

"By the Book"

Text: John 7:40-53

Ephesians 3:20-21 *Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*

Dear Fellow Servant-Slaves of the One True God:

"By-the-bookers" have always gotten a bad rap, no matter where you find them – sometimes deservedly so, sometimes not. You know who they are, or were back in your own day. They were and are the men and women who either follow or enforce the rules to the letter, without exception and without compromise, no matter what the circumstances.

I now find it both interesting and disturbing to look back and examine my own attitude toward such folks. Back when I was in high school they were called "straight-arrows" or "goodie-goodies." (Kids today undoubtedly have more colorful identifiers.) Those in positions of authority called them "model students" and "the best of the best." Today I think of most of them as those who simply and humbly lived their Christian faith, even in the face of tremendous peer pressure.

That's not to say that all "by-the-bookers" were noble and pure in their motives and actions. There were and are always a select few that simply crave the power that accompanies every rule-enforcer. Others adopt a certain rigidity as a demonstration of superiority, or to mask their own evil actions.

Once again then we find ourselves with one of those "partly yes and partly no" situations. Is "by the book" good, or isn't it? Our text will help us to answer. Our goal is to clear away any and all rationalizations for our evil behavior, and at the same time to reinforce that which is truly God-pleasing. The text that will form the basis of our study this morning is found in the Seventh Chapter of John's Gospel:

^{ESV} **John 7:40-53** *When they heard these words, some of the people said, "This really is the Prophet." ⁴¹ Others said, "This is the Christ." But some said, "Is the Christ to come from Galilee? ⁴² Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?" ⁴³ So there was a division among the people over him. ⁴⁴ Some of them wanted*

to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him. ⁴⁵ ¶ The officers then came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, "Why did you not bring him?" ⁴⁶ The officers answered, "No one ever spoke like this man!" ⁴⁷ The Pharisees answered them, "Have you also been deceived? ⁴⁸ Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in him? ⁴⁹ But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed." ⁵⁰ Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, ⁵¹ "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" ⁵² They replied, "Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee." ⁵³ They went each to his own house.

So far the very words of our God. Confident that God will keep his promise not only to visit us with power whenever we study his Word, but also that he will keep his promise to grant to us, his children, those good things for which we ask, so we pray, "**Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth.**" Amen.

It is certainly grounds for repentance wherever and whenever we examine our own lives and find that we have not measured up to God's perfect standards. It is easy, for example, to shift from telling funny stories about the past to actually bragging about past sins, treating what ought to be shameful as badges of honor. Make no mistake: God never thinks sin is funny. Never cute, never cool, never to be fondly treasured. Rebellion and disobedience of every sort is condemned by God in no uncertain terms. To be anything less than sorry for the sins of the past should always be out-of-character for every child of God. That new man within each Christian loves God's law and longs to run the way of his commandments. It is that sinful side – that perverse old Adam in us – that revels in sins, both past and present. In this sense, every single one of us ought to yearn to walk "by-the-book" before our God.

So we pray first this morning that our God would purge from our hearts not only every sinful thought, word, and action, but also the love of all that is evil in God's eyes.

What makes this whole subject both interesting and difficult, however, is the fact that "by-the-book," in the absence of love, is itself sinful. This also means that there are indeed grounds for the Christian to despise the evil sort of rigidity and strictness that, in the absence of love, apes the heart condition our God wants to see in his children, but does not measure up.

Here's a quick example from our days in the Deep South. Proper children in the South are still taught to say "Ma'am" and "Sir" to their elders. As parents we came to appreciate the custom and applied the rule to our own children. It was gratifying to hear evidence of honor and respect from children toward their elders. What we quickly learned was that there were two very different ways the "Ma'am" and "Sir" rule was followed. The first was the way the parents envisioned it; the second an act of pure rebellion and derision. Tone generally indicated the condition of the heart, but not always. There was always a smooth Eddie Haskell here and there that sounded sincere, but whose heart was anything but.

There are, of course, many examples of false or superficial adherence to rules that feed our own sense of rebellion toward what ought to be very God-pleasing. Our text offers one such. The Pharisees were the ultimate "by-the-bookers". They were so fanatical, of course, because they actually believed that they could earn their way to heaven through obedience to their own self-imposed rules and ordinances. If their position or belief had held merit, Jesus never would have condemned it – or them. He did, of course, for several reasons.

The first reason Jesus condemned the rigidity of the Pharisees was that it was carried out not as an act of thanksgiving to God, but as their own payment for sin. Self-salvation (work-righteousness) is always an abomination to God. Equally repulsive to God was the fact that the Pharisees practiced their religion in a love vacuum. There was no help offered to those who fell; no attempt made to reach out to sinners or rescue souls in need. Sinners were to be shunned and despised. Jesus condemned the Pharisees and their lovelessness with these words in Matthew 23:2-4: **"The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, ³ so practice and observe whatever they tell you--but not what they do. For they preach, but do not practice. ⁴ They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger."** The **"heavy burdens"** they laid upon the people were the rules they themselves manufactured without any command from God. We have similar examples still today. God nowhere forbids the moderate, sober use of alcohol. Nor does he forbid marriage. All who then impose such rules **"tie up heavy burdens"** upon others. Note that Jesus does not here promote disrespect or disobedience to those in authority; he condemns loveless, work-righteous rigidity to man-made rules as a path to heaven.

Here, again, is where things get a bit difficult for Christians. The Old Testament rule was that no one was supposed to go in and eat the

showbread from the temple (tabernacle), yet Jesus defended David and his men for doing exactly that. Jews were not permitted to "harvest" grain on the Sabbath, but Jesus defended the actions of his men when they essentially did just that because they were faint with hunger. The key here is that these actions were not "by the book," but they were in accord with the law of love. Jesus said of the Sabbath, for example: **"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. ²⁸ So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."** (Mark 2:27-28)

You can see the problem, can't you? Our old Adam recognizes that Jesus here did not mandate a rigid, by-the-book keeping of Law, and that old Adam in us would love to construe that as evidence that we are now free to pick and choose which commands we will obey, and which we will not. We take that as evidence, in other words, that our disobedience can be justified.

Our text offers us evidence of just how important this whole topic is to our eternal futures. In fact the stakes could not be higher, for there the careful reader will note that the blind rigidity of the Pharisees actually barred their entrance into heaven. Here's how. When many of the Jews were convinced, on the basis of his miraculous actions, that Jesus was different from all that had come before him, others dismissed that possibility on the basis of one overly rigid reading of an isolated Old Testament passage. Our text described the difference with these words: ***When they heard these words, some of the people said, "This really is the Prophet." ⁴¹ Others said, "This is the Christ." But some said, "Is the Christ to come from Galilee? ⁴² Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?"*** Some obviously saw what Jesus did and were led by the Holy Spirit to believe that he was who he said he was. Others denied that evidence because of the passage in Micah 5 that said he would be born in Bethlehem. This represents rigidity of the best and worst sort.

Were the people right to cling to the belief that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem? Of course. This is exactly the sort of "by-the-book" that our God wants to see in us – the sort that allows only Scripture to dictate what is and is not true. The wrong sort of rigidity here was in stubbornly believing that this was an either-or, rather than a both-and. A simple question to Jesus would have cleared it up: ***"Jesus, the Scriptures say that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem, but you are from Nazareth. Can you explain this?"*** Jesus would undoubtedly have answered that he was born in Bethlehem and moved as a youth to Nazareth. Easy.

The problem went deeper for the Pharisees. They didn't want Jesus to be the Savior because they didn't believe they needed saving. They were content with their own illusion of righteousness, and therefore Jesus' very title as "Savior" was an offense to them.

There's another lesson in our text by which we can be forewarned. Note well how the enemies of Jesus used the ad-hominem broadsword when they were unable to answer the challenges of those who believed in Jesus. When they could not refute the argument, they attacked the individuals that raised it. In our text, for example, they attacked first the soldiers and then Nicodemus: ***The officers then came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, "Why did you not bring him?"*** ⁴⁶ ***The officers answered, "No one ever spoke like this man!"*** ⁴⁷ ***The Pharisees answered them, "Have you also been deceived?"*** ⁴⁸ ***Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in him?"*** ⁴⁹ ***But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed."*** ⁵⁰ ***Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them,*** ⁵¹ ***"Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?"*** ⁵² ***They replied, "Are you from Galilee too?"*** Note well – no attempt to answer the arguments; just a personal attack against those who raised them: ***"Have you also been deceived?"*** In other words, ***"Are you also that stupid that you believe in him too?"***

We should expect no less in our own day. Know that the godless can't refute what God teaches, so they have no choice but to try to belittle and marginalize all who actually believe what the Bible teaches.

How then, in the end, do we resolve all of this? How do we learn the right and wrong sort of stubbornness and rigidity – the kind that is God-pleasing and commendable? The answer, of course, is to be "by-the-Book" people – those whose opinions are made and maintained only by Holy Scripture. It is there we learn to love, obey, rejoice, exercise patience and every other virtue. Infinitely more important still is the fact that there we learn that Jesus Christ saved us by earning forgiveness for us. There we learn that the full wrath that we deserved because of our countless sins was visited upon Jesus as our Substitute. Only a religion established by God himself on the pages of the Bible can serve as our rock-solid guide and source of truth. The Holy Spirit has worked through that truth also in your heart, so that you too now believe by-the-Book.

Having now put on the new man by faith, we long to ***"speak the truth in love"*** as Paul put it to the Ephesians. While our text ends on something of a sad note (***"And everyone went to his own house"***) which seems to

indicate that the Jews abandoned Jesus to seek their own path to righteousness, let it not be so with us. Declare instead, as did Jesus' own disciples: ***"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words to eternal life!"*** Our religion will forever be by the Book, for therein is revealed the path to heaven through faith alone in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **Amos 7:12-17** And Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there, ¹³ but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom." ¹⁴ ¶ Then Amos answered and said to Amaziah, "I was no prophet, nor a prophet's son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. ¹⁵ But the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.' ¹⁶ Now therefore hear the word of the LORD. "You say, 'Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.' ¹⁷ Therefore thus says the LORD: ""Your wife shall be a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be divided up with a measuring line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land."

^{ESV} **Hebrews 2:10-18** For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. ¹¹ For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers, ¹² saying, "I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise." ¹³ And again, "I will put my trust in him." And again, "Behold, I and the children God has given me." ¹⁴ ¶ Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵ and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. ¹⁶ For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. ¹⁷ Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

2510 E. Divide Ave. Bismarck, ND 58501

Parsonage and Office: (701) 223-4885 Cell: (701) 425-5483

Website: www.bismarcklutheran.org

Mr. Michael McEnroe, President Mrs. Eileen McEnroe, Organist

Michael Roehl, Pastor Miss Suzannah Miller, Organist

The Second Sunday after Christmas – January 4, 2015

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 708 (Verses 1-3) (Brown Hymnal)

"Oh, Come, All Ye Faithful"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The Old Testament Lesson: (Amos 7:12-17) A man will generally tolerate condemnation only until that condemnation truly and accurately condemns him. So also in our first lesson the idolatrous King Amaziah would permit the Prophet Amos to speak God's words only when and where those words could *not* directly affect him or his evil ways. Man certainly can resist God's messengers for a time, but God is never mocked, and his final judgment is terrible.

The Psalm of the Day – Psalm 121 (Brown Hymnal page 42)

The New Testament Lesson: (Hebrews 2:10-18) Sin brought suffering into our world as an inevitable consequence. Jesus, our Savior, subjected himself to that suffering in saving us. In him we therefore now have a sympathetic ally and friend – One who has been here and understands our struggles, and who now speaks to the Father in our defense. Jesus therefore not only *was* our Savior, he *is* our Savior.

The Confession of Faith -

Apostolic Creed – (Supplement page 15)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 710 (Verses 1-2) (Brown Hymnal)

"Once in Royal David's City"

The Sermon – John 7:40-53 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

"By the Book"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post-Sermon Hymn – 710 (Verses 3-4) (Brown Hymnal)

"Once in Royal David's City"

The Installation of the 2015 Church Council

The Offering followed by the Prayers

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn - 50 (Red Hymnal)

"Lord Dismiss Us with Thy Blessing"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States, as well as Canada, India, and Africa. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again!

Attendance - Sunday (49) Average (50)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee time
Tuesday	-6:00 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
Wednesday	-7:00 p.m.	– Mid Week Bible Study
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee time
	-11:30 a.m.	– Church Council Meeting

CLC News – Pastor Frank Gantt has returned the call to Resurrection of Corpus Christi, TX. He is still considering the call to Calvary of Marquette, MI. Pastor Matt Hanel has returned the call to Redemption of Lynnwood, WA. New online courses are now available from Immanuel College in Eau Claire. Please see the information sheet on the entry table.

Church Council Meeting – The Church Council is scheduled to meet next Sunday following the fellowship hour.

Church Council Installation – Having been elected to serve our Lord on the Church Council of St Paul, the members of the Council are scheduled to be installed during the service this morning. Please keep these men in your prayers – as well as your Pastor, this congregation, and our Synod – that God might be glorified in all that we do, and that the peace and joy of the gospel might be shared both here and in lands and among people that most of us will meet only in heaven.

Bible Study and Confirmation Class – Please note that we have returned to our regular schedule following the holiday break. Parents of confirmation students please note the Tuesday schedule and bring any scheduling conflicts to the attention of the Pastor.