

Rules for Life

In his autobiography *Brother to a Dragonfly*, Will Campbell recalls how his friend PD East pressed him for a succinct definition of Christianity. East did not want a long or fancy explanation. “I’m not too bright,” he told Campbell. “Keep it simple. In ten words or less, what’s the Christian message?” Without thinking, Campbell blurted out: “We’re all bastards but God loves us anyway.” East paused to take that in and then replied, “If you want to try again, you have two words left.”

If someone asked you, “What is Christianity about?”, how would you answer? Most people, you know, are like East—they don’t want a dissertation or even a 10-page essay. They want it boiled down to something simple and straightforward, something that makes sense to a non-believer. They’re looking for what business people call an “elevator pitch,” a pithy summary that can be given in the time it takes to ride an elevator.

As luck would have it, we’ve got several recent attempts at this. Lutheran scholar Martin E. Marty suggests: “God, through Jesus Christ, welcomes you anyhow.” Princeton Seminary President M. Craig Barnes offers a good, Protestant answer: “We live by grace.” And New Testament scholar Beverly Roberts Gaventa proposes, “In Christ, God’s *yes* defeats our *no*.” Other attempts make an explicit appeal to Scripture: Lamin Sanneh’s “God was in Christ, reconciling the world” echoes 2 Corinthians 5, and Ellen Charry’s “the wall of hostility has come down,” references Ephesians 2. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, for his part, tries to pack in as much meaning as possible in his answer: “Israel’s God’s bodied love continues world-making.” That’s a mouthful, isn’t it! Still, no one has ever surpassed the definition St Athanasius gave back in the 4th century: “God became man that man might become God.”

Now, a skeptic might wonder if, given the differences among these proposals, Christians understand their own faith, if Christians understand their own faith, or if maybe there is no such thing as Christianity, but rather several “Christianities,” one for each person perhaps. But really what it means is that the gospel is multifaceted, carrying many meanings and encompassing implications in multiple dimensions of life. No one interpretation is therefore complete. Which is why we have not one story of Jesus’ life, one Gospel account, but four. While all four agree on the essentials, each offers a slightly different “take” on Jesus. Mark’s Gospel, the earliest account, tells how, through Jesus, God confronted the powers and forces of evil at large in the world. If Mark were ever asked for his “elevator speech” for the gospel, he’d probably say something about how Jesus came to “bind the strongman” (referring to Satan) and how he overcame evil on the cross. Matthew’s gospel, by contrast, emphasizes Jesus as Emmanuel, God with us. And Luke’s account presents Jesus first and foremost as the Liberator, the one who releases the captive and relieves the oppressed, as we just heard. The most famous statement of the gospel, though, comes from John: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)

However we define it, though, the gospel is always related to human need. I mean, the Good News can't be considered "good" if it doesn't serve to meet some necessity or resolve some dilemma. In fact, one way to construe the gospel is "God meets us in our need," whatever the need is. So, if a woman is dying of cancer, the gospel is God's promise of resurrection. If a person is weighed down with guilt, the gospel is God's assurance of forgiveness. And if someone is experiencing extreme suffering, the gospel is the prayer: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble." For the starving, the gospel may be a meal. For a refugee, it may be a home in a new land.

The point is, the gospel is always related to human need. It's never truth in a vacuum, some theologically correct statement that exists apart from our life. The gospel is God's truth, God's message, God's action, God's word to a particular person, to meet a particular need, in a particular historical situation.

With that in mind, let us turn to our first reading, from Nehemiah, which offers probably the most unexpected account of "good news" that you can think of. Now, Nehemiah is something of an obscure book. We almost never read it in worship; it only comes up twice in the three-year cycle of readings. And it concerns a time in Israel's history that few Christians know much about. Most of us have heard of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Moses and the Exodus, King David and Solomon. Nehemiah comes *after all that*, The Kingdom of Israel is no more, having been conquered and its people carted off to exile in Babylon, returning fifty years later after Babylon was itself conquered. This reading comes a hundred years *after that*, after the Jews had returned and finally completed rebuilding the city walls.

To memorialize the accomplishment, Nehemiah has Ezra the priest stand on a platform and read "the book of the Law of Moses." The reading takes all morning, but the people stand the whole time, listening reverently, attentively. By the end the people are on their knees in tears, until Ezra tells them to stop crying and stand up, for this day, he declares, is holy, a day of celebration and feasting.

Now, most of us, I'll wager, can't imagine standing for hours listening to someone read the Bible. And we can't imagine being so affected by it, crying and falling on our faces and then breaking out in praise. I mean, we're talking about a book *of Law*, a book of commandments, rules. Not something most of us would find interesting, let alone emotionally moving. Yet for the Jews, it was. Why?

I suppose, we'd have to put ourselves in their shoes, have lived through what they'd lived through, and seen what they'd seen. Exiled loomed large in their experience. It had been over 500 years since Israel's golden age, the stories of David and Solomon were little more than legends. And even now, after they had returned to the land, life was hard. The old ways had been all but forgotten. They were threatened by nations around them. People were disillusioned and morality was lax. Chaos loomed over the horizon. They were adrift, flailing, with nothing to grab on to, nothing firm to stand on.

But then they hear Ezra read the book of the Law, a book that speaks not only of law—do's and don'ts—but also of God's covenant, of God's choosing them, how they were a people of God's

own possession. And so in that context, the rules God laid down for them were received not as an imposition, but as a loving father's wise counsel. It had been a long time, you see, since they'd heard anything from God, but here now they were back in touch with Him, once again hearing God speak, through Scripture, showing his goodness by instructing them how to live a good life, how to live well, to walk righteously before Him.

It may be hard for us to appreciate what this meant for them. Because we've always known the ways of God, a lot of us. We've grown up knowing God's commandments: don't lie, cheat or steal, honor your father and mother, don't murder or commit adultery, forgive those who hurt you. But fact is, that's not true for a lot of people today.

Some months ago, I told you about a college student who went up to a colleague of mine, a chaplain, expressing his frustration and disappointment at how ill-served he and his classmates were by their parents' generation. He had asked his father for advice in life, and his father frankly couldn't offer any. You see, his father was part of the generation that had rebelled against the rules but had nothing to replace them with, and so no guidance to offer his son.

I can't say how many other young people feel this way, but I doubt this young man is the only one. Having been fed platitudes like, Do what feels right, Follow your heart, Be your own person, younger generations are discovering how empty and unhelpful these slogans are for getting on in the world. They may not know it, they may not be able to articulate it, but it's hard to deny. I mean, just look at the statistics. Marriages and births have plummeted, mental illnesses have skyrocketed, workforce participation has cratered, distrust is rampant, loneliness is epidemic. People are flailing, trying to grab hold of a purpose, meaning, a sense of order, something that is true and reliable, that they can base their lives around.

This explains, I think, the growing appeal of evangelical churches and non-denominational churches, churches where not only is worship more 'entertaining' but the preaching is also more practical. Each week attendees sit listening to the pastor preach 40-minute sermons not on abstract theological points but on subjects like how to have a good marriage, how to be a good parent, what it takes to be a good friend. Or take the surprising interest among young people, especially young men, in conservative Catholic and Orthodox churches. What these more traditional churches offer are clearer expectations and a more defined moral structure than you'll find in most mainline churches. A longing for order, for guidance probably also explains the attraction of books like Jordan Peterson's *12 Rules for Life*, and Dave Ramsey's Financial Peace University, and even the popularity of "masculinity coaches" like Andrew Tate—people who explain the "rules of life" they were never told.

Now, I'm not saying this is all good and healthy. (Tate certainly isn't) But these trends all speak to a real hunger, a need. And they make me wonder if, in a time such as this, when everything seems up for grabs, if the way God is responding to our need today isn't so much in dramatic declarations of salvation, as much as in the less flashy, more ordinary form of wisdom, providing instructions for living well.

Now, I know what you're thinking. Following rules is no guarantee of happiness, and there are exceptions to every rule, and rules aren't the same as being in relationship with God, nor does

rule-following save our souls. That's all true. I don't disagree. But the fact is, God doesn't just speak forgiveness when we fail. He also tells us how we should live in the first place. That's the point of God's laws, his commandments, and it's what's behind "wisdom books" in the Bible like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, which lay out how to conduct ourselves in the moral universe God has set up.

So, what if one of the ways in which God is meeting our needs today, one of the ways God is providing for us, is in teaching us, reminding us of the moral order of the universe, and showing us how to live well, to lead lives that are faithful, productive, generous and upward-aiming? Not because that's all there is, or because that's what is most important, but because that's what we need right now, because we are living in a time not unlike that of Nehemiah, when the old ways have been forgotten—or dismissed—and chaos threatens to undo us, when many people are looking for something reliable and trustworthy to order their lives? In such a time, God laying out a way for us to live well amidst the chaos is indeed good news!

To be clear, I'm not saying that the gospel can be reduced to self-help, or that the other aspects of the good news—forgiveness, eternal life, peace, intimacy with God—aren't important. My point is simply that when we neglect one way God's goodness is manifest, in wise instruction, in favor of other, more flashy ways, we are limiting our reach and depriving people of the very word from God they need to hear most.

So I've got a little exercise for you, some homework. In your bulletins is an insert, "10 Rules for Life." What I'd like you to do sometime today is to write down ten rules, ten bits of wisdom you have learned. It could be something your parents taught you, or something you had to learn the hard way. However it presented itself to you, I would like you consider how you have benefited from it and how it might bless others. You all have seen a lot, experienced joys and heartbreaks, good times and trials. So I expect you've got a wealth of wisdom to share. And it could be that that wisdom is just the "good news" someone needs to hear. Thanks be to God!