Several years ago I read a book titled *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon*. The book describes how the popular image of Jesus in America is so often nothing more than a reflection of what is going on in our culture. The author summarizes his findings with this provocative statement: “In the book of Genesis, God creates humans in His own image; in the United States, Americans have created Jesus, over and over again, in theirs.”

People in every nation and every culture do that. It’s not limited to Americans. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we all like to make Jesus into someone with whom we feel comfortable. So naturally we make Jesus into someone who resembles us. We want to domesticate Jesus. We want a Jesus that we can totally understand and in some sense control.

That’s why there are so many different versions of Jesus. Think about just two of them with me. First, there is the no-nonsense Jesus. Jesus is Lord! And you had better acknowledge it! Jesus gives commands to his followers and expects us to obey them! That’s the no-nonsense Jesus. There is also the laidback Jesus. This Jesus loves people unconditionally. He accepts them and loves them for who they are. He teaches them things about how they should live, but he doesn’t stress commands or obedience.

Which of those two pictures of Jesus is right? The no-nonsense Jesus? Or the laidback Jesus? Is either one of those portraits of Jesus correct? If not, then just who is Jesus? That question is the essential question of the Christian faith. Who is Jesus? And how are we going to respond to him?

A New Expectation

Think again about the passage from the Gospel of Mark that we read a few minutes ago. What is behind the question that the people are asking Jesus?

18 Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?" (Mark 2:18)

Those of us who are familiar with the accounts of Jesus’ life that we find in the New Testament usually think of the Pharisees as “the bad guys.” They are the ones who are always giving Jesus a hard time. But in the first century the Pharisees were generally admired. The Pharisees were the people who were trying to live according to God’s law. They were trying to call the nation of Israel back to the living God! In other words, the Pharisees were part of a reform movement. The same was true of the John the Baptist and his followers. John was not a Pharisee, but he too was calling on the people of Israel to repent of their sins and to turn back to God.

So it was only natural that the people would ask this question about fasting to Jesus. “Jesus, if you are trying to reform our nation and get us to return to God, then how come you’re not doing what John and the Pharisees are doing? How come your disciples are not fasting?”

Jesus responds with a terribly baffling answer. “How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them?” (Mark 2:19).

What? What does that have to do with the question? The people are talking about a solemn religious duty—fasting—deliberately going without food in order to demonstrate devotion to God. And Jesus starts talking about a wedding! What do you make of that?

Then we read another statement from Jesus. Mark 2:21-22 records Jesus’ famous teaching about new wineskins. No one pours new wine into old wineskins. Once the fermentation process

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starts that old and dried-out wineskin will only stretch so far. Eventually it will break. New wine needs to be poured into new wineskins that are supple and can stretch with the fermenting wine.

What is Jesus’ main point when he talks about the bridegroom and the wineskins? Jesus is creating a new expectation. “I am here to do something new. Don’t try to fit me into your customary way of looking at the world and your favorite way of thinking about religious movements because I do not fit. I am not here to live up to your expectations or to anybody else’s expectations. You need to put those expectations aside because I come on my own terms. You need to know me for who I am, not for who you want me to be!”

As good evangelical Bible-believing Christians, we say, “Amen, Jesus! You tell ’em!” We like hearing Jesus rebuke those people who want to twist the Bible’s teaching and make Jesus into someone that he isn’t. But, of course, we love the Bible and we read the Bible and we know that Jesus would never say such a thing to us! Not us! And yet as soon as that thought goes through our minds—and let’s not admit that it doesn’t, we know that we are wrong.

Nobody ever felt entirely comfortable around Jesus. People were attracted to him, but he was constantly surprising them. He didn’t live up to their preconceived ideas. He didn’t meet all their expectations. No matter how long we have been Christians, we need to keep asking, “Who is Jesus? How does he want me to respond to him?”

A New (or Renewed) Orientation

In the next section, Mark 2:23-3:6, we once again find Jesus teaching some surprising things. In Jesus and his disciples pick some heads of grain as they are walking through a field, and they eat that grain even though it is the Sabbath day! Then Jesus heals a man with a shriveled hand. And—horror of horrors!—he does that on the Sabbath day too!

In the first century, there were two things that marked off the Jewish people from everybody else. First, there was the practice of circumcision. Second was the Jewish people’s devotion to observing the Sabbath. The Old Testament Law said that no work was to be done on the seventh day of the week (Exod. 20:8-11). That was the Sabbath day. No work on the Sabbath!

That, of course, raised a question: What was work and what wasn’t work? The Jewish rabbis debated that question and came up with all kinds of detailed instructions to make sure that nobody did any work on the Sabbath. You couldn’t plow your field or hunt for food. Those restrictions were the obvious ones. You also were forbidden to tie or loosen a knot or to sew more than one stitch. One stitch was OK, but no more! It was also forbidden to set a dislocated bone.

Think about this situation. What if a building fell down on the Sabbath day? What could you do? The rabbis decided that you could remove enough rubble to see if there were any victims underneath the rubble. If they were alive, then you could rescue them. But if they had died, you had to wait until the next day to remove their dead bodies.

That’s hard to imagine, isn’t it? Yet those kinds of restriction are still in effect among orthodox Jews today. I remember going on a tour to Israel years ago and asking some waiters to take a picture of our tour group at our last meal together. They said that they couldn’t do that because snapping a picture was work, and they couldn’t do that on the Sabbath day. Some hotels have all the buttons in the elevator pushed in on the Sabbath day so that the elevator moves up one floor at a time. That way you can get to your floor without ever having to do the work of pushing the button.

That is so far removed from the experience of most of us that we have a hard time even imagining it. Try to let that mentality sink in as you read about Jesus and his actions on the Sabbath and his teaching about the Sabbath. “The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). In other words Jesus is saying, “Your rabbis have got it all wrong!” To the people listening to Jesus that is an entirely new orientation toward the Sabbath. You can almost hear them saying, “There is something more important than obedience to the Sabbath commandment? The Sabbath was somehow made for us? That’s not what the rabbis say!” It would be hard for us to underestimate how revolutionary this new orientation toward the Sabbath law is.
On the other hand, we also need to understand that Jesus is not actually teaching anything new. This is not so much a new orientation as it is a renewed orientation toward the law.

I remember so well the first time I realized this. I was reading the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy. I had never read it before. I had read the rest of the Bible, but I had put off reading Deuteronomy because I knew that it was going to be boring and depressing. It was just a huge collection of commandments! To my surprise I discovered just the opposite. One of the things that struck me as I read Deuteronomy was how often God emphasizes that he is out for our good.

Think about one of the Ten Commandments. “Honor your father and mother.” Do you know that commandment? Do you know how the commandment ends? “Honor your father and your mother . . . so that you may live long and that it may go well with you in the land the Lord your God is giving you” (Deut. 5:16). Did you hear that? God is saying, “I’m giving you this commandment not because I am trying to be mean and what to ruin your life! No, I’m giving this command to you so that you will enjoy life more if you obey it.” That promise is not just true for honoring your father and mother. Read the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, and you will find that promise cropping up over and over again (Deut. 4:20; 5:29, 33; 6:2-3, 18).

That’s really the same thing that Jesus is saying. “The Sabbath (and all of God’s commandments) are made for people! For their good! So that you can enjoy life!” In the first century the rabbis created all those detailed and tedious rules, and in the process they tragically drained God’s law of its essential goodness. Jesus wanted the people to rediscover that God’s commandments are good and that he gave his commandments not to weigh them down but to enable them to enjoy life!

Have you ever thought about God’s commandments that way? God loves you and me so much that he has told us how to go through life so that we can get the most out of it. Thank you, God! That’s the way that you and I should think about God’s commandments. Remember that God’s laws are for your good. That’s what the Old Testament teaches and that’s what Jesus teaches too.

A New Authority

But there is something more. As important as that new or renewed orientation toward the commandments of God is, it is not the main thing that Jesus is after. Jesus goes on to say something more shocking and more important than what he just said. He talks not just about a new orientation but also about a new authority. In Mark 2:28 he says “The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”

To understand that we have to once again put ourselves back into the first century. Jewish life revolves around the Sabbath. Jesus’ favorite name for himself is the Son of Man. (In a later study we’ll look into why Jesus preferred to use that title for himself.) When Jesus says, “The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath,” he is, in effect, saying, “I am the One who rules the Sabbath. I am the One who has the authority to give commandments. I am the One around whom life revolves.”

That is a far more shocking thing to say than that the rabbis had it wrong about the Sabbath. Jesus is describing himself as if he is God! No wonder that Mark 3:6 says that “the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.”

Jesus is more than a religious reformer. He is more than just a teacher giving a new orientation on the law of God. Jesus is claiming to have the very authority that belongs to God himself. Jesus is claiming to be God! He is the ultimate Authority!

Application

How do we put all this together? We have covered a lot of territory this morning. Jesus warns us against expecting him to live up to our expectations. OK. So who is Jesus? Is he the laidback Jesus who loves us unconditionally and doesn’t get too worked up over whether we do everything he tells us? Or is he the no-nonsense Jesus who expects us to follow his every direction and is disappointed when we don’t?

Let’s ask the question in a different way. Are Jesus’ commandments important? What role should commandments play in our Christian lives? Is obedience important? Or does obedience necessarily lead to legalism?
It’s fascinating to see how Christians today deal with this issue. Listen to one contemporary explanation of the subject. It comes from The Shack. Do you remember The Shack? A couple of years ago its popularity caught everybody off guard. It became a huge bestseller.

At one point in the book the main character, Mack, is having a conversation with God, and God says to him:

“Enforcing rules, especially in its more subtle expressions like responsibility and expectation, is a vain attempt to create certainty out of uncertainty. And contrary to what you might think, I have a great fondness for uncertainty. Rules cannot bring freedom; they only have the power to accuse.”

“Whoa!” [Mack responded.] “Are you telling me that responsibility and expectation are just another form of rules we are no longer under? Did I hear you right?”

“Yup,” [God responded.]²

Does The Shack have it right? Is there no place for rules or commandments or even responsibility in the Christian life? Should we banish those terms from our Christian vocabulary and only talk about relationship? Does that adequately summarize what the Bible teaches about God and his commandments? Is that the picture of the Christian life that Jesus gives to his disciples?

Overall I liked The Shack, but on this particular point I think that it missed the target. Here is how I would summarize the issue. The Christian life must not be reduced to a set of rules. It is a relationship with the living God found through faith in his Son Jesus. But—and here is the key point—that relationship like all relationships comes with responsibilities.

It is that final point that needs to be emphasized today. Unlike the author of The Shack, I’m not the least bit afraid of the idea of responsibility. All relationships come with responsibilities. For example, being a friend means more than just having access to that person’s Facebook page. Being a friend means that you do things for the other person and that the other person can count on you.

That’s the way that it is with God too. We enter into a relationship with God by placing our faith in his Son Jesus. We give up on trying to obey all kinds of religious rules so that we can qualify for God’s attention. Instead we consciously and deliberately trust that Jesus did all that was necessary on the cross so that we can be accepted by God. Through faith in Christ we enter into a living relationship with God. We find out that he genuinely cares for us, and we learn to rest in and enjoy his love.

And with that relationship comes responsibility. Jesus is Lord. He is the ultimate Authority. He is the One in charge. We need to fulfill our responsibility to him. We need to obey him. There is no need to apologize for talking about obedience as an important part of the Christian life. But we also need to remember that obeying God’s commands is not a depressing burden because we know that his commands are for our good.

You might say, “Pastor Fred, that is a lot to take in. Can’t you make this easier for us?” No! Remember who it is that we are talking about! Jesus! Jesus is that person who people are always attracted to but whom no one can quite get comfortable with. He’s not a person that we can squeeze into our little religious pigeonholes. We cannot domesticate Jesus and make him into our spiritual pet!

Life with Jesus must not be reduced to a set of rules. If being a Christian is just obedience to a bunch of commandments, then it’s legalistic and ugly and lifeless. The Christian life is a relationship with the living God that is found through faith in his Son Jesus. Let’s never forget that! But let’s also remember that with that relationship come responsibilities. Let’s eagerly and joyfully fulfill those responsibilities knowing that they are for our good!

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji on September 26, 2010 by Dr. Frederic M. Martin.