

“What Is Your Life Principle?”

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Is it just my imagination? Or is this country, our culture, even our world experiencing a serious **erosion of authority**? It seems that the watch word of our times is *“Says who?” Who gives you the authority? Why should we pay attention to you?*

We find it difficult to trust anyone. We are given the impression that the hallowed halls of government are filled with people so politicized that few, if any, are there to serve the best interests of the people. The leaders of big business seem interested only in padding their own pockets. Professions once honored and respected are pictured in the media as buffoons, crooks, perverts, and are the target of endless jokes.

Mind you, I’m **not encouraging naivety or gullibility**. Our Lord cautions us about the prevalence of false prophets, corrupt leaders, and instructs us *to judge a tree by its fruit*. But we have to distinguish between a healthy skepticism and destructive cynicism which undermines authority.

We seem to be placing our **trust in self-determination and instant gratification**. *“I’ll decide what is right, and I’ll decide on the basis of what it does for me...right now!”* In the language of our text, this is *“shifting sand.”* Simply doing what is right in your own eyes is the path to anarchy and destruction.

__What is missing, it seems to me, is a **commonly held guiding principle** on which we can build our lives and judge the reliability of our leaders. It is the way to distinguish between rock and sand.

Our Gospel Lesson is the conclusion of what we have come to know as the Sermon on the Mount, the previous three chapters are a distillation of the teachings of Jesus. As it all boils down, Jesus warns his hearers about listening to people who offer a different set of principles and concludes by insisting that his words are a sure foundation..like rock!

Notice that the people are *“amazed and astonished”* by these teachings. This is nothing like what we have heard before!... and also by his confidence, his sense of authority, his willingness to overturn the prevalent ideas and interpretations of the establishment. He is saying, *“here is something on which to build your life..and don’t trust anyone who tells you anything different.”*

Are we ready for this? **Are we prepared to build our lives on a rock-sure principle which will guide all our thoughts and actions?** Are we ready even if it is a minority opinion? Even if it seems to contradict what we would call common sense?

The Hebrew people were very much into this..foundation principles and instructions. Deut, 11 *“Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds, tie them as symbols on your hands and foreheads, Paint them on your door frames and your gates. Teach them to your children. “Do you know **what a phylactery** is? It’s a little leather box into which orthodox Jews place little*

snippets of the Torah and literally tie it around their forehead and their arm. So you can't ever forget about it.

Are we ready to listen to Jesus and live by his amazing and astonishing ideas? Are we ready to make his word our guiding principle? Ready to tattoo it into our brains and teach it to our children? Are we willing to accept his authority? Do we understand the alternative?

Listen to F. W. Robertson, London born preacher of a previous generation.. *"It is an awful moment when the soul begins to find the props, the foundations on which it has previously rested for so long are rotten...and in that horrible insecurity begins to doubt if there is anything to believe at all."* Truth is, **we hunger for solid rock..** a certain place to build a meaningful life, and die a fearless death.

And **what is this ultimate principle which is to form the backbone of our existence?** This one sure thing on which heaven and earth depend? What is it that so astonished the people of Palestine and still amazes the modern mind? What is this rock?

If I can risk putting it into a single phrase, realizing that summary statements are always a bit hazardous, I submit this for your reflection.. ***"Mercy is an even higher good than justice."***

Think about it...we rest our security on God's love, his mercy, not his fairness. *"God so loved the world..."* *"By grace you are saved, thru faith..not of works"*. We rest our security on God's love, his mercy, not his fairness, not on justice. And we are to emulate that love in all our relationships. Mercy is to be the guiding principle of our lives. We are to value mercy more than justice, kindness more than fairness, love more than Law.

This is called **"living the Gospel."**

This is the new testimony, **the new Testament, the new covenant.** The old covenant, the old deal between God and his people is succinctly stated in our lesson from Deut.30 *"I set before you today a blessing and a curse, life and death.. Love the Lord and walk in his ways and be blessed... turn away in disobedience and you will certainly be destroyed.* That is just. That is fair.

But Jesus, in his words and especially in his life, death and resurrection, offered a higher and more noble way. It is the way by which we have hope and confidence. St. Paul summarizes it nicely. *All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came in Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement.* (Rom. 3)

Put simply, **God determined to live not by the principle of fairness and justice, but by mercy.** Thanks be to God. And now he commends this principle to us! He tells us that this is the Rock, the sure foundation. This is our hope and our confidence and it behooves us not only rejoice in it, and tell others about it, but to live it out... to make it our guiding principle. *"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."*

No wonder Jesus' hearers were astonished. This was a challenge to the teachings of Moses, the acknowledged ultimate prophet of God. And even more, it was a challenge to human pride and achievement, the idea that I'm a little better than you. This new teaching rested on the premise that no one could hold his head up before God, that if we were dependent on justice and fairness, we would be lost.

Now this is not **to say that justice is to be ignored, or that we can forget about being fair.** I have all the respect in the world for our system of justice, for law enforcement officers and lawyers and judges who strive, with God-given authority, to administer the laws of our land. Without law and our efforts toward justice and fairness, we descend into chaos. In the realm of law, justice is the best that can be hoped for.. and it is a worthy goal. But Jesus sums up his teachings by insisting that we *“do unto others as we would have them do unto us.”* **And the truth is that in the crunch I would rather be treated with mercy and kindness than with justice. It is the higher good.** Thank God that we are not the object of God’s justice, but God’s mercy. And he would have us love as we have been loved.

Here is a challenge for you. Your Valentine Day roses have not even wilted. Have you already found something to grumble about in the shortcomings of your spouse? Are you still sub-consciously keeping score in your husband/wife relationships... he hurt me, so I have a free ticket to get even? Same with the neighbor..are you keeping score? or the fellow worker. Tit for tat. It’s only fair and just. Are you enraged when someone cuts you off in traffic? These idiot drivers... where are the cops when we need them? When is that waitress ever going to bring me my bill? I can see the place is busy, but I’ve got places to go. There goes her tip.

Does it really get under your skin that a small percentage of people find a way to cheat the welfare system? It just isn’t fair! There ain’t no justice.

I trust you see what I’m saying. This **is not a philosophical discussion. it is a principle for daily living. Mercy is a higher good than justice.** If it sounds like a pious platitude, nice sounding but wholly impractical, just try it. See what fruit it bears. Discover how amazing it is, how unusual and out of the ordinary it is. And teach your children, by example, to value being unique and strange, like Jesus. Tell them and show them that you believe mercy is a higher good than justice.

What we are **talking about is a value system that is rooted and grounded in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.** It will always value human need over material possession. It will always be alert for opportunities to reach toward the hurting, the lonely, the forgotten, the homeless, the imprisoned. Not to lecture them about their failures and the opportunities they may have wasted, but to care, to love beyond what they may deserve. Jesus says this is building on rock. Jesus says this will enable you to endure the storms of life. Other ways may seem more practical and certainly be more popular, but ultimately they will fall with a great crash, for they are sand.

He that has ears to hear, let him hear. Amen.