Rules for holy living? Col 3

Why does he do it? He doesn't seem to be able to help himself. Paul and his dastardly inability to say anything to anyone without resorting to rules and regulations and laws. What is this obsession with reducing everything to rules. Look at what the New International Version of the bible that we use does with this chapter. Rules for Christian living. Rules for the Christian household.

It all sounds very worthy and admirable and English and Victorian. Here's how a Christian family behaves. The only thing missing is the whistle being blown as the children line themselves up for clean-hand inspection before the evening meal.

Well – all I can say is this. Whilst we may want to say that the Bible is the Word of God, the paragraph headings are absolutely, definitely, incontrovertibly NOT the word of God. Especially these paragraph headings – which lead us to read this text in precisely the opposite way to the way that we are supposed to read them. Because when you interpret Paul as the one who comes along and turns this wonder dynamic Gospel of Jesus into a dry set of rules and regulations – you end up understanding nothing of what Paul actually wanted to say.

Mind you, people did the same thing with Jesus. Think about the sermon on the Mount. It is well known that much of Jesus' supposedly ethical teaching is nothing of the sort. Think of Jesus talking to a bunch of peasants on a Palestinian hillside:

You have heard that it was said Eye for eye and tooth for tooth. But I tell you – do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.

If you've been at Bloomsbury any length of time, you will have heard Ruth and I interpret these kind of passages within the context of subverting the occupying forces. If a Roman strikes you on the right cheek – using his right hand – then he has to use the back of his hand to do that. But if you 'turn the other cheek' you are not just becoming a Christian door mat. You are accepting the slap, but demanding that he now strikes you with the palm of his hand – and he cannot do that without considering you an equal. Roman customs are being subverted without recourse to violence.

And the Roman soldier – could commandeer your tunic. But Jesus says not that the law should be disobeyed. But neither does he say that the law should be obeyed. Instead, he says that the law should be subverted – by giving more than is asked of you.

And the same logic applies to going the second mile. It is not simply a call to be a good person, and go out of your way to help someone else. It is to go beyond what is expected by the Roman law, in order to subvert that Roman law and show that you are acting on another authority – even higher than that of Caesar.

Above all, you are not just being nice to a Random neighbour. You are going out of your way here to help a Roman soldier, a hated oppressor, someone who has trampled all over your precious promised land and treated you like dirt. And Jesus is teaching that these hated oppressors are best subverted in this passive but deeply subversive way. This way of reading

the Gospels is slowly being understood as the most faithful means of understanding what Jesus was up to.

But precisely this same logic is absolutely applicable to Paul in this passage here. Paul is not simply giving a random set of commandments about how Christian families ought to be run. He is subverting the laws and customs and expectations of the empire!

If you think about it, wives and children and slaves are encouraged to be subject to their superiors. At least that's how it looks. But what is significant here is this – that wives and children and slaves are addressed. That wives and children and slaves are not just given rules – but are given a moral responsibility. Now – in the empire, there is a natural order of things – a natural hierarchy – with Caesar at the top – he is the great Father – the Pope, in a sense. The father is the head of the house – and so wives, and children and slaves simply have to do as they are told by their superiors. A place for everyone and everyone in their place.

There is an old British comedy sketch with the two Ronnies and John Cleese. The three of them are in a row. John Cleese is the tallest – then Ronnie barker in the middle – and Ronnie Corbet at the end.
I look down on them, because I am upper class.
I look up on him because he is upper class but I look down on him because he is lower class. I am middle class.
I know my place. I look up to them both, but I don't look up to him as much as I look up to him.

That is precisely the order of the empire. A place for everyone. And everyone knows their place. It is the natural order of things. But Paul has done something quietly radical here. These instructions to wives and children and slaves appear on the surface to tie in with the natural order of things. Until we think a little more. Because they wives and children and slaves are not told to know their place. They are told to submit themselves to others. And if you are told to submit yourself to others – it means that your natural state is as their equal. Otherwise, you have no power to submit yourself to them.

And what is more, Paul does not simply give instructions to wives and children and slaves. He also gives responsibilities to Husbands and Fathers and Masters. And the ethical basis of Paul's moral instruction, is not some timeless hierarchical order of things. Paul is not simply giving a list of rules. He is taking the rules and laws and regulations that ultimately place Caesar at the top – and he submits those rules and laws and regulations – without breaking them – he submits them to Christ. In six verses, he bases the ethical injunction six times on no one other than the Lord.

Christians live this way not because of a natural order, but in order to please the Lord. Not working for another because they are superior to us. Not being paternalistic towards those under your care because you are superior to them. But again and again and again – the basis of these rules and regulations and laws – is about pleasing Christ. He takes these eternal, unshakeable, natural rules and regulations and laws – and places them on the foundation of a living desire to please the living Christ.

In other words – he is releasing Christians from this law-driven way of life, into a way of living that is based upon relationship with Christ himself. He takes these laws and relativises

them, robs them of their power, makes them subject to Christ. It is precisely what Jesus was doing with the sermon on the Mount.

It seems to be the same story. For Paul – Christian Ethics is not some timeless body of rules and regulations for Christian living. Despite what those paragraph headings might say. You can't live by rules and regulations and law. Paul is instead, encouraging us to live out our ethical lives on the basis of nothing other than trying to please Christ. That relationship is the basis for any rules and regulations and law. It is the foundation of any principles or morals or ethics. And when the foundations of these great pillars, is a living, vibrant relationship – then those rules and regulations and laws become very much a secondary thing – until we don't need them any more.

This has been a recurring theme in recent weeks, so I don't want to rehearse it again now. Simply to say that Paul is not someone who comes along and turns something dynamic into a dry and concrete set of laws. Instead, he comes along and takes a dry and concrete set of laws and turns them into something dynamic.

This, it seems to be, is in tune with contemporary approaches to Ethics in popular postmodern culture. We no longer seem to be that interested in timeless morals and truths and principles and ethics and foundations and certainties and laws. It all seems a bit irrelevant. And cold. And distant. Instead, the basis of postmodern ethics seems to be rooted instead in our relationships with other people.

This is true in advertising. When you look at how charities raise funds – they do not cite rules and regulations and laws encouraging us to do what is right. What do they do? They show us pictures and images. Of children, or people suffering this or that plight. Because when we see people, especially children, we are more likely to be moved to action through a common humanity. So images of broken bodies, or distended abdomens – or … donkeys! Yes – there is a donkey sanctuary – to make sure that retired donkeys are properly looked after. And we see their sad, unhappy, elderly faces – moving us to compassion…

Anyway – the same ethical approach is found in the Simpsons, as we've noted before. Where Homer – despite being an awful example of a human being, who doesn't seem to be able to do anything properly – in the end, he can always be relied upon to do the right thing, not because it is the right thing to do, but because he looks his son or daughter or wife or someone else, in the eye – and when you see him make eye contact with someone, his selfishness evaporates and he does what we all believe to be the right thing.

And this ethical way of being, that doesn't have any timeless truths or general principles or metanarratives, or eternal verities – this ethical way of being that is based on relationships has its roots in Christian Scriptures. And in Jewish Scriptures – in what we call the Shema. How did Jesus summarise the Law and the Prophets? With some rules? No – he puts a relationship at the centre of everything: not rules and regulations and laws, but loving-communion:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart , all your soul, all your strength and all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself. There is no commandment greater than this.