

In fiction and in real life, we've seen people get tripped up when other people point out that they've broken a rule, especially when they haven't hurt anyone by doing so. We know the feeling of chagrin when our own imperfect observance is pointed out to us. This is especially true when the observation is shared in a less than gracious manner, but often, if we see the rule as legitimate, our deepest aggravation is with ourselves. When we see this happening with others, or in fiction, we often empathize more with the rule-breaker than the rule-enforcer. We don't need to hear a sermon to understand that our souls long more deeply for grace than for approval, or affirmation. And yet, we keep putting rules ahead of souls, and acting ungraciously towards our neighbors.

It's even worse when the rule-enforcer demands adherence to an expanded version of the rule, one that was not created by the same authority who created the original rule. But this can be played for laughs. I'm remembering the scene from the movie "Office Space" where the female lead is working as a server in a kitschy chain restaurant. Servers there are required to wear suspenders, and to wear buttons on the suspenders with upbeat or "fun" designs. The buttons are called "flair." The manager confronts her: "We need to talk about your flair."

"Really? I... I have fifteen pieces on."

"Well, okay. Fifteen is the minimum, okay? Now, you know it's up to you whether or not you want to just do the bare minimum. Or... well, like Brian, for example, has thirty seven pieces of flair, okay. And a terrific smile."

"Okay. So you... you want me to wear more?"

"Look, we want you to express yourself, okay? Now if you feel that the bare minimum is enough, then okay. But some people choose to wear more and we encourage that, okay? You

do want to express yourself, don't you?"

Well, it was funnier in my head. Anyway, many of us have had experiences of people moving the goalposts like that, and it's not a fun position to be in. Even if the stakes are low and the delivery is not overly hostile, we can sense deep down that someone is trying to exercise power over us illegitimately. The resentment this provokes is not only valid, but also a valuable defense mechanism. If they can exercise this power, what else could they do to us?

Something like that is happening in today's Gospel, though it's a bit more complicated, and a lot more serious. Biblical law requires cleansing rituals in certain circumstances, like when Jewish priests were going to eat a ritual sacrifice. We see an echo of this every Sunday when I symbolically wash my hands during the offertory. But the Bible does not command ritual handwashing before ordinary people eat ordinary meals. When the Pharisees talk about "the tradition of the elders," they are not talking about common-sense hygiene, and they are not talking about Biblical law. Rather, they are referring to a body of supplemental material that had been created to help observant Jews avoid breaking Biblical law and live lives of greater piety and righteousness.

These traditions could be very elaborate, for example, describing the motions of handwashing in overwhelming detail. Originally these traditions were handed down orally, but they developed into extensive writings. And, I should emphasize, they were not bad. They were very well-intentioned. I think there's something beautiful about loving God so much, and taking one's faith so seriously, that one invests so much effort in honoring God and trying to stay close to God. In fairness to the Pharisees, some of the rabbis said "the tradition of the elders" should be accorded

as much authority as Biblical law, and many ordinary Jews were happy to follow the tradition.

Jesus, clearly, was unhappy. But why? Why is this such serious business, anyway? He calls the pharisees “hypocrites,” which is the Greek word for “actors.” He is accusing them of being insincere in their intentions, accusing them of teaching religious practices that God did not command, not for the good reasons I described, but in order to maintain a position of power over the people. The argument becomes clear when we recognize that the purpose of the Law was to keep the people united with God and with each other. Commanding adherence to rules created by human beings, with the same importance as the Law itself, implicitly puts the human beings who created those rules, or the ones making the command, in the place of God. And doing this creates a division among the people, and a power dynamic that God never intended, thereby working against the purpose of God’s Law, even as the people taking power insist that they are upholding that same Law. Very serious business indeed.

Well-meaning preachers have said that the takeaway from this passage should be that having good intentions and treating people well are all that matters, and rules and rituals should be ignored. But that is to ignore all the rules and rituals that God gave the chosen people. Most of them are only meant to apply to Jews, but to say that law and ritual are unimportant to God, or bad, unambiguously contradicts the text. And many of the traditions that people made in response to what God has done are well-intentioned, useful, and beautiful — not things that we should simply throw away. God created us in the image of God, and part of that is a capacity for creativity. Just as God creates order and beauty, our own creative powers have no higher

purpose than adding order and beauty to our religious life.

The answer, rather, is not to lose sight of the big picture. God's big picture. Which is the joyful union of all people with each other and with God. Laws, rituals, intentions, and actions should all be understood, and evaluated, in this light. This sounds simple, and in a way it is, but our feelings can't always tell us when we're losing focus on our goal of reconciliation with God and one another. That's why it's so important to keep in touch with God and one another by regular church attendance. God made us sensitive to ritual; it's a need and a form of connection almost as deep as interpersonal interaction. It would be nice if you washed your hands before the service, as I do, but I'm not going to give you grief about it. Instead, God is going to give all of us grace, as God always does. Our response is to follow God as best we can, giving grace to one another.