

Welcome

Our little experiment this morning demonstrated something we're all already aware of: we don't like rules. Not surprising, given we're a nation of protesters - we were basically founded on a protest against taxes, and we've been protesting ever since. This desire for freedom, for a life of our own making, is deeply human. Today, I want to talk about rules, about our natural reluctance to embrace them and - surprisingly - I want to suggest that a life free from rules, from constriction, isn't actually the best life.

You already know this if you're a sports fan. Sports fans love rules because they make the sports we love possible. Of course we'll get mad about a bad call - but we're mad that it's a *bad* call... not that it's a *call*. We understand that for the game to make sense, we have to have order - for the sport to function, for the players to thrive, we need rules.

Today, we're going to explore God's rules and our propensity for ignoring them. And we'll see that God's rules aren't arbitrary, cruel or unnecessary but quite the opposite. God's rules sketch out the path that leads to life and flourishing. God's way leads to life.

So we're going to sing some songs now about God's goodness and trustworthiness. And as we sing, I want to invite you to consider God as a rule-giver - and how you feel about God's rules.

Message

[**God is boring, Devil is fun**] If there's one thing religion is famous for, it's having rules. That's not only a perception of people outside Church. I grew up in Church and I know plenty of religious people who make religion all about the rules. It would be sort of funny if it weren't so sad. They think the rules of religion are basically not to have any fun. Let the sinners have the drugs, sex and rock'n'roll... for now. They're content to follow the rules and be miserable because they're sure they'll go to Heaven when they die and all those partying sinners will have *much less fun in Hell*.

It's a horrible perspective - one that assumes a life with God is fundamentally joyless and boring, that *life* with God isn't really life. If we're being honest, it's hard to blame people who don't want anything to do with that sort of religion.

When your understanding of God is joyless and lifeless, your perspective needs an overhaul. We'll see today that God's rules lead us to life and flourishing. We'll also explore some hard truths about why we don't follow God's rules.

This is the first Sunday of Lent, the season of the Church year that prepares us to celebrate Jesus' resurrection at Easter. Lent is a season of confession and repentance. It's a time for honest, difficult self-examination.

Our series this year is called "Lent is for Losers". This year we are working through the whole story of God's people, witnessing again and again how they failed to live up to God's calling on them. Along the way, we'll reflect on our own failure to answer God's call. And we'll see, despite

our failure, God's consistent grace. Lent points us toward the cross, when God joined us in our sin, became the ultimate loser for us and with us.

Only when we admit that we're losers, confess our failure to be God's people, can we embrace the rescue God offers through the Cross.

So today, we're going all the way back to the beginning, to the story of our human vocation and how we refused it. In this story, we'll see a template for our own callings, and how we've refused them.

[Scripture Slide] Turn with me to Genesis 2. In the creation story in Genesis 1, humanity is created in the image of God and told to rule over the earth. In this second story, here in Genesis 2, we get some clarification about what exactly that ruling looks like.

In Genesis 2, God is a gardener and a potter - God likes to get his hands dirty. God plants a garden called Eden, and God creates a human out of the earth. There are two special trees in the garden - the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Let's read what happens next:

The Lord God placed the human in the Garden of Eden to tend and watch over it. But the Lord God warned him, "You may freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden— except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die." -- Genesis 2:15-17

God places the human in the garden to "till and watch over it". The word "till" there actually means "to serve". So the "ruling" God commands in Genesis 1 comes into sharper focus here: God gives creation to us as a gift, and it's our job to watch over it, to take care of it, to serve it. (This is exactly what God does for us - give us life and watch out for us. So we are ruling the earth the same way God rules us. We're in God's image.)

God gives us tremendous freedom - we can eat from any tree in the garden (including the Tree of Life!). There's only one rule: don't eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

If you don't already know the story, you can probably guess what happens next - that tree might as well have a big "DO NOT EAT" sign on it.

Skip down to chapter 3 (we're skipping past the creation of the animals and of the woman).

The serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild animals the Lord God had made. One day he asked the woman, "Did God really say you must not eat the fruit from any of the trees in the garden?"

"Of course we may eat fruit from the trees in the garden," the woman replied. "It's only the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden that we are not allowed to eat. God said, 'You must not eat it or even touch it; if you do, you will die.' "

“You won’t die!” the serpent replied to the woman. “God knows that your eyes will be opened as soon as you eat it, and you will be like God, knowing both good and evil.”

The woman was convinced. She saw that the tree was beautiful and its fruit looked delicious, and she wanted the wisdom it would give her. So she took some of the fruit and ate it. Then she gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it, too. At that moment their eyes were opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness. So they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves. -- Genesis 3:1-7

The subtle serpent convinces the woman to question God's rule. He suggests that maybe God *doesn't* want them to have life. Maybe God has a more sinister motive, like jealousy. God is hoarding knowledge. God doesn't want us to be as good as him. God is holding out on us.

The woman is distracted from her vocation by the fruit - it looks good and she craved its effects.

[Two Trees: Life and Control] Speaking of which, the nature of the tree is the key for us here: "good and evil" is a Hebrew way of saying "everything". The "knowledge of Good and Evil" is how the Hebrews thought of being in charge, calling the shots. Determining what counts as good and evil. The two trees, then, are Life and Control.

God's calling for us includes Life. We were able to eat from any tree in the Garden except the tree of control. God created us and gave us paradise and life and insisted only that we let him be God, that we live into our role as God's faithful, image-bearing care-takers.

This requires trust - trust that God actually wants life for us. Trust that, as the creator, God knows better than we do what will bring life for us. Like the first man and woman, we allow any number of distractions to divert us from what God is calling us to do. We strike up conversations with all sorts of interesting animals we probably should have left alone. We rationalize our decisions, convincing ourselves that what we want to do is right whether it is or not (especially when it's not).

And all of that leaves us right where the man and woman were - we hide ourselves from God and each other. We can't be naked, vulnerable, because we know we're not who we were created to be. We know we've ignored our holy vocation, our divine calling.

[Choose Control Tree/not trusting God] Friends, this is the ugly face of Sin: God created us and gives us life and gives us the way to that life. But instead of trusting God, instead of following this God's way, we chart our own paths. We insist we know better, that we're the masters of our own destiny. But again and again, we see the consequences of unrestricted freedom: broken relationships, selfish and unrestrained ambition, oppression, injustice, hatred, suspicion - we could go on and on. Loneliness is the disease of our age, with everyone too caught up in self-actualizing to pay attention to anyone else. The serpent promises the joy we crave is just over the horizon, but again and again we find that what we really need is a friend, someone who can

understand, someone we're not ashamed to bear our full selves before. What we really need is to be known and loved by the God who created us.

It's time for us to admit the serpent was a trickster. That God really was trustworthy all along, that we should have listened, should have trusted, should have been faithful. We've found God was right: our desire for control brings all kinds of death into the world.

It's no accident that today, on this first Sunday of Lent, the Gospel text is Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. There, Satan comes to him and offers the same kinds of temptations: distraction with delicious food, a beautiful world to rule and the power to do so. But unlike us, Jesus refuses. He will not be distracted. He refuses the toxic voices. And he will not rationalize what he would do, praying instead, "Not my will, but yours."

In my life, recognizing how deeply I choose to go my own way has been sometimes difficult to discern. One of the biggest places I struggled to believe God was in the area of my money. I liked to spend money, liked to buy gadgets and books and whatever else I wanted. I knew God commanded generosity - that those who have money should give. I knew that part of what it means to be a Church is to support the Church financially. But I didn't want to - even when I was working as a pastor at a church!

I distracted myself with all the latest gadgets, convincing myself they were all worth it. I rationalized it away, making every excuse in the book why it was totally right for me to do the exact opposite of what I knew was right. And of course I never talked about it with anyone because I was ashamed. I knew at the end of the day that the way I was using my money was bad.

And ignoring God's command to be a good steward of what I had been given did bring suffering. I ended up with a lot of credit card debt and school loans I really didn't need to have - debt I brought into my marriage, debt it's taken us years to crawl out from under. I got addicted to having the newest, shiniest thing, tried to find fulfillment in the newest toy.

There came a point when I had to decide if I wanted to continue to dig a hole of debt or maybe consider that my way isn't going anywhere good and I need to stop and submit myself to God's way.

I have to tell you - we're not millionaires by any stretch of the imagination. But the freedom I have found in living within my means and in giving - supporting our church, our friends who serve as missionaries, contributing to friends who have a need - this is a much more full life than the self-centered, debt-saddled life I had.

But I couldn't see that until I confessed my sin. Until I acknowledged that my attitude toward money was not what God had commanded. I had to trust that God's rule about generosity and stewardship wasn't about depriving me of all the things money can buy, but rather about teaching me what real life looks like.

Where do you struggle? Maybe it's with money, like me. Maybe it's something else - a temper, a habit, a relationship. Maybe you have known for a while what your next step is and you're refusing to take it out of fear.

Friends, our lives are much like a good game - we need rules. We need boundaries. We need to know what's in and what's out. And the creator of the universe, the one who designed the game, has shown us the way to a full, flourishing life. We've all broken the rules. We've all created chaos on the field, so to speak. What is keeping you from trusting God's way leads to life?

Examen + Confession + Communion

Where we have failed to be faithful to our vocation, Jesus follows his all the way to the cross. And there he becomes the failure we have been. He takes our sin on himself and allows himself to be broken for all the ways we have broken away from God.

This morning, I want to lead you in a prayer of Examen. I'm going to ask you to reflect honestly on where you have refused to trust God's way, and to consider the next six weeks of Lent.

After that, we're going to do a corporate confession of sin. The words will be on the screen for you. I know reading together, out loud, can make some of you uncomfortable. You don't have to participate, but I want to challenge you to. The Lenten journey toward the cross cannot begin until we confess we are sinners. We can't be saved until we admit we need to be rescued.

[Communion Slide] The confession then leads us into a time of communion. We approach the table as losers, failures, sinners. We need Jesus' faithfulness on the cross like we need food and drink. So we come to receive bread he gives us as his body, broken for us. He gives us wine as his blood, spilled for a new covenant.

We come to the table as sinners. We receive grace and mercy. And we leave walking in God's way, as God's faithful image-bearers, to return to our vocation of caring for the world and for each other.

1. **When in the last week have you followed God's way?**
2. **When in the last week have you ignored God's way?**
3. **When in this season of Lent will you be tempted to ignore God's way?**
4. **How can you submit yourself to God's way in this season of Lent?**

Confession:

Leader: We have not believed you or trusted in your power.

People: Lord, help our unbelief.

Leader: We have stained our souls by our action and inaction.

People: Cleanse us, Lord.

Leader: We are broken by disease, bruised by the sins of others, weakened and unable to repair ourselves.

People: Heal us, Lord.

Leader: We ignore your call to center our lives in you, and so are deaf to the hopes and cries of the poor, the sick, the needy, and the earth.

People: Ground us, Lord!

Leader: When we confess our sinful ways, God abundantly pardons. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.

People: In the name of Jesus Christ, we are all forgiven

Prayer

Assignment + Blessing

Spend time with Psalm 32, reflecting on your sin, confessing and preparing for Lent