

WORDS TO LIVE BY

I started my first career as a teacher at the ripe young age of 20. Looking back, it was lucky that I had flunked a couple of subjects in late high school and had to stay six years instead of five – otherwise I would have started teaching at age 19. I was of the naïve belief that discipline and order in the classroom could be maintained by the existence of rules, and so on the first day of school I announced a rather lengthy list of rules to my 37 grade seven students. Some of them looked at each other with smirks on their faces, probably thinking ‘yeah – wait til he tries enforcing all of them.’ And as time went on, if someone did something inappropriate in class that wasn’t covered by an existing rule, I would simply make a new rule about it. Fortunately as I gained experience, I came to understand that while indeed it was important for students to know what was expected from them, there was much more to maintaining order in the classroom than the mere existence of rules. This wisdom became even more apparent when I became a father.

As we heard in scripture this morning, the book of Exodus in the Old Testament tells the story of how God passed on His rules of conduct to mankind. These ‘10 Commandments’ were said to be God’s rules for human behaviour, and the people of that time were supposedly happy to have an understanding of what God expected of them. But the reality of human existence illustrates that, in fact, they were not fully adhered to even then. One commandment says we shouldn’t kill people, yet another story in Exodus 2 tells of how even Moses killed a man. The man was his boss and was beating an elderly worker who was too weak to stand up and work, and the boss’s brutality pushed Moses beyond his breaking point. And while the Commandments laid the foundation for future laws in many societies, the

fact that society needs police forces and courts shows that laws are not always obeyed. And even our legal system recognizes that sometimes breaking of a law can be justified – even the killing of another person can be deemed justifiable if it's an act of true self-defense.

Another commandment advises us to honour our parents, and while this is certainly a desirable thing, what about children whose parents are physically or sexually abusing them? It would be pretty hard to honour their parents in those situations. And while the Commandment about respecting the Sabbath day forbade *Sunday Shopping* in the past, how many of us stop off after church at a grocery store, a gas station, or even the LCBO? I won't spend more time on the 10 Commandments in this message. You know the list. And I can't tell you how or whether they apply in your lives, but I can tell you that when I review the list, I don't score a 'perfect 10'.

Now, while the Old Testament relied on messengers and prophets to spell out expectations for human living, the New Testament gives more specific examples. Jesus Christ had arrived on earth with the Creator's hope that, by seeing a human example of love, the world would have a clearer picture of what was expected of them. It's perhaps based on the premise that being *told* how to do something is helpful only to a point, and that *seeing concrete examples* enhances the learning experience. And as we've heard in many meditations, Jesus's advice was short and sweet – 'Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself,' pointing out that the Creator's law is centred on these two commandments. And then he went about illustrating what he meant. He healed the sick. He forgave sinners. He sat and spoke with any and all people regardless of their social status. He refused to write out a list of rules and laws when challenged by the Pharisees, calling them

hypocrites for strict adherence to the letter of the law rather than the spirit. And the central theme of all his actions in his brief lifetime was the theme of love.

Now I don't want to leave the impression that I think this is as simple as it sounds, because it can be hard at times. We can often get caught up in our own internal struggles between our intellectual will and rules for conduct... and our surrender to the universe. When searching for answers to life's dilemmas, we may pray for God's will to be done, but how often do we resist it when it unfolds? How do we resolve a conflict between our adherence to rules and the fulfilment of our instincts and desires?

Well for starters, it may be helpful to view the term *rules* in a more flexible concept such as *guidelines based on principles*. A *principle* is the value on which a *guideline* is based, and it's our *principles* which guide our *actions*. While *principles* can be seen as wide in scope, our *actions* are specific and influenced by situations which may involve multiple *principles*. As an example, our belief that traffic rules should be obeyed can be overshadowed by our driving behaviour when rushing a sick family member to the Emergency ward of a hospital. We may then feel ok about breaking a traffic law in favour of getting prompt medical attention. The point here is that a rigid set of rules for living can impede human compassion. Drawing a line in the sand may be ok as long as we remember why we drew it where we did, with the acceptance that future situations may require a shifting of the line. And if we draw that line in the expectation that others will adhere to it, are we prepared to adhere to it ourselves? The world of politics is rife with examples of political leaders and justice officials loudly condemning behaviours such as homosexuality, mixed cultural relationships and marital infidelity, only to be found to be living out these same behaviours in the sad darkness of their own

living. How much more gently could they be living if they simply accepted their own inner conflicts and dealt with them? How much more gently could they then be living peacefully with others, often within their own families? And how much more gently can we live if we base our guidelines on the principles of love and compassion- for ourselves, and for others? Allowing the waters of our own compassion to flow and soften our own lines in the sand can indeed open up the flow of compassion for others in our circles. This is all that the Creator, through Jesus, has ever asked of us.

And if we heed the message of Jesus, our principles for daily living will be based on what we believe our inner *love* is calling us to do. And while there can be some common agreement on this, there are as many human interpretations as there are people. And so the call to each of us is to listen within to where we hear the voice of our Creator speaking to us. It may not be where we had wanted. It may not be what others expect from us. But if we're truly open to the path our Creator has for us, we won't need a set of Commandments or rules to guide us. Our *words to live by* will be based in the truth of our love for ourselves and others, and in following where the inner instincts of our own personal faith lead us. It doesn't mean our paths will be easy. It doesn't mean that our colleagues, our friends or even our families will approve. But in the end, none of that will matter, because we'll be at peace with ourselves, and our Creator will smile with us.

Brian Stocks. Westminster United Church. May 6, 2018.