

Hello, This is Pastor Matthew Woods, Pastor at Grace Lutheran Church and this is the Devotion for the Week of July 6, 2020

### “Can’t Win Without Rules”

Can you imagine driving down the road and everyone got to make up the rules as they went. Some of us have tried it—going 85 mph in a 70-mph zone. Or maybe we have rolled through a stop sign because we just didn’t feel like stopping. And perhaps we have sat at a red stop light when no one was around and at least thought about going ahead. But imagine if every time you rolled through a stop sign someone else did too. Imagine if someone really decided not to follow the rules and decided to drive on the wrong side of the road. We all know what happens then. Someone gets hurt. The fact of the matter is that a safe drive depends on everyone following the rules and having those rules enforced.

Consider a basketball game. I see that the NBA is coming back to finish its season this July when we would normally be paying attention to the baseball season. Why not... I guess. Most of us know the game of basketball. You have to dribble the ball to move. You can’t foul. The coach earns a technical foul if he gets on the court. If you make a basket it worth two points or if its outside the three-point line its three points and so on. In fact, today its almost annoying how meticulous calls by the referees have become especially in the world of college basketball. It seems like the game is stopped a lot more these days to watch a replay on the sideline just to see if the player’s foot touches the line; or shot the ball before the shot-clock ran out.

Imagine, not following the rules of the game. A player might think he deserves extra points for how stylish his slam dunk looked. Maybe they could tackle the opponent with the basketball. Maybe a player could have points taken away for mouthing off to the referees. The fact is without the rules no one knows where the boundaries of the court are; how much a basket counts for; what a foul is; how tall the basket should be off the floor; or anything. Without those rules no one can understand the game or win it.

The same can be said of God’s Law. If you want to win the Law is necessary. In Matthew 5:17-20 at the beginning of Jesus Sermon on the Mount Jesus say, <sup>17</sup>“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. <sup>18</sup>For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. <sup>19</sup>Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>20</sup>For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Rules are not only essential for games and for a society to exist but also to win spiritually. Let’s understand what I mean. First, we Lutherans often talk about the three uses of the Law. The first is the Mirror, which shows our sins. Romans 3:20 says, “We become conscious of our sin through the Law.” We look into God’s Law and as sinners we realize that we cannot fulfill its demands for perfection. We cannot be saved by it because we can’t keep it. In and through the Law we realize our sin and therefore our need for Jesus.

Second, is the Curb or fence. Years back when Josh was just starting to walk, we lived on a busy street corner. Every time we went outside, he would run towards the road thinking it was fun to get us to chase after him. He had no idea of the dangers of the road. So, we put up a

fence to keep him safe. The Law does something similar when God says for example, “You Shall not Covet Your neighbor’s house, wife, workers, or animals.” If David, whom God loved, didn’t covet Bathsheba all his other sins could have been avoided. The idea is to protect what is loved and treasured. In the case of the Law we are God’s beloved children that he wants to keep safe.

Finally, we know the Law to be a guide. It tells us what to do and what not to do. On our recent trip to Gatlinburg we did a lot of hiking on Mt. Le Conte. It was beautiful. Before hitting the trails, we made it a point to stop at the park office and consult someone who knew the trails so we knew what to expect. In the same way the Lord knows better than we do the terrain of life. The Lord has seen it all and has given His people a guide in His Word to follow. “Your word is light unto my path and a lamp unto my feet” (Psalm 119:105). Those who follow His Word are called wise. In fact, as Jesus preaches the Sermon on the Mount, He is effectively teaching how to traverse this world under the Law. He also says, whoever hears Jesus’ words and puts them into practice is like a man who builds his house on the rock.” In the sermon on the Mount Jesus demonstrates how to follow the Law properly and not in a way that the Pharisees had been demonstrating.

The basics of sin is to replace God’s Law for another—usually with our own set of rules. You can almost hear the words of Satan in Genesis 3 each time this happens. “Did God really say...?” Adam and Eve knew what God said, but as soon as it was decided that the fruit was desirable for gaining wisdom, they ate it. Suddenly the Law was broken. The results were banishment from the Garden and death.

The Pharisees in Jesus’ day were very creative in their rule breaking. They tried to do so while claiming that they were keeping the Law. In Mark 7 Jesus confronts them about the commandment to honor one’s parents. Jesus reveals that they deliberately break this law in a tradition called, “Corban”. Instead of using their money to help with the folks and care for them as was prescribed by the Law they declared their income corban or holy, something belonging to God and could not be used for personal interests. Therefore, they were off the hook to help. Except they had no problem buying themselves fine clothing and nice homes. What’s more in Matthew 22:15-22 when the Pharisees challenge Jesus with whether its is Lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not Jesus exposes their hypocrisy. The money they were carrying around not only wasn’t corban but it had Caesar’s image on it. “Give back to Caesar what is Caesars and to God what is God’s.” One set of rules for the people another for the Elites.

Without a willingness to keep the Law regardless of who is breaking them, no Law will ever work no matter how many are written. If a person will not humble themselves to submit to a Law because they do not believe in God, or if one hates Caesar they are a danger to everyone.

But Jesus didn’t come to abolish the Law. The Law of God is not the problem, sin is. And not one least stroke of the pen will be erased from it. The Law is simply impossible for us to keep perfectly. So, Jesus comes into our world and does what Israel could not. Jesus keeps the Law perfectly. He plays by His Father’s rules and humbles Himself even to a cross. And when it is all finished Jesus is not just a keeper of the Law but the full expression of it. Jesus is the Passover Lamb who takes away the sins of the world. Jesus is the perfect sacrifice for our sins. 2 Cor 5:21, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Jesus won the game dying under God’s rules that someone must pay for our sins. Those sins were laid on Jesus on the cross. The game was won and the resurrection is promised.

The Law establishes what is expected and why Jesus had to die on the cross. Without the Law we have no knowledge of sin. We also have no sense of the holiness of God. We have no sense of order and nothing works. We cannot win without the Law—that is because Jesus fulfills the Law just as He says. The Law by itself doesn't work for us. But in Christ the Law becomes a way to identify ourselves with the image of God. All because Jesus has fulfilled the Law we are saved by faith through grace as a gift of God (Ephesians 2:8-9). In Jesus we win.

Let us not forget love is the centerpiece of God's Law. Love is also the driving force of our salvation in Jesus—for God so loved the world that He gave. Imagine how much better things would actually be if we loved the Lord our God with all of our being and then loved our neighbor as ourselves. Just think how different our neighborhoods would look.

And now the Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face to shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord look on you with His favor and give you His peace. Amen.

Pastor Matthew Woods  
John 3:30