

“Rules or Relationship?”

Not a Fan – part #4 – based on the book by Kyle Idleman

Matthew 23:1-12

[58-donkey] There is a story credited to Aesop that is found in several cultures. It’s about a man carrying a heavy burden.¹

The man and his son go to town to buy a donkey. As they are walking back home with the new animal, someone begins to mock them. “Look at that idiot! He doesn’t even know how to use his beast properly.”

Upon hearing this comment, the man climbs up on the donkey and they continue their journey. However, a second scoffer comments, “What a selfish father, making his small boy walk while he gets it easy on the donkey!”

So the man dismounts, puts his son on the donkey, and they continue. A third observer yells at the boy, “What a horrible son you are, making your old father walk while you enjoy the ride!”

So they stop again, and after a moment of thought, the man gets up on the donkey behind his son and they both start riding. Yet another person from the PETA - People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals - calls out to them. “Stop afflicting that poor beast, you brutes. It can’t carry both of you.”

The father and son dismount. Seeing no better option, they tie the donkey’s feet together, hoist it on a pole, and carry the donkey home, while the crowd laughs at them. It’s impossible to please everyone all the time.

Have you ever suffered under the burden of meeting the expectations of others? I am a recovering people-pleaser. While I was a good student, relationships were more of a struggle for me. You can’t score an “A” in making good friends. Ironically, I barely passed “Interpersonal Relationships” in college.

Too often people see Christianity as a bunch of rules to follow so that we can please God. That is simply not true. In fact, to hold such a view is detrimental to our faith. We become like the man and his donkey – more worried about following people than actually doing the right thing in the first place. True Christianity isn’t about rules; it’s about a relationship with Jesus.

¹ Aesop. <https://sites.pitt.edu/~dash/type1215.html>

[59-marching band] Let me use an example from music to illustrate the difference. A lot of you know, I'm a marching band geek. Marching band is all about rules and expectations, appearance and uniformity. Literally, we are all supposed to look the same and move the same. Eight strides of exactly 22 ½ inches will take you five yards. We used to “drill the position of attention.” Feet: Together! Stomachs: In! Shoulders: Back! Chin: Up! Eyes: with Pride! Eyes: with Pride! Eyes: with Pride! The rules of band were published in a book we had to read. We memorized our music and drill charts. We expected perfection. The rule was, never make any mistakes... at least, not ones that get noticed. Was it fun? Yes, but also stressful.

[60-jazz] On the other hand, my brother teaches vocal jazz out on the West Coast. He has a great choir, and he teaches his students to scat, that time-honored art form my mom fondly refers to as “baby talk.” Skee-bop-biddably-do. I suppose there are rules to jazz, if you want to call them that. There are chords, styles, measures, beats. But the whole point of jazz is to explore within that form. Jazz musicians play songs differently every time. If they make a “mistake”, it's not a mistake, it's just a new chord! G#-minor-flat-9-sharp-11 with a D# bass? How about add the 13th? Yes! In jazz, it's more about the relationship between the music and the audience than it is about strict boundaries.

[61-Pharisees] In a way, the Pharisees were the marching band peeps. They were trying to please the band director, I mean, God. They followed God's rules strictly, and added some of their own. Here is a classic example: “Obey the Sabbath,” rule #4 of the “Big Ten.” (Exodus 20:8) That wasn't specific enough for the Pharisees. They had rules about what you could eat on the Sabbath, how far you could walk on the Sabbath, what constituted work and what didn't. If you kept the dozens of their man-made rules, you wouldn't break God's one rule. The Pharisees judged others harshly for not following their homemade rules.

[62-Jesus heals a man's hand] Jesus had a very different view of his relationship with God. Jesus was into jazz-type faith. Jesus' favorite two rules were “love God” and “love people.” The rest could be improvised, so to say. When Jesus saw a man with a withered hand, he went ahead and healed him, even though it was the Sabbath, and he was breaking one of the Pharisees' rules.

(Matthew 12:9-14) Jesus knew that God cares more about people than crossing the T's and dotting the I's.

This is where the Pharisees messed up. They needed less rules and more jazz, more relationship and caring about people.

[63-scripture] Jesus knew the Pharisees got it wrong, and Jesus called them out. Jesus said in Matthew 23:23-24, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.”

[64-No Skateboarding] Let's admit, we are more like Pharisees than probably anyone else in the Bible. We want to be religious. We want to follow God closely. And the truth is, we have our rules. Let's write them down on this paper. What rules, spoken and unspoken, have we taught in the church? **[Pause for answers]** What music can we play or not play? What version of the bible should we read? What version of the Lord's Prayer is the “right one” to say? Who decides what pew you can sit in? How long does a worship service last?

This is our confession this morning, friends. I'm right there with you. None of these things matter if we don't love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus is trying to tell us not to be fans – don't try to look good on the outside, if on the inside you've never surrendered to Christ.

[65-Pharisees] Jesus spoke to the crowd, criticizing the very ones who were supposed to be the religious leaders of the country: Do what they say, not what they do. (Matthew 23:3) Would those words apply to ourselves?

The biggest reason the Pharisees were the target of Jesus' anger was their desire to look good in front of people. They wore the biggest phylacteries – scripture wrapped in boxes they wore on their wrists and foreheads. They wanted the best seats in the house. They wanted the pomp and circumstance, the parades, the well wishes of the people. But in truth they neither cared about God's heart or God's people. They were into rules, not a relationship.

[66-Ask yourself] The question we have asked ourselves all along in this series is, “Am I a fan of Jesus, or a follower?” Maybe we need to ask ourselves further: “Am I hypocritical or humble? Does my inside match my outside?”

[67-scripture] As you ponder those admittedly difficult questions, let me remind you what God says about the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 20:26 – “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant.”

Mark 10:45 – “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

1 Peter 5:6 – “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, so that in due time He may exalt you.”

If the Pharisees had shown Jesus their humility, had shown a willingness to learn, the story would have ended quite differently. God always shows grace and mercy to those who humble themselves, who earnestly repent of their sin. That promise was true then, and it is still true today.

[68-man kneeling] The great thing about belonging to a church is you give others permission to be honest with you. Church is the place where we learn about grace because we hold each other accountable. We are not here to pick on each other, nor beat each other down. We are here to remind each other what the most important things are. Please, stop trying to impress God. Let grace overflow. If we become hyper-focused on rules, we need other voices to say, “Stop. Wait. Where is the Holy Spirit in this thing? If he’s not there, maybe we need to rethink what we’re doing.”

[69-quotes] In his book, Not a Fan, Pastor Kyle Idleman says, if you associate following Jesus with following a bunch of rules, you will walk away from both. (N.A.F., 77) I remember a preacher who said, “Legalism is Jesus plus anything else. Grace is Jesus plus nothing.” We need to focus on Jesus, trust in him alone for our salvation, and put away our unhealthy need to be perfect. Idleman says, “Jesus doesn’t expect followers to be perfect, but he does call them to be authentic.” (N.A.F., 74)

Remember what Jesus said on the cross: “It is finished.” The work of the cross cannot be undone. The commands of God should be followed, not because we have to, but because we want to. “Obedience to God comes from the inside out.” (Idleman, Not a Fan, 77)

[70-title slide] The grace of God is enough to cover our sin. Our response is to live a life that honors God.

Here’s one last quote from the book. Idleman says, Fans think about the “do”. Followers celebrate the “done.” (Not a Fan, 80) Or as another pastor once said, “If you concentrate on the do’s and the do not’s, you only end up with a bunch of do-do.” Let’s focus on the relationship instead, friends.

Let’s pray.

Memory Verse:

Matthew 23:12 - "For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Reflection Questions:

1. Have you ever felt the weight of others’ expectations? What were they, and how did you feel and respond?
2. Why do you think the Pharisees felt it was so important to follow God’s law perfectly? Why do you think they went “over the top” to keep people from breaking it?
3. Why do some people care too much about appearance and try to hide their shortcomings? How do we find the balance?
4. Why is the grace of God the most important part of living out our faith? What happens when we confuse grateful obedience for works righteousness?
5. What is the most important part of a relationship with Jesus? What is your “number one rule”?