

Long ago, when our children were small we decided that one way to get them to display the type of behavior we wanted in their lives was to create a star chart.

It worked something like this. You do a certain behavior, you get a star. When you accumulate enough stars you get a reward.

It had its advantages. When you wanted to get the toys picked up at the end of the day, when you wanted the dishes washed; the reward of accumulating stars motivated good behavior.

As I think about it today, it had the potential to send the wrong message. You accumulated more stars by following the rules and the one with the most stars was, in essence, the most loved.

I think there are many people today who view God, and the church, from the same perspective. If you keep our rules, the rules we say that God wants you to keep; then God, and in turn people in the church, will love you.

I think I grew up with that mindset that there was a list of do's and don'ts and if I kept enough of the do's and avoided enough of the don'ts then I would be loved by God and the people in the church.

There are a lot of people who view Christianity from the perspective of rule keeping. Many people have been hurt by the church because they didn't live up to the rules of a particular church, or a particular church's interpretation of biblical passages. Many people don't want to be involved with a church because they don't want to keep, much less remember, the ever evolving list of rules.

Think about it. We can all agree that keeping the Ten Commandments is a good place to start. But then you add in the things that well-intended religious people have added throughout the ages (no dancing, no movies) and no wonder people think that Christianity is all about keeping the rules.

It was a similar climate that Jesus found himself in as he began his ministry. The religious leaders of the day had over 600 rules that they expected people to keep. You may have heard of these religious leaders, they were called Pharisees. And it was one of these religious people who approached Jesus and asked him a rule-keeping question.

Matthew 22:34-40

Jesus was never interested in the Pharisees rule-keeping way of living. As I noted a few weeks ago, when Jesus answered the Pharisees question about which rule was the most important he framed his response in the form of two relationships, our relationship with God and our relationship with others. Jesus literally said, love God and love others, do that and you will not need to worry about whether or not you are keeping all the rules.

Jesus was only interested in his followers getting one thing right in their relationships; love. Jesus believed that as his followers grew in understanding the love of God for them that their lives would evidence an outward and inward change which God desired.

That leads us to what I want you to take away today: loving God is not about rule keeping, but relationships. The goal of a disciple of Jesus is relationship, not perfection. It's not rule keeping, but relationships.

Obedience to a set of rules will make you a Pharisee. A growing relationship with Jesus will lead you to love God and love others!

Now if you think about it; had Jesus been interested merely in rule keeping, the Pharisees would have been his best friends, not his worst enemies. But as it was, the Pharisees repeatedly chastised Jesus and his disciples for breaking the rules. Healing people on the Sabbath, eating grain as they walked through a field, and many more.

To the Pharisees, rule keeping was the way to demonstrate one's love of God.

But that was not the way that Jesus approached his ministry.

Jesus built his ministry on relationships. As a matter of fact, the rule keepers despised Jesus for the relationships that he kept. Think about it; Jesus engaged in relationships with all sorts of sinners and tax-collectors. He touched people who were considered unclean- prostitutes, lepers, and the sick.

Jesus purpose in the relationships that he kept was to introduce a God who loved people. A God who loved first, and was not interested in perfect behavior. After all, God knew we couldn't be perfect. That was the whole purpose of Jesus coming to earth, dying on the cross and rising again.

Jesus relationships were an opportunity for people to experience God's grace and mercy, forgiveness and love; not a list of do's and don'ts.

Simply put, Jesus wanted people to experience the love of God, so that as a result they would want to love God. The more they experienced the love of God, the more they would want to love God in return. Not out of a requirement to follow rules, but out of a desire to grow the relationship that God wants to have with each of us.

So, if you want to love God, follow Jesus.

How do you do that? One way is to read your Bible. Not because someone tells you that you have to; but because you want to know more about this God who loves you.

When you read that God promises to be with us always, you see his love and in turn want to love God. When you read that God does not remember our failures, you see his love and in turn want to love God. When you read that God loves you with an everlasting love, you see his love and in turn want to love God.

The more you discover about the love that God has for you; the more you will want to love God.

And how do we love God? Well, think about this; if you are married, did you love your spouse the way you do today on the first day that you met? No, you grew to love one another over

time. You learned about each other. You learned each other's' likes and dislikes. Your love grew as you spent time together.

You love God in much the same way. You grow your relationship with God. You engage in activities that prompt and shape your behaviors in order to become what God desires. And so we love God in practices like reading our Bible, by communicating with God, by learning to experience God's presence in every moment of our day...

We engage in those activities not out of rule-keeping but out of a growing and expanding relationship in which we first experience the love of God.

Do you see the difference? Engaging in Bible reading, prayer, worship, etc when done out of a duty to keep rules will never bring the joy and satisfaction that comes from engaging those things with a desire to deepen our relationship with Jesus.

How you and I express loving God is going to be as unique as each individual. Loving God will happen in different ways and at different stages; but in the end loving God is about a growing relationship with God in which we are shaped inside and out to become what God desires.

Here is a simple take away from today. The way Jesus lived his life, the relationships that he established, the things he did in other people's lives; all of it was for the purpose of demonstrating that God loves you and wants to have a growing personal relationship with you.

What would happen if we started viewing all of our relationships from that same perspective? It would certainly make a difference not just for us but for the people that we encounter every day. Because as we love God and love others; they will experience the love of God.

This morning as we partake of communion we see the demonstration of God's love for us. "While we yet sinners, Christ died for us." We are reminded in the bread and cup that God desires a loving, growing relationship with us. And our response to that love is measured not in rule keeping, or perfection, but by loving God and loving others so that they experience the love of God through us.