

Changing The Rules

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[0 : 00] We're looking at, under the general topic of changing the rules, or moving the goalposts, as Bill suggested to me, Don Pestursky, in a book that he has just published, says that the new golden rule is, you let me do my thing and I'll let you do your thing, which is changing one of the fundamental rules by which our society has developed.

The basic rules that most of us are familiar with are those which are called in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Ten Commandments, which as you know came on two tables of stone, down to ten, and they were laid down as kind of the basis, the basic rules on which society should operate, and we've worked on them and taken them in order that there be no other god but me.

We've been able to establish that a plurality of gods is healthy and allows us to do what we want, that there is to be no imitations, and in fact that's all life is, is imitation, so that one has to be discarded.

You look at taking the Lord's name in vain, that is, it's wrong to empty it of its meaning. We at least used it as a curse word, but I don't think in our modern secular society we'd even take it in vain that way, since we want to be totally disassociated from the Lord's name.

We've changed that rule. The Sabbath, which demanded a kind of rhythm in our life of rest and work, and we had to build in that rhythm to every day and every week and every year.

[2 : 00] We've decided that we don't want, we don't want a, that kind of rhythm. We want time to go by as punctuated by a pile driver, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, without remitting at any point.

So we've pretty well smashed that one and found it unacceptable. As far as honoring your father and mother, we've largely made that the business of the state, and if people want to get elected, they better take care.

The murder or killing somebody, we have realized that even at the highest levels is a sadly necessary part of our society, which we must indulge in from time to time, so that while in a personal sense I'd never think of doing it, corporately we find it necessary.

Adultery, we've discovered to be an inhibiting prototype that has suppressed the expression of who we really are, and so we've changed that one so that we can have more freedom to explore the reality of who we are.

As far as stealing goes, we still don't like people that steal, but we've got lots of ways now of making it socially respectable, so you can do it that way, and it becomes a kind of white-collar activity now that we can approve of.

[3 : 32] So, false witness, you recognize that a little false witness can induce a commercially stimulating response, which fundamentally drives our economy, so we can't be tied by that rule either.

And then we discover that when it comes to coveting the housewife, servant, maid, ox, or ass of our neighbor, that that too is, as you will see later on, that's part of the thing that...

Some of you may not live where I live. I live in Shaughnessy. And we get shiny magazines week by week that are delivered only to a select group of people.

And so every time I see them, I feel so select. And I... And, you know, that all they are doing is they are a kind of exercise in promoting covetousness of the worst order as you leaf your way through them, and you end up totally trapped by them.

Well, those are the... That's what happens to our world, is that we of this generation suspect that we have been able to change all the rules and exploit the potential of the human species into doing things that it has never done before in history.

[5 : 10] And what a wonderful people we are. We're coming to Ecclesiastes in a minute, so don't get carried away. The fact is that we can pride ourselves on technological achievements.

We can pride ourselves on interplanetary travel, that when the Bible says three score years and ten, we've now got up to four score years and ten. Overcoming handicaps.

We've done a lot of work in that way. Air and highway travel is remarkable. Remarkable. The industrial revolution, the social revolution, the information revolution.

It looks like our whole world has changed until you look more closely. And the reason for this list of things that you have in front of you, which are taken from the book of Ecclesiastes, is to show you that despite all our accomplishments in changing things, there are things that don't change.

And I want to look at those verses one after another just to give you some impression of how it all works. My first illustration is this, which you can see is a...

[6 : 33] Well, I didn't know. Okay. Think what you like. I wanted you to divide on whether it was dawn or evening because the first verse, the sun rises and the sun goes down.

You know, there is... There is... He gives... Things go up and things go down. And the pattern of your life is you will be in the ascendancy for a little while.

Some of you are coming fairly close to the noon hour of it all. And you're starting down the other side. And some of us are way ahead of you. And some of you may think because the curve is upward that it will go upward forever.

But you are reminded the sun comes up and the sun goes down. And that doesn't change. And in order to enforce it, he says the same way streams run to the sea.

That's all they do. It was a great surprise to me in my youth when I discovered that all the rivers did run that direction. And that the cycle just goes on and on and on.

[7 : 52] And that doesn't change. That's a rule that doesn't change. The wind goes from the south and from the north, from the east and from the west. A generation comes and a generation goes.

One of the great truths of society which was captured forever in what I suppose most of you are too young to remember. But a song which used to go at a table down at Moray, something like that.

You know. We are poor little sheep who have gone astray. Yeah, the whiff and poof song. And yes. Damned from here to eternity, I think it ends up with.

Which was certainly a grasp of reality that people need to get hold of. But that this thing happens, you know. The fact that we think that we are the only generation that has probably ever been, certainly with any significance, is a fact which slowly erodes with time.

But it does erode. And as the process, the inevitable process of generations come and generations go.

[9 : 08] In chapter 1 and verse 8, the eye is not satisfied with seeing. Chapter 2 verse 10 says, whatever my eye desired, I did not keep from them.

But your eye has an insatiable appetite. And even though we provide a tremendous amount for the eye, we've developed that.

The sort of, that the eye requires this stimulation. And with all sorts of ways, we stimulate the eye. We're doing a book study tomorrow, which is a fascinating book by a Presbyterian minister in the States called Working the Angles.

And he said that one of the great attempts of the Herodians in the time of Christ was to get the Jews away from their predilection to listening to the word of God.

And he wanted them to see things, to see circuses. In other words, to move from a hearing to seeing. And he says we're far better off if we listen than if we see.

[10 : 20] Because we're so capable of being deceived by what we see. And how bringing in the Greek culture and the Roman culture to the Hebrew people and getting them away from sitting and listening to the scriptures was one attempt to try and reform those people.

And certainly it's been an attempt to try and reform us. Well, then you go on to the next verse, which is what has been, will be.

That is, that Nietzsche talks about the eternal recurrence of the same.

You know, and that there is nothing in the catalog of human experience which has not happened before.

And even though it may be totally unique to you as a person, the story is an old story. Somebody said there's only a few themes around which all the stories in the world are written.

[11 : 34] And it's because what has been is what will be. And a journey, in terms of our human life, in terms of here and now, the journey always comes back to where you began.

And it doesn't lead anywhere ultimately. And that's because what has been is what will be. And we're caught. The lovely statement which I like, which is one of the, what is crooked cannot be made straight.

And for that reason, I want to bend that around there like that and give it to you and ask one of you to straighten it out before we're finished today to prove that this is wrong. But it may have to do with character or something about our personality that what is crooked cannot be made straight.

But you know how difficult it is once something is bent to straighten it up again. And you know how difficult it is in human experience once something is bent to straighten that person up again.

What a task it is. He goes on to say, what is lacking cannot be numbered. And I think that that's basically what happens when you see a whole selection of furniture on sale with the advertisement saying, save \$780.

[13:00] But if you don't have it, you're not really going to save it. But Ecclesiastes sees through that little pretense and you can't count that.

And if you could just go home and explain that to your wife, it would be the verse you need to work from is here. He goes on and says, another rule is that the wise man and the fool, one fate comes to all.

That is, the wise man and the fool come to the same place in the end. And that's death. And he says that that is the intractable reality of our life, is that no matter what the record of your accomplishment is, the end result is that the wise man and the fool come to the same place.

And that's one of the bitterly frustrating realities of life that we find it very difficult to come to terms with. We like to change that rule if possibly we can.

In chapter 3, verse 14, it says, whatever God does endures forever. That is, that there is this understanding that whatever God does, nothing can be added to it and nothing can be taken away from it.

[14:31] And the extreme frustration of human life is that the wise man and the fool, no matter how high the level of achievement and accomplishment is, we come to the same end.

And it's bitterly disappointing to us. We try and deny and deny and deny it, but we are led inevitably to the reality of it, and it becomes inescapable.

And you take that reality and say, in contrast to that, whatever God does endures forever. Nothing can be added or taken away.

And you see, God is at work in some way, and the business of our whole temporal, time-locked existence is to become aware of the thing that God does.

You know, that... We were talking about this yesterday. Tom was there and saying that at the Nuremberg trials, that those men who acted presumably out of loyalty to their country and in obedience to the commands that they were given, and they did what they did with certain goals in mind, humanly speaking.

[16:19] But when they came to their trial, the argument which sent them to the gallows was, there is another reality which you have ignored.

And as long as you have ignored that reality, you're held responsible for it. So that, you know, when you're downtown and trying to work out the ethical problems of modern business, trying to understand how you do business in this kind of world, there is another reality to which you are ultimately responsible.

And you dare not lose touch with that reality. The other night, I heard from someone who lived in Hong Kong and someone who had visited Hong Kong that wickedness pervaded the whole of the life of that colony at every level.

And that it was only restrained... And I said, well, if people from Hong Kong come to do business in Canada, what happens? And apparently they felt that they would be restrained by Canadian law. But that you have this kind of fundamental reality in which people will... are prepared to be wicked as long as they are not restrained by law.

[17:51] And what Ecclesiastes is saying is that ultimately you have to give account for it. Ultimately, you are responsible. Ultimately, you have to make your own decision.

And ultimately, you have to take the consequences of the decision that you've made, knowing that even though your life may be short and insignificant, there is another dimension to it.

And that other dimension is the awareness that whatever God does endures forever. And that there is this other side to it.

If you go on to chapter 4, verse 4, you'll see the kind of what I would think was almost the engine of our economy as we understand it from a pragmatic level when it says in chapter 4 and verse 4, I saw all toil and all skill in work come from a man's envy of his neighbor.

That's where it all comes from. All the skill and all the toil. That's how we learn. That's why we compete. That's when we succeed. It's motivated by at that level.

[19 : 10] And even though we recognize practically that that is in fact true and come to terms with the fact that it is probably inescapable, nevertheless, we are responsible in that situation.

And you can't, in a sense, let yourself off the hook, even though you can agree that all toil and all skill and work comes from one's envy of his neighbor.

And if you go on to chapter 5, verse 10, he who loves money will not be satisfied with money. It's fascinating. On the front page of the Globe and Mail two days ago was just a squib which I saw saying that they are now setting up casinos in Poland for gambling.

Now, supposing you win everything, what are you going to buy with it? You know, I mean, that's the fundamental problem. But it's that they recognized that there is a human love for money.

And this tells you as clearly as possible that that love will never be satisfied. We came across in our breakfast Bible study this morning, you know, that the love of money is the root of all evil because it's such a powerful motivator on the one hand and yet so illusory in what it can do on the other.

[20 : 48] And so that's what he says. What it means, I think, I tried to interpret it into our world. It means that the only people in our society that should buy lottery tickets are the people who don't want to win.

And that that's the only way you can handle it. People who buy them because they want the money are in danger because they can't be satisfied.

7.20 on this same list says, there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins. And that's one of the great religious problems of our world is the suspicion that there are such people or setting people up without recognizing this fundamental reality of the whole of humanity that there isn't one who does good and never sins.

in the 8.8 it says, no man has power to retain the spirit or authority over the day of death.

You know, you are not in control. You are under the control of something else. And that again is a rule you can't escape from. There will be no discharge from war.

[22 : 09] that you are engaged in a war and that war won't end. It's, you know, we have great ideas about peace and war may be changed and war may be modified and the methods of war may be drastically altered but the fact of war will not change.

And then it goes on to say after that, nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it. You know, you can't accomplish a good end by an evil means.

That, it just doesn't work. And once you get caught in that cycle believing that the wickedness that you have to indulge in because that's what the rat race demands will produce the results you dream for, you dream of.

And it doesn't work. It simply can't work. And the only way is to start over again. I once had as a friend of mine a fellow who was a famous Canadian for having been a member of the Boyd Gang which some of you will remember but most of you won't.

And he, he was working with kids that were starting on drugs, you know. And he, he says, well, it's like this. They get on them and they go down the path and they go down the path and they think they can change but the only thing they can do is be brought right back to the beginning and start again.

[23 : 40] And, and this is what happens when in, in our lives is that we have to get brought back to the beginning to start again. Now, most people consider that to be a disaster but I hear of lots and lots of people who think it's the best thing that ever happened to them that they had to do that.

But it's simply recognition of the rule that wickedness will not deliver those who are given to it. In 817 it says, the work of God however much man may toil in seeking it he will not find it out.

but you see that is, I think that's the tantalizing reality of our human circumstances that while the business of our life is to know the work of God the business of our life is to identify the work of God the business of our life is to get in tune with and in touch with the work of God we don't know what it is.

And so it's extremely difficult. If you ask someone here how to run a law business or an engineering business or an accounting business or a selling business you know what it is.

But the only way you can be in touch with the work of God is by some kind of communion and fellowship with God as he says this is the way.

[25 : 07] And you trust him and follow him. But you don't know what it is that he's doing. And that's why I think our Christian faith is rejected by many many people.

If you tell me where I'm going I'll go. But if you don't tell me where I'm going I won't go. And we can't you know you can't know where you're going.

You can't know. I mean we can paint pictures of heaven and golden streets and fruit trees and all those lovely things. But we don't know.

All we know is that God has revealed his character to us and invited us to trust him and to live in accountable to him and in response to him.

That's all we know. And that's about all we can say. So chapter 9 verse 1 goes on to say something which is very poignantly true today that time and chance happen to all.

[26 : 09] you know and I think that a lot of people use religion I think to get out of the process of time and chance and then are very disappointed when time and chance in fact happen to all.

You know time and chance take I mean this is the great sort of I mean the front of the province this morning said earthquake kills many.

you know it could have said time and chance happen to all. That's what our world is about. And that's one of the dimensions of our world.

That's one of the inescapable realities of our world. And you don't trust God because you don't think time and chance in fact happen to all but only to a certain number of whom I'm not one.

But it says time and chance happen to all. And I think we have to come to terms with that rule because we can't change it. And so as the book of Ecclesiastes comes to an end it talks to the young man and says enjoy all you can of life but God will bring you into judgment and he will bring every deed into judgment with every secret thing good or evil.

[27 : 35] judgment now I have always in my life heard of judgment as being the most terrible thing that could ever happen but I think there is a reality in which it's the most wonderful thing that could ever happen.

Think about it this way for a minute. If you are an athlete training for a great event and the great event never comes then what a disappointment your life must be.

The big race is never there. Well we in effect are all spiritually athletes training for a great event.

The great event is when we encounter the judgment of God and if you think you can pre-guess what's going to happen there you are very much mistaken because the secret things are going to be brought out and we are going to be held accountable to a God whose purpose towards us is that he might express his love and that we might have the faith to receive it.

And that's why even though we don't know what God is doing and we don't know what his purpose is within the circumstances of our human life we have to be judged by him we have to stand before him and we have to recognize that that's what our life is all about is that point of judgment and to try and live your life on the grounds that it will never come is just wasting your life you know that everybody else knows that unless there is everything that happens to you good and bad ultimately has to come up against that reality and then one last verse with which I'll quit which I just love and I will illustrate for you is this one which is that is the serpent and the serpent appears not on your list I'm sorry but on chapter 10 verse 11 of Ecclesiastes if the serpent bites before it is charmed there is no advantage in a charmer now that is just think about it let your mind get hold of that if the serpent bites before it is charmed there is no advantage in a charmer the Christian faith the Christian faith and the Christian church are recognized for the most part by a lot of people as the place where you learn to charm serpents so that you can walk out into the world and you can charm all the serpents that surround you you know you can be like who's that guy that gets let down in the snake pit indigo jones or somebody indiana jones you can you you you you sort of daily immerse yourself in the snake pit and you go to church on sunday so you can learn how to charm you know that the reality of of the

[30 : 57] Christian gospel is the recognition that you have been bitten and the poison is penetrating through your body and you need something more than to know how to charm snakes you need some kind of radical antidote to the poison that will destroy you and that's that's what the Christian gospel is about is the recognition that you're not learning to charm serpents you've been bitten and your life is at stake and that and you know the poignant picture which is taken from the Old Testament when the children of Israel were being bitten by poisonous snakes and the bronze

serpent was set up in the midst and said if when you're bitten you look at the serpent you'll be healed and then John picks that picture up and takes Jesus Christ and says of him I if I be lifted up that as the gospel of Christ

Christ's death on the cross his resurrection are lifted up so we who have been bitten look to him and live through faith in him and that's how God has chosen to deal with us and you may think you want to know more about it than that but once you've recognized that you've been bitten and the poison is already in your system you don't need to argue as long as you might otherwise argue because you recognize that a radical cure is necessary and when you consider the Christian gospel you will see that it is presented as a radical cure let me say a prayer our father we thank you for the book of ecclesiastes the kind of cold hard pragmatic reality of it that challenges all our fantasies and all our illusions and all our self induced deceptions and leaves them smashed and brings us to the place where anything we know of you we must hold on to with all our strength that we may come to the place where we commit all of ourselves we know and we may not know very much to all of you that we know and again we don't know very much but you can bring us to the place of trusting you and you invite us to that place through

Jesus Christ we ask that you will give us grace to see this through your word and as we share one with another in Christ's name amen name so a name to