

Please Live Gently
Matthew 23:1-12
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, July 13, 2008

If you've ever driven up 83 North into Pennsylvania, you've probably noticed the large sign that greets you at the Mason-Dixon Line. On the right hand side of the sign is the silhouette of a state trooper. In bold print it reads, "**Speed Limits.**" And then there is a chart that tells you how much you will be fined if you break the law:

55-60 mph--\$50.00
60-65 mph--\$100.00
65-70 mph--\$125.00

and so on and so forth. Someone in Pennsylvania was determined to be very precise in laying out the letter of the law.

On the other hand, as you drive 83 South and cross back over the Mason-Dixon Line into Maryland you are greeted by a sign that says pretty much the same thing but in an entirely different spirit. This sign simply reads:

"Welcome to Maryland.
Please Drive Gently."

Whenever I see these signs I can't help but think of the way we have a need to take something that is very simple and helpful and turning it into something very complicated and burdensome. I've seen this happen years ago when I was involved in hospice work.

Twenty five years ago when the hospice movement was taking root in Baltimore doctors, nurses, social workers and lay volunteers went about the business of loving and caring for their patients with the general guidelines of standard medical practice, and they all did quite well, thank you. But today those guidelines have been ensnared and complicated by a maze of state and federal rules and regulations that must be followed and documented with mountains of paper work.

Certainly hospice workers still give the best possible care, but Big Brother is always reminding us, "**Obey the Speed Limits,**" instead of simple saying, "**Please Drive Gently.**" For some mysterious reason, far beyond my comprehension, there is a deep-seated need, visible in some of us more than others, to make life so complicated that we lose our perspective and ultimately our sense of purpose. We feel we have to cover all our bases and anticipate every eventuality. We all do it.

When your child goes out to spend an afternoon at a friend's house how great is the need to spell out all the do's and don'ts. "**Make sure you play fair!**" "**Don't get into any fights!**" "**Don't rip your clothes; don't leave the property without adult supervision.**" "**Remember to say thank-you.**" The list of do's and don'ts for our children is long. **But how much better would it be if we could sum it all up simply and profoundly with two little words, "Be good."** In other words, "**Please live gently.**"

By the time Jesus walked the earth the Law of Moses, the Ten Commandments, which were the guiding principles that governed life for God's people had evolved into 613 laws that specified what was right and what was wrong. But then a cadre of temple bureaucrats called scribes who were as zealous as their contemporary counterparts in the I.R.S. added to Moses' laws and further codified them into literally thousands of rules and

regulations. These scribes deduced that if a situation arose that wasn't in the Law explicitly, it must be hiding in there implicitly.

So, these driven scribes, made it their sworn duty to micro-manage people's lives with all these rules and regulations. How minute could these regulations be? Take the commandment that the Sabbath was a holy day. No work was to be done; it was to be a day of rest and worship. The scribes decided it was necessary to define "work." One of their definitions classified the act of **"carrying a burden."** **"What is a burden?"** They determined a burden was among other things, **"food, equal in weight to one dried fig, enough wine for mixing in a goblet, milk enough for one swallow, honey enough to put on a wound, ink enough to write two letters of the alphabet,"** and so on and so forth.

You get the idea. The scribes inadvertently put unnecessary conditions on the people's relationship with God. All the legalist do's and don'ts perverted what was supposed to be a beautiful thing. Here's how.

Getting back to the opening illustration: Whenever I'm driving on 83 North and cross into Pennsylvania and see that sign, even if I'm going 55, the legal limit, I slow down. Why? I'd like to say I obey the speed limit because I'm a good citizen who wants to be a responsible driver, a driver considerate of his neighbors on the road. That should be my only motivation. But of course, it isn't. My immediate motivation for not speeding is I don't want to get caught. I'm afraid of getting ticket. I don't want to get punished.

In the broader context, if we reduce our relationship with God and each other to a long list of do's and don'ts, we then spend our lives not wanting to get caught. We spend too much time wanting to keep the law, or finding ways around the law, instead of wanting to develop a strong, open relationship with God.

Late in his life W.C. Fields endured long periods of illness, much of it brought on by his addiction to alcohol. Fields had a hard boiled, curmudgeonly reputation, and had little regard for religion.

One day a friend unexpectedly showed and was surprised to see Fields reading the Bible.

"You old hypocrite, what are you doing with that Bible?"

Fields replied, **"Looking for loopholes!"**

This is what a religion of rules and regulations can do to you. God no longer becomes a life-giving, loving person. Instead we see God as a cop waiting for us to screw up so he can punish us because, after all, we're not good enough. So, we look for loopholes.

That's why Jesus denounced the meddling of the scribes and Pharisees. "They tie up heavy burdens hard to bear and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them." Were the scribes and Pharisees "bad people"? No more or less than you or me. You see all of us, each in our own way is capable of doing the same thing. Without even realizing it we take what God gives us and turn it into something God couldn't recognize as being his.

For instance, the love we give to others has conditions, we think, "There's no such thing as unconditional love." So, since God can't love us unconditionally, we then think we have to earn God's love, so we devise our little systems of rules and regulations, in whatever form they take, to make ourselves worthy and respectable. Our work ethic, doing good deeds, paying our own way, standing up on our own two feet, realizing the American dream, becomes our standards that we live by even as the scribes and Pharisees made up their own standards to live by.

But Jesus came to cut through all our self-imposed legalisms. He came to free us from any burden that keeps us from fully receiving and freely giving his gift of unconditional love. I don't mean that the Ten Commandments are now passé. We are not given blanket permission to do our own thing because "**Jesus loves me.**" Quite the contrary. Now we are given a new reason to keep the commandments; not because we're afraid that if we don't we'll get caught and then we'll get punished. Now, because of Jesus, his life, his teachings, his death and resurrection, we are able to embrace God's law out of gratitude and celebration for God's active presence working in and through us ushering us closer to where he wants us to be: forever with him and each other in community.

Perhaps St. Augustine put it best, "**Love God, and do what you like.**" In other words, if you put God first, if you seek him out in people and tasks, then your life will be changed dramatically and you will do God's will not because you have to but because you want to--out of love.

You begin to live "**gently.**" I don't mean "**tame**" or "**docile**" or "**soft.**" Quite the contrary. Living gently means living boldly, but that at the center of your life is that gentle serene peace and calm from which you can draw strength and courage to meet the challenges of the day. And the source of that gentle center is Jesus himself who teaches us how to live gently in our sometimes harsh and always broken world.

Living gently means living boldly like Jesus, realizing that any success, any peace, any joy you experience in life is a gift from God. It's all grace. You can't pay God back. You can't be good enough or powerful enough. But you can simply give yourself back to God in the spirit of true Thanksgiving.

An eighty year old lady was watching her eighty year old neighbor planting a small peach tree. She joked, "**You don't expect to eat peaches from that tree, do you?**"

The old man rested on his spade, "**No, at our age I know I won't, but all my life I've enjoyed peaches, usually from a tree I never planted myself. I guess I'm just trying to say thank you for the others who planted trees for me.**"

Be aware of God's eternal presence; claim all opportunities for service to others. Love God and do what you like and you will find yourself, by God's grace, living gently, living intentionally for Jesus.

Let us pray!