

Rest from Rule-Keeping

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[0 : 00] I want to talk this morning about rules, keeping rules. Now, much as we might not like the idea of rules, the truth is that we also really want rules.

Humans are weird creatures, you may have noticed that. But at heart, humans, we all are actually rule keepers. We secretly like the idea of rules and order in our lives.

We want to know that we're keeping the rules. And almost as much as we want others to know when they're not. You just look on social media and you can easily see how people complain, especially in community groups.

People complain that other people are not keeping the rules. And look at me, I'm keeping the rules. I'm going to take a selfie and show you that I'm walking where I should or my dog's on a lead. Look, I'm keeping the rules.

Whatever it is, we like keeping the rules. And we like criticizing others for not. But I've also experienced this as a pastor. In my ministry, very often people will come to me and they will ask me questions along the lines of, as a pastor, is it okay for a Christian to...

[1 : 17] Are Christians allowed to do this or that? Is it wrong for Christians to do this or that?

In other words, the question is, what are the rules? That's what I often get asked. What are the rules of being a Christian? How do I make sure that I'm in? How do I make sure that I'm acceptable? And interestingly, you look at any religion and it's the same idea. What are the rules? It's just different rules from religion to religion, but the same heart behind it. People wanting to keep the rules.

Interestingly, though, it's not just the religious people in the world who want to keep the rules. It's just as much the non-religious or the secular society that turns out to be just as legalistic as religious people.

Have you noticed that? Especially today. More than ever, you've got to be very careful about what you say. Very careful about what you post on social media. It's so easy to offend people.

[2 : 17] It's so easy to say the wrong thing and be cancelled if you break the rules. You see, society may have abandoned religion as a moral guide a few decades ago, but it's just replaced it with another set of rules, a new form of legalism.

We can't get away from being rule keepers. Religious or not. Now, as we turn to Matthew and we continue looking at this portrait Matthew paints of this extraordinary man who walked our world, Jesus Christ, one of the most striking things about Jesus is how he confronted the whole underlying idea of rule keeping.

Not just the Jewish rules, but the whole institution of rule keeping that is so part of us as humans. Jesus confronted it.

And we see it in today's passage where he comes head to head with the rule keepers of his day. He meets the Pharisees. He's encountered them before, but now especially he has this confrontation with them.

And the Pharisees, if you didn't know, they were the best at keeping rules. They knew exactly how to keep the rules and exactly what rules to keep and when and how to keep them perfectly.

[3 : 42] They were the rule keepers. And so Jesus comes head to head with them. And what's interesting, if you look at the context, is that Matthew decides to record Jesus' encounter with these rule keepers right after this promise that he made at the end of chapter 11.

Look in your Bibles. It's what we heard about last week. I'll remind you what he said. Chapter 11, verse 28. This great promise where Jesus says, Come to me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

It's no mistake that right after that, he comes into confrontation with these rule keepers. Because you see, what's happening here is that Jesus has come to give us rest, but not only from the burden of sin.

He's come to give us rest from the burden of rule keeping as well, which is so deeply ingrained in our hearts. And today we're going to find out how.

And so let's go from verse 1 and see what happens. At that time, Jesus passed through the grain fields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick and eat some heads of grain.

[5 : 01] When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, See how your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath. Okay, just pause there.

I don't know where these Pharisees were. I get the picture of the disciples and Jesus just chilling in the grain fields, and then they touch the grain, and suddenly Pharisees pop up. It probably wasn't like that.

They were probably on the edge of the field watching, and when they came to the edge, they confronted them. But essentially, the problem they have with the disciples is they're breaking the rules. And the rules they're referring to, of course, were the Jewish Sabbath laws that prohibited, amongst other things, you weren't allowed to do things on the Sabbath day, which was a Saturday for the Jews.

And there's a lot of things you weren't allowed to do, including reaping or harvesting, or any form of kind of the work that you would do during the week.

And that's what they considered the disciples to be doing, even though they were just taking a few kernels of grain. That was considered reaping or harvesting, technically. So they took exception to that. Now, it seems petty.

[6 : 09] We look at that, and it seems just silly for them to be bothered about this. But we've got to understand, they took the Sabbath very seriously. And after all, it was based on a command from God to rest every seventh day.

This was part of the Ten Commandments. This was part of God's law. And the point of it was to remember that they were not to rely on themselves and their own efforts, but they were to rely on God's provision.

It started in the wilderness when they came from Egypt, to rely on God's provision for them rather than to, you know, frenetically try to support their own lives. They had to rely that God was their provider.

And that was the basis of the Sabbath. But they, of course, took that, and then they took it very seriously. And over the years, they built around a whole lot of other rules to make sure that they didn't ever get even close to possibly breaking the Sabbath.

And they still do today in Israel. There's many ways that the Sabbath law, and there's Sabbath laws on the Sabbath that people aren't allowed to break.

[7 : 15] In fact, I heard that there are elevators in Israel next to the regular elevators, and they're called Sabbath elevators, where they stop on every floor so that you don't have to press a button for your floor because that's considered working to press the button.

Okay? And they have Sabbath settings on your stove, things like that. And there are appliances with Sabbath settings. You may have seen SAB on your oven come up on the little, and you don't know what it means.

It's a Sabbath setting. They take the Sabbath and these laws very seriously. And so that's what is behind their criticism of Jesus' disciples.

They are breaking these serious rules. And so Jesus comes to their defense. But not the way we expect Him to.

Now this is where the passage gets interesting. Because we would expect Jesus to argue along the lines of, no, well, they're not really breaking the Sabbath. You're being petty.

[8 : 16] This wasn't really at the heart of the original Sabbath command. But He doesn't do that. He could have, and He probably could have made the point. But He chooses a different tack. He makes a much more controversial argument, which is essentially, my disciples don't have to keep the rules because they're with Me.

Now you can imagine why the Pharisees got so angry later. And He makes the point by starting with the story of King David. So I'm going to read from verse 3.

He said to them, So he's referring to a well-known story in 1 Samuel, where David, who was at the time God's appointed king, but he was on the run from the king in power at the time, who was Saul, who wanted to kill him.

And so he was out in the desert with his men, and they were hungry. They needed food. And the only food available was the bread, which was the sacred bread in the tabernacle, which only the priests could eat.

But because David needed it, the priest let him eat it. And that was considered okay. And so Jesus' point here is, it was okay for David to do that because of who he was.

[9 : 43] He was God's appointed king. So he was allowed to break the rules because of who he was. It's kind of similar to how a traffic officer today is allowed to speed if he's chasing a criminal, right?

And his lights are on, and his sirens are on. He's allowed to break the rules, but he's not really breaking the rules because they don't apply to him because of who he is as a law enforcement officer. It's the same idea, the same principle Jesus is getting at.

And he uses another example about priests who work on the Sabbath, technically. So verse 5, Or haven't you read in the law that on the Sabbath days, the priests in the temple violate the Sabbath and are innocent?

See the point he's making. They had to do sacrifices. They had to do a lot of things that the Jews considered working, but it was their job on the Sabbath day. Much like a preacher has to do work on a Sunday.

And Jesus said, of course, that's fine. They were allowed to do that, and you don't disagree with me that they were allowed to do that because of who they were. So that's the argument he's using here.

[10 : 52] They were allowed to break the rules because of who they were, and he's using the same argument for him and his disciples. He's saying, the rules do not apply to us because of who I am, and they don't apply to my men because of who they're with.

And in case they missed it, he makes it explicit in verse 6, and verse 8. He makes some big claims to underline what he's saying. Verse 6, I tell you that something greater than the temple is here. He's referring to himself. Something greater than the temple is here. And verse 8, for the Son of Man, that's how he referred to himself, is Lord of the Sabbath.

I get to say what's right and wrong on the Sabbath. This is a huge claim he's making. It's an inflammatory claim because he's claiming that he has actually come to fulfill the whole purpose of these Jewish Old Testament laws around the Sabbath and the temple.

You know, you might come across Christians who still want to keep these laws. They misunderstand this whole point. That the laws were only ever to be fulfilled in Jesus and to point to Jesus.

[12 : 10] And that's what he's trying to claim here. That he is the true rest that the Sabbath always pointed to. He's just said it in the last passage.

And that he is the true connecting point between heaven and earth that the tabernacle and the temple was always about. All of these Old Testament institutions and rules were actually all foreshadowing what Jesus was going to do.

He's the true rest that the Sabbath pointed to. He is the true connection and the overlap of meeting place of heaven and earth that the temple pointed to. And so, the conclusion, if someone's with him, they don't need the rules.

If someone's with him, which his disciples were, they don't need these rules anymore. It's a huge thing he's saying. But it's, if we understand what he's saying, it's a source of great, great relief from the burden of rule keeping that these Jews were under.

I remember, not perfectly, but I remember snapshots of my last day at school. Do you remember your last day at school?

[13 : 27] I remember my last day at school. Fishwick Senior High School. Last day of matric. That's grade 12, by the way. And, they, they, you know, the standard eights and nines.

I'm not going to translate that to grades. Just work it out. They formed an honor guard. I mean, they weren't honoring us. They were just standing there because the principal told them they have to. But, they were kind of on the sides and all the matrics came out and left the school property for the last time.

It was quite a cool moment. You know, the relief. Leaving that and knowing I don't have to come back tomorrow. This is awesome. The relief of leaving school. But, but you know where that relief was also based on the fact that I'm leaving all those rules behind.

Those, wearing a blazer. doing my homework. Walking on the left side of the passage. Going, you know, rocking up at school every day. All the rules that come with school which are good when you're at school.

We need them. But, it was such relief to now leave those rules behind. Not have to keep them anymore. But, the interesting thing is it wasn't that I was now going to go out and break the school rules.

[14 : 37] Right? It's that they didn't apply to me anymore. In fact, those, all those rules at school were only ever meant to get me to the point of being free of them.

So that I don't need to adhere to them anymore. That's kind of what's going on here with Jesus, you see. It's the same with being a Christian.

That Jesus has come to bring us out of the need to keep rules and give us and give us the relief and the freedom of them not having to apply to us anymore.

Not that we break them but now we don't need them and there's a big difference. It's why Paul says in Galatians, you don't have to turn there but let me read to you from Galatians 3.23-26.

This is what Paul writes later on. He says, Before this, faith in Christ came. We were confined under the law, imprisoned until the coming of faith was revealed.

[15 : 39] The law then was our guardian until Christ so that we could be justified by faith. But since that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

for through faith you are all sons of God in Christ Jesus. See what Paul is saying here. He's saying the same thing. This guardian in another translation, older translation, it's the schoolmaster.

The law was our schoolmaster until Christ came. And so essentially those who follow Jesus, those in relationship who have come under His rule and follow Him, have graduated from keeping laws that were only ever meant to lead us to Him.

You see, in following Christ, we can experience real relief from all those rules. The same relief that I felt leaving school.

That's the kind of relief that we can have. Relief from law keeping, relief from legalism, relief from having to keep these rules to be acceptable. And so Paul writes elsewhere in Colossians 2.16, he says, therefore, don't let anyone judge you in regard to food and drink or in the matter of a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day.

[17 : 08] These are a shadow of what was to come. The substance is Christ. Those laws don't apply. Those Old Testament laws. We have relief from having to keep those.

And yet, I think so many Christians are not convinced of that yet. I think there are so many Christians who have not yet experienced that relief from the law.

And they're still trying to keep the rules. So many Christians still obsessing over what is allowed and what isn't allowed. Is this a sin? Is that a sin? Now, of course, we want to avoid sin, right?

And I get where that's coming from. But as Christians, we avoid sin not by keeping rules but by loving Christ who transforms us into a real relationship with God, our Father, and gives us His Holy Spirit as the prophet said would happen in the New Covenant where He would write His law on our hearts to keep them and He would give us a desire to actually not want to sin and to do what is good so that we don't need rules to tell us because we want to.

You see, that's the difference Christ makes. That's why we can have relief from the rules because He comes to change our hearts. It's why the great church father, St. Augustine, famously said, love God and do whatever you please.

[18 : 50] That was basically His summary for the Christian life. Love God and do whatever you please because if you really love God, you'll want what He wants.

And that is why Jesus came to free us from rules but not to make us into lawbreakers, not to make it so that we're free from rules.

We can now, you know, go and live the sinful lives we want to. No. Jesus came to free us from the rules so that we can truly please God from the heart and truly pleasing God does not come from keeping rules.

Rule keepers are not actually what God wants and that's the next thing we see in the next episode here. We see the difference between rule keepers and what God wants.

Let's pick it up from verse 9. Moving on from there, He entered their synagogue. There He saw a man who had a shriveled hand and in order to accuse Him, they, the Pharisees, asked Him, is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?

[20 : 04] Now, let's just pause there and see what's going on. You see what's going on? This is so ugly. This really exposes the ugliness of rule keeping, doesn't it? If ever the ugliness of legalism was revealed, it's here.

These legal minded Pharisees see a man with a disabled hand, a shriveled hand and the first thought they have is not, man, you know, Jesus could heal this man.

This man could get relief. No, no. Their first thought is, oh, we could tempt Jesus to heal this man. It's evil. We could tempt Jesus to break the Sabbath law.

They're more concerned with being right than with this man actually being healed. Isn't that so true of legalist people? Their primary concern is being right, not actually helping people.

And so Jesus responds. He exposes their hypocrisy from verse 11. He replied to them, who among you, if he has a sheep that fell into the pit on the Sabbath, wouldn't take hold of it and lift it out?

[21 : 15] A person is worth far more than a sheep. And so it is lawful to do what is good on the Sabbath. Then he told them, he told the man, stretch out your hand. So he stretched it out and it was restored as good as the other.

You see, Jesus' point, I think, to the Pharisees is, have you even considered what God really wants in this situation?

Have you considered what God actually wants? No, you're just thinking about your rules. You're not even, you haven't even spared a thought for what God actually wants. There's a disconnect between your rules and what God wants.

That's what Jesus is exposing. And you know, the same could be said of so many religious rules that people keep today. That we, often, people keep these religious rules out of rote because they were raised to do it, because, you know, their religious leaders tell them to do it, because it's the done thing.

But nobody ever steps back and asks, you know, is this what God really wants? Is God really bothered if I touch the button in the elevator? I mean, I've walked with my legs all the way here, and that's fine, but now suddenly God is, is angry because I touched it.

[22 : 33] Really? Really? Is, is that how God really thinks? Nobody has actually considered these rules in terms of what God really wants. Or, you know, Muslims, with, with Sharia law, who, who would jail a woman because she's not wearing a burka?

Really? Is that what God really wants? Women to cover up the beauty that He's given them and then to be put into jail when they, you know, forget to put a head, really?

Is that the kind of God we're dealing with? You see, there's, there's a huge disconnect today, and I'm sure the same could be said of many Christian rules, religious rules that Christians keep.

We've got to stop and say, is this what God really wants? There's a huge distance between the rules and between God's true will, God's true desire.

There's a big difference between keeping rules and doing what God really wants. And you know what? If that makes you feel uncomfortable, good. Because we mustn't find our comfort in keeping the rules.

[23 : 40] Because often we can, we can keep the rules and still be not doing what God wants. that's what Jesus is exposing here. Don't think because you're keeping all the Christian rules that you're actually pleasing God.

In fact, you might be doing the opposite. And we see that in the very next verses. Verse 14. Have a look what happens. But the Pharisees went out and plotted against Him how they might kill Him. Jesus was aware of this and withdrew large crowds followed Him and He healed them all. Do you see the irony in these verses?

Verse 14 and 15. The law keepers, the law keepers, the Pharisees, are plotting murder while the law breaker is showing mercy on all these people.

You see the irony? Who's actually doing what God wants? That's what God really wants. Mercy. mercy. And that's the last thing I want us to see is actually showing the mercy that God desires because that's what Jesus embodies here.

[24 : 54] I want to take you back to verse 7 of Matthew 12. When Jesus was first having an argument with these Pharisees, He mentioned this in verse 7.

He said, if you had known what this means, and He quotes from Hosea, I desire mercy and not sacrifice, the words of God, then you would not have condemned the innocent. You wouldn't have condemned my disciples.

So that there, I desire mercy and not sacrifice, is a quote from the prophet Hosea who spoke God's words to Israel at a time that they were caught up in a lot of sin and yet they were hiding the sin behind all their religious rule keeping.

when God actually wanted and He communicates through the prophet Hosea, God wanted not a people who just keep rules. He wasn't interested actually in rule keepers, but He was interested in the people who show mercy from the heart.

I desire mercy, not sacrifices and all these rules you keep. Mercy. Mercy is what God wants. Not rule keeping.

[26 : 07] Mercy, which is to treat other people better than they deserve. Mercy, which is to give people what they haven't earned. That's mercy.

Do we give mercy? Are we mercy givers? As a church? As a church, as a church community, would we be known as rule keepers or mercy givers?

What would be the impression that we leave with people as a church or as individuals? You, in your daily life, in your relationships, in your interactions with people, in your marriage, are you a rule keeper or a mercy giver?

Do you demand that people keep your rules and you'll only show them favor if they do? This is so often in the marriage as well. You know, where husbands and wives have certain expectations of the other and they will only meet their spouse's expectations if their spouse meets their expectations.

Rule keepers. Or, are you someone who forgives? Who bears with the sins of others and the weaknesses of others?

[27 : 42] Who shows kindness that the other person hasn't earned? Is your life marked by mercy? Ask yourself. Is your life out there marked by mercy?

Is that a feature that people see in you? Is that a feature people see in us as a church? Well, Jesus is a mercy giver. That's what he's showing us here.

And he showed us what that looks like in seeking out and loving those who didn't deserve it. Over and over and over again, Jesus is a mercy giver.

That was his heart because that's the Father's heart. And in showing what it looks like, in showing mercy, he actually fulfilled an ancient prophecy from Isaiah that Matthew now quotes from verse 18. Let me read it. So from verse 17, Matthew says, This was so that the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled. Here is my servant whom I have chosen.

[28 : 44] This is essentially the words of God speaking about his son Jesus. Here is my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved in whom I delight. I will put my spirit on him and he will proclaim justice to the nations.

He will not argue or shout and no one will hear his voice in the streets. He will not break a bruised reed and he will not put out a smoldering wick until he has led justice to victory and the nations will put their hope in his name.

So this is a prophecy of what Jesus would do. In other words, it was always the plan that Jesus was going to come and establish and advance the kingdom of God and win people to his kingdom not through force or persuasion shouting in the streets and getting up on a soapbox just like modern politicians will do in order to get people onto their side.

No. No. How will he win people? He will win people through mercy. That's how people will come under his rule. That's how people will enter into his kingdom through him showing mercy not forceful persuasion and that is beautifully described in the next verse.

So verse 19 says you know he will not be forceful he will not try to pull people into his kingdom. How will he do at verse 20? He will not break a bruised reed and he will not put out a smoldering wick until he has led justice to victory.

[30 : 19] What is that talking about? I've often read this verse and what does that mean? Then I got the opportunity to actually study it this week and I realized what it means.

That bruised reed and that smoldering wick is people. It's talking about people. It's describing people. Broken people who aren't doing what they're meant to do. Who have messed up.

Who have failed to be who they should be. So reeds were used they were the straightest thing in nature that could be found in the Middle East. They were used as measuring lines. They were used to draw whatever. So if one was bent or bruised it was useless. Normally it would be disposed of. And smoldering wicks the same thing. In a candle a smoldering wick isn't giving any light.

It doesn't have a flame. So it's not doing its job. Normally it would just be snuffed out. But Jesus doesn't snuff anybody out.

[31 : 22] He doesn't dismiss people because they've failed. And because they're not the people they should be. But he shows mercy to them. Mercy that a rules based religion never would.

And the reason this is beautiful. The reason he can do that. The reason he can show that mercy to sinners is because he's going to go to the cross and die for their sins.

You see that's what makes it possible for him to show this mercy that you don't see anywhere else in the world. And that's what the next part means.

The end of verse 20. Until he has led justice to victory. He will satisfy the justice of a just God. But justly pardon sinners because he takes the justice for their sins on himself.

So justice is satisfied and then he brings them into a relationship with God that can transform them so that they will truly keep the law from their hearts. So justice is satisfied.

[32 : 30] He brings justice to victory through dying for sinners and showing them mercy. And that mercy, that is what will cause the next verse, that is what will cause the nations, the Gentiles, who had no hope under the law, to now put their hope in this king and come under his rule.

Is that you? Someone who has no hope under keeping the rules? Who has no hope if you were accepted by how well you do?

Is that you? Well, I've got good news for you. You're the type of person Jesus came for. The bruised tree, the smoldering wick. Are you not who you should be? Have you failed and you know it deep down inside?

Well, put your hope in his name. Don't put your hope in trying to keep the rules. Put your hope in his name. You are who he came for and it's through him that you can be transformed in a way that you never could by keeping the rules.

That is how he wins people to his kingdom. That is how he transforms people. That is his evangelistic strategy, if you like. Question is, is it ours?

[33 : 41] As Christians, as a church, we seek, I hope, to win people to the kingdom. That is what we are about. That is what we are here for. To bring people to know Jesus and come under his rule.

What is our strategy to do that? Is it to convince them and answer all their questions? Is it to give them a list of rules that they should keep? What is our strategy? Well, Jesus' strategy, his most important and most effective strategy for winning people was to show them mercy.

Is that our strategy? Is that your strategy for how you win people to Christ? To show mercy to those who have broken the rules.

To win people through mercy. To seek out the bruised reeds. To seek out the smoldering wicks who have been rejected by all the other aspects of society that want them to keep the rules.

Are those who we are seeking out, are those the types of people we are showing mercy to? Or do we only like the decent people to come into church?

[34 : 45] The people who keep our rules. We should ask ourselves that. Are we only interested in sharing Christ with people like us? Or are we seeking those who desperately need mercy?

Well, Jesus wants us to follow his lead. If we call ourselves his people, of course we should follow his lead, and that is by showing mercy to those who have broken the rules, and to bring them into a real relationship with God where they want to obey him, not through the burden of legalism, but through the amazing mercy that is found only in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let's pray that we are mercy givers. Father, we come before you and we hear you, and we are sorry for those bits of legalism that continue to cling to our hearts.

Lord Jesus, thank you that you came not to snuff out the smoldering wick or break the bruised reed, but to show mercy to those of us who have failed. We thank you for that, and we pray that you would help us to do that to others in Jesus' name.

Amen.