

New house rules

Jeremiah 31:27-34; II Timothy 3:14 – 4:5

When you were growing up, I wonder what were the house rules where you lived? Was there a ‘last bus’ rule, a ‘be home by’ rule, a ‘no pudding till you’ve cleaned your plate’ rule, a ‘do your homework before you go out to play’ rule?

Rules can be restrictive and prohibitive. They can hold us back, or trip us up. But rules can protect us and set helpful boundaries. Rules can give order and structure to our lives.

When we think about God’s House, and God’s rules, the questions become bigger and wider. But they are just as important.

What do you think God’s rules are? Are they carved in stone, like the Ten Commandments? Are they more relational, like the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount? Are they summed up, as Jesus suggests, in two rules that tell us to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, souls, minds, bodies and strength, and our neighbours as ourselves? Actually – that is just about it – that’s where God’s House Rules start and finish – all we simply have to do is work out what that means for us!

Did I just say, ‘simply’?

For most of us, even though we are aware of the rules, even though we might even have the rules off by heart, the challenge of living our faith out is how we apply what we know, what we have learned, and illuminate our lives with these things. Sometimes we get it right, sometimes we get it wrong, which is why these rules, though the words never change, address a changing reality in our lives. We are not the same people that we were ten, twenty, forty years ago. Our circumstances, attitudes, understanding, experiences – all will have changed. It is therefore how we take what God is saying to us today and apply those words, those ‘rules’, that will make us the connected, involved, responsive Christians God wants us to be. And it will be slightly different for each one of us, because we are slightly different, each one of us. God has created children, not clones.

One of the vibrant but unsettling things about faith is that it keeps asking questions, and casting light on what we say and think and how we behave. The place of faith, and the Bible, is something we need to look at regularly. People of faith, and people of no faith, often find themselves caught on the one hand between a fundamentalism that flattens out a Bible text, and ignores its historical and literary character, and, on the other hand, a liberalism that tends to avoid the Bible entirely or that dwells only on texts that support a particular ideology.¹

Jeremiah is still writing to a people in exile. They were far from home. They were hurting. They felt abandoned and that nobody cared for them. The familiar things they knew and loved were no longer around them. It was a time of sour grapes and teeth being set on edge and everyone was out of sorts and down-hearted. This is C6th Babylon, but it could just as well be C21st Britain.

Jeremiah, in the reality of that disjointed, uncomfortable, painful time writes: “Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant...I will write (my law) upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people...they shall all know Me...for I will forgive...I will remember...”

Far from home, fearing that their God had abandoned them, or worse, had been defeated, God breaks through the darkness and promises something new. A candle of hope is lit. A bright light will, in time, roll back the darkness. It’s a new promise. The old promise had caused the people problems. They knew it, they maybe even believed it, but they didn’t live it. God tries something else. His new house rules will not be written on stone, they will be written on the hearts of His people.

It is to be a living thing. A thing of flesh and blood. Just like Jesus is also a thing of flesh and blood. God’s new house rules says, ‘relate to Me’. Jesus will be the embodiment of this new house rule. God is with God’s people.

God’s relationship with God’s people is renewed, and this newness comes because God will forgive. Whatever God’s people have done, however frequently God’s people have got it wrong, or made a mess of things, or fallen short, God will forgive. Clean sheet, new page, a fresh start.

God wants, “a relationship we live into, not a standard we live up to.”ⁱⁱ God sees that forgiving allows for mistakes and offence, but forgetting places their remembrance behind, so that they can no longer be a barrier to relationship. Grudges are removed, sincere regret is not only allowed but more than that, forgetting releases the harboured anger and hurt. Forgiveness receives apology, but forgetting closes wounds. God sees that forgiveness is an act of compassion, but forgetting is an act of love.

New house rules. And they’re in the Old Testament before we even get to Jesus, and His forgiving and forgetting mercy and love.

H G Wells wrote a short story about the day of the Last Trumpet. Every grave is emptied, and everybody who had ever lived is summoned by the trumpet to the judgement of God. God is seated on His throne, and a recording angel opened the book, and God, surveying the multitudes said, “Let us begin.”

The first book was full of A’s. A figure, a possibly Ahab, is brought before God on a cloud. He is told to tell God what he had done with his life. “I plead guilty,” Ahab said, and told part of the story of his terrible life. God bent forward and took this man in his hand, and held him up close as if to see the man better. The recording angel then reads the full story of the man’s life. Not just the big bad things, but the little silly things of which he was more ashamed. The wicked man began to run around on the palm of God’s hand, but there was no escape. Finally he turned about, and fled up the sleeve of God.

Saints and sinners, kings and commoners, good and bad; it seemed not ten seconds before each one was rushing to and fro over the great palm of God, until, unable to bear it no more, each one fled into the shadow of God’s sleeve. Everyone, everyone who ever was, fled and hid in the sleeve of God.

“And now,” said God, as He shook us out of His sleeve upon the planet He had given us to live upon, the planet that whirled about green Sirius for a sun, “now that you understand Me and each other a little better...try again.” Then He and His great angels turned themselves about and suddenly vanished. The Throne had vanished.

All about me was a beautiful land, more beautiful than any I had ever seen before – waste, austere, and wonderful; and all about me were the enlightened souls of men in new clean bodies..."ⁱⁱⁱ

God's new house rules. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, body, soul, strength.

Love your neighbour as yourself.

Love your enemy. Do not be anxious. Ask, seek, knock.

Take heart. Be healed. Believe. Let the children come.

Give to the poor. Pray. Forgive. Follow Me.

God's new house rules. A relationship based on forgiving, forgetting, beginning again, and loving. In this house of God, in every house. In our hearts, in every heart.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Texts for Preaching, A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year C, p566

ⁱⁱ W Hullitt Gloer, Feasting on the Word Year C, Vol 4 p175

ⁱⁱⁱ H G Wells, Story The Third, A Vision of Judgment