

Providence Presbyterian Church
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June 11, 2023
Matthew 9: 9-17

What rules did God have to bend or break in order for you to be included in God's kingdom? Who might have been offended or dismayed when your name appeared on the roles of those newly introduced into God's family?

I would like to suggest that given the nature of grace as a concept, a principle, a characteristic of how God acts towards us—given the nature of grace, when grace is extended to someone like you or me, somewhere a legalist is unhappy. Because grace, by definition, is that we are given what we need, not what we deserve. God extends love and forgiveness and belonging, not because we earned it, but because God has chosen to give it to us, God has born the cost and made it available to us. Christ has taken on our curse, so that we might be free of it. And so, yes, somewhere a diligent hard-working rule follower is ticked. Like working for years to pay off your student loans only to hear someone else may get theirs's forgiven, and will not have to pay them off.

When Jesus invites Matthew to be his follower, religious leaders feel like the bar just got lowered, and that their own diligence just got cheapened. When Jesus sits “at dinner in the house, [and] many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples,” the religious leaders find it objectionable.

Now we tend to paint the scribes and the Pharisees as the bad guys when we read the gospel stories, because they tend to oppose Jesus. Jesus tends to criticize and correct them. But they are not being exceedingly unreasonable. They know the tradition, they know the scriptures, and many times they are just reading straight from the Torah. The Torah is filled with instructions about food and diet and what makes one clean and what makes one unclean, and what is holy and set apart from unholy things. They are steeped in the tradition where love of the Lord is indicated by the fervency one takes in abiding by the standard of clean-ness, of holiness.

So mixing with the unclean. Forging relationships and being in association with the unclean, with tax collectors and sinners, it seems quite questionable. Jesus is acting in a way that is unnecessarily compromising. Jesus is eating with tax collectors and sinners. And who were the sinners? Well, in the gospels, sinners usually refers to those with physical ailments or deformities, those unable to enter the temple, those who were unclean in one manner or another, whose lifestyle was questionable or

outright objectionable, or those who fell in a group who tended to be more scrutinized than others.

So, the Pharisees are unhappy with Jesus. They are critical of Jesus. However, I think they are the ones reading their Torah carefully, and adhering to the tradition more judiciously. They are on good and solid ground, quite frankly. Even the structure of the temple reinforces their reading of God's word. For there are separations, divisions. In the temple, there is the place where the priests go, then there is the court for Israelite men, and separated from that is the court of Israelite women, and separate still from there is the court of the gentiles, for non-Israelites, and even further out, separated by the wall is all those deemed unclean and unworthy of God's courts, unable of being in contact with God's presence. So, sneer all you want. The pharisees know their scriptures. They know the tradition. They are diligent and fervent and serious. Jesus is the one blurring boundaries, going against tradition, and ignoring clear directives of Torah.

This takes me back to my initial question – what rules did God have to bend or break in order for you and me to be included in God's kingdom? Because in the vision of the Old Testament torah, God's kingdom is for Israel, those of Abraham's literal bloodline, it is for those who are clean, it is for those eat clean food and stay away from those unclean, who follow the law and the sacrifices. In order for you and me to be included, something had to give, something had to change.

This is what the scribes and pharisees don't anticipate or understand, that Jesus is forging a new covenant, an update, a rewrite, a new covenant rooted not in obedience and conformity and such, but in Christ's own life, and obedience and blood. And in this new covenant, grace is heightened as the value, the principle, the core, and showing one's love of the Lord takes a new shape.

Now as a Hebrew Bible guy, a student of the Old Testament, I feel the need to say that grace was always present in God's relationship to God's people. God had always freely chosen, freely committed God's self to God's people, freely granted promises and blessings. Grace is not altogether new with Jesus and the new covenant. But it is heightened. It becomes clear and emphasized, the core principle—that people get a place at the table with Jesus, people get a place as disciples, get a place as beloved and forgiven, not because of adherence to the law and to customs and cultural expectations, but because of their response to Jesus.

So, Matthew gets an invitation to follow. And these other sinners at the table, they don't get relegated to outer courts or to long processes for admission, they go straight to the table having fellowship with Jesus. Jesus is bending and breaking a

lot of Old Testament customs, laws, tradition when he sits down to a meal with Matthew and these other sinners. And furthermore, not just these sinners at table, but the Pharisees also take issue with Jesus' disciples, how they don't wash and adhere and take seriously the customs of cleanliness by which one honored the Lord. Things are changing.

I do think that one of the important aspects of what the law and the customs meant to the Jews and to these Pharisees is that it is how one shows fervency, how one demonstrates love of the Lord, how one shows honor and obedience to the Lord, respect, honor, integrity. But one of the unintended side-effects of this system of dietary laws, rules about clean and unclean, sacrifices, and holiness customs is that it separates people, that it treats some as whole and loved by God and others as unwhole and unworthy of God's love, presence, and blessings. Some are able to be clean, others not. Some are in by birth, and others will always be second-rate citizens of God's family. Furthermore, this system makes us feel flawed in such a way that we are constantly trying to earn and secure our place.

New wineskins. Not just a small change patched onto the tradition, but a core change, a new covenant. Where folks like Matthew and the sinners around the table are also full citizens, who are also recipients of grace. Where love of one another becomes the higher call, overriding all of the customs that kept people separate from each other. So, when Jesus calls Matthew, and when he shares table fellowship with the sinners, and when he calls you and me children of God and disciples, and invites us into relationship, he has bent the rules, broken a bunch, and somewhere a Pharisee has his face in his hands.

Now, one of the anxieties around grace of any form, is that the recipient may take it for granted, that he or she may take advantage, that they may not be grateful or responsible. And this is a constant motif in the bible, from Adam and Eve, to the Israelites in the land, to the early church. God grants, God established a covenant, a relationship, and God's people fail in reciprocating, turn away, complain, make a mess of things. I'm sure this history may be one factor that made the pharisees all the more diligent and fervent about the law and how we demonstrate our obedience to God.

So, it raises the question, in the wake of the grace shown through Jesus, how we now demonstrate that fervency, how we show our Love of the Lord, how we act out that obedience, that desire to live in covenant relationship with the Lord and not always in rebellion and complaint and ungratefulness. If Jesus is changing the covenant relationship, and he is letting folks in without the old expectations and

rules, what will keep these people from taking it for granted, from following the old patterns of dishonoring the Lord?

Well, Jesus says that the whole law is reduced in essence to two commandments – to Love the Lord with one’s whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself. Well, how does one do that? To follow the example of Jesus. To live in relationship with God, to live in prayerful connection at all times, to seek to do God’s will, to love and be in relationship with people, offering that love and grace, conveying the news that we are all loved, we are all invited into relationship with God, we are all capable of change and love and grace.

Last week, Pastor Tom spoke on the parable of the prodigal and his brother. And where that parable ends is that the younger son has been restored as a son and is being celebrated, all because of the grace and love of the father. But the older brother is angry about this, unwilling to accept that grace and believing his own place in the family is based on his hard work, on his diligence and fervency. And the lingering question is whether he will come to accept his own place in the family, at the banquet, based on grace, not merit; to accept grace – both for his brother and for himself.

That is part of what gets obscured for us diligent responsible folks, like the older son, like us boring types that never had a clear prodigal phase, like the Pharisees and the scribes, is that even for us to be at the table, for us to be in the family, to be part of God’s redemptive story, that at some point God bent or broke some rules for us. We are here not because we earned it or deserve it or are better than others. We are all here because God made room for us.

And what it means for us to understand this, to be faithful covenant people, to reciprocate God’s love and grace, is to follow the pattern of grace that we see in Jesus. Not to go rooting around in the law for a guide as to whether you should share fellowship with someone or whether you should love someone, but rather, to be a voice and an embodiment of grace. Because, Jesus seems to think that grace itself has the power to change. Grace itself has the power to heal and make whole, and bring repentance and gratitude and change.

“Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

And all God’s people said...

The Call of Matthew
(Mk 2:13–17; Lk 5:27–32)

⁹ As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him.

¹⁰ And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” ¹² But when he heard this, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³ Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

The Question about Fasting
(Mk 2:18–22; Lk 5:33–39)

¹⁴ Then the disciples of John came to him, saying, “Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?” ¹⁵ And Jesus said to them, “The wedding guests cannot mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them, can they? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. ¹⁶ No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, for the patch pulls away from the cloak, and a worse tear is made. ¹⁷ Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.”