

“What Are the Rules?”

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Please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen. I am a person who likes to know the rules. I also generally like to follow them though, to be honest, I'm more likely to follow them when they make sense—like when they've been created to protect people. As you probably know, I was just on vacation in the UP. So as a rule follower, I found myself paying a lot of attention to the folks who did and did not wear masks at the gas stations and restrooms. Even on our hikes outside, if the path became narrow and we came within 6 feet of others, my entire family would whip on our masks and then try to distance ourselves. But we found that, in some places, there were many people who weren't wearing them.

It was a bit of an ordeal at times and my family and I found ourselves getting pretty irritated, especially when others would get sick of waiting in a line and would push past us or crowd around us, say at a waterfall or Pictured Rocks. The worry and the irritation this caused made our vacation a little less relaxing, a little less enjoyable.

Noticing this caused me to pause and to think again about today's scripture. The New Testament lesson shows us a disagreement between some rule's lawyers and Jesus. The story is not initially a great comparison to mask wearers vs non-mask wearers, so please bear with me. You see, the rules lawyers believed very strongly that everyone had to follow the letter of the law and that letter very clearly stated that people were only allowed to eat certain foods—Kosher foods. Jesus wanted his followers to focus on the spirit of the law. The spirit of the Kosher laws was to keep people pure in body, mind and spirit. As we can see by what he says here, what we put into our bodies generally doesn't make us as impure as our thoughts and words can.

So, it's not a great comparison to make to masks vs. non-masks, since wearing masks truly IS a way to protect yourself and others from Covid. Indeed, since the marginalized, the poor, and people of color are getting Covid in higher numbers, wearing a mask is a particularly good way to show love to one's neighbors.

Nevertheless, Jesus' observation here about impurity coming from our words and thoughts is really useful in this example. As we read and see on the news all the time, the debate about wearing masks has become incredibly contentious, and even cruel and violent. People are fighting

about this rule, rather than focusing on the spirit behind it, which is the hope and desire to keep all people safe from Covid. As we know, some people have become so angry about being asked to wear a mask that they have attacked or even killed the askers. People on both sides are getting in shouting matches. Even I, I am ashamed to admit, when I heard about the sheriff in Florida who is requiring his employees AND visitors to the police station to NOT wear masks, I had a gut reaction—I thought, maybe he will get Covid and see how real it is.

An impure and cruel thought, indeed—one that is very un-Christian.

It's difficult not to have harsh thoughts like this one from time to time, especially knowing what I do about how terrible Covid is. I will admit to having become very frustrated with the fact that something that should be binding us together as a people—a deadly disease—has become a political issue. As our Old Testament reading tells us, “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity.” So why can't we unify and agree on this! And I don't know about you, but I then feel guilty and convicted when I hear Jesus' words about impure thoughts and words. In fact, I'll be reading a prayer provided from the UCC about this, and it, too, made me feel convicted the first time I read it.

In case you are like me, I would like to ask you to grant yourself some grace about this. You see, even Jesus got really angry and snarky from time to time and took it out on others. The section of scripture right after the one we read for today is a great example. So, picture this: Jesus has just told the rules lawyers to chill out and stop being so picky about the food they eat when their thoughts and words are much more impure. He's basically just said how very important it is to behave lovingly towards others. At that moment, a wealthy woman, a Canaanite, comes to ask him to heal her daughter. Jesus turns to her and says, “It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the little dogs.”

Jesus swore at the woman and blew her off!

The context of this situation helps us a little. Jesus had been healing and teaching outcasts, the poverty-stricken, the hungry and homeless, but he'd also just been badgered by the rules lawyers who he knows would like to kill him. So, things are a little stressful for him. And then this woman who has all the privileges, all the access to the best medical care, pushes her way through the crowd and demands that he help her. Jesus came to help the ones who can't get help for themselves because of the system they are stuck in; he doesn't want to help this woman and I can definitely understand why he snaps at her.

Still, it's a pretty ironic reaction, considering what he had just been saying. And it reminds us that perhaps it is okay if we give ourselves a little grace when we also become irritated at others and have harsh thoughts towards them, especially if they are ignoring rules that we know are for the common good. If even Jesus can become so angry and lose his temper, maybe it makes sense that we sometimes do, too.

But I do want to go back to what our Old Testament lesson teaches and what Jesus was trying to teach before he lost his temper. There is truly something impure about cruel or harsh words and thoughts. Both are a form of violence, which means that they harm both the speaker and the one being spoken to. Violence also tends to cut off real communication and understanding, making true connection impossible.

Luckily for Jesus, the Canaanite woman he was speaking to didn't take it personally—or maybe she was just so desperate to help her daughter that she would put up with his name calling. She responded by telling Jesus that even the little dogs would be given table scraps—meaning that she would take anything that Jesus would be willing to give her, if only he would help her. This quiet reason and attempt at true connection, this de-escalation, got Jesus' attention. He backed down and healed her daughter.

During this last week, we traveled with one of my daughter's friends who honestly and open-heartedly asked why some people were being so difficult about wearing masks. Without pausing, I switched right into teacher or pastor mode, and started offering some possible reasons for their thinking: They could have a lung or breathing issue; they could be truly confused about the science or recommendations; they could be truly confused about how to find good information about the virus; they could be following the advice of people they know and trust, etc. And once I started thinking about such possible reasons for their behavior, my irritation lessened. I still wanted them to wear masks and would have loved for them to social distance more, but my inner being—my feelings and my thoughts changed—maybe the way Jesus' had when confronted with quiet reason.

And then it hit me: My vacation really had been a little less relaxing and enjoyable, but I didn't need to let it keep being that way. Dwelling on my frustrations and thinking negative thoughts about the non-mask wearers truly had harmed me. But I couldn't do anything to change their behavior. However, even thinking about reasons they acted the way they did humanized them for me, calmed my spirit.

There certainly are times when following the spirit of the law means that we need to let our anger galvanize us into action, especially to protect others. But if purity comes from our words and thoughts, and not from following the letter of the law, then one way we can be more pure and live more harmoniously is by not dwelling on the things we cannot change, and also seeking to understand one another as much as possible. I am going to try this more this week when I'm out and see non-mask wearers. I will hope that they do the same when they see me, fully masked, hand sanitizer in my pocket, and social distancing. Amen.