

# *The Rule (not the rules) of God*

Luke 4:16-22

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ April 5, 2015 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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<sup>16</sup> When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, <sup>17</sup> and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

<sup>18</sup> “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

<sup>20</sup> And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. <sup>21</sup> Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” <sup>22</sup> All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” (Luke 4:16-22, NRSV)

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I might as well just tell you right up front, there is something wrong with me.

I had to drive downtown the other day at a time of the morning when I knew the traffic would be bad. I knew the road would be filled with lots of impatient people rushing to work, cutting me off, not letting me in, speeding past me. So I prepared myself, gave myself a little pep talk as I left the house. Today behind the wheel I am going to keep my cool. I’m going to drive like Jesus would drive, slowly, with patience, speaking words of kindness under my breath to the first person who cuts me off. In my mind I had a very clear picture of how I was going to behave as I drove downtown.

You know what they say, don’t you? The road to downtown is paved with good intentions. Before I’d even reached the Fruitridge exit thoughts I won’t verbalize this morning had passed through my mind about some jerk in a silver Mercedes Benz who probably doesn’t even realize he has a working rear-view mirror and turn signal. I said some things about him under my breath I’m fairly certain that Jesus would not have said about him under his breath. Like I said before, something is wrong with me.

Maybe you can relate. You begin most days with a very clear picture of how the day will unfold. You see yourself listening with caring attentiveness to everybody you meet along the way. You have a picture in your mind of a parent who responds with patience when your kids do dumb things and make dumb decisions. You envision yourself acting selflessly and tenderly towards your spouse. Today is the day I’m not going to worry about things I can’t control. Today is the day I’m finally going to quit that destructive habit of mine. Today is the day that I’m going to do the things I know God wants me to do.

You see, most of us have no problem picturing in our minds the sort of life we sense we are supposed to live today. The problem only comes when we actually try to live that life. Again, something is wrong with me. I’m guessing something is wrong with you as well.

Apparently it’s not just us. Is there anybody in this room today that looks at the current state of our world and believes that everything’s fine? No doubt there is tremendous beauty and goodness in our world, and plenty of it! At the same time, so much is broken. There is so much that is wrong, so much pain and evil and heartache and death. Let’s be honest this morning – there is so much that is wrong with our world and with us as a part of it.

It's been two thousand years since Jesus walked on this earth and yet even after all that time people are still captivated by him. All around the world this Easter Sunday churches are packed with people still captivated by this man. You know why? The reason Jesus has always mattered to people is because people believe that somehow Jesus can help us fix what is wrong with us and what is wrong with our world. Somehow we sense that he is the one who can make things right.

Some people have the idea that there will come a day when Jesus will take us out of this world into a better place called heaven and that at that time everything wrong will be fixed. Now, that's not a bad idea. In fact, there's even some truth to that idea. Still, is Jesus only relevant after we die and go to heaven someday? What about now? What about all that's wrong with our lives and with our world now? Is Jesus relevant only when it comes to heaven someday? I hope not.

Other people believe that Jesus left us instructions on how we can fix what is wrong. The Bible is full of his teaching and his example so what we need to do now is follow the instructions and the example and begin cleaning up this mess ourselves. And that all sounds good until you actually try to do it. Again, I have a really clear picture of the way Jesus wants my day to go. That's not the problem. Making my day go that way, *that* is the problem.

This morning I want to tell you that the message of Easter is that Jesus is, in fact, extraordinarily relevant to our broken lives and broken world but perhaps not in the ways many of us have considered him to be relevant. Let me explain it this way.

When Jesus came to earth he came as a king but he didn't show up looking or acting like a king. He flew coach, not first class. More accurately, he took a Greyhound bus. This king wasn't born in a palace; he was born in a stable. He didn't grow up among nobility but was raised the son of a peasant carpenter. The truth is, Jesus didn't look much at all like these guys. He looked a lot more like these guys. He wasn't some highly-revered holy man perched up on some mountaintop or locked up in some temple. Though he was God he chose to inhabit the most ordinary spaces of human life. He ate regular food, slept in a simple bed, cried real tears, worked with calloused hands, walked through the dust, experienced human pain, made friends and lost friends – in just about every way he lived just like us. In fact, if Jesus came in our day he could very well live in an apartment just down the street, go to your school, work in your office building, shop where you shop, and order whatever it is you order when you go to Starbucks.

Why? Why did the Son of God, the Prince of Heaven, come to live as one of us? Well, he told us why. We just read why in Luke 4. At the very beginning of his public ministry Jesus goes to the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth one day and gets up in the middle of the service to read ancient words from the prophet Isaiah. Everybody in the place that day expects that these are words which reference the Messiah who was to come one day to finally make everything that was wrong in the world right again. Poor would receive good news. Captives would be set free. Blind people would see. The Lord's favor would be declared over those who had been previously out of favor.

When Jesus finishes reading, however, he says something nobody in the place expects. "Today," he declares, "this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." In other words, "God is doing this thing now and God is doing it through me." And the people say, "What? You? You're Joseph's boy. You're just the ordinary son of an ordinary carpenter! There is no way God is going to do this through you!"<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, this was his claim. There is something wrong with our world. There is a great deal wrong with our world. But Jesus' claim is that he has come into our world, into the most ordinary parts of our world, into even the worst parts of our world, so that he can take what is wrong upon himself and make it right. Through him poor will receive good news, blind will see, captives will find freedom, and the out of favor with God will find favor with God.

As you might know, Jesus talked all the time about the Kingdom of God. Now in a kingdom things go the way the king wants them to go. Right? That's how a kingdom works. The king is sovereign. The king is in charge. Well in our world things have not gone the way God, the King of Kings, has wanted them to go. People suffer in our world; that's not the will of the King. People hate one another and hurt one another; that's not the will of the King. People don't trust the King, which is not his desire either. People get sick and die. People go hungry. People get left out. People

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<sup>1</sup> When Jesus insisted that he was, they became so mad at him they tried to throw him off a cliff.

are abused. The world itself is abused. None of this is the will of the King of this world. And so Jesus, the King, came to reestablish his Kingdom. Okay? He came to reestablish God's Rule.

Not rules. Listen to me. Not rules! That's what a lot of people think. It's like when you were a kid and you're messing around downstairs in the basement doing things you know you're not supposed to be doing and your dad has to come down and give you a lecture about how you're supposed to be treating one another and treating the house. Sadly, many people think this is why Jesus came, to lecture to us about a bunch of rules that we can follow and get things right. But that's not what he did. We already knew the rules. The problem was that we *couldn't* follow them. On our own we can never follow them.

Let me say it one more time, there is something wrong with us. God has given us free will over our lives. You might say we have rule over our own little kingdoms. And yet, too often we do not rule our little kingdoms in the way he wants to rule things in his Kingdom. I have authority over my hand and I can choose to use it to push you down or help you up. I have authority over my words and I can use them to encourage and comfort you or I can use them to demean you and gossip about you. I have authority over my wealth and I can use it to help others who have nothing or use it to make myself more comfortable and secure. We each have authority over our own little kingdoms and yet, to some extent, we all have failed to align our little kingdoms with his great Kingdom. There's a self-centeredness in us, a refusal to set aside our own interests, a fear of surrender, a lack of willingness to trust that God knows better than we know, which in the end keeps us from God and from the life God has for us. Our little kingdoms are a mess.

So the King came to us. In the person of Jesus Christ, God came into the most ordinary and the most broken parts of our world to take upon himself all that is wrong with the world. When the Son of God died on the cross that's what he did, he took the worst of this world, all the sin and death and darkness, upon himself. At the deepest part of mess in our world is death and that is the depth to which God himself descended. That Friday Jesus died and descended to the worst of our world.

Thing is, he didn't stay dead. Thing is, three days later he rose. And he didn't just rise. On Easter Sunday, the grace of God which has the power to set everything in the world right again, even turn death to life, exploded out from the grave, into every square inch of creation, into even the most ordinary parts of our world. Jesus rose from the dead with the power to transform everything that is wrong with me and with you and our world and that transformation began the very moment the tomb was empty.

You see, the message of Easter isn't simply that you can go to heaven when you die. That's part of it, of course, but far from all of it. And the message of Easter certainly is not that you now have a set of rules Jesus has given you to follow to make things right. Again, we can never make things right by following rules. No! The message of Easter is that through his death and resurrection Jesus Christ is the one who is already setting things right and will, in time, set all things right. He is alive! He is here! Now! By his Spirit he is moving in and through this world and wants to move in and through your life, to inhabit even the most ordinary parts of our lives and to fill them up with his gracious presence.

Apart from Christ our lives are like an empty glove. They have the shape of the thing that they are supposed to be but no power to become that thing and do what that thing was meant to do. However, when a person comes to believe the message of Easter, to place faith in the claim that Jesus is actually alive and present in our world ready to transform things, then that person is like a glove that is now filled with a hand. Suddenly there is life. Suddenly there is power. Suddenly you can do things you otherwise could never do and become a person you otherwise could never become.

One of the first Christians was a man named Paul. I want to read to you a part of a letter he once wrote. In Colossians 2 we read the very same message I'm giving you this morning. Paul writes,

Entering into this fullness is not something you figure out or achieve. It's not a matter of...keeping a long list of laws. No, you're already *in*—insiders—not through some secretive initiation rite but rather through what Christ has already gone through for you, destroying the power of sin...When you were stuck in your old sin-dead life, you were incapable of responding to God. God brought you alive—right along with Christ! Think of it! All sins forgiven, the slate wiped clean, that old arrest warrant canceled and nailed to Christ's cross. He stripped all the spiritual tyrants in the universe of their sham authority at the Cross and marched them naked through the streets.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Colossians 2:11-15, selections, The Message

We can't follow the rules of God. That's been my experience. I trust it's been yours as well. But through Jesus the Rule of God has broken into our world with the power to heal even the most ordinary parts of our broken world and our broken lives so that now they begin to thrive in ways our King has always desired them to thrive. If we simply give up trying to run our lives and instead place our faith in this King then his Rule begins to heal and transform our lives as well.

How do you and I become the sort of people we all know we were made to be? How do we begin to live out a day in the way we sense it was made to be lived out, even in places as ordinary and mundane as driving downtown? C.S. Lewis once put it this way,

Humanity is already 'saved' in principle. We individuals have to appropriate that salvation. But the really tough work – the bit we could not have done for ourselves – has been done for us. We have not got to try to climb up into spiritual life by our own efforts; it has already come down into the human race. If we will only lay ourselves open to the one Man in whom it was fully present, and who, in spite of being God is also a real man, He will do it in us and for us.<sup>3</sup>

You know what the church is? You know what this church is? It is simply a community of people who have come to admit that on our own power we cannot follow the rules. We've come to recognize that no matter how hard we try, the intentions with which we begin each day are not going to be lived out as the day progresses.

This does not lead us to despair, however, because we have discovered that God has made another way. God sent his Son to become one of us and live among us in the most ordinary ways. That Son eventually died and took all that was wrong with our world upon himself. Then he rose from the dead and overturned death and, in doing so, the power to undo all that is wrong with the world exploded from the grave. He is alive. He is near. He is gracious. He is full of mercy. And we trust him. We are learning to trust him. We hear him speak to us. He leads us. He is changing us. Not all at once, but he is slowly and surely changing us. And in time we, by the power of the Risen Christ among us, are finding ourselves able to do and be what before we could not do or be, even in the most ordinary places of life, even on the freeway headed downtown in the middle of rush hour.

If you believe it, say it with me one more time. The Lord is risen. He is risen indeed!

Amen.

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### **The Next Step** **A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application**

1. Jeff said, "Something is wrong with me. Something is wrong with our world." Would you, or could you, say the same thing about yourself? If so, what is wrong?
2. The claim of Easter is the Jesus is risen, that Jesus is alive. What does that mean? How is that relevant to us today? Is Jesus risen today in the same way Jesus was risen back then?
3. Read Luke 4:16-22 again. Jesus read this and claimed that he was the one come to bring this about. Has he? Do the poor have good news? Do the blind see? Are the captives set free? Is this the year of the Lord's favor?
4. Do you see a difference between the 'rules' of God and the 'Rule' of God?
5. Read Colossians 2:11-15 again. What good news does Paul want us to understand?
6. Do you believe that Jesus actually wants to bring massive change into your life and into our world today?

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<sup>3</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Glasgow: Collins, 1942), 153-154.

7. How have you recently experienced the power of the Risen Christ in your life transforming your life and the world around you into the way He wants it to be (i.e. bringing his Kingdom)? Be specific.
8. If Jesus had died on the cross but never been raised from the dead (i.e. the resurrection never happened), what would be different? Would it all still be good news?