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Proper 7C10 / June 20 / Galatians 3:23-29

Imagine, for a moment, the following scenario: eighteen boys visit a library. And in that library, they discover a copy of the first set of baseball rules published in 1845 by Shane Ryley Foster. Imagine now that these particular boys had never heard of the game “baseball” before. All they know about the game of baseball is what they are reading in that 1845 booklet. As a result, and through the years, whenever these boys play baseball and have a question about the game? ~ Foster’s rule booklet is the ultimate and final authority.

One day, a Coach comes to town ~ a Coach whom the boys really and truly love. They love him so much that, in fact, these boys would do *anything* for him. What happens, then, to the 1845 rulebook? What, if anything, happens to the boys’ *relationship* with the rule book?

This was the kind of question being wrestled with by the Jewish and Gentile Christians in Galatia. Before Christ came, the Jewish people had the law ~ their rulebook. They had the Torah, they had the Old Testament ~ they had the *rules* that were contained both in the stories of their ancestors’ relationship with God as well as in the proscriptions handed down by Moses. These *rules* had been a part of their history for thousands of years. It’s what they knew! And whereas the Jewish Christians in Galatia had readily *accepted* the news of Jesus as being the Messiah, some of them were *insistent* that Gentile Christians be required to also follow the *law* ~ *all* of the law. In essence,

they were insisting that these Gentiles become people of the Old Covenant as part of their formation as being people of the New Covenant.

This question ~ the question of how the laws of the Old Testament on one hand relate to the grace offered by God through Jesus Christ on the other ~ this is an ongoing theological question, one that continues to be wrestled with even in the 21st century.

What *should* our relationship be, as Christian people, with the law? What impact, if any, should the law have on our life as Christian people?

Let's go back to our imaginary baseball scenario. Remember ~ the boys discovered the 1845 rulebook; they have been playing by the rules for a good long time; they have recruited more boys to join them; and then a Coach then appears on the scene whom they all love and adore. As a result of having this Coach be such an integral part of their lives, some of the boys no longer see a need for the 1845 rulebook. This is the 21st century, after all, and a book of rules published 165 years ago should be considered outdated and irrelevant. Furthermore, because some of these boys believe that they have such a special and loving relationship with the Coach, *their* opinion is that the rules of the game should no longer apply at all! And in fact, using their relationship with the Coach as their rationale, they go so far as to invent *new* rules for playing the game ~ new rules that they insist be adopted and enforced based on their understanding of the relationship between them and the Coach.

By the by ~ this particular understanding of the relationship between law and grace was seen in the church in Corinth in the first century as well as by some Christians in our own 21st century. So it's really not a new problem. Some Christians simply see

the law of the Old Testament as being *antiquated*. Since salvation comes through grace, they deem the law as being no longer *relevant* to daily life. Instead, personal feelings and personal beliefs have *replaced* the law ~ and ironically, in some circles, these feelings and belief become promulgated as being the *new* law which others are expected to follow.

To use Paul's imagery, it would be like an adult forgetting all the manners that they were taught as a child and making up new laws to fit their personal context and their own particular circumstances. For instance, when a toe is stubbed, God would be seen as sympathizing with our pain as well as with understanding our choice to use His name in a rather creative manner. Adultery becomes not a sin but something to be validated by the circumstances in our lives. Even the commandment "Thou shalt not murder" is seen to depend upon the circumstances; honoring father and mother becomes a matter of personal choice; and the phrase "Jesus would understand" becomes the new motto. In short, when the law is seen as being antiquated and no longer relevant, it loses its convicting power in our lives. And as a result, we no longer need grace ~ our sins no longer need to be forgiven ~ because we have rationalized all of them away.

Well ~ that is a way that *some* of the boys understood the arrival of the Coach. Interestingly enough, however, a *second* group of boys had quite a *different* take on the situation. For *these* boys, the arrival of their beloved Coach didn't *replace* the 1845 rule book ~ the rules, themselves, never changed. Instead, the Coach gave the rule book an authoritative, ratifying voice! The Coach became the Embodiment of the rules. And thus if a boy said that he loved the Coach, then the boy must (by default) love the rules. If the

boy *didn't* love the rules ~ indeed, if the boy even disagreed with *one* of the rules (such as letting girls play?) ~ then it was obvious that that boy didn't *really* love the Coach. And because that boy disagreed with a rule, it was equally obvious that the Coach didn't really love the boy.

In the same exact manner, for some Christians, like the Jewish-Christians in Galatia, Jesus did not come to replace the law or to supersede the law ~ for them, Jesus came to *embody* the law. In the eyes of *these* Christians, law and grace are on an equal footing. Christ *embodies* the law, Christ *enforces* the law, the law and Christ speak with one voice! And thus a person receives grace if, and *only* if, they agree with the rules. Or more precisely ~ a person receives grace if, and only if, that person agrees to follow the rules that that Christian views as being particularly most important to them.

For you see, we would be hard pressed to find any Christian today who believes that *all* 613 of the Old Testament laws fit our society. You will not find, for instance, many who will argue about that eating shellfish or pork is tantamount to rejecting Jesus. But there are *other* laws that the Old Testament contains ~ other *laws* that these same Christians feel very strongly about. *So* strongly, in fact, that Christ and *those* laws have become one and the same. Thus if a person is in favor of women being ordained as a priest or bishop, they are cast off as a heretic. If a person, who divorces after an abusive marriage, seeks to remarry, *they* are told that *they* are rejecting Christ's teaching and are also cast off. Even a person's political choices are compared with the laws of the Old Testament ~ and if those choices are found to be in conflict, that person is seen ~ and is publicized ~ as rejecting Christ.

Now if a person wants easy answers to life ~ if person likes to see their world cast cleanly in the colors of black and white ~ then this is a *very* tempting way to approach Christianity. Give me the rules; tell me what I'm supposed to do; tell me what I'm supposed to believe; and then I will know ~ and then I will be *sure* ~ that God loves me and that I'm guaranteed a spot in heaven.

This is a tempting way to approach Christianity ~ but it's not an accurate way. And it's not a true way. Because when the law and Jesus are seen as one ~ the law certainly keeps its convicting power in our lives ~ but it misses a very important key ingredient. It misses *grace*. This methodology of approaching the law totally and completely misses grace. It puts God in an awful tiny box ~ and it confines His voice not only to an historical time ~ but also to our own prejudices and fears.

This then brings us to the *third* group of boys. These boys had read the rules in the 1845 rulebook, they had memorized them, and deeply respected them. These boys also loved and adored their Coach. Yet unlike their fellow players, these boys realized that, in the game of baseball, a coach and a rule book are *both* very necessary. The 1845 rulebook revealed the nature of the game and the guidelines for playing the game properly ~ and for playing it well. The Coach, however, helped them to *interpret* the rulebook so that its words could be understood and properly applied in their context and in their culture in which the game was being played. Girls, for example, could play if they wanted to play! For these players, the Coach was providing them with an encouragement and his *passion* for the game that the book of rules was never able to deliver! But most importantly, these boys saw that the Coach had incorporated into the

game the element of *grace* ~ a grace which the Coach was seeking to impart and to ingrain in all his players.

And as a result, when one of them saw a struggling child who finally hit the ball? ~ giving that child an opportunity to make a home run became the most important thing in the world ~ so much more important than trying to tag that child out.

Grace ~ grace is what helps us to enjoy the Christian life to its fullest. Grace is what makes us want to come out and practice the Christian life on a daily basis. For now that Christ has come, you and I can respond to God, and respond fully, through our faith. Not a faith bound by strict and rigid legalism ~ and not a faith consisting of loose and easy rationalization. But rather a faith that deeply respects the rules of the game ~ and a faith that truly and deeply loves the Coach whom we have come to adore.