# Congregational-Presbyterian Church

 **“The Purpose of God’s Rules”**

**Matthew 5:17-19**

 **March 19, 2023**

When I was a sophomore in High School I took Driver’s Education. Toward the end of the course we took a written test on the traffic laws of the State of Colorado. We were given the handbook of traffic laws, and I studied it intently because I wanted a perfect 100% on that test. Having finished the test I felt really good, but when it was scored and given back to me I was disappointed that I hadn’t received a perfect score. I looked up the questions I had missed, and I still remember one of them.

The test instructions had informed me that this was a multiple-choice test, and I was to choose the best answer to each question. The question I missed went something like this: “The posted speed limit is 35mph. What driving speed should you observe while on this road?” The possible answers were: A. 35mph; B. 4-5 miles faster than 35mph; C. Whatever speed you choose; and, D. The speed that is safest for the driving conditions, not to exceed 35mph. I remember seeing the A. response and knowing it was the right answer. B was clearly wrong, and I barely glanced at C. and D. because I thought I already knew the right answer. But, I had ignored the test instruction which was to choose not a right answer but the best answer. The test didn’t want me to choose the answer that unthinkingly adhered to the posted speed limit, but to think about the purpose of our traffic laws. They exist for our wellbeing and the wellbeing of those on the roadway with us, for our safety and for theirs. The best answer was “D. The speed that is safest for the driving conditions, not to exceed 35 mph.”

We have been working our way through Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapters 5-7. We took several weeks to examine the eight beatitudes in chapter 5, making the point as we went along that Jesus’ teaching shows us how to become more like himself by growing our inner light in such a way that it imitates the light of God. Then, last Sunday, we saw in verses 14-16 that Jesus declares us to be the light of the world. The purpose of growing our inner light is so that it can shine forth in good deeds of faith and love. This brings us to Jesus’ next statement which we read in verses 17-20 of Matthew 5.

“Don’t misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not even the smallest detail of God’s law will disappear until its purpose is achieved. So if you ignore the least commandment and teach others to do the same, you will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But anyone who obeys God’s laws and teaches them will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven. But I warn you—unless your righteousness is better than the righteousness of the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven!”

“Don’t misunderstand why I have come.” Some of you may be thinking that I am here to get rid of God’s laws, to tell you that you don’t need to follow the rules anymore. That’s not at all what I’m saying. I’m here to teach you the purpose for God’s rules. So, don’t even think of ignoring God’s rules and teaching others to do the same. Instead, obey them, but do so for the right reason.

You see, the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees were really good at following the rules for their own sake. “We’re members of the 35mph club,” they announce. “If God says 35 mph then that is what we will do. Not a mile slower or faster. Regardless of who is in front of us, behind us, or around us on the road, if God says 35 we’re going 35. And when we get to where we’re going, we’ll be sure to let you know how proud we are of our driving, how well we kept the rule.” Yes, Jesus says, they are righteous. It’s good that they went 35. But, by ignoring everyone else for the sake of the rule, and then being proud of it and telling others they are going to hell for speeding, their right rule-keeping becomes abusive. They don’t understand the purposes for God’s rules. They think all God wants is blind obedience, unthinking rule following, and legalistic religion, but he doesn’t. He never has, and Jesus is here to teach us that truth.

You need to do better than their form of righteousness. You need to let your light shine in good deeds of faith and love, not simply because its’ God’s rule, but because in doing so you are working with God to accomplish his purpose which is to work for your best and the best of others through your good deeds.

Drive 35mph, says God, because I love you and I don’t want to see you hurt. Drive 35 mph, says God, because I love those who are on the road with you, and I don’t want you to do anything to hurt them. I’ve decided 35mph is a good rule for that particular road, but don’t follow the rule blindly. Pay attention to who the people are, how they’re driving, and regardless of whether they’re going faster or slower than the rule, love them. For I love them and sent my Son into the world to die for them so that they may live eternally with me; he’s wasn’t there, and neither are you, merely to get people to follow my speed limit.

Jesus moves on from these verses and begins to give concrete, practical examples from everyday life of how to live according to the purpose of God’s rules. We will get to those verses next Sunday, and I encourage you this week to follow the Bible Reading Plan and read the Daily Devotions in this morning’s bulletin and on our church website for verses 21-48 of chapter five. There is way too much material in those verses for me to cover effectively in next week’s sermon, so it will be good for you to come prepared for a brief summary of Jesus’ six areas of life addressing anger, adultery, divorce, vows, revenge, and love for enemies.

When I was preparing to enter my first year of college, a close friend of mine was killed by a drunk driver. Up until then, the Christian life for me had been one of trying to do my best to follow God’s rules. I saw myself as a pretty good 35mph driver, and I thought it only fair that not only didn’t I deserve to be pulled over for poor driving, but also that God should reward me for keeping the rules. But, when my friend was killed, I began asking myself what good it did to follow the rules if God wasn’t going to reward me by ensuring I didn’t suffer the pain of my friend’s death. It led me to decide I no longer wanted to be a Christian. But, as time went by I knew that I still loved God and I still wanted to be his child. I began to realize that being a Christian was about a lot more than being a good rule keeper. I began to love God not just with my rule-keeping but with my heart, and my Christian faith has not been the same since. My growth in the Christian life has come about by better understanding God’s purposes for his rules, not just doing a better job keeping them. As I’ve better understood why his rules exist, I am better able and even motivated to keep them. Not just for reward or to avoid punishment but because, as Jesus says repeatedly in the beatitudes, when I do so I am blessed.

God wants more from us that simply being good at keeping his rules. He wants us to be good at applying the rules in such a way that his love for us and for others is lived out, that his goodness is evidenced in the rule keeping that we practice. When we live this way, we will be living our very best life, a life that shines brightly for God.