

Putting Rules Before People

Part 3 of 4 in the series, *When Christians Get It Wrong*
John 4:5-18, 39-42 – September 26, 2010 – Browns Point UMC
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We're on our third of four weeks on this topic of "When Christians Get It Wrong," during which we're discussing what outsiders think of Christians and what Christians often do, even with good intentions, that causes others to reject the faith, or at least to stay out of the church. Last week we talked about when we act out of fear instead of following Jesus, especially when dealing with people of other religions. Today we tackle what happens when we put rules before people: when we try to apply the individual laws of the Bible to every day, rather than putting the love of Christ first in our lives and relationships. This is a tough topic, because we're talking not just about one of the most controversial issues in the church today, but also how we read our Bibles, which is foundational to the way we understand God and the way we live. And so let us begin with prayer:

If you've read the gospels, you know how frequently the Pharisees tried to peg Jesus for breaking the rules. The Pharisees were people of the book, who held the Old Testament laws fastidiously, and they were constantly frustrated and confused that Jesus didn't seem to hold the laws in such high esteem as they did. He healed someone on the Sabbath when he wasn't supposed to be working. His disciples picked grain on the Sabbath when walking through a field. Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. He allowed himself to be anointed by a sinful woman. He didn't seem to follow the rules, and this upset the Pharisees again and again.

While it seems almost silly when we see it with other people, this kind of legalistic behavior is often what turns people away from Christianity. There were 613 Old Testament laws that the Pharisees followed to the letter. 613 – that's impressive! But again and again, Jesus told them they had missed the point. Jesus summed up the whole law and the prophets by saying: "Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself."

A few years ago, a researcher named David Kinnaman did a survey of 440 young adults who identified themselves as "outsiders" to the church – people not associated with Christianity. In the survey, the researchers gave the young outsiders a list of 20 words or phrases – 10 positive and 10 negative – that could be used to describe Christianity, and asked each one to identify which ones were most accurate according to their perceptions of Christians. *By far* the descriptor which these young adults chose to describe Christianity most often was "antihomosexual." This was followed by "judgmental" and then "hypocritical." The first favorable adjective came in at number five – the very ambiguous, "has good values and principles." The very lowest scores went to "people you trust," "seems genuine and real," "something that makes sense," and "relevant to your life."¹

"Antihomosexual." That is what people outside of the church think of Christians. And how did we get there but by acting like Pharisees – ignoring who Jesus was and what he taught in favor of following the rules. By putting rules before people.

Now I'll admit that it's a little scary to just jump out there and start talking about the issue that is dividing the church more than any other issue, with only a few minutes to try to tackle the nuances and complexity of these arguments, but if this is what people are saying about Christians,

¹ Kinnaman, David and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: what a new generation really thinks about Christianity...and why it matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 28ff.

we can't avoid it. We have to take a serious look at how we're engaging the issues and how we're engaging each other so that we're inviting people to participate in the Good News and not telling them that they don't qualify for it.

At its core, the division in the church over homosexuality is largely not just a fight about behavior or lifestyle, but a fight over Scripture. I learned this from some friends who were a part of a hugely successful Episcopal church in Florida. A few years ago, two of the priests and more than half of the families broke off from that incredible congregation, bought an old Pentecostal church building about a mile up the road, and started over. They didn't agree with the part of their congregation that stayed behind, and didn't want to be associated with the Episcopal Church anymore, so they aligned themselves with an Anglican bishop in Africa and gave themselves a new name.

I was angry when this happened, as I was just certain that the split was about homosexuality, and I thought my friends needed to be more open-minded. But my friends who went through this very painful divorce helped me to see that the debate, while involving homosexuality, was really about the way we read our Bibles. These two factions of this congregation could not agree on how to interpret Scripture, and so they didn't think they could live and worship together anymore.

There is an old slogan that says, "The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it." This is largely what I thought growing up – if it's in the Bible, it must be true, and there's little room for argument. But as I've studied the Bible more and more, I've realized that such an approach is overly simplistic. The bible is hugely important – hear me say that: I believe wholeheartedly that *this* is the best way for us to understand who God is, it's the story that each of us has been given to live out the rest of our lives, and it's the greatest Truth the world will ever know. But it is not simple. And as the Rev. Adam Hamilton has said, "To read it simplistically is a grave injustice that ends up hurting people."²

I know as well as you do that Leviticus says it's an abomination for a man to lie with a man and that Genesis is clear about God making men and women for each other. But I also know that the Bible forbids the eating of shellfish and pork.³ It suggests that the Sabbath should be celebrated on Saturday, not Sunday.⁴ It says that women should not speak in church.⁵ It says we should not store up treasures on earth – and I think that would include 401K plans.⁶ It says if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off.⁷ And yet we set *these* rules aside again and again and hit the rules against homosexuality over and over, condemning people with a special level of hatred until outsiders' number one perception of us as a group is that we're "antihomosexual."

Now one way to remedy this situation would be to go back to the 613 laws of the Old Testament and observe them *all* fastidiously, like the Pharisees – then add in all the rules that Jesus and his apostles gave, too. But somehow I don't think that's going to get Christianity a much better reputation than we already have, nor are we going to be immensely successful at that kind of faithfulness. So I'm going to suggest something else: first, that we use all the tools we've been given

² As quoted in sermon called "In Dealing with Homosexuals," given at Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, KS on February 1, 2009. Accessible via internet at <http://www.cor.org/worship-sermons/sermonarchives/show/sermons/When-Dealing-with-Sinners-Anti-Homosexual-Judgemental/>.

³ Leviticus 11:2-12.

⁴ Genesis 2:2-3.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 14:34.

⁶ Matthew 6:19-21.

⁷ Matthew 5:30.

when we read Scripture. And second, that we never forget to ask the age-old question: “What would Jesus do?”

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism and a man of *great* faith, encouraged the early Methodists to read Scripture daily. He wanted us all to be immersed in the text. He loved the Bible as much as anyone. But he believed that God had given us permission to ask questions about each text, to try and discern whether each individual verse could possibly capture the heart and will of God or whether it spoke more to the values, reflections, and questions of the people who lived three thousand years ago and wrote these things down. Wesley suggested that we use reason – the minds that God created us with, logic and common sense; tradition – the history of discernment about these texts and the way the church has understood God over the last two thousand years; and experience – how we understand God through our own relationship with God and other people. If we use these tools – reason, tradition, and experience – when we read Scripture, then we can ask those questions: “Does this capture the heart and will of God for all time?” Or does it require further research to figure out what to do with it or what its authors really meant? Now these tools also mean there is never a reason to throw a text out – we aren’t allowed to just toss aside the scriptures we don’t like – but it does mean we keep reading the little pieces in light of the whole story.

Because then we ask, “What would Jesus do?” If you remember, the Word of God is not these individual verses from this long, confusing book – the Word of God, the revelation of God, is Jesus. John 1 says “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God...and the Word became flesh and lived among us.” The clearest revelation of God’s word that we will ever have is the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus, who *knew* the Old Testament laws and who repeatedly reinterpreted them for his followers. Jesus, who confounded the rule-following Pharisees again and again.

And that brings us to the woman at the well in John 4. Now what has usually happened, up to this point in the Bible, when a man has gone to a well, is that he has met a woman there who would be his wife. And when Jesus runs into this Samaritan woman – a Samaritan, mind you, one of the people Jews do not talk to – perhaps she thinks he’s looking for a wife, too. Then he asks what could be construed as a really bad pickup line: “Where is your husband?” – cause maybe she didn’t have a ring on and he wasn’t sure... And maybe she thinks, “Hey, hey, I got one interested here...” “I have no husband!” she says, giving Jesus the go-ahead. And then he tells her the truth: “No, you’ve been married and divorced five times already, and you’re currently living with a man who is not your husband.”

I imagine that kind of changed the game a little. It at least showed her he wasn’t looking for a date. Because then he taught her and revealed that he was the Messiah. The disciples came up and they were *astonished*, the text says, that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said anything – maybe they were getting used to this with Jesus. And having been offered the water of life by the savior of the world, this woman went into her city and told everyone she met about Jesus, and many believed, the gospel says.

Jesus didn’t give her a lecture about marriage and divorce or sex outside of marriage, though his views on that were clear in the Scriptures. He didn’t say to her, “Get your life in order, straighten up, then I’ll give you some of this living water and you can go tell people about me.” He didn’t say, “I love you because I’m supposed to, but I really hate the sin you’re living in.” Instead, he offered her the water of life, because she was more than a Samaritan woman – she was a child of God. And she became the first missionary and evangelist to her people, changing their lives forever.

That's what Jesus was like. That's one of the things I love most about him. Jesus loved people that other people didn't love. I want us to do that, too.

We don't all have to agree on homosexuality or any other divisive issue of our day. And I would be crazy naïve to think that one sermon on the topic would put us all on the same page. But we *can* agree, I think, to be Jesus kind of Christians, to love people – the people other people don't love. We can be the kind of Christians who aren't known for their negative treatment of outsiders, but who are known the world 'round for the way we love. Because that's what Christians do. They try to be like Jesus.

May it be so for us. Amen.