

TOO MANY RULES

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You know ... I like going fast. I miss driving on I-10 in West Texas, where there's an 85 MPH speed limit, so I think I'll start doing that on the local interstates and roads ... and maybe some residential areas. Oooo ... and slalom in and out between cars! That's fun!! I just don't like traffic rules; they restrict what I want!

Well, obviously, such a program of behavior will sooner or later inevitably end in traffic citations at best and destroyed lives and property at worst. Thus ... traffic laws.

One of the common reasons given for giving up the Catholic faith in particular, or the Christian faith in general, is that "there are too many rules"—for we love to throw off perceived chains of any restriction. But we think of how many and how ardently people love sports ... which tend to have lots of rules. How many times do you or a companion scream at refs for making a bad call, or no call at all? What?! You would have them follow/enforce rules?!!

But what are rules, or more generally, what are laws for? They give society both order and protection, just as in a football game, you can have only a specific number of players on each team for order, and spearing tackles or face-masking is prohibited so as to protect the players.

The same is true of the Christian faith—its rules give both order and protection—and even more, kindness and charity. The Bible—especially the New Testament writings in particular—is given to us as a model to follow for our own good and the good of our neighbor; they are not just a bunch of rules for rules' sake. And ... which rules would we toss out? Those against murder? Stealing? Faithfulness to spouses? Those requiring charity? Honesty? Courage?

Almost inevitably, the rules people don't like are those of restraint—food and drink, and those concerning sexuality. Many, even Christian churches, don't speak of chastity anymore because of the modern culture's pretty much wholesale abandonment of it. Yet what have been the fruits of that abandonment? Confusion. Lots of single parents straining to raise their kids, lots of infidelity in marriage and even unmarried relationships, difficulty in finding life-long spouses, etc. Now, many simply give up even the idea of marriage commitment and any lasting commitment. After all, if we can easily bail on a marriage in which we vowed lifelong commitment, what will we commit to?

Then we hear the "I'm spiritual but not religious" line, which many people claim. But what does that actually mean? Is it "whatever I feel at the moment is my spirituality". Or, whatever I feel God or gods to be is my "religion". But what is that except making oneself one's own standard ... one's own god? Under such a "religion," anything can be justified.

There was a billboard not long ago that claimed "Jesus didn't like religion either," ... which seems to disregard the belief of Jesus' divinity, and as the divine is He who gave us the Jewish and Christian religions. The mainstream Christian belief is that Jesus—the second person of the divine Holy Trinity—is eternal as the Father and the Holy Spirit are eternal. He didn't "begin" but always has been, yet took on humanity (not in substitution of) as well 2,000 years ago in Israel. And as the Creator of Mankind, not unlike a car designer, he knows exactly how we work, what we need to "run right," etc. And like the car's designer, God knows our design to the last detail ... what we need and what we need avoid. You don't take a Corvette off-roading, so to speak; if you do, it probably isn't going to end well. This is the point of the moral "rules" of religion.

Finally, we have the "I wasn't being fed" rationale for leaving the faith. But we have to be careful of such a theme because we tend to like foods that taste great but are not so great for us. For example, I'd love to live solely on pizza and ice cream, but I doubt I'd be very healthy (or long-lived!) if I tried to do so. The wiser will throw in a little green stuff (besides mint chocolate chip ice cream!) and protein in their diet as well. For example, moms: how many of your babies spit out the baby food veggies when they first taste them? Then why feed it to them? Because you know it's good for them; they just don't understand it yet ... until they learn. We tend toward junk food and couch-potato-ing, but health comes from true nutrition and the, at times, unpleasant exertion of exercise.

Similarly, in a largely secular world, people aren't as likely in our day to pick up the treasures of the Christian faith by passive exposure as might have been done in the past when cultures were largely steeped in Christianity. We do see remnants of such in New Mexico more than most states; there are still many roadside shrines, yard statues, and displays throughout. This modern dearth of common exposure to Christianity is why it's so very important, my Christian brethren, that we have the courage to truly live lives in accordance with Jesus' words and example—to show Him to the world by our own determination to live morally well.

St. Paul reminds us that Christ is the head, we are His body ... His hands working in the world. Jesus Himself assures us that those who follow the will of the Father—Jesus' teaching being in absolute accord with the Father's will—are His brother, sister, and mother. What is that will? "This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day." (John 6:40). How blessed we will be in bringing a wandering prodigal back to Him.

So ... too many rules? To borrow a theme from three bears in the Goldilocks fairy tale, some think the way is too hard, and some think it too soft. But really ... it is just right.