household. This, in and of itself, would not have been an easy task, as it would likely require multiple trips, and drawing water, filling a giant jug and lugging it back and forth from well to home. So when this random stranger asks Rebekah for some water to drink, it wouldn't be difficult to put ourselves in her shoes and consider what her reactions may have been. I don't think it would have been out of line for Rebekah to say, "Get your own water." Or, if she was feeling generous, to offer to give the servant some water and leave it at that. However, we know this is not what Rebekah did. She not only offered the man water, but offered to water his camels! Many of you may not know this seeing as how camels are not too common around this area, but camels drink A LOT! To have drawn enough water for them all Rebecca had to be STRONG! Like, body-builder strong! By doing this we see that Rebekah is not only generous, but also hardworking.

But if Rebekah had been trying to follow a specific set of rules in this situation, she probably would have been out of luck. I doubt her local church group would have prepared her with a rule saying, "If a stranger asks you for some water, put in the tremendous amount of effort it would take to water his camels, too." No, the reason Rebekah was chosen by God is because she was not just living her life according to a set of rules, but with a desire in her heart to love God and to love her neighbor. And it was this desire that compelled her, when she heard of the servant's plea to God, to leave her home and her kindred and travel to a faraway place under God's guidance.

As convenient as it would be for us to have a set of rules to guide us in every possible situation we may come across in life, that's just not possible, and we'd probably end up breaking the rules anyway. But if we have the desire in our hearts to love God and to love our neighbor, that can steer us in the right direction more than any set of rules could. Yet it's true that even if we do have this desire, we will still fail. We will not be able to perfectly love God or to perfectly love our neighbor. Because as we see from Rebekah's story, doing those things often takes a lot of hard work, and we will not always feel up to the task. But we, as Christians, must dedicate ourselves to keep trying over and over again, knowing that Christ is our constant companion and support. Even if we feel overwhelmed and think that we cannot possibly live as God would have us live, we must remember that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us, and reassures us with the words, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Amen.