

**J.D. Ousley**  
**Sermon—25Aug19**  
**Lk. 13**  
**“Not by the Rules”**

*In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.*

As you know, the current state of Israel was founded after World War II by Jews who survived Nazi persecution.

Based on this history as well as on the ancient Hebrew Scriptures, Israel has come to see itself as something of a Jewish state. It has a secular democratic government, but it makes some allowances as a society for the Hebrew religion.

But what exactly these allowances should entail has been hotly debated since the founding of the country. On the one side are so called “secular” Jews as well as non-Jews who favor more freedom to express or not express a religion.

On the other side are Orthodox and especially “ultra-Orthodox” Jews who believe that even relatively minor religious laws should be enforced by the state.

One current controversy in Israel involves the observance of the Hebrew *Sabbath*. The traditional Sabbath runs from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday.

Some ultra-Orthodox Israelis argue that the entire nation should make the Sabbath a day of rest. That means that there should be no unnecessary public transport, no frivolous amusements, and—in general—a very quiet Saturday!

The many Israelis who are not religious—or not even Jewish—resent these infringements on their liberties. They believe they should be free from these rules.

These secular Israelis feel that if Orthodox Jews want to keep a strict observance of the Sabbath, that’s fine. But the Orthodox should leave their fellow citizens alone to make their own choices about how they spend their Saturdays.

These arguments aren’t new. The observance of the Sabbath is a point of contention in today’s Second Lesson, from St. Luke’s Gospel. In the text, Jesus is engaged in teaching in the synagogue on one Sabbath day.

While he is there, he sees a crippled woman who was bent over by some illness. Jesus feels sorry for the woman, who has evidently been sick for 18 years. He lays his hands on the woman, and he prays for her, and she is healed.

Now for the Jews of Christ’s day, this healing action of Jesus constituted “work.” And work was something that was supposed to be avoided on the seventh day of the week, the day when God rested from his “work” of creating the world. As the leader of the synagogue says in the Second Lesson, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.”

But Jesus defends his action by noting that some forms of work were already regarded as acceptable on the Sabbath. Tending to your animals is necessary seven days a week if you want to have animals to take care of!

And while healing the crippled woman might technically be “work” for Jesus who is a healer, the healing is also an act of compassion. Such acts are surely welcome any time if they are able to relieve great suffering.

So we see Jesus in his ministry being confronted with the question of *religious rules*. And rules are tricky for any religion.

If you’ve got a religion, you’ve got to have *some* rules. Otherwise, there is no difference between being religious and being a skeptic.

Christians have rules about going to church, for example, because they know that if they don’t worship God, they are no different from non-believers.

Christians try to love their neighbors, because if they don’t at least attempt to perform acts of charity to show their love for God and God’s people, they really are no different from nonbelievers.

Now I grant that we may not always appreciate this fact that religions need rules. On a cold winter’s Sunday, we are tempted to stay in bed instead of going to church.

But we also recognize the need to show the spiritual flag and make a public witness for Christ. We do that when we go to church. And at the same time, we're able to support our Christian community.

So even if we sometimes feel a rebellion against rules, we recognize that that they are necessary. *Sports*, for example, like religion depend on rules. Without rules, a sport can't be played.

Games like baseball have rules that say when a game is over and one of the teams has won. Otherwise, the contest would go on interminably. (I admit that some fans find that baseball games already go on interminably, even with their rules!)

Yet within sports, the rules have flexibility. What constitutes a strike in baseball ultimately depends on what the umpire says it is. On a given day, there can be larger or smaller strike zones.

It was this flexibility about rules that Jesus seized upon. He looked first at what was most important—and that was human beings, not rules. As Christ famously said, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”

This is Christ's *rule about rules*. For Jesus, people always count more than religious regulations. Farmers need to feed their animals on the Sabbath day because the animals need to be fed every day.

A crippled person shouldn't need to endure one more day of misery if she doesn't have to. A few moments of healing won't threaten the general custom of faithful people taking a day every week for rest.

That said, there still need to be rules, and sometimes we don't value them enough. In America, we have seen in recent times the effect of abolishing what were called, “blue laws.” It used to be illegal for stores to sell certain goods on Sundays. Even to this day, you can't be served an alcoholic beverage in a New York bar between 4 AM and noon on Sundays.

But as the blue laws have loosened or disappeared, Sundays have become much like other days in America.

And many people—Christian and non-Christian—now regret the fact that Sunday is no longer “special.” There's no encouragement of rest or recreation or church for that matter! Sunday is just one more day of the week.

Incarnation was historically in the “Broad Church” tradition of the Episcopal Church. This loosely organized movement advocated the acceptance of a variety of worship styles and political interests.

But there were limits to the acceptability of this variety. For example, the Broad Church movement didn't tolerate slavery or racism or other forms of prejudice. And, as many of you know, our parish was instrumental in founding Barnard College to give New York women access to advanced education.

Unfortunately, an attitude of tolerance in itself doesn't excite much enthusiasm. It's something most people already buy into, one way or another.

By the same token, from an evangelism point of view, “general acceptance of others” doesn't excite deep support for the church! People need some ideas and practices that they can believe in—and that they can feel passionate about.

For instance, we can be tolerant of what people do with their Sundays—allowing working and shopping and providing medical care. At the same kind, we can appreciate that countries with a majority religion like to have some extra time once of week on their day of worship.

So the lesson to be learned from the debate about the Sabbath is this: Faith is nourished by the right customs.

Let the teaching of Christ help you choose your rules. Let your religion guide you.

And remember that the rules, properly chosen, will be on your side. They will make your life easier. Set a regular time for prayer and you will find it much easier to get your prayers done.

The Sabbath was made for you, not you for the Sabbath. The rules are a gift.

Amen.