

God's Ground Rules

Luke 14:1, 7-14

Crossroads Christian Church

Jeremiah 2:4-13

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Today we're thinking about "God's Ground Rules." So what are ground rules? We've all heard the expression. It's a baseball term, originally. Before a game, the managers and umpires make sure that everybody's on the same page about the rules. There are some generic ground rules common to all baseball games, but each park also has its own, because unlike other sports, baseball games aren't played on a uniformly shaped field. They're all different, in size and shape. For instance, what happens when a batted ball gets hidden in the ivy on the outfield walls of the friendly confines of Wrigley Field? It's a ground rule double. At Tropicana Field, the Home of the Tampa Bay Rays, there are catwalks high above the field in their domed stadium. A batted ball that hits either of the two lower catwalks (C Ring and D Ring) between the yellow foul poles is ruled a home run. The two upper catwalks (the A Ring and B Ring) are considered in play; a ball that touches either can drop for a hit or be caught for an out. The Green Monster at Fenway, the flagpole on the field at Houston, all have their own rules. So you need to have a commonly-agreed upon set of ground rules to know how to play the game.

The reason that the term "ground rules" has become common in life beyond the baseball field is that it's a handy way of expressing the idea that we do need mutually agreed-upon sets of rules to help us get along in life. Sometimes we use "ground rules" to describe what's in the Employee's Manual of where we work, and sometimes to describe those unwritten rules that everyone assumes that you know; like, "well, we always go out to lunch on the third Thursday."

So what are God's ground rules? How do we act as faithful, loving disciples in a world that sends out so many confusing, contradictory values and attitudes? Earlier, you heard Jeremiah telling the people that they hadn't been following God's rules; that they had forsaken the God who had given them freedom; that they had replaced the living water of God's love for the leaking cisterns of doing their own thing. Although the Bible's not a rulebook, you can find lots of rules there, over 700 by some counts. And the Jewish people expanded on those rules to try and clarify them for

specific situations in different Talmuds and Midrashes that never made it into the Bible, but still were guides to life, guides for obeying God. Like the legal system today, everything depended upon precedents. But what if you wanted the big picture, instead of the minutiae? You can find the key guidelines to life in three places: The Ten Commandments, where the first four point us to God and the last six point us to fair treatment of our neighbor; Micah 6:8: He has told you, O Mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? And Jesus summarized all that came before in the Great Commandment, which is really two intertwined commandments. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.

Those are all good examples of God's ground rules. They will all keep you on the right track. But sometimes God's ground rules and human customs and expectations can get all muddled up, or sometimes clash.

Our Gospel lesson today is interesting. Jesus came to a dinner party, but it wasn't a very relaxing one. Have you ever been taken to dinner as part of a job interview? The idea's to relax, enjoy yourself, and make new friends, right? Not completely. You know as you take care not to let the pasta sauce drip onto your shirt that you are under scrutiny. Your potential employer is checking you out for how you handle yourself socially, what you drink and how much, and what kind of entrée you order on company money. Relax? I don't think so. Jesus wasn't applying for a job, but he was under careful scrutiny. He was a dinner guest at a group of Pharisees. Now don't think that just because they're Pharisees that they are the bad guys, or that they were all enemies of Jesus. Pharisees had a lot about them that was admirable. We might call them spiritual athletes. Pharisees were lay people so committed to following God's law that they went the extra mile. They not only followed the law of Moses as it was given to lay people, but they followed the law as it was given for priests. They kicked it up a notch.

Now the laws and traditions that they followed while eating a meal were pretty complex. They were testing Jesus, to be sure. They were trying to figure him out. Where was he coming from? What were his values? Was he really as impressive as his reputation said he was? Was he from God, or was he just a charlatan, a rabble-rouser?

Jesus must not have read *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Jesus must not have been interviewing for a job, because Jesus just

started right off, challenging people, offending people, embarrassing people. Here, Jesus healed a man with Dropsy. That's an old-fashioned diagnosis for someone whose body, especially his joints, retained fluid. So Jesus asked, "Is it permitted to heal on the Sabbath?" Everyone was afraid to answer. So Jesus healed the man, and used a similar teaching to last week's text. If a child or animal fell down the well on the Sabbath, wouldn't you rescue him?" If it's legal to perform acts of mercy and compassion on the Sabbath, then why couldn't these people be healed?

Moving up the corporate ladder, moving up the totem pole, is nothing new. Jesus noticed how the guests at the meal were jockeying for position, trying to move to the best seats in the house, trying to show themselves as people of importance. Jesus told them not to organize their dinners around pride, but around humility. If you think that you deserve to be at the head table but the host doesn't, then you might end up totally embarrassed. But if you don't make a big deal of yourself, your host might make a big deal of you. Jesus wasn't exactly a "let your people do lunch with my people" sort of guy, was he?

Then, just as everybody was getting more and more nervous and awkward, and wondering who let this Jesus in, he even went a step beyond. After giving etiquette lessons for the guests, he now gave them to the host. When you have a dinner, don't invite just those who are rich, or who are family, or who will help you get ahead. Experience a blessing by inviting the misfits, the folks from the wrong side of the tracks, those who don't know where their next meal is coming from.

What's that say to us today? Humility and compassion are in short supply in a me-first culture. Is it just that I'm getting older, or are people getting ruder and more aggressive? If you need to move over a lane on the highway, how many people wave you in, verses how many cut you out? Another example—Sandy and I have given up watching sitcoms on TV and we ignore comedy club offerings, not because our sense of humor has dried up, but because the prevalent humor today is too often based on putting others down, or cutting them off at the knees. Look for the vulnerable point and zap! And political discussion isn't dialogue anymore, it's cut and burn, innuendoes and personal attacks, rather than candidates exchanging ideas on how to solve the nation's problems. It's a tough world, and the style of life that Jesus recommends doesn't seem to be in vogue.

Still, though, it's the way of life, the way of love, which takes us back to the great commandment, to love God completely, and to love your neighbor as yourself. Everything that Jesus said at that dinner party came out of a desire to shake these people up so that they could see that, so that they could extend true hospitality.

Being kind, being gracious, taking awhile to listen to someone even if you've heard all their whining and complaints before, isn't a commandment, but it is humanizing. It does open us to be able to perceive Christ in others, and for others to know something of the Christ for having known us. It's countercultural, isn't it? Christians are invited, called even, to be the light, to be the leaven, to be the salt that makes life gentler, kinder, happier. It's the little things that count. That's part of the ground rules. Amen.