

## ***The Law of Stone and the Rule of Grace***

A sermon preached by

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*May the Lord be in my heart and on my lips, that I may worthily proclaim the Good News of our salvation in his name. Amen.*

Every time I hear this morning's Gospel story, part of me wants to feel sorry for those money changers and animal sellers in the Temple. After all, they were probably just a band of devout old Jews who year after year had been sitting in the courtyard of the Temple providing what was in fact a public service for their fellow worshippers. The law of Moses as recorded in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> chapters of the Book of Leviticus is very explicit about which parts of which animals may be burnt as offerings to God, and how every last detail of the sacrifice must be done properly. Now if you were making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Passover from some far-off corner of Palestine, it would be next to impossible to bring your own animals with you to be sacrificed at the altar. The most convenient alternative would be to purchase a ritually acceptable animal once you arrived at the temple. In the same way, the money changers in the temple also served to help worshippers obey the Mosaic Law. By the time of Jesus in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, Judaea was a Roman province and most ordinary financial transactions were completed with Imperial Roman coins, each bearing the image of the Divine Roman Emperor. The Scribes and Pharisees, those experts at interpreting Jewish Law, had long ago ruled that for a Jew to pay his annual Temple tax with such coins would be a grave blasphemy against the Law of God. Jews from all over Palestine would first need to exchange their Roman sesterces and denarii for simple coins of Tyrenian silver with which to pay their tax. If a little graft and greed and corruption occasionally crept into this transaction, well, we can just blame the Romans. The money changers, like the animal sellers, were there simply to help their fellow Jews obey the Law of God. The same office is performed by the devoted men and women who are this very morning ushering and passing the collection plate and counting up the offerings in every Christian church in the world. So what did the money changers do to deserve the wrath of the wild-eyed, whip-brandishing prophet from Nazareth? Perhaps it was not so much about what they did, as about what God does. Perhaps it was about the furious love of God when anything, even religion itself, tries to come between God and God's people.

As we read in Exodus, when Moses presented the Law of God to the Israelites, he gave them tablets carved in hard stone. The Law of God became as rigid, as inflexible, and as heavy a burden to carry as the stones upon which it was carved. Century after century, the rabbis expanded their teachings on the Law until a total of 613 commandments or *mitzvot* can be found in rabbinic commentary on Old Testament scripture. 613 detailed rules that a devout Jew was expected to fulfill throughout every day of his or her life. And as a devout Jew, your measure of righteousness was determined by how well you adhered to this scripturally defined lifestyle, all 613 laws worth of it.

A.J. Jacobs recently wrote a wonderfully thought-provoking book titled *A Year of Living Biblically*. In it he describes his earnest efforts to follow to the letter every one of the 613 biblical commandments for an entire year. Some rules were easy. He did not marry his wife's sister. Some rules were a real trial. Faithfully obeying the command in Leviticus not to mix two kinds of fabric in one garment, A.J. Jacobs threw out all of his poly-cotton tee shirts. He found other commandments downright impossible to obey. He utterly failed, for example, to stone to death even one of the several homosexuals he knew. A.J. Jacob's book might make you chuckle, but it will also make you ask some

essential questions: why do these religious laws exist, what happens if we break them, is God a checklist carrying policeman or a God crazy foolish in love with God's people?

These are the very questions in the Apostle Paul's mind as he writes the message to the church at Corinth we heard this morning. Paul says that all the "professionals" think that they have God all sewn up in their systematic theologies and philosophies and canons. The lawyers, the philosophers, the theologians, all the experts who claim to know how God thinks, have reduced the unfathomable mystery of God to a simple equation, where God's justice plus human sin equals punishment for humankind. Here is human sin, here is God's justice. Here is God's Law, here is God's punishment. If your sacrificial animal is the wrong color or the wrong size, God punishes. If you dare donate to the Temple a coin adorned with the head of Augustus Caesar, God punishes. Yet, as he writes elsewhere in his Letter to the church at Rome, Paul knows that even though we might try to obey all the Laws of God, we are just weak human flesh, hopelessly enslaved to sin. We always seem to fail to do the good things we want to do, and despite our best intentions, we commit the very sins we hate. Still, the religious formulas and equations of the scribes and pharisees and theologians demand that we avoid God's punishment and earn our own salvation-- deserve our own salvation-- by obeying to the letter the all the rules, regulations, and rituals of religion. But it's hopeless, Paul says. Every personal effort at holiness is doomed to failure. As an experienced sinner myself, I know the meaning of the words in the old Leonard Cohen song: "When you're not feeling holy, your loneliness says that you've sinned."

I once read a description of holiness in which it was compared to the Empire State Building. God's own perfect holiness was at the very top of the gleaming spire at the pinnacle of the building. By comparison, someone like Adolph Hitler or Sadaam Hussein was seen about 1/64 inch off the surface of the ground. Someone like Mother Theresa or Saint Francis of Assisi would be much higher, maybe about an *inch* off the ground. Yes, compared to God's perfection, even the holiest of us humans are impossibly tiny on the divinity scale. Even the most devout Jew who carried out each of his 613 *mitzvot* in painfully perfect detail would be just like a flea futilely trying to leap from the ground to the top of the Empire State Building.

So instead of continuing the struggle to enter the kingdom of God by obedience to the Law, Paul surrenders the battle. He knows he can't do it on his own. Self-justification, self-righteousness is a dead end. The equations have all broken down. The only answer? The illogical foolishness of Christ crucified. God, in the person of Jesus Christ, hangs himself on a criminal's cross in a shameful and embarrassing death, and only then do we see the power of God and the wisdom of God. It's a whole new equation where God's mercy plus human sin equals redemption for all humankind. On Jesus's cross, God punished Himself for every sin that we would ever commit. That tiny flea *can* finally jump to the top of the Empire State Building, but only by hitching a ride on the back of an eagle. The only way you and I will ever enter the kingdom of God is not marching in righteously on our own two feet, but carried in by Jesus, helpless sinners held in the loving embrace of those same arms that were stretched out on the hard wood of the cross for our redemption.

Does this mean that the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments don't matter? In Robert's words, are they really just the "Ten Suggestions?" I'll echo St. Paul: "By no means!" But I will offer a little paradigm shift to consider. I honor the Ten Commandments the same way that I obey the road sign: "Railroad Crossing – Do Not Stop On Tracks." I honor the Ten Commandments the same way that I heed the warning on the steel utility box: "High Voltage – Do Not Touch" or the label on the bottle that says "Poison." In other words, the Ten Commandments are loving warnings written on our hearts, as the prayerbook says, to encircle us and protect us from harm. They are not a set of stone-cold

regulations imposed on us by some divine policeman. The Decalogue is literally “The Ten Words” according to the Greek roots: *DEKA*, ten, *LOGOI*, words. Ten profound spiritual revelations spoken to us by a loving God to keep us from what will harm us. Ten spiritual paths that help us grow more fully and deeply human in all of our relationships: with God, with our fellow human beings, with creation, and even with ourselves.

But when rules become more important than relationships, when laws are more important than love, when the size of your sacrificial animal or the shape of your coins becomes more important than your love for God or your compassion for another human being, we can expect to feel the furious love of God breaking through to upset the applecarts of our self-righteousness. You can’t pay your way into heaven. You can’t obey your way into heaven. You can’t even pray your way into heaven. All you can do is accept the fact, that Jesus himself, hanging bleeding on the cross in his foolish love for you, has already paid in your name, obeyed in your place, and prayed on your behalf. He offers his hand and pulls you from the fire. And once you know that, your whole life changes. If you obey, you obey not out of legal obligation, but out of humble gratitude and faith. If you fail to obey, you realize that there is nothing in the world that you can ever do to earn God’s love, and there is nothing in the world that you can ever do to lose God’s love, no matter what. That is simple salvation. That is the rule of Grace. God’s foolishness for us is always wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness for us is always stronger than human strength.

From all eternity, God has known what our sins would be, how we would use and abuse God’s gift of free will. So, have you ever wondered why God even let us be born, knowing our future sinfulness all too well? For the same reason, probably, that any woman brings a child into the world: love. God’s foolish love shatters tablets of stone, overturns tables, collapses and rebuilds Temples. God’s rule of Grace destroys our sins even as we are busy committing them. God’s relentless, foolish, spendthrift Grace sets us all free.

The medieval mystic St. Catherine of Sienna once prayed:

When then, eternal Father, did you create this creature of yours?  
You made us for one reason only.  
In your light you were forced by the fire of your love  
to give us our being in spite of the evil we would commit.  
Oh, unutterable love, even though you saw all the evils  
Your creatures would commit against your infinite goodness,  
You acted as if you did not see, and set your eye only on the beauty of your creature,  
With whom you had fallen in love like one drunk and crazy with love.  
You are the fire, nothing but a fire of love, crazy over what you have made.

Each one of us, you and I, is the one that God has been drunk and crazy in love with from all eternity. There is nothing more we need to do to earn God’s love. There is nothing we can ever do to lose God’s love. And that is the Good News -- the *astoundingly* Good News -- of our salvation.

Amen.