

Changing the Rules of the Game
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Geneseo United Methodist Church
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Matthew 23:16-22 ⁶"Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the sanctuary is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound by the oath.' ¹⁷You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the sanctuary that has made the gold sacred? ¹⁸And you say, 'Whoever swears by the altar is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gift that is on the altar is bound by the oath.' ¹⁹How blind you are! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred? ²⁰So whoever swears by the altar, swears by it and by everything on it; ²¹and whoever swears by the sanctuary, swears by it and by the one who dwells in it; ²²and whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by the one who is seated upon it.

Children love to play games; board games, card games, computer games, even imagination games. Some of my kid's favorite games were games like Hi Ho the Cherry, Chutes and Ladders, and Candy Land. More recently they have moved up to Monopoly, Risk, Life, Sorry, and card games like Kings Corner, Tripoly, and War.

It was the imagination games always got me in trouble. Like playing Barbie, or Adventure Hero's; I would be informed that I was a specific person, and then told what to do. After a while, I would try and have a mind of my own and be creative, then I would be informed that the Rules had Changed. I never quite caught on, but it seemed like those rules always changed to the advantage of my children, and not for me.

As they are growing up and their taste in games is changing, I find it more enjoyable to play with them. I mean honestly, even though Candy Land and Chutes and ladders are great games and more to my liking than the imagination games, I have to confess, I always felt like I was finding a way to miss count the spaces just so my kids would win. I know, it was an act of love and kindness, and I bet a few of you parents did the same thing for your kids. But no matter how nice it was, you have to admit, it was still Changing the Rules of the Game.

The funny thing is, even the card games that we play as adults, I find that the rules change depending on whose house we play at. I guess the good news is that at least the rules don't change in the middle of the game anymore. Unless you end up partners with your spouse, then the rules are out the window.

And what about professional sports today? It is interesting to me that the referees can change rulings now based on instant replay. How many historical games

would have ended different if they would have had that option? Or think about the college players who break drinking rules, curfew rules, or grade requirements, and somehow the rules are magically “Changed” for them.

Well, this is what Jesus is accusing the Pharisees and Scribes of doing. They would commit to something and swear by the altar in the temple and then later say, “oh haha, I got you, swearing by the altar doesn’t mean anything.” It sounds a lot like my kids changing the rules of a game on me. But we don’t do that do we?

On the other hand, how many of you have ever said something while you had your fingers crossed behind your back? Or maybe you made a deal with God that if he would only answer your prayer, you would start tithing, or never miss a Sunday in Church again.

All of a sudden we find ourselves “Changing the Rules” to accommodate our personal comfort level. “Well I didn’t really mean a full tithe, or the Sunday’s when family are in town. We find it easy to change the rules on things like that because after all, they were our words in the first place, and our words did not really express what we meant.

First of all let me say plainly, this game of bartering with God is not acceptable. And on top of that, the first things most people start to bargain with are things that God has already set the rules for. When God says keep the Sabbath Day Holy and a day of worship, he does not mean just when it is convenient. When he says return a full tithe to God, he doesn’t say, your pocket change will do. I think we can say God has been pretty specific about the rules of life, the rules of our relationship with him. Bartering about the finer points should not even be a game we engage in. Let me say that again, bartering about the responsibilities of being a Christian should not be a game we engage in.

Now, with that said, the games I personally like are games like Chess, or Suduko; games where the rules cannot bend or be changed. There is something comforting about knowing what the rules are. However if you have ever tried to complete a Suduko puzzle when there is a number out of place, it is easy to become frustrated or just simply put it down and admit defeat.

That reminds me of another favorite puzzle I had growing up; the Rubik’s Cube. Yes I was one of the few who could solve it. In fifth grade, there was a line at the recess time waiting for me to solve all their Rubik’s Cubes. Most of them I could solve in under 2 minutes, but there were a few that I never could solve. I learned later that the ones that were unsolvable were ones that someone had tried to change the rules on. You see, someone had gotten frustrated with it and moved the stickers. Although that solves a temporary problem, maybe completes all the colors on one side, it also

causes a much greater problem, those cubes will never be able to be solved. When the rules are changed, not everything fits back into place the way it is supposed to.

Just like Jesus noticed a problem in the integrity of the Pharisees who were willing to change the rules for their benefit, there is a problem when we try to manipulate or soften the rules of Christianity to accommodate us rather than simply playing by the rules.

Now let's get serious for a moment. We know the rules that I am hinting to, but rarely do we talk about them in a way that emphasizes the importance of our integrity with them. Yes there are the 10 Commandments, but Jesus summarized them into two; Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind; and love your neighbor as yourself.

Do we fulfill those rules, or do we change them as need be? If we neglect spending time with God every day in scripture and prayer, do we really love him with all our heart...? If we hold back some of the tithe, do we really love him with all our heart...? If we hold the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ in our heart, and are afraid to share or even offer it to a neighbor, do we really love them as ourselves? How can we love someone and not tell them of the love of Jesus Christ?

Are we playing by all the rules, or are we playing by the ones that make us feel good and crossing our fingers for the ones we don't like?

Jesus told the Pharisees that does not cut it! It did not make the grade for them, and it does not make the grade for us either.

The most interesting thing in this passage to me was what the Pharisees were placing the value upon. When someone took an oath on things that were sanctified and holy, those were the vows that could not be broken. It seems the real question for them was what was holy? And although they knew the answer, just like we do, they changed the rules based upon what they were comfortable with.

Now Jesus did not let them get away with it as he said, "So whoever swears by the altar, swears by it and by everything on it; and whoever swears by the sanctuary, swears by it and by the one who dwells in it; and whoever swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by the one who is seated upon it."

Here is where an amazing thing happens. For a person to become a Christian, we accept Jesus Christ as our atoning sacrifice. (That means that his death paid for the forgiveness of our sins and that makes him our savior) We also invite Christ into our lives to be our Lord, and so for a person to be a Christian, we must claim Christ, the holy one of God, as our Lord and Savior.

Now what happens when you wash a dirty rag in bleach? It is made clean! And in the same way when a person becomes a Christian by inviting Christ into their life, their sins are washed away, and they are made holy, pure, and sanctified.

And so now, we are the rule! What I mean by that is, whether we say something or make a vow, it doesn't matter if we swear by our great grandmothers grave, or our left eye, we are bound to it, because Christ is in us, and we are holy. Furthermore, because Christ was the fulfillment of the law, we are bound to the law and to upholding them. That means really loving God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind and our neighbor as ourselves. It does not mean finding ways to make it work for us, or cutting corners, or keeping some of the law.

Let me give you a good example. While I was in seminary one of my professors sold a house. It had been on the market only a short time and a potential buyer scheduled a visit. After viewing the house, they made a verbal offer of the full appraisal value of the house. My professor made a verbal agreement and set a time to do the paperwork.

Later that evening a couple called from in the area and said they would like to see the house. My professor said that would be ok, but told them he already had agreed to sell, and they would only have an option if the first agreement did not go through.

Well after seeing the home, this couple offered \$20,000 above the appraisal and more than the first couple had offered. Now just a reminder, up to this point, there had been no paperwork done. Which offer would you take? Although he admitted he was tempted, my professor said he had to keep his first verbal agreement. You see, he understood that just as Christ is holy, we are holy, and our word is our integrity.

We cannot change the rules of the game or it is like changing the colors on a Rubik's Cube; it can never go back together, it can never be solved.

Nor can we define the rules of loving and obeying God by what is comfortable for us. We know in our hearts what it means to be a Christian, but will we fulfill the rules, or like the Pharisees twist them to our own preference?

If we call ourselves Christian, Christ followers, we have to play by the rules. You know, during my walks, the most interesting question I run into is what difference does being a Christian make? They look at us, "Christians," and they see that we are no different than the Pharisees. We say one thing, then act a different way; our language, behavior, attitude, and actions toward others tell them that we are not following the rules, so why should they? It is no wonder Jesus called the Pharisees blind hypocrites, unless we change our behavior we deserve the same title.

I say, it is time to stop changing the rules of the game. It is time to start loving God with everything we are. Amen.