

Welcome

As the oldest of three, it might not surprise you that my mom had to get creative at discipline. It also may not surprise you to learn that she found pretty quickly grounding me to my room wasn't particularly effective. Between my legos and my bookshelf, I spent a lot of time in my room *anyway*.

But my mom's pretty smart, so it didn't take her long to devise the perfect punishment for me. We lived in a cul-de-sac at the bottom of a big hill. My punishment quickly became running laps to the stop sign at the top of the hill and back. I've never been one of those masochists who runs for fun. It was pure torture for me.

My little brother, on the other hand, was a different story. He's a natural athlete, and he *loved* to run. I remember the first couple of times after my mom designed the "run to the stop sign and back punishment" - my brother did *extra laps*, just because he wanted to. And when he got back inside, he was even more rowdy than before.

It her a couple of weeks to figure out that the best punishment for my brother was the opposite - having to sit alone in his room.

Now, for any of you who are parents to more than one kid, you are not surprised by this, are you? Whatever aspirations to impartial parental justice we might have at the birth of a second child are dashed once their personality starts to emerge.

Any teacher or manager knows that same lesson: people aren't all the same, and if you want the best out of people - children, students, employees - you can't treat them all the same. We're all motivated by different things. We all have different fears, dreams and hopes.

So it shouldn't surprise us that faith is as complicated as the other parts of our life. And yet how many of us imagine God to be a distant, impartial judge who hands down a list of abstract rules to be obeyed?

But if a good boss knows you can't treat every employee the same, how much more must God know that? If a good parent knows every kid is different, how much more must our creator know that?

Friends, today, we're going to explore how God knows us, and what it means to live in a world where relationships matter more than rules.

Message

We're in the wake of Easter, when we gathered to celebrate Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Easter night ended with Jesus appearing to the disciples when they were hiding in a room, afraid to go outside. Jesus breathes on them, giving them the Holy Spirit. This is a powerful image - in both Greek and Hebrew, the word "Spirit" can also mean 'wind' or 'breath'. John imagines the Holy Spirit as the very breath of Jesus, filling us with Jesus' own life and power.

So during this season following Easter, we're going to explore what a life lived in the power of the Holy Spirit looks like. Where does a life whose sails are filled with God's divine wind take us? What does it mean to have the Holy Spirit's divine power transforming us?

Last week, we saw that the Holy Spirit is our ADVOCATE, God teaching us how to know God, speaking for us, praying with us. Making us look more like Jesus.

Today, we're addressing a real problem in religion - how do we know what the right thing to do is? The simple religious answer is, "That's what we have rules for. You just follow the rules."

A sort of classic example of this is one we debated in youth group all the time: lying is wrong. God says don't lie. But what if we had lived in Nazi Germany during the Holocaust, and had been working with the resistance to help Jewish Germans to safety - and a Nazi soldier asked if we were hiding Jews?

Is lying wrong *then*?

The rule says Yes, it's still wrong. So you either tell the truth and face the consequences or you choose to sin and ask for forgiveness. But... *really*? God's rule about lying is so absolute, so inflexible that even the context of *genocide* doesn't matter? That feels wrong on a deep, existential level.

But if we go the other direction and say, "Okay maybe in some cases lying *isn't* a sin, then... how do you know when it is and when it's not? Isn't this just a slippery slope to saying truth doesn't matter?"

It's a great question, isn't it? And it really gets to the heart of a deep tension for people of faith: how do we negotiate between rules and relationships? After all, that's really the heart of the question about resisting Nazis - what does God care more about? The rules God gave people or the people the rules apply to?

And when we frame it that way, the answer starts to become more clear, doesn't it: God gave us rules to guide us into relationships - both with God and each other. But the rules are only a guide. They're not the goal. Relationship is always the goal.

Which means, obviously, that faith is much messier than we think. After all, that's the nice thing about rules - you follow them, you're rewarded. You break 'em, you're punished. It's pretty black-and-white. Relationships are full color. They're messy.

[Scripture Slide] So what do we do? Well, this is where the Holy Spirit comes in. Turn with me to John 16. This is part of the same speech from Jesus we saw last week, the one he gave after the Last Supper, before his arrest. He's already promised to send the Holy Spirit as an Advocate for us, but he goes on to explain more about how the Spirit works in and through us. And in this part of chapter 16, Jesus promises that the Spirit *convicts us* of sin. Let's read:

It is best for you that I go away, because if I don't, the Advocate won't come. If I do go away, then I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world of its sin, and of God's righteousness, and of the coming judgment. The world's sin is that it refuses to believe in me. -- John 16:7-9

We hear this - the Spirit will convict the world of Sin, and we immediately picture a courtroom and a judge handing down a conviction. It takes us back to the God-the-Lawmaker trope, distant and removed. But for the Jewish people, God wasn't a lawgiver but a Father. And, contrary to what we think today, they didn't see God's laws as a burden but an invitation.

Take the 10 Commandments - as rules go, pretty famous. God handed down 10 laws and said, "Do all this stuff."

Except, that's not how the people who *received* the commandments experienced them. Religion at that time looked like priests in temples hand down arbitrary laws. The average person didn't get to experience the gods. And that's exactly how Egypt was set up - which is where God's people were enslaved before they received the 10 Commandments.

But as God liberated the people from Egypt, part of the liberation was this new covenant we call the 10 Commandments. God brought the whole nation to the foot of Mt. Sinai and then, rather than speaking through Moses or a priest, God spoke directly to the people: Be my people and I will be your God. And when the people agreed, God spoke these 10 Commands to them.

To the whole people.

This scared the people - so badly that they begged Moses to go back to acting as a go-between.

Now the people, to this point, had experienced 10 plagues. Passover. The parting of the Red Seas. It's hard to believe God speaking to them - as awe-inspiring as that must have been - could have been *that* terrifying.

I can't help but wonder if what was so scary for the Hebrews at Sinai was the tremendous freedom God's voice represented. They didn't have to rely on a priest to mediate their relationship with God. They didn't have to wonder, "Am I still God's child?" anymore. Because God was doing something new here.

God didn't speak only through priests. God didn't leave religion to be something guessed at, interpreted with omens, oracles and weather. God spoke to the people. God made a covenant.

These things we call 10 Commandments weren't laws, but an invitation to trust. (The Jews call these the 10 Words, by the way - not commandments.)

So what happened? How did God's word become commandments? How did the invitation to relationship become rules?

Time, of course. Fast forward a few hundred years and this assurance that we belonged to God had transformed into complacency. And so God's prophets began to dream of a new Sinai. Not a return to Sinai though, not a new set of laws on new stone tablets, but a hope that God would once again do something new. Listen to Ezekiel:

Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. Your filth will be washed away, and you will no longer worship idols. And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations. -- Ezekiel 36:25-27

Our New Living Translation obscures the wordplay Ezekiel does here - look at it again:

I will take out your *heart of stone* and give you a *heart of flesh*. -- Ezekiel 36:26

Ezekiel wants something beyond laws and regulations. Something human, something filled with God's own Spirit.

Sound familiar?

When the disciples received the Holy Spirit on that Easter evening, they understood themselves to be the recipients of Ezekiel's hope. God was doing a new thing. They were the new Sinai. Just as God spoke then, now God breathed on them.

And, as Jesus promised, God is doing something new. Not laws, but Spirit. Not rules but relationship. Let's go back to what Jesus said in John 16:

When the Spirit comes, he will convict the world of its sin, and of God's righteousness, and of the coming judgment.

This word 'convict' is an interesting one. The Greek carries the connotation of revelation. A conviction is an uncovering or revealing of truth. Which is why what follows is so interesting: the Spirit convicts us not only of Sin, but of *God's righteousness*.

Righteousness is another one of those big Biblical words we're not exactly what it means. But the word is, most basically, a relational word. The word means both righteousness and justice, and it points toward a state of relational harmony. A *just* world is one where everyone is in harmony and everyone has what they need. A righteous world is a world the way it was meant to be.

But the difference between a sinful world - where everyone does what's right in our own eyes - and a righteous world - where we're all living as we're created to be - can be difficult to discern. Which is why we want to fall back on laws. Make everything black and white. Treat everyone the same.

But God didn't create us all the same. On purpose. We're all different genders and ethnicities and races and personalities and... the list is endless. God is endlessly creative and our individual and cultural identities reflect that.

Which makes living God's way in this world really hard to discern. John, in his Gospel, refers to the world as lost in darkness. Jesus is light, and the Spirit illuminates God's way for us. The Spirit shines the light of God's love into our messy, complicated world to show us the way to truth.

Jesus doesn't give us rules. He gives us his Holy Spirit. When encounter those grey areas of life, it's the Spirit - God's own self - who guides us, who shows us truth, who illuminates God's way and the ways of sin.

Over the past several years, I've faced a number of big questions that don't have an easy answer. How does a Church respond to a police shooting in our community? What about a tornado? Or a global pandemic?

Pastors joke that we didn't have classes to prep us for these kinds of events, but it's true. There's no rule book. How could there be? Every tragedy is different. Every community is different. Every *church* is different.

The same goes for smaller, every day stresses. Navigating friends in crisis, illness and death in my family, my wife switching jobs and going back to school. In none of these situations is there a "right" answer. Life is way too complicated for that to be the case.

Because life isn't about right answers, it's about people. You know why there're 5 million books on marriage? Because every marriage is different. You know why there're 10 million parenting books? Because every kid is different. Friends, faith is the same way. There's no one-size-fits-all faith.

That's why Jesus gave us the Holy Spirit. To reveal truth. To shine light so we can see God's way clearly.

Which begs the question: are we living in the Spirit? Do we spend time regularly seeking the Holy Spirit, asking God to fill us and speak to us?

If we don't, how can we possibly expect that we will see God when God is present with us? How can we expect we'll know right from wrong, life from death, if we ignore the author of our life?

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus invites us into relationship with him.

1. When in this last week have I made space to be in relationship with God?
2. What have I allowed to keep me from spending time with God in the last week?
3. How can I make space to be with God this week?

Assignment + Blessing

Prayer of Examen