

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time + 1 September 2024 + Deut 4 + Jas 1 + Mk 7

Does the Church have too many rules? Now you can probably guess what my answer is going to be. After all, I would not have given my life to the Church if I thought that She was fatally flawed. But knowing that this is a common belief held by many these days, it is a question worth considering. Please note that I'm going to use rule, law, and commandment here interchangeably for ease of discussion.

First, a few words about law. All human law, to have any real authority, must have at least some connection, or logical association, with eternal law. If it doesn't, it is a merely human construct: meaning, it is subject to change, it is arbitrary, and very vulnerable to being misused. On the other hand, Eternal law is the wisdom of the Creator. God's wisdom that has been instilled by God into His creatures is called natural law; it is written into every human heart. These laws teach man how to do good and avoid evil, are binding on all people, and cannot change. They are expressed most completely in the 10 commandments, which teach us how to live in right relationship with God and with each other.

Because sin blurs man's ability to discern the good, the 10 commandments were truly a gift to God's chosen people, the Israelites, as we heard in our 1st reading today. But like any gift *coming down from the Father of lights*, it was not only meant for them; it was to also make them a light to the other nations, drawing them in to become part of God's people too. The 10 commandments, moral laws, were not the only laws given by God in the Old Testament. There were also liturgical laws and civil laws—all necessary for good order. Some of these laws seem strange to us today, because we are so far removed from the culture, geography, psychology of the ancient near East. Many people today try to use the "strange" cultic and civil laws to create a false equivalency, saying that because of these, all Old Testament Laws should be thrown out, especially the now-unpopular moral laws.

St. Thomas Aquinas is very helpful here. He explains that the civil laws of the Israelites applied only to their time, because the new people of God are no longer a civil state, but a Church. Old Covenant Liturgical laws also no longer apply, because they were all preparations, foreshadowings, that have now been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. But the moral law, that is, the 10 commandments, still do apply, because as we said, they are the written form of what God has inscribed into the human heart: the "logic" of His creation.

As the Old Testament progresses, you see the number of laws increasing as the people become more depraved. Rather than drawing the pagan nations into God's people, the Israelites wanted to live like the other nations. They wanted the so-called "freedom" to live like the pagans: to have kings rule over them, to have no limits placed on their sensual desires, to worship idols like the pagans did (which even included sacrificing their own children to false gods). This didn't apply to everyone, of course. There always remained a 'faithful remnant.' But by and large, the people failed in their call to be a light to the nations.

And it was in response to this situation that the Pharisee movement likely originated: they wanted strict observance to the Law, and strict separation from the pagans, so to be a holy people again. But there was a big problem. The Law could not change the human heart, damaged by sin. It made people aware of sin, it made them aware of right and wrong, but it could not empower them to choose and to love the good. Following the Law became a source of human pride in the Scribes and Pharisees, and even worse, contrary to Moses' warning, they added more laws, that eventually became impossible to keep. They were hypocrites, and so received some of Jesus' harshest words in the Gospels, as we hear today.

Because just mechanically following the Law is not enough. Remember, the Law was a sort of exterior reminder of what really is deep within all of us, in our hearts. And so Jesus came to empower human hearts not only to *do* the good, but even more, to *want* to do it. That's where real freedom is found. Every addict knows that he is only free when he no longer has to white knuckle temptations, because that temptation is no longer attractive. And that change of heart is a work of grace, made possible by the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit into our hearts, changing them and making them new: making them pure images of God's own heart.

This movement to the heart is the whole pedagogy of the Bible, made especially evident in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. For example, He says, *You have heard that it was said ('said' in the Law, that is), 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.* He is not abolishing the Law here, but fulfilling it. Only He can change man's heart to move from lust to love. That's not easy. It may be life-long process, and Christ's mercy is always there along the way. But true freedom is found not just when a man can say, "I don't cheat on my wife," but rather, "I don't *want* to cheat on my wife, because I only have eyes for her."

So now, back to our original question. No, I don't think the Church has too many rules. But we also need to stop and re-examine them at times, always careful to distinguish what flows from divine law and is thus unchangeable, and what is perhaps wise but still human tradition, and so is changeable. One might see the 2nd Vatican Council as an attempt to do just that, reminding us of our call as God's people to be a light to the nations. We have spent over 50 years now in that process, with no shortage of disagreement along the way: did we go too far, or not far enough? Are we too much like Pharisees, judgmental and rule bound, keeping unbelievers out? Or have we failed to *keep ourselves unstained by the world*, as St. James says in our 2nd reading, unattractive because we are no different than the world?

As painful as this process is, such purification is necessary, especially given the monumental change that has marked human civilization in recent times. And the only way forward is fixing our eyes on Christ, Who was both radically open *and* radically holy. He did not abolish the Law but fulfilled it, reminding us that its final end is the human heart—the very place where He desires to draw every person to Himself.