

Homily
22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 1, 2024

Because I told you so! How many of us heard this when we were younger? How many of us have said those words? They were probably said out of frustration, because the rule they referred to was meant to keep us safe or someone we love safe, but the details were difficult to convey. “You must be home by 10 PM.” “Why?!” “Because I want to keep you safe from harm, in the unlikely event that you should encounter a bad element of our society or from keeping you from making poor decisions as the night wears on.” “But, why?!” “Because I said so.”

Parents, teachers, supervisors, legislators, kings, tyrants, all make rules that we are expected to live by. They are meant to maintain order in our lives. And because all of these rules are made by fallible humans, and they are followed by fallible humans, they sometimes miss the mark. Sometimes the rules don’t make sense or are overreaching. Sometimes we don’t follow the rules because we judge them unlawful, think we know better or want to achieve something that this particular rule would prevent. Some we ignore in times of urgency. There’s always a risk balance when we choose to bend or break the rules. Just last week in my neighborhood, I drove on the wrong side of the road, safely, to steer clear of a pedestrian with a child on the sidewalk.

But why should we obey any rule or law or ordinance? Why not have a society where we all do what we want and do not worry about the consequences? First, we wouldn’t have a society. It would be very difficult indeed to live in a society where there were no rules. We would have anarchy, chaos, disorder, misery. Second, if we do not obey the higher laws (do not lie, do not steal, do not murder), then we will be forced to obey the lower laws (distrust, destruction, death). If we don’t obey the law of being careful when walking on an icy sidewalk, then we will obey the law of gravity.

What about the Pharisees and scribes? They obeyed the laws. They made sure that all of Israel obeyed the law! They made sure that everyone saw them obeying the Law. They made a living demonstrating their obedience to the Law! This is what Jesus was talking about; this is what Jesus meant when He quoted Isaiah, “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” Jesus was saying that the Pharisees and scribes obeyed the letter of the law, but did not obey the spirit of the law. For the Pharisees and scribes, it was all show and no substance.

When we tell someone to do something, are we telling them out of a reverence for God, for building up the kingdom of God, or are we telling them for some selfish purpose? What is our intent? When we make a rule, is it for someone’s benefit or is it to ‘Lord it over them?’ Are we being a servant or a tyrant?

Why do rules matter in the Catholic Church? We seem to have many rules. The Roman Missal has an entire section called, “The General Instruction of the Roman Missal,” affectionately referred to as the GIRM. We are told to, “Say the black and do the red.” We are instructed to not add to or take away from any part of the GIRM. The Catechism of the Catholic Church has 2,865 paragraphs and the Code of Canon Law has 1,752 canons or laws we are all called to follow. Why are these important?

We are intentional in our relationship with God. It's important to have order in what we do and how we say it. Without rules and regulations, we'd all be doing our own thing and there would be no sense of communion with each other. Most of these are not scriptural, but as they are the rules of men, should not be treated as the unchangeable word of God, but it doesn't mean we can ignore them either. We don't worship the rules, but the rules do help us worship God.

With all this said, it is important that we learn what the rules are, then we get to know what the spirit of the law is. Then we must decide if we are going to be good citizens, parents, children, employees, good Christians, and follow not only the letter of the law, but the spirit of the law.

And most important of all is that we know God loves us right where we are, in all our sinfulness, wants only what is best for us, calls us to love Him and each other, and that loves us too much to leave us where we are. Our God is a God of judgement, but more so a God of mercy. God judges our actions, but He knows our hearts and has mercy on us. This is why Jesus told the adulterous women, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin anymore."

Zig Ziglar said, "When you are tough on yourself, life is going to be infinitely easier on you." Remember, if we don't obey the higher law, we will obey the lower law. It is difficult to stay on the narrow path, but the consequences of straying are eternal. And the consequences of staying faithful are also eternal.