

**Sermon:** Beyond Rulesets

*The following story is about a fictitious character set in the midst of biblical events.*

Dear people of the Way here in Iconium (and dear guests with us from other parts of Galatia), I stand to speak to you today feeling *on the one hand* like I've been *made over* (which is freeing and energizing) and, *on the other hand*, upset and (frankly) ashamed for what I've said and insisted on before now.

For those of you who don't know me, my name is Simon; I am a Judean from the city of Bethsaida, right on the northern tip of the Sea of Galilee. I am a man fortunate to have met Jesus, the first time on his very first day in Bethsaida. He came

- teaching—*so amazingly* teaching!—about the way God *always intended* life to be ordered (Jesus called it, “the kingdom of God”), and also
- healing the sick ... there were so many sick folk who came or were brought to him that day!

What Jesus had to say was so fresh and uplifting that time simply flew by. A truly outstanding thing about that day: it came to be suppertime, and no one was moving. Jesus had his disciples set us up in groups of about 50. Then he took the only food on hand (5 loaves of bread and 2 fish); he blessed God for them, broke them into pieces, gave them to his 12 disciples who in turn waited on the great crowd of us (someone said there were 5000 there); and we were all filled, with 12 baskets left over!

I got to see Jesus again a little more than a week later. We learned that he had gone out to Mount Hermon with his disciples (and later we found out that, up on top, those with him saw Moses and Elijah come speak with him!). I went out there with some of my friends because we dearly wanted to hear more from him. It turned out there was a fellow in the crowd who had brought his son because the lad suffered from

terrible convulsions, in fact he had one right there. Jesus' disciples weren't able to help, but Jesus spoke and the boy's seizure stopped. The whole thing was so moving and inspiring that I decided I had to be part of this. From that moment, I followed after Jesus ... and I wasn't the only one.

The next thing we heard from him was shocking ... it made no sense ... he said that he would come to be betrayed ... none of us could even figure how to ask him about it.

The company of us following him next found ourselves making our way to Jerusalem, and it was on this journey that I first felt called – I first *was* called – to be a missionary. There were 72 of us, in fact, whom Jesus directed to go ahead into the towns along our route, announcing to the people in each, “the kingdom of God has come near to you.” We went with no provisions, just with Jesus' mandate to heal-and-cure the sick, even as he had been doing. Jesus told us to stay in whatever household offered us hospitality and to eat whatever they could set out for us (he said, “for the laborer deserves to be paid”). Those were days of long, tiring work; but it was incredibly exciting, not only for the lives changed then-and-there, but because what we were doing had such huge ramifications. We Judaeans know our numbers!: sending out 72 pointed to the fact there are precisely 72 Gentile nations. Jesus was announcing this was just the beginning; there would come to be missionaries beyond Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth. Can you see how my coming here to Galatia was put in motion right then and there? But I'm getting ahead of myself.

You, in Iconium, know as well as Christians everywhere how the journey to Jerusalem led first to a glorious parade into the city and—within the week—to Jesus' arrest, trial, crucifixion, death, days of mourning and fear, and then his *everything-changing* resurrection. Next came days of blessed encounters, then Jesus' ascension, and—on that

Pentecost—the streaming down of the Holy Spirit on all of us there in Jerusalem.

It may be less clear to you how we functioned as his followers in those early days *after* Pentecost. Keep in mind that we were all synagogue-attending, Temple-worshipping Judaeans, just as Jesus had been. We went on doing the same: attending Temple; reading and studying the Law, the Prophets and the Writings ... and we also met together in each others' homes to eat together like we had done when Jesus was with us. At those meals, we remembered and talked about what he had said and done; in particular we remembered him in the bread (broken like his body), and in the new covenant of the wine we together drank.

It was in *those* gatherings—those *reminiscings*—that I learned of Jesus' words and deeds which had happened before he ever came to Bethsaida. Overall, I can tell you, the experience of that Jerusalem community was ... well ... *miraculous*. Whenever one of us needed something, those with more-than-enough straightway provided. We were energized by a great hope that Jesus would return, in glory, at any time. But as wonderful as this was, Jesus' last words had been “you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Probably I was even more anxious than most about this, since I already felt (I knew!) my vocation was to be a missionary to the nations.

However, before I got myself organized to leave, word came to us that Simon Peter already had set out and gone to preach to a household of Gentiles in Caesarea. To our horror, we learned that he had *stayed with them*, eaten un-kosher food with them, and actually baptized them as followers of Jesus Christ without first fulfilling the law and becoming one of God's people, Israel. This was scandalous. How could anyone possibly follow Jesus without first joining his people? Jesus never suggested such a thing. Sure, he had conversed with Samaritans and

Gentiles; he even healed on their behalf; but he never called one to follow him like we had. How could Simon Peter be so foolish? And I say “foolish” because the rest of Israel (the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes) would clearly never stand for this. Indeed, just to be Greek-speaking had gotten our Israelite Christian neighbours in Jerusalem either thrown out, put in jail, or even killed (you probably heard about Stephen). Simon Peter’s move and—worse—were there to be a *continuing* practice of accepting Gentiles as Christians, could not but place all of us in terrible jeopardy. In truth, “jeopardy” has already happened. Ever since then, it is hardly possible for Christians in Jerusalem to go into the Temple to worship, or even do their everyday business, without being scorned. But I am getting ahead of myself again.

Peter, when he returned from Caesarea, explained and defended his actions on two accounts: First, he relayed a vision he had had of unclean animals offered to him, by God, as totally acceptable food. Second, those Gentiles, to whom he preached, reportedly *actually received* the Holy Spirit, and spoke in tongues. There are those, mostly believers from away, who then agreed right away that Peter did the right thing by baptizing them; but I and many others were not persuaded ... in truth, *the Jerusalem church* was not persuaded. This whole episode was the deciding impetus for me to get on with my missionary calling, to go out and do a proper job of bringing converts into God’s people Israel so as to truly follow Jesus.

You get what I’m saying here, right? There are rules to follow; it’s the same everywhere! For families to work, women stay in the house except for errands, like getting the household water; and children get raised by their mothers until the boys, at age 10, come work with the men. Our villages and towns *work* because we come together at the gate to do business and decide on disputes by the rules. In the cities, we “people of the land” can come in to do business, but must be sure to go outside the walls at night. Slaves have to obey their masters. In

synagogues, like in Temple, only the clean and pure can come, lest the holy be defiled ... and, thanks be to God, we *have* Moses' 10 commandments, and all the laws, to get us clean and keep us clean. Without rules, well, there'd be chaos, wouldn't there?

So, I set out. I had preached for years in a number of other towns before coming to Galatia; but nowhere else was the challenge as great as here. Paul, who founded this fellowship, had quite clearly left you with the impression that your men did not have to be circumcised *like Jesus had been*; you did not have eat kosher food *like Jesus had done*; you did not have to observe the great festivals of our faith *as Jesus did* ... in short, you could end-run all the business of becoming one of God's people, Israel, and still claim Jesus as Lord. My goodness, it couldn't have been clearer to me that God had brought me here with a divine and obvious purpose: to correct such gross misunderstanding and bring you into harmony with the Jerusalem church.

We were making real headway on this. Then, last week, Paul's letter arrived. I should tell you I have only seen the man Paul once, and that was back in Jerusalem when he was a ring-leader in the persecution of the Greek-speaking Christians, like Stephen. I had heard about Paul's conversion experience (like everyone else!) and I could only conclude that *a Pharisee* like him would have Gentiles come into the people of Israel in order to find and follow Jesus. From my perspective, you had to have misunderstood Paul's intentions when you were thinking and acting otherwise.

That letter cut me to the core!, because I learned it wasn't just Paul I had misunderstood, it was Jesus, way back when he sent out the 72 of us. The business of food was actually key, if only I had only figured it through ... just as food was key for Peter in his vision of those unclean animals brought down from heaven. Because, when Jesus told the 72 of us to eat whatever was put in front of us, as our wages, *he knew* "ordinary villagers" were unable to strictly fulfill the kosher law. (And,

if I am honest, I was hardly fooling myself as I *swallowed hard*, some nights, pretending that “Surely, all must be right and good here!”.) The people Jesus sent us to minister to ... well, according to the rules, the whole lot of them were “lost sheep”: sick ones, broken ones, dirty ones, sinner ones, **all without hope of help from any of the ones *strictly keeping the rules*** (the Pharisees, Sadducees or Essenes). Even as Jesus had reached through/beyond the rules to the people, he set the 72 of us out to do the same. Because *all* the people are daughters and sons of God ... **this is what Jesus had lived and taught**; it is the message Paul now finally got through to me and—in his own hand writing—reinforced for you. No need to become a daughter or son of Israel when you already are a child of God! Paul summed it up well near the end of the letter: “For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.”

So, like I said when I stood up this morning, I feel like I’ve been made over (which is so freeing and energizing) and, at the same time, I stand here humbled and ashamed for *what it was* I have been *saying* to you and *insisting on* up until now. Please forgive me. And please join me in re-evaluating all these rules of ours—in family life, in community life, in national and international life—[rules] defining “others” and putting them aside, keeping them down, requiring them to be like us in order to be in our company and Jesus’ company. And, like the 72 of us back then—what’s more!—do not expect it’s supposed to be about any “othered” ones coming to us; it’s about us reaching them *beyond* the rulesets, and *living*

- “**a new creation**” like Paul said;
- “The kingdom of God,” like Jesus said.

Thanks be to God! Amen.