
SIMPLE RULES

- Love your enemies.
- Do good to those who hate you.
- Bless those who curse you.
- Pray for those who mistreat you.
- If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also.
- If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them.
- Give to everyone who asks you.
- If anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back.
- Do to others as you would have them do to you.
- Do not judge, and you will not be judged.
- Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned.
- Forgive, and you will be forgiven.
- Give and it will be given to you.

It occurred to me while reading this passage how easy it is to dismiss JESUS' words in this difficult teaching.

- We might dismiss them by assuming JESUS is setting up an impossible set of commands, forcing us to admit our need, our sin, our brokenness (however you define it), and then driving us to the good news of His promised forgiveness and grace.
 - (I'll admit this is probably the "Lutheran Option.")
- Or we might dismiss these words as the naïve instructions of a dreamer, someone whose head was always in the clouds, someone who clearly didn't understand how the world really works.
 - (How do we possibly take to heart and practice JESUS' words in today's violent world?)
 - (We might perhaps call this the "Cynical Option.")
- And sometimes we dismiss JESUS' words by assuming that we actually follow them pretty well (which of course takes a fair amount of self-delusion) and taking on the responsibility, burden, (and, I suspect, secret delight) of making sure *others* are following them.
 - (I think of this as the "Holier-Than-Thou" or "Pharisaical Option.")

Each of these ways of dismissing JESUS' words—whether done consciously or unconsciously—are similar in that they hear JESUS' words as a set of commands.

- But what if these aren't commands at all, but instead are a promise.
 - The promise, essentially, that things don't have to be this way—the way that we find it, the way the world seems to say it has to be.
 - That there is another option.
 - That we can treat others the way we want to be treated.
 - That there is enough, more than enough—love, attention, food, worth, honor, time—to go around.
 - That no matter how hard you play by the rules of the world, you're still trapped in the death and loss that is part-and-parcel of this world,
 - but that this world isn't the only one, maybe not even the most real one.

You see, that's the thing.

- JESUS isn't really offering a set of commands that, if you keep them, you get to get by or get ahead in this world,
 - but rather some simple rules that show a whole other world.
 - A world that is not about measuring, and counting, and weighing, and competing, and judging, and paying back, and hating, and all the rest.
 - But instead, a world that is all about love.
 - Love for those who have loved you.
 - Love for those who haven't loved you.
 - Love even for those who have hated you.
 - That love gets expressed in all kinds of creative ways, but often comes through especially by caring—
 - extending care, and compassion, and help, and comfort to those in need.
 - And through forgiveness—
 - not paying back but instead releasing one's claim on another and opening up a future where a relationship of love is still possible.

I have at times read or heard some of the better-known atheists of the day talk about the ridiculousness of religious faith in a cause-and-effect, world.

- There is no room, they argue, for miracles, let alone a DIVINE BEING, in the physical world in which we live.
 - One miracle—let alone resurrection, let alone a GOD who lived and moved and continues to create—would bring down the whole orderly universe.

And yet, each time we forgive each other, are we not interrupting the cause-and-effect laws of this world?

- I mean love deserves love, hate deserves hate, deeds, both good and bad should be repaid in kind, force must be returned with force, violence begets violence, and so on and so on.
 - But when you forgive, you interrupt this endless cycle and create something new.

Dr. Bernice King, the youngest child of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. explains it this way:

- "JESUS didn't call it 'social justice.' HE simply called it Love. If we would only Love our neighbors beyond comfort, borders, race, religion, and other differences that we've allowed to become barriers, "social justice" would be given. Love means justice happens."

Love itself, when you think about it, makes no sense in this usual "eye-for-an-eye, tooth-for-a-tooth" view of the universe.

- For love, defined most simply, is seeking the good of another,
 - equal to your own, or even above your own.
- Love is not a means to an end.
 - It is an end unto itself, which, in turn, creates morality and justice and all the rest of the things we strive for yet fail to find or manifest apart from love.

So, commands that frustrate and fail us, or simple rules that lead to a new vision for the future and for now?

- If command, that is, one more thing someone has told us and that we'll be held accountable for—then we'll likely continue to live in fear and, while we may behave a little better, at least when someone is watching, ultimately nothing is different.
- But if simple rules, then we might just imagine that there is another world, available to us at this very moment, and see each other as gifts of GOD and experience the transformation that JESUS offers.

When you imagine that JESUS is offering an invitation to live with simple rules, everything sounds different:

- Love your enemies.
- Do good to those who hate you.
- Bless those who curse you.
- Pray for those who mistreat you.
- If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also.
- If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them.
- Give to everyone who asks you.
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Everything sounds different because, well, everything is different.

- No more commands, but simple rules, a different way of living.
 - In other words, we cannot NOT love our enemies.
 - We cannot NOT do go do those who hate us.
 - We cannot NOT bless those who curse us.
 - We cannot NOT pray for those who abuse us.
 - We cannot NOT do to others as we would have them do to us.
 - We cannot NOT be merciful, just as GOD is merciful.
 - We are not asked to or called to judge.
 - We are asked to forgive.

Is there a difference between commands and rules?

- I think so.
- I think simple rules—the simple rules that JESUS offers today show us the possibility of a different world:
 - GOD's world, both as we anticipate GOD's future, and hope for GOD's future now.
- I think simple rules matter and that simple rules can change things.
 - Simple rules show us GOD's will and GOD's vision, and call us to share in that possibility.
 - The world can change and be so much more, when we commit to following GOD's simple rules.