

Preached by Dr. Carl Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA
June 29, 2008

Psalm 13
Matthew 10:40-42
Exodus 20:1-21

WEIGHTS BECOMING WINGS

If you decided to make a list—a set of rules based on everything that you read in scripture about dos and don'ts—how many legal pads do you think you would fill? Two, if you had all of the prohibitions there; three, maybe four or five? People who want to live biblically have tried to do just that. No television, so that they don't run the risk of turning on a brazen image. No mortgages, all of those prohibitions against usury. But what about stoning adulterers or killing magicians or wearing blended fibers. Would any of those rules make your list of things that you can or cannot do?

One thing that is for certain, the Bible talks more about our practice of hospitality as Jesus said in Matthew than it does about being a bottom-line kind of rule-keeper. Most people believe that if we were to sit down and add up all of the rules that we have kept and then subtract all the rules that we have broken, that we would end up with a positive balance. Most people believe that about themselves. You hear it all the time. I'm a good person; I do the best I can. Some just believe that since they know they would have a positive at the end of the day, that they do more that is right than is wrong; some people are just tempted to believe that God can't help but love them (I'm doing better than most. I'm here in church on a beautiful day.).

As mostly God rule-keepers, isn't it true that we've begun to feel a little entitled? That forgiveness on balance is easier to give to us than to those who don't keep the rules nearly as well. I wonder this morning if you can see the fallacy of such reasoning, if you can see the problem that is laid before us. Yes, I think that most people obey the speed limit more than break it; however, when we get out on I-81 or I-66, don't we deserve the right to go just a little over the speed limit for all the time we were keeping it properly back in metropolitan DC? Or as drivers from some states believe, if the traffic is not conducive, just pass on the right, the shoulder is wide enough.

But, back to the passage. Which commandment do we ignore the most? Be honest, how many of you said, "rest—the Sabbath?" That's the one we ignore the most. We don't take from God the gift of rest. Now here's the tough one, and I won't ask you to raise your hand. Which are we least likely to ignore? I'd love to have prepared a piece of paper and we could have tallied them up like we do the offering at the end of the service. Which one do we mostly obey?

It's interesting that the most fundamental literalist and the most abusive atheist love to point to our biblical rule-keeping, the accounting of what we are prone to avoid or ignore. In the magazine, *The Christian Century*, Tom Long says that biblical rules are often seen as weights, burdens that slow us down, burdens which are ultimately impossible to keep. But he says there's another way to look at what is happening in the book of Exodus, in Deuteronomy, and indeed, throughout Leviticus. These are

blessings of those who live in the kingdom of God, who want to practice kingdom behavior. Look back at verse two. I tried to accentuate it. "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." I am the guy doing the good stuff for you. I'm the one delivering you and here's how to live within the kingdom that I want you to share. I'm the one who has set you free. Because I am the Lord your God, you are free not to need any other Gods. I'll be enough for you. And you don't need to pretend that you're God by trying to use my name when you shouldn't. And you are free to rest on the Sabbath. You are free from the tyranny of keeping up with the Jones', the idols of our own making. I'm setting you free; you no longer need to justify killing or murdering one another. It's no longer necessary. I am the Lord your God.

There is another choice. I am the Lord your God, Jesus said, who cares for you more than sparrows or more than the lilies of my field; and yet not one sparrow falls that I, the Lord your God, have not seen, not one lily withers, that I do not know. I even know the number of hairs on your head. And I, the Lord your God, will supply your needs so you are free to be honest (and if you'll allow me the liberty—you are free to be honest, but start with yourself, then move to others). You are free to stop lying. I, the Lord your God, set you free from the need to steal from one another. You will have enough. I will supply. You are free to stop coveting or wanting another person's fidelity by taking another spouse rather than your own. You are free to honor and respect your mother and father. Sorry, Oprah, Dr. Phil, you just can't blame them any longer. Your job is to honor, not lay the blame and responsibility on someone else.

Tom Long penned the title to how we should see God in this way, this setting us free, and he said the commandments are not weights, but wings that set us free to soar upon the Holy Spirit of God. Not lots of accounting of our rules. Rules kept and rules broken and not even worse, the burden of making up our own set of essential rules by which, of course, we have no problem living. You're free to have one God, have no idols, stop cursing (would you love to get control of your tongue?), free to rest, free to remember the gift of mothers and fathers, free not to kill, or from the compulsions that we in this society perpetuate, free not to commit adultery, not to steal, or lie, or covet.

Now such liberation is best described as we are free to love God and neighbor. Freed and empowered to walk in the light that we know God had provided, freed from the need to worry, freed to be compassionate. That little verse in the 10th chapter of Matthew—if you offer a cup of water to the little ones, many people think that the little ones are the laity (don't be offended). You're free to be compassionate, free to not always choose the easy path. Or as a prophet in our own time has said, "Free at last, free at last, praise God almighty, I am free at last."

Take the wings that God has prepared and claim your freedom.
Amen.