

Worship Rules

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Preacher: Rev. Dr. Russell Herbert

[0 : 00] I'm going to ask you a question, and I apologise in advance if it sounds like a bit of a negative one on a day in which we're celebrating an amazing thing like baptism.

But the question is this. Have you ever met anyone who's really, really turned you right off Christianity? I have.

Now before I go any further, let me just say that I consider it the most enormous privilege, and I know I speak on Clive's behalf as well, to do the job that we do as ministers because, and I genuinely, genuinely mean this, that as a minister you are surrounded by the most amazing, amazing people who really do show the truth and the integrity and the love of Christian faith. And I want to say that first and last, okay? But if we're honest with ourselves, every now and then perhaps we meet somebody who perhaps we could describe as atheism's greatest advert. And it very often has to do with that good old-fashioned, well not so good old-fashioned, that old-fashioned human obsession with religious rules.

[1 : 21] When I was about seven years old, I can remember being on holiday with my mum and dad, and we went to visit a cathedral. And I don't think I'd been in a cathedral before.

I was fascinated with it. It was a really hot summer's day, and I was wearing my new baseball cap. I was really chuffed with this baseball cap. It went with me everywhere. I slept in it. I loved my baseball cap.

And so I was in this cathedral with my parents, and suddenly I could hear footsteps, and I turned around and looked up, and there was a member of the cathedral staff looking down at me, not looking very happy at all.

And as they said in that tone of voice that kind of communicated something along the lines of, you look like something that I've just stood in. They didn't say that, but they said, young man, did anybody ever tell you you should take your hat off when you come into a place such as this? I was mortified. Not just because it was my baseball cap. I just didn't like being told off. Rules. My mum will tell a story of when she was a little girl, and one Sunday morning was out playing in the garden, and my nan was hanging out the washing.

[2 : 42] And the next-door neighbour leaned over the fence and said, you shouldn't be hanging out your washing. And my nan turned around and said, it's the Sabbath, it's the Lord's Day, it's the Sunday, you should not be hanging out your washing on a day such as this.

After my nan had, shall we say, responded, and a few hours later, I'm not quite sure what the reason was, but my mum had reason to go next door and enter their next-door neighbour's home, and the said lady who had had the exchange over the fence a few hours earlier was in the kitchen and her washing was hanging up indoors.

Rules. If there's one thing that I think turns us off, Christianity is this sense that it's about religious rules.

If you want to find an example of somebody that will turn you off the whole thing, it will be probably somebody who has this obsession with telling you what those rules are, and with that slight air of moral authority that they know those rules better than you do, and they like to point them out. One of the things I find so compelling about Christ and the way the story of Christ is told in the Gospels is the way in which the story is never sweetened.

[4 : 24] It actually takes all of the stuff that you would think that otherwise would put you off faith in God, and it takes those things and uses them for occasions to tell the story of Jesus, and that's exactly what happens here, because what we have is a religious authority, a teacher of religious law.

There were 613 Jewish laws, and the teachers of the law would spend their time debating how you would work that law out alongside that law when they seemed to contradict one another, and so they would spend their whole time debating the meaning of their religious law.

And so the picture that we have of this person that approaches Jesus is not a positive one. Now, that's no comment on the laws themselves. It is a comment on the person that approached Jesus, because we are told that he went there specifically with the purpose of catching Jesus out.

So think of the kind of person that I'm trying to paint a picture of right now, the kind of big off-put Christianity, okay? Somebody with their obsession with religiosity and rules and establishing the moral and spiritual high ground over you, that's the kind of person that is being presented in the Gospels here, and we are being told about Jesus through that person.

Now, I find it compelling, because if I was going to write a story and I wanted to argue the case for Jesus, I would not make my starting point those examples of bad religion.

[6 : 11] But that's what we have. That's where the story is told and how it is told. So we have this person who is obsessed with religious rules and regulations, and he comes towards Jesus, and he says, so come on, Jesus, which is the most important rule?

Give me just one. That's the backdrop. And Jesus' answer is disarmingly simple. Love God.

Love people. Summed up there. Now, we might ask the question, how can love be a rule?

I mean, if you command somebody to love, how can that be? Because it's not love something spontaneous. Isn't it a feeling? Isn't it an emotion?

Well, it can be. But the kind of love that I think Jesus is talking about when he talks about the commandment to love God and to love people is something far bigger and deeper than that.

[7 : 19] It's about an engagement of the will. It's about loving when our feelings may be taking us in the other direction. It's about love that goes far beyond emotion.

It's about love that actually pushes us into action. Because when we have that kind of love, it takes care of all the other things.

You don't need any other rules when you have that kind of love going on inside. Because that kind of love equals action. When on the 6th of April 1996, I stood in a church and married Tamara, the vicar did not say to me, Russell, do you promise that every week you will put out the recycling without complaining?

Do you promise that every day faithfully you will load and unload and reload that dishwasher and smile?

Do you promise that every time your wife-to-be has made a visit to the hairdresser, you will meaningfully recognize, acknowledge and affirm such visit has taken place?

[8 : 47] And he promised that you will always, without fail, restore the toilet seat to its rightful downward position. Could it have?

But he didn't. He simply said, will you love this person? And we all know, if we're honest with ourselves, that love, whoever we are, and whether we're talking about married love, whether we're talking about family love, whether we're talking about love in the neighbourhood, in the workplace, at the school gates, whatever it might be, that once we get beyond emotion and feeling, love is something that can be a challenge because it's not just a feeling, an emotion.

Love is an engagement with a will that translates into action. So when Jesus says, love God, love people, he's not talking about an emotion.

He's talking about something that, if that exists within us, everything else will be taking place, will just fall into place. But notice, he says, love God first.

Now that's a challenge. It's a challenge because my guess is, is probably most, if not all people in the world, whatever their background and whatever their beliefs may be, would accept, at least in principle, that there is something to be said with loving your neighbour as you love yourself.

[10 : 26] You don't need a PhD in moral philosophy to get your head around that one. Let's not make light of it, though, living out that reality, loving others as you love yourself.

As I once heard somebody describe it, it's like wrapping your own skin around every other human being. Loving others is not to be just given the nod and say, yeah, I'll go along with that.

It's a challenge. But as challenging as it is, my guess is everyone, everyone on the planet, would accept in principle that that makes a lot of sense. But it's not the first thing that Jesus says.

The first thing that Jesus says is not love your neighbour as yourself. It's love God. Now, Jesus did not then get into the whole discussion, and I'm not going to get into it either, as to, well, can you

love others without believing in God?

Well, of course you can. It's in our human nature. We're made that way. I believe we're made that way by God, that we have in us this instinct to love others, and that there are millions of people in the world who say they do not believe in God, but we'll love others, of course, of course.

[11 : 42] So let's not get into that philosophical debate about can you be good without God? Of course. It's in our nature. But, but, the reason why Jesus never even got into it was he just assumed truth, because that is truth.

God is there. We can't prove, we can't disprove. It's just that God is there. And so with that truth before him, Jesus said, the most important thing is love God first.

And the second is like it, love others like yourself. Now, why does he put it in that order? I believe he does it for this reason. Love is challenging. Love is hard work. Love is not to be underestimated. But it makes all the difference when we know that God loves us infinitely. The command to love God is an invitation to that relationship.

To know that for all our humanity, for all our mess, and for all our obsession with rules and regulations, God loves us, and loves us beyond we can possibly imagine. It is only when we really take that on board and accept that God loves us and loves us inexhaustibly that we're set free to love others.

[12 : 59] Truly. And so these words of Jesus, this invitation to follow him, that which is celebrated in baptism, is that invitation not to a set of rules.

It is the invitation to know the love of God and to live by the love of God. And when you know and live by the love of God, then the light shines onto every other type of relationship.

As C.S. Lewis said, I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sunshine has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.