

July 29, 2018
New Life UMC
Fairland, Indiana

I Corinthians 9:24-27
Hebrews 12:1-3

PLAYING BY THE RULES

1 Corinthians 9:24-27 New American Standard Bible (NASB)

24 Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. 25 Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. 26 Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; 27 but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.

Hebrews 12:1-3 New American Standard Bible (NASB)

12 Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. endured such opposition from sinners so that you won't be discouraged and you won't give up.

Playing by the Rules

For the last 10 years I have been a soccer referee. There are 17 laws of the game. Under each law is listed rule after rule. The rule book is over 200 pages of small print.

It is the responsibility of the umpire or ref to keep control of the game and to make sure everyone is playing by the rules.

We need rules to get along in everyday life. We elect officials at every level of government to make rules. We have a court system to sort out the compliance.

It is overwhelming when you think of all the rules a child has to learn in various contexts – family, playground, school, church, scouts.

Recently an 8-year-old told me that there should only be one rule. “What is that rule?” “There are no rules.”

There is no way we can meet all the demands of the law and keep all the rules. Many have tried. All of us, to some degree, try consciously or unconsciously.

We will marvel and sing throughout eternity that God broke the rules leaving only one rule: The law of love, mercy and grace.

The good news is that Christ came and fulfilled all of the law’s demands. Love so amazing, so astounding, that the Son of God should bleed and die on our behalf. “For by grace are you saved through faith and not that of yourselves lest anyone should boast.”

The General Rules

279 years ago about a dozen people came to a little man who was only 5’3” tall. They knew all about Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. They had accepted Christ as their savior. Yet, was something missing. They agreed to meet every Thursday evening.

Anyone could participate in the meetings. The only requirement was that they have the form and are seeking the power of godliness. This is a crisis I see across America. We know the form of the righteousness but lack its power. We know we are saved by faith in Jesus. The problem is that even though we have prayed the sinner’s prayer and go to church we do not know the power, joy, peace, assurance and hope provided by the Holy Spirit.

How do you prove you are seeking godliness? How do you prove you are making the effort? How do you prove you are grateful for what Christ has done for you?

This little man established 3 General Rules. Today we might call them basic disciplines. Every week he would inquire about their souls. He would ask if they are keeping these rules. If you could not convince him that you were sincere in seeking to please God, then you were chased out.

These groups of Methodists sprung up all across England. John Wesley would come and interview the members. He would dismiss anyone that was not serious about their relationship with God. It was not uncommon for him to remove 80 % of the membership. The more he kicked people out the more the groups multiplied.

The ultimate goal is to have the mind of Christ and to grow in holiness. He considered these rules to only be the first steps and not a comprehensive list.

A. Do no harm – avoid evil of every kind

B. Do good at every opportunity

At first glance these first two rules do not seem so unusual. You learn this in pre-school and kindergarten. Play nice. Boy Scouts, Rotary, everyone knows we should be doing this. Combined they are really the golden rule.

Jesus said, "Do unto others as you have them do unto you."

When you read the fine print under these two, you have to sit up and take notice. For example:

Do no harm and avoiding evil of every kind such as taking the name of God in vain, profaning the day of the Lord, usury, doing what we know is not for the glory of God, diversions that cannot be used in the name of God, singing songs or reading books that do not tend to the knowledge and love of God, softness and needless self-indulgence, and laying up treasure on earth.

Do good at every opportunity includes giving food to the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting and helping the sick and, encouraging imprisoned. It includes doing good to the other person's soul by instructing, reproving and exhorting. It includes patronizing the businesses of members of your group.

The bottom line is: Yes, you are your brother's keeper physically and spiritually.

C. Attend all the ordinances of God

When Yakov Smirnoff first came to the United States from Russia he was not prepared for the incredible variety of instant products available in American grocery stores.

"On my first shopping trip, I saw powdered milk--you just add water, and you get milk.

Then I saw powdered orange juice--you just add water, and you get orange juice.

And then I saw baby powder, and I thought to myself, "What a country!"

We make similar assumptions about Christian transformation--that people change instantly at salvation.

We want and expect some quick fix to sin. According to this belief, when someone gives his or her life to Christ, there is an immediate, substantive, in-depth, miraculous change in habits, attitudes, and character.

We go to church as if we are going to the grocery store looking for powdered Christian. Just add water – baptism – and you have mature disciples.

Discipleship requires slowly being raised through many trials, suffering, and temptations.

True-life change only begins at salvation. To grow requires using every means of grace available. It is about training as we read in today's Scripture lessons. Growing in your love of God is all that matters.

This third rule is what separates the church from any service club. It is what really separates the Christian from the world.

What are these ordinances?

1. The public worship of God.

The reasons I don't go to the movies:

Because my parents made me go as a boy.

Because no one speaks to me when I am there.

Because they always want money.

Because the manager never visited me in my home.

Because the people who go there never live up to what the movies teach anyway."

We might think that we can check this one off. After all, we are here today in church.

Or can we?

"Mom, how high have you ever counted?"

"I can't remember ever just counting? How high have you counted?"

"8,397"

"How can you remember that?"

"That's easy because that's when church was over."

In survey after survey about why people don't go to church, the number one reason they give is that church is boring.

It gets boring because we are self-centered and selfish. We forget worship is not about you and me and what we want.

It is about the Almighty, Ever-living Triune God who created us, redeems us and sustains us: The God who has been revealed to us as Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

Worship of God is the very purpose for which you exist. You are created to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

2. The ministry of the Word, either read or expounded.

Hebrews 4:12 – “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”

Jesus began his ministry of preaching, teaching and healing by quoting Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.”

Jesus’ last instructions were to preach to all the world.

Everywhere the early disciples went they preached about Jesus, the Christ.

The young preacher was flattered when someone described him as a “model” preacher, until he looked up the word “model” in the dictionary and saw that one of the definitions for “model” is “A small imitation of the real thing.”

Soon after, someone else in the congregation described him as a “warm” preacher. Again he consulted his dictionary, and was disappointed to see that one definition of “warm” is “not so hot.”

There was a famous preacher in England in the 1700’s by the name of Rowland Hill.

Late in his life, a friend told him: “It has been 65 years since I first heard you preach, and the sermon was worth remembering. You remarked that some people are offended about the manner of a minister preaching; but then you added, “Supposing one is hearing a will read, expecting to receive an inheritance, would you use the time in criticizing the lawyer’s manner while reading it? No, you would give all your interest to determine if anything were left to you and how much. Let that, then, be the way in which you listen to the gospel.”

“We preach first Christ, and last Christ, and always Christ,” declared Martin Luther. “That may seem like a monotonous theme but we are never at the end of it.”

3. The Supper of the Lord.

Eucharist means thanksgiving

Whatever you may call it (Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, Breaking Bread, The Lord Table), this sacrament has proven for nearly 2000 years to be a primary means of grace through which the Holy Spirit speaks to our souls

4. Family and private prayer.

The only thing the man's parrot would say was "Let's pray. Let's pray." The woman's parrot would only say, "Kiss me, kiss me." The man and woman got married so the parrots were brought together.

The first parrot said, "Let's pray. Let's pray." The second parrot said, "Kiss me. Kiss me." The first parrot then said, "Praise God! My prayers are answered!"

One day the pastor heard the boy fervently praying, "Tokyo, Tokyo, Tokyo". After the boy stopped praying, the pastor inquired. "I am impressed by the earnestness of your prayer. What was it about?" "I just finished taking a geography test in school and I need God to make Tokyo the capital of France."

Billy Graham once wrote: "I watched the deck hands on the great liner United States as they docked that ship in New York Harbor. First they threw out a rope to the men on the dock. Then, inside the boat the great motors went to work and pulled on the great cable. But, oddly enough, the pier wasn't pulled out to the ship; but the ship was pulled snugly up to the pier. Prayer is the rope that pulls God and us together. But it doesn't pull God down to us; it pulls us to God. We must learn to say with Christ, the master of the art of praying: 'Not my will; but Thine be done.'"

5. Searching the Scriptures.

Is your Bible dusty?

Is it protected underneath everything else instead of the top of your reading list?

Hide God's Word in your heart – not under the clutter of your end table.

If your life is a mess, my question is: have you been studying the operating manual?

God's will isn't all that difficult for us to figure out as we read the Bible. The more difficult matter is our will which conflicts with God's

Spurgeon declared that a Bible that is falling apart is usually owned by someone who isn't.

6. Fasting or abstinence.

Jesus did not say, "If you fast..." Jesus said, "When you fast..."

The early Christians would fast every Wednesday and Friday until 3 in the afternoon. John Wesley felt so strongly about it that he would not ordain anyone who did not do the same.

The Bible gives principles and not detailed instructions. Like financial giving, each of us must decide what is right for us. There are many types of fasts. You can fast from anything that is habitual in your life or something you obsess about because it reminds you that you can indeed get by without them.

Maybe we should practice fasting from cell phones.

Fasting trains our passions. We are so used to giving ourselves whatever we want. We say "I feel like a donut," so we go get a donut. We say "I feel like having ice-cream," so we go get some ice-cream. "Our stomach is like a spoiled child, and spoiled children do not need indulgence. They need discipline". As Christians we are not to be controlled by our stomachs, but controlled by the Spirit of God. Fasting is spiritual training in self-control.

Why should we play by the rules? I think Paul sums it up well in Ephesians 3

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.