

Theme: Not a Fan

“More Than Rules”

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Scripture: **John 8:1-11**

Things I'd like to remember from today's sermon:

Meditation Moments for Monday, April 7

MORNING QUOTE: *“Those people are where they are for a reason. You work hard, you live a good life, and you get ahead. There are rules in life. All the good intentions in the world can't change that.”* -- Bill, NAF Study

MORNING SUGGESTION: These words are what might be called Bill's worldview. It is how he sees life. It is how he believes the world works. A worldview is what automatically comes to mind when we are proving our point, defending ourselves, explaining things to our kids, and so on. In our minds, this is just the way it really is. Complete the sentences below with your automatic thoughts – not what you wished you thought, but how you really see life.

People are... The way to get ahead is... The most important thing in life is... I am... When you mess up...
The way to be happy is... God is...

EVENING REFLECTION: Put your true worldview in words again. *The purpose of life is... The most important thing in life is... What makes me who I am is... Everyone ought to... Jesus is...*
Would Jesus agree with your worldview?

END OF THE DAY FOCUS: Go to sleep with this question on your mind: Could I be wrong about some things I have long thought were totally true?

Tuesday, April 8 – MORNING QUOTE: *“Fans are very much caught up in an outward appearance. They think that somehow God is going to be impressed with their religious rule keeping or rituals or their traditions. There is nothing wrong with those things, in and of themselves. The problem comes when we do those things and it's not out of a pursuit of Jesus or a relationship with him, but as a way to prove or measure our own spirituality.”* -Kyle, NAF Study

MORNING SUGGESTION: What are the primary "Christian" things you do? Prayer? Worship attendance? Morning quiet time? Working this journal? Going to a small group? What are the reasons you do those things? Are you doing them because you should? To be a good example to others? To avoid guilt? To become a better person? Because others expect it? Because you always have? To know Jesus better? To avoid Hell?

EVENING REFLECTION: Why are you doing these Meditation Moments? So that you can tell yourself you did it? To ward off temptation? To reconnect to Jesus? Whatever your reasons, now imagine you are spending this brief time because Jesus is so cool, so desirous, that you just want to be filled with his presence all the more. What would this attitude be like for you? If you really wanted to know Jesus, to be filled with him, to experience him, to fully see him, what kinds of things would you do to make this happen?

END OF THE DAY FOCUS: Which of the things you listed earlier could you do while awaiting sleep?

Wednesday, April 9 – MORNING QUOTE: *“It doesn't matter how accurate you are if you are aiming at the wrong goal.”*
-Kyle, NAF Study

MORNING SUGGESTION: Matt Emmons lost the Olympic 50 meter rifle event because he aimed his last shot at the wrong goal. What goal will you aim at today?

EVENING REFLECTION: The goal you described this morning, was it more about passionately pursuing Jesus? Or was it more about being good? Or maybe about avoiding being bad? Or possibly just about surviving? What do you like best about the times when you

do passionately pursue Jesus? Try to describe what you enjoy most when you really are about knowing and loving Jesus.

END OF DAY FOCUS: Go to sleep meditating on what it is like for you when you passionately pursue Jesus.

Thursday, April 10 – MORNING QUOTE: *“You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.”* (Matthew 23:24) Straining out a gnat is tedious, unrewarding work. If you swallow a gnat, you won’t die. You won’t even get sick. Gnats may look big and significant when they are floating in your soup, but in reality their presence is relatively inconsequential, especially when you have a camel lodged in your throat. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you see the gnats which you tend to strain – things which feel important to you but in actuality make very little difference in how well you know and love Jesus. *What are the gnats in your life at church... with your kids... in your devotions... when it comes to food, drink and clothes... with your friends...*

EVENING REFLECTION: Have you noticed any gnats today, things that feel really important to you but in reality are flea-sized matters in a world of elephant-sized issues? Take time and imagine life without gnats, a life not straining over insignificant things that feel important but really aren’t. What would it be like for you? If you could be gnat free, how would it affect others in how they see you? Would Jesus like it?

END OF DAY FOCUS: Go to sleep meditating on a gnat free life.

Friday, April 11 – MORNING QUOTE: *“Jesus explains the difference between these religious fans and true followers. And the fans are self-righteous and judgmental. They look down on others. But the followers of Jesus are humble and are quick to give the same grace to others that they’ve received from Jesus Christ.”* -Kyle, NAF Study

MORNING SUGGESTION: In each pair, which best describes you?

Humble or Self-righteous

Ashamed or Appreciative

Judgmental or Understanding

Angry or Grieved

Frustrated or Serene

Sarcastic or Encouraging

Based on your answers, would you say you are living under grace or law? The cure for pride isn’t shame or self-loathing. The cure for pride is the humble act of receiving unconditional love. Sit with your hands open, your palms up, and imagine receiving undeserved, unconditional, unlimited love, forgiveness, grace and favor. Sit and receive the overflow of Heaven, a waterfall of unending grace, more than you can hold. Feel it flood your soul, fill your body like a glass full of cool water, filling you to the top of your head, and overflowing. After taking time to imagine this love pervading you, go back and mark the pairs of describing words again. What, if anything, changes in your choices?

EVENING REFLECTION: Sit before God, but this time with hands clinched and closed. Imagine yourself refusing unconditional love and grace. Imagine even, shaking your fist, and saying to yourself “I cannot be loved. I must earn everything I get. I will not take favors from anyone.” As you do, feel the reaction in your body. What are your senses telling you? If you choose, gradually unclench your fists, open your hands, and ask for unconditional love. It will probably feel like a humbling act, even a child-like act. As you do, sense again the difference, what you are like what life is like when you freely receive the unconditional love of Jesus. Finish these sentences in your mind... *“I can’t receive unconditional love because...”* *“I must receive unconditional love because...”* *“What do you want to put in my hands?”*

END OF DAY THOUGHT: Try going to sleep with your hands open.

Saturday, April 12 – MORNING QUOTE: *“I walked away from God because I thought He was like you!”* -Eric, NAF Study

MORNING SUGGESTION: If people thought Jesus was like you, what would they like about Jesus? What wouldn’t

they like? Would they want to follow Jesus? What quality of Jesus do you most adore, most appreciate? However you answered, open your hands again and imagine receiving this quality. Imagine it flowing throughout your body, possessing plenty of it for yourself and so much it overflows to others. Try to hold this image in your mind during the afternoon.

EVENING REFLECTION: What difference, if any, did holding the image of your favorite quality of Jesus filling you have on your day? Imagine Jesus standing before you in all his glory. See his holiness in his radiating robes. See compassion in his warm eyes, and his strength in his firm jaw. Then imagine Jesus stepping into your skin, melding with you, the two of you becoming one. What was this experience like?

END OF DAY FOCUS: *"Father, I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."* (John 17:26) As you go to sleep, imagine Jesus pulsating within you, his very being inside you, all that he is living in you. Hold this perspective in mind until you drift into slumber.

"More Than Rules"

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber

April 5-6, 2014 at First United Methodist Church, Durango

Scripture: John 8: 1-11

1 Jesus returned to the Mount of Olives, 2 but early the next morning he was back again at the Temple. A crowd soon gathered, and he sat down and taught them.

3 As he was speaking, the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery. They put her in front of the crowd.

4 "Teacher," they said to Jesus, "this woman was caught in the act of adultery.

5 The law of Moses says to stone her. What do you say?"

6 They were trying to trap him into saying something they could use against him, but Jesus stooped down and wrote in the dust with his finger. 7 They kept demanding an answer, so he stood up again and said, "All right, but let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!" 8 Then he stooped down again and wrote in the dust.

9 When the accusers heard this, they slipped away one by one, beginning with the oldest, until only Jesus was left in the middle of the crowd with the woman.

10 Then Jesus stood up again and said to the woman, "Where are your accusers? Didn't even one of them condemn you?"

11 "No, Lord," she said.

And Jesus said, "Neither do I. Go and sin no more."

VIDEO Not a Fan Week 5 Sermon Starter

SLIDE More Than Rules

As we begin today I want to invite you to take out of your bulletin the Meditation Moments and your Message Notes. At the top you will find the Scripture passage we just heard and below are lines where you can take down notes. There is something to write with in the pews in front of you. On the inside you will find daily meditation moments and Scripture readings that come from the “Not a Fan” journal. During this season of Lent, the 40 days and seven Sundays before Easter, we invite you to take time each day to read them on your own. There are reflections for the morning and the evening each day. I think if you spend a few minutes each morning and evening reading the Scriptures and asking these questions and reflecting upon them, they can help your heart and your mind grow as you seek to follow Jesus.

When I was a youth pastor in my first church, there was a young girl in my youth group who got pregnant when she was 16 years old. News of the pregnancy spread quickly. For a while she kept trying to come to church, even though she was showing, but some of the parents had a problem with this because they didn’t want their kids to see this teenager, who was pregnant. I remember one Sunday morning I was sitting in the sanctuary in the back. There were two moms sitting in the pew right in front of me, and this girl, quite pregnant at that point, walked into the sanctuary, and one mom said to the other mom, “I can’t believe she’d come here in a condition like that.”

I got in a bit of trouble when I tapped them on the shoulder and said, “What if that was your daughter? Don’t forget that she is God’s daughter.” This was before I developed any tact as a pastor, but when you’re 25, you don’t really care about that stuff. At that point in seminary I was taking a class that was studying Gandhi and I was thinking of one of my favorite quotes as I sat in church that day.

SLIDE “I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.” (Graphic)

In today’s Bible story we read about Jesus teaching in the courtyard one morning. His teaching is interrupted by an angry mob that bursts onto the scene, but the mob is made up of the religious leaders of his day. Being pushed along on the crest of the mob was a woman, and perhaps she was dressed in nothing but a

bed sheet as she is shoved to the dirt on the ground in front of Jesus. One of the religious leaders gives the accusation to Jesus and says, “We found this woman in bed with a man that was not her husband. The Law says we stone her. What do you say?”

This was a pushy move by these religious leaders. They use the rules to try to trap Jesus. Rules can do that to us; turn us into an angry mob of sorts. We might not form together and parade a sinner around town, but we’ll huddle in whispering circles and drop someone’s name to everyone we talk to.

I want to be clear about something. God’s Word provides both guidance and commandments. And those commandments, those laws, they are here to protect us. And, if we’re honest, none of us can follow those laws perfectly. Every one of us has fallen short, some of us in more public settings, and others in more private ones. But when we overemphasize following the rules, we can get people thinking we’ve got it all figured out. We can get people thinking they shouldn’t share their struggles with us, because we’re perfect. And that’s what I want to address this morning.

Sometimes, if we are honest, we Christians can be a lot more like the Pharisees and religious leaders than our Messiah. We end up using the rules to rationalize how we treat others in the church, especially newcomers or those whose sins are more difficult to hide. I do think this happens oftentimes unintentionally. We mean well. We say things like, “Well, we’re keeping the standard high. We want to make sure we maintain a certain level of excellence.”

But in doing so, maybe unintentionally, we make it hard for people to come to God. “If you want to come to God, then you’ve got to follow all these rules that we’ve established just to make sure that only the people who are really serious get in.” But in the end, even though we are well meaning, we end up creating a list of rules that wear out and frustrate new believers.

While rules are important to keep boundaries and literally keep us safe sometimes, let’s be honest about them for a minute.

SLIDE 1) Rules Can Be Cumbersome

For example, Christian schools often have a lot of rules. I want you to understand me. They have every right to have these rules. I think it’s great for schools or for homes and families to make some of these rules. I don’t have a problem with them, but there are just a lot of rules. Maybe you read about the Christian school that expelled a young girl because she dressed like a tomboy. I’m

sure there was more to the story, but she was being raised by Grandparents and she was told not to come back to school because she dressed like a boy.

My neighbors, when I was in High School, were 5 boys and they all went to a Christian school. One of the school rules was that you couldn't have your hair below your collar if you were a boy, and girls' skirts couldn't be more than a couple of inches above their knee. We even have that rule in public schools these days. At my neighbor's school, you had to be clean-shaven and when Chris, who was my age, was thirteen he got sent home from school because he hadn't shaved and his hair was touching his collar.

His mom picked him, took him home to use his dad's shaver and then to the barber to get a haircut, then took him back to 7th grade!

There were all kinds of rules and they were closely monitored and followed. Boys had to wear the collared shirts that were white and a certain color of pants. Girls had certain rules about makeup and jewelry and had to wear skirts, not pants, except on casual Fridays. I know you think the corporate world invented casual Fridays, but it actually was a Christian School.

Again, it's fine for schools or families to have those rules, but here is what happened for a lot of the kids, who were my friends, who went to that school: they associated those rules, not with going to school, but with being a Christian. Somehow many of them got the message that these are rules you've got to follow if you're really a Christian. And when they graduated from high school, almost all of them just walked away because they were tired. I am friends on Facebook with my former neighbor, Chris, and he has not been to church since he left high school because of all the rules...and he's 50!

They were exhausted from trying to keep all the rules at school and at home. And again those rules are fine. The problem is that they had somehow gotten the idea that following those rules made them a Christian.

Now back to our story in John 8 and this woman who was looking down—humiliated, guilty and ashamed. She's been caught breaking the rules, and this may be the day that breaking a rule costs her everything. You ever hear what happened to the man in this story? Where is he anyway? The Scripture tells us they were caught IN THE ACT, so there had to be a dude? Where was he? Well, in Jesus' day, he was just seen as "sowing his oats" or something of the sort. It's the woman who was left to be chastised in public no less.

Have you ever been publicly called out and made to feel less than human?

It's not fun and that's exactly what's happening in this story. In the middle of this public trial by an angry mob, Jesus kneels down and he begins to write something in the dirt.

We don't know what he was writing. Some commentators speculate that perhaps Jesus was writing the sins of the accusers in the dirt. Meanwhile, the religious leaders wait for an answer. They know they've caught Jesus by surprise, and they're ready to hear him submit to the letter of the law. They're waiting for him to shrug his shoulders and say, "Well, those are the rules."

Finally, Jesus looks up at these spiritual leaders and says, "If any one of you is without sin, he can cast the first stone." And one by one these bullies drop their stones and walk away; and Jesus is left alone with this woman. And perhaps, with a little bit of a smile, He looks up at her and He says, "Is there anyone left to condemn you?"

Maybe she thought, "There is still one. There is still one who could condemn me." And then Jesus says with tenderness, "Neither do I condemn you. You go now and leave your life of sin."

That leads us to the second truth about rules.

SLIDE 2) The Rules Don't Inspire Grace

I read a story this week about a Chemistry teacher at a Christian school that did something a little unusual – he wanted to teach his students a lesson about God's grace. He handed out a test to all his students that he knew would be difficult. They had been preparing for this test for several months. When the teacher handed out the test, he told his students, "I want you to read through the entire test before you begin to take it."

As they read through the test – most of the students realized they were in trouble – they should have studied more. However, when they got to the end of the multiple page test, they read these words at the bottom: "You can try and get an "A" by taking this test or you can just put your name on it and automatically receive an "A.""

Several students immediately signed their name, walked up to the desk and walked out. Several students didn't read through the test – they just started taking the test – even though most of the class turned their test in after a few seconds, these students never caught on. Here's one time when following the rules got you an easy and automatic "A", but they missed out.

There were several students who got quite upset because they had spent so much time studying – and what kind of teacher gives an “A” for nothing – so some of them stayed and took the test on principle. If they were going to get an “A” they were going to earn it.

We are talking in this series about not being a fan says. Let me suggest to that a fan says:

SLIDE ***“I’m not taking any handouts! I can do this on my own.”***

We fans can spend our lives carrying around the burden of religion.

The grace of Jesus, that same grace that saved a woman from being stoned, calls to us who have been hauling around a long list of rules and rituals and obligations. Jesus calls to those of us who are tired of pretending to be more than we are. He calls to us who have had the guilt and fear of religions wear us down and he says

SLIDE ***“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”***

Maybe you grew up in a home where you were taught all about Jesus. You went to church on the weekend and church camp in the summer. You learned to fear Jesus. You kept as many rules as you could, hoping you wouldn’t go to hell. And when you would sin, you would feel guilt, wondering if you would be good enough. And you were taught to observe different religious traditions and rule keeping. But somehow you never really fell in love with Jesus. You became a fan because when you come into a situation in which rules take precedence over love and grace, it’s hard to fall in love.

Think about it this way: when I got married to my wife there were some rules that I said I would live by – some of them are written, some unwritten. But I understood when I said “I do” that I would:

1. Be faithful to her. As long as we both live I am going to be hers alone.
2. To provide for her. I’m going to meet her needs.
3. To be committed to her, for better or for worse.

There are other rules I didn’t know about that have since been established...

1. I am to always let her know my schedule.
2. I am not to make fun of her before 10 a.m. or after 8 p.m.
3. I am to say out loud what I am thinking.

If I saw our relationship as a bunch of rules I had to keep, I wouldn't be very happy. But because I love my wife, I find joy in being a good husband. I would do anything for her, and so doing the dishes, or putting the lid down on the toilet, or other extravagant acts of sacrifice are a joy for me—most of the time.

In the end, the grace and the love of God frees us and inspires us to live for him. One of the early leaders of the church, Augustine said:

SLIDE *"Who can be good, if not made so by loving?...Love God and do as you please."* --St. Augustine

He could say that because he knew that when you love God, you will want to please God. But your priority, your emphasis, your focus has to be on loving God. It has to be about a relationship with Jesus, otherwise it won't work.

This brings us to the third painful truth about rules.

SLIDE **3) The Rules Don't Keep Us Around**

I want to say this very carefully and clearly. When our kids grow up and they define Christianity as keeping a moral code instead of defining Christianity as being a follower of Jesus Christ, then they will walk away from both. We think, "Well, I've got to make sure that they understand these rules and these moral obligations of being a Christian." And while that's true, I'm telling you, if they define Christianity that way instead of defining Christianity as following Jesus and having a relationship, they will walk away from both. They will walk away from Jesus and the moral code.

We must define Christianity, first and foremost, as the following of Jesus Christ. We cannot expect to recruit the world to a set of standards that we would never live by or follow if it wasn't for a love relationship with Jesus Christ. They're not going to get on board with that—unless it's because they know Jesus. So it must, first and foremost, be about following Christ.

Several years ago a young woman came to our church with her two younger children. She had never been here and was nervous. One of our ushers took her to her son's class and on the way there, she told the usher that she had gotten divorced six years ago and after that she was no longer welcome at the church that she had gone to. She hadn't been to church since then and she was terribly nervous. The usher shared with her that she had been divorced and a single mom and she knew how tough that was.

Once her kids were in class, she went to the door of the sanctuary and

stopped. She asked, “Am I allowed to go in the sanctuary since I’m not a member?” The usher told her she was. The service had already started and everyone was standing and singing. After the last song in the opening set which was, “Meet with Me,” one of our Praise Team members prayed something like this, “God, thank you that no matter where our path has taken us in life, you can redeem us and forgive us and you meet us here.”

With that her tears started to flow and really didn’t stop throughout the entire service. The fear and the guilt melted away. Her body language went from tense and frightened to calm, but excited. That week we began to announce our River Baptism service and later that week she called to ask if she could have her baptism re-affirmed.

We met together the next week and she said to me, “I went through a divorce a few years ago and my other church wouldn’t have me.” It was really more of a question than a statement. And I said, “I am so sorry. We would love to have you. We’ll take anybody!”

And we would. We would love to have you. I don’t know what your story is. I don’t know if there is a Christian who bullied you, misrepresented Jesus Christ, who wasn’t at all like Christ.

I don’t know if it was a church that taught you a lot of traditions and rules and regulations, but you never really got around to studying the Gospel of Jesus or the Scripture. I don’t know if maybe you grew up in some kind of religious affiliation where nobody seemed to make a big deal out of grace, but sure made you feel really guilty every weekend. We would love to have you come and experience the freedom that is found in knowing and following Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior.

One of the many groups of people in this church who have committed to making that journey is our Stephen Ministers and Congregational Care ministers. They are people like you who have gone through more than 50 hours of training to learn how to better listen, encourage and pray with persons going through tough stuff. Some of them have been divorced, lost spouses or children to death. Some have fought through cancer or lost a loved one to suicide. They recognize that God does his best work through the tough times and God can take those painful moments in life and use them to bring about healing.

Today we commission our newest group of Care Ministers together and we do it in front of you so you can see them and you know they are here for you.

Whatever you share with them is confidential. The other day I got a message from one of our members who has a Stephen Minister. They had called the office hoping to meet with me because they were going through a crisis, but I was not available so we found them a Stephen Minister. They told me the other day, "I'm so glad you were not available. They were much better than you!" I think it was a complement.

The truth is that when you are baptized, you are not baptized into a set of rules. You are baptized into the MINISTRY of Jesus Christ. You are baptized to follow him into the mission field of hurting, lonely people who need to know about a God who saves. You are not baptized to be a fan, but to be a follower and each of these persons is living that out. So will you join me as we pray for them?

SLIDE Prayer for Stephen and Congregational Care Ministers

SLIDE Communion