

“The Right Way to Do Things”  
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Galatians 2:15-21

When we play board games at the Corbin home, I am the de facto rule keeper. I’m the one who likes to read the rules first before playing. I always read through them thoroughly and then keep them handy, referring back to them often during a game, just to make sure we’re all playing the *right* way. Not too long ago, Kristi bought a game second-hand from a resale shop. Once the game was home, we discovered that the rules were not included. One of my daughters took out the game pieces and, out of her imagination, created her own game to play. *Oh, no, no, no! This simply will not do! How can we play a game without knowing the rules?* So, I searched online and I found the rules and we then played the game the “right” way. Later, my daughter asked me, “Daddy, why do you care so much about playing the ‘right’ way?” Good question, isn’t it? Before I interrupted her, she was having fun playing the game her own way. Isn’t having fun the point of games? Why could I not let her just have fun, even if it wasn’t the “right” way? Well, I’ve decided that sometimes I’m like Saul. Not necessarily Paul, Saul’s new name after his dramatic encounter with Jesus, which led to his conversion. No, sometimes I’m more like Saul, who was just following the rules, doing things the “right” way. As Chuck read to us from Galatians 1 last week, Paul wrote “You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.” Saul was quite zealous about the traditions of his ancestors. He was very concerned about following the rules. In doing so, he was unknowingly persecuting God’s church. In trying to follow the rules, he was, as we might say, “missing the forest for the trees.”

I understand that difficulty. I want to follow the rules, to do things the “right” way. In doing so, though, the tendency is to turn the rules into a checklist, something that I mentally compare myself against as I go throughout my day. Do not murder: check. Do not commit adultery: check. Do not make any graven images: check. Do not covet your neighbor’s house. Oops. I have been guilty of looking enviously at someone else’s house. I’ve not always honored the sabbath – I could be found mowing my yard last Sunday evening, something I was told growing up was certainly not permissible. It’s possible that I haven’t always honored my mother and father, perhaps once or twice as a teenager, that is. Just like that, I can easily list times when I’ve broken at least three of the ten commandments. My righteousness from not committing murder is wiped away by my lack of righteousness from eying a nicer house.

That’s the inherent issue with the rules. Paul tells us in our Galatians passage today “no one will be justified by the works of the law.” It’s just not possible, though sometimes we try our best. Jesus speaks of church leaders who “tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others” (Matthew 23:4). I found a list of rules from a Russian Orthodox Church which included such gems as this: “If you see friends and acquaintances in church, greet them with a silent bow. Never stop to shake hands or ask questions, even if they are your closest friends.

While you are standing in church, do not be curious; do not stare at those around you. Never, under any circumstances, indulge in private conversations or jokes in church; that is a sin.”<sup>1</sup> Note that it says “while you are *standing*,” as the next rule states “While in church you should stand, not sit. Only if you are ill or very weak is it permitted to sit down.” We’ve all broken these rules this morning! No, we do not need these heavy burdens of the law. As another translation puts Paul’s words, “no one is put right with God by doing what the Law requires.”

If trying to follow the rules is not what will put us right with God, then what is? Paul spells it out for us: “we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.” Rule following will only get us so far. It will certainly not earn us salvation. Salvation comes through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul says elsewhere “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9). This is a tenet of reformed faith: Salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. We cannot earn our way to salvation by rule-*following*, nor can rule-*breaking* deprive us of salvation. It is all God’s free gift. Our part is to have faith in Jesus Christ.

However, even *that* is not really our doing. Scholars note that Paul’s phrase “by faith *in* Christ” may also be translated “by the faith *of* Christ,” which, in turn, may be translated “by the faithfulness of Christ,” referring to his steadfast adherence to the will of God and his endurance all the way to the cross.<sup>2</sup> The Greek contains all of these nuances. We have faith in Christ, but we also receive the gift of the faith *of* Christ. Jesus was faithful to the call on his life, and our salvation rests in *His* faithfulness. As one commentator put it, “So what is the key to our righteousness? The faith *of* Jesus. And how do we receive this gift? Through our faith *in* Jesus. Both are needed in order to be made completely right with God.”<sup>3</sup>

Paul says that this turn away from trying to be saved by adherence to the law is absolute. He says “For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God.” The Living Bible puts it this way “it was through reading the Scripture that I came to realize that I could never find God’s favor by trying—and failing—to obey the laws. I came to realize that acceptance with God comes by believing in Christ.” Perhaps even better is The Message paraphrase: “I tried keeping rules and working my head off to please God, and it didn’t work. So I quit being a ‘law man’ so that I could be God’s man. Christ’s life showed me how, and enabled me to do it. I identified myself completely with him.”

This complete identification with Christ is such that Paul goes so far as to say “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” For Paul, there is added weight to these words, as his old life as Saul *did* come to an end. His life of Pharasetical condemnation of Christ and Christ followers ended on the road to Damascus with his encounter with the risen Christ. Should it be any less so with us? Perhaps we haven’t been blinded by an

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.orthodoxphotos.com/readings/temple/behavior.shtml>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2872](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2872)

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/btl\\_display.asp?installment\\_id=93040969](http://www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=93040969)

encounter with the Divine, but if we have come to believe in Christ and to accept the faithfulness of Christ as our path to salvation, shouldn't our old lives have ended and new lives begun?

What does that look like? If we say that we have died with Christ, and it is Christ who now lives in us, how do our lives reflect that? The temptation is to then look to rules of behavior befitting our new lives, but then we are back into the old pattern of believing adherence to the rules is what counts. As The Message paraphrase puts Paul's words from the Letter to the Romans, "Is it not clear to you that to go back to that old rule-keeping, peer-pleasing religion would be an abandonment of everything personal and free in my relationship with God? I refuse to do that, to repudiate God's grace. If a living relationship with God could come by rule-keeping, then Christ died unnecessarily." (Romans 6:20-21). So, should we be libertines? Should we dispose of the rules and just live however we want? Should our motto be Sheryl Crow's line "If it makes you happy, it can't be that bad"? Paul answers this elsewhere: "Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?" (Romans 6:1-2)

What is the answer? If we are not to go on living in sin, but we also are not to look to the rules as our means of salvation, how then do we live? In a seminary class on Christian Ethics, I was introduced to something called "Virtue Ethics." Virtue Ethics is one way of understanding why we do right and wrong. In this understanding, "good and right are grounded in our nature as human beings as created by God."<sup>4</sup>

In other words, ethical behavior is not a matter of simply following the rules. Ethical behavior is how we live every moment of our lives, rather than comparing behaviors with a checklist of right and wrong. As one pastor put it, "Virtuous people will do the right thing simply because they are good and they have no need of a list of rules. So rather than learning the rules, we need to cultivate virtue. The Christian life is not a list of do's and don'ts – it is about a transformation in your heart."<sup>5</sup>

*That* is how we live – as those who have had a transformation in our hearts. It's not about meeting the bare minimum requirement of the rules. It's about having a heart oriented toward love. It's about being guided by the Holy Spirit in all things. Rather than focusing our *heads* on memorizing the rules, we should focus our *hearts* on being the people God created us to be. In so doing, we will do the right thing. We will not only not murder; we will treat even those who act hatefully toward us with love and kindness, knowing that such love and kindness comes from Christ living in us. We will not only not commit adultery; we will not reduce others to objects for our satisfaction, instead honoring our spouse and others as persons created in God's image. We will not only not create graven images of God; we will so honor the love and grace of our Creator that we will seek to experience the divine in all to whom God gave breath and life.

If we truly live as those transformed by the grace of God and the faithfulness of Christ, there will not be a checklist of rules in our heads, as virtue will be ever present in our hearts. We will do what is right, because what is right is written on our hearts. The rules won't be a kind of

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<sup>4</sup> From my class notes – 8/29/2006 – Intro to Christian Ethics, MTS, Dr. Peter Gathje

<sup>5</sup> Martin Hilliard, from PRCLL mailing list, 2/8/11

bare minimum or way to get by with something. “Oh, they said don’t *run* in the church, but they didn’t say anything about *sprinting*!” Instead of following the letter of the law, we will follow the spirit – not the spirit of the law – but the Holy Spirit, indwelling in us. Our actions will reflect that we no longer live, but it is Christ living in us. And then maybe, just maybe, I can let my daughter simply have fun with a game, instead of insisting on doing things what I call the “right” way. Friends, let us seek to live so that the world will see only Christ living in us, in all that we say and do, as we receive the gift of the faithfulness of Christ. Amen.