

## PLAY BY THE RULES

Sixth in a series by Dr. Rick Perrin on *Lessons for Life* from Luke 5:12-16

*“He ordered him to tell no one, ‘But go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, just as Moses commanded, for a testimony to them.’”* Luke 5:14

Let me tell you about George Washington. Did you happen to notice that George Washington’s two hundred seventy-sixth birthday was last Friday? I fear that America and her children are forgetting George Washington—and we shouldn’t. As a teenager Washington was tempted toward the loose lifestyle of the privileged, especially in his sexuality. Among his friends he had a reputation as a ladies’ man. At one point was smitten by a young married woman for whom he might have sold his soul—if she had returned his affections. However, at about age twenty, something happened to Washington that changed his life. In his journal he wrote a prayer: *“Direct my thoughts, words and work, wash away my sins in the immaculate Blood of the Lamb,”* he implored God, *“and purge my heart by Thy Holy Spirit...daily frame me more and more into the likeness of Thy Son Jesus Christ.”* (Quoted in P. Marshall, *The Light and the Glory*, Grand Rapids, 1977, 285) From that time Washington dedicated himself to follow Christ and to bring his feelings, words, and actions under the control of God’s word. He married Martha Custis, and unlike Jefferson and Franklin, he faithfully loved his wife for forty-one years, until he died. In everything he undertook, he lived with godly discipline and self-sacrifice

When Washington took command of the Continental Army in 1775, for instance, he immediately issued orders to discourage the *“foolish and wicked practice of profane cursing and swearing.”* If you’ve ever served in the military you know how radical that is! But Washington explained, *“We can have little hopes of the blessing of Heaven on our arms, if we insult it by our impiety and folly.”* He backed this up by appointing chaplains for every unit and commanded his troops to attend worship on the Lord’s Day. The cause of liberty was a holy cause, he insisted. And his men loved him for it. They would not disappoint him. Because of his example they stuck it out through the darkest days of the Revolutionary struggle. One historian has observed that no one else in the whole country could have won America’s independence but George Washington.

Who this man was can be seen even more clearly by contrasting Washington with his enemies. On Christmas Eve, 1776, Washington’s was down to his last, desperate, roll of the dice. It was either win now or lose the cause completely. In freezing temperatures he led his soldiers across the Delaware River. One man froze to death. He marched his troops through a blizzard to attack the Hessians at Trenton. Because of the snow, the Hessian commander, Col. Johann Rall, figured there was no danger of attack and called in his lookouts. He went to a Christmas party. He was drinking heavily and playing cards when a note arrived warning of an imminent American assault, but he stuffed the paper in his pocket without reading it. They found it on his body the next morning. General Howe, the British commander in New York City, couldn’t stir himself to leave the delights of his mistress, the wife of an officer who desired a promotion. His delay allowed Washington and his tiny army to withdraw and fight another day. In London, the First Lord of the Admiralty, John Montagu, was a notorious womanizer. A wag

described him as “*too infamous to have a friend, Too bad for men to commend.*” Montagu supported his wanton lifestyle by accepting bribes and appointed “*worthless scoundrels*” to command positions over more qualified men. The British Secretary of State, George Sackville-Germain, was responsible for the land war in America. He was a homosexual. He was in such a hurry to join his lover that he forgot to sign vital orders, with the result that the British were defeated at Saratoga, the turning point of the Revolutionary War. (*World*, March 1 2008, 61ff)

Washington pressed on with his ragged army, suffering through harsh winters, starvation, and lack of supplies. Instead of growing bitter at the incompetent and foolish politicians who controlled Congress (sounds familiar!), Washington chose to pour out his requests for help in fervent prayer to God. You decide whether it pays off—this sixth lesson for life that we draw from the teaching and example of Jesus: *Play by the Rules*. Turn to Luke 5:12-16 and let’s see what we may learn from the incident described here.

Jesus was now taking a series of what we would call mission trips to the cities and towns in Judea. The disciples he had called in the early part of this chapter undoubtedly accompanied him. At one of these cities a man with leprosy saw Jesus, fell down in front of him, and begged Jesus to heal him. Jesus had been healing people, but this may have been the first case of leprosy he confronted. Jesus reached out and touched the man, something you or I might have been reluctant to do. He said to him, “*Be cleansed,*” and the man was instantly healed. Then in verse 14 Luke tells us, “*He ordered him to tell no one, ‘But go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, just as Moses commanded, for a testimony to them.’*” The first word in verse 15 is “*but.*” Apparently the man did not do as Jesus had commanded him. The parallel account in Mark says, “*But he went out and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the news about to such an extent that Jesus could no longer publicly enter a city.*” (Mark 1:45) Instead of going to the priest and keeping his mouth shut, the man began telling everyone he could find, forcing Jesus to preach out in the fields to ever larger crowds.

**1. Our addiction to independence.** To a certain extent we can understand why this now-healed victim of leprosy would not be quiet. He had been made well. His joy bubbled over. He probably felt that this was such great news he had to tell about himself that he did not need to take Jesus’ injunction seriously. We can almost not blame him! But I want especially to look at this other command. Jesus told him to go to the priest to show that he was healed. On the surface, this doesn’t seem to make a lot of sense. The Old Testament directed that if a leper was healed he must be examined by a priest. That was what Jesus was telling the man to do. The man must have thought to himself, “That’s fine for an earlier age. But this is Jesus here! If Jesus heals you, you’re really healed! Why do I need to be shackled by an outmoded, legalistic provision of the Old Testament?” Do you see how easy it is to reason away the commands of Jesus? Jesus says, “I want you to play by the rules.” But we say, “The rules are unreasonable. Why must we be bound?”

People have always felt this way. That was how Adam and Eve reasoned when they ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. But our culture seems especially

vulnerable to this kind of thinking. We live among people who would rather be amused than discipline themselves. They'd rather jam their lives with activity than cultivate a quiet home life. They'd rather pursue career or self fulfillment than surrender it for the sake of family. They'd rather let their children drift through the educational process than insist that their kids learn something that doesn't interest them. They'd rather the church be one option out of many good choices, than dig deep to deep study God's word or practice personal holiness. American people today seem to have little patience with the past, and small interest in doing the hard or difficult thing. That's not true of everyone, of course, but it's enough to make it common. Does that attitude affect you and me? It's hard not to be children of our age. "Play by the rules," Jesus says. But we don't like rules very much.

**2. Analysis of the leper's condition.** Let's ask ourselves, did Jesus insist that the leper he'd healed follow the rules for no particular reason? Do we believe Jesus is just being arbitrary? I'm not comfortable just writing Jesus off, like the leper apparently did. So, let's probe a little deeper. The place to start is with some knowledge of what the leper had been living with. First, let's consider leprosy as it is mentioned in the Bible. Most of us have never seen a leper. We have seen pictures of lepers in other cultures where the nerve endings in the extremities of the body have gone dead. The leper may have burned off a finger in the fire without feeling a thing. Or his nose may have been eaten away. I knew a missionary once who worked in a leper colony and he described people who were disfigured and handicapped. I know missionaries in India who run an orphanage for the children of lepers. The children's parents have been quarantined and cannot care for their kids, so the church does. Those are the horror stories. Today we have drugs that over time can cure a leper. But in ancient times there was no cure.

So we ask then, if there was no cure, why did the Old Testament make provision for a person who had been cured? The answer is that the term *leprosy* in the Old Testament covered several different contagious skin diseases, including what we narrowly define today as leprosy. You'll find these conditions described in Leviticus 13. A priest was trained to recognize these diseases. Leprosy in the Bible then, was descriptive rather than diagnostic. In those days medical science did not know about bacteria or viruses. The priest had to deal with what he could observe. The result was that a person with leprosy may not have had what we call leprosy. And eventually he might recover from the skin disease. But until he was cured, he had to be quarantined to protect other people from contracting the disease. So the person who had leprosy was expelled from the community, was forbidden contact with his family, and was not permitted to worship at the temple or a synagogue. He was in effect, completely isolated.

However, as a testament to God's mercy, God's word made provision for a person to be readmitted to society, to family and to the worship of God if he no longer had the disease. For the leper Jesus encountered then, he had spent at least part of his life on the outskirts of town, living by himself or perhaps with other lepers in a hut someplace. He had been dependent on the mercy of others to provide him with food and clothing. He had not been able to go near his family—to embrace his wife or to dandle his children on his knee. He could not share in the Passover or any of the other great religious events of

Israel, could not have a sacrifice offered for the forgiveness of his sins. And he was the object of loathing by all the people around him. Simply put, people were afraid of him.

**3. The authority of the Old Testament Rules.** When Jesus told the healed leper to go to and show himself to the priest, he was invoking regulations contained in Leviticus 14. A healed leper went to the priest and the priest led him through a week long process by which he might be readmitted to society. There were two stages to this process. First, outside of town the leper was to wash, and then shave himself. All the hair on his body came off. His head, his arms and legs, his eyebrows, everything. That allowed the priest to examine him thoroughly. The leper then brought two birds to the priest. The priest would kill the first bird and, taking the blood, apply it to the man in a purification ceremony. The death of the first bird symbolized the end of his life outside the community. The second bird was released to fly away, and that symbolized that the leper had been freed from the effects of the disease. He went away again and returned a week later. The priest examined him once more to be certain he was disease free. Then the priest performed other actions related to the altar. These symbolized his restoration to God. Finally the healed man could go home. How wonderful that must have been! What a joyous occasion! Jesus ordered the man to go through the readmission ritual. But this was what the man saw no need to do. Jesus had healed him, and Jesus had more authority than any priest, didn't he? Why did Jesus tell the leper go to the priest?

**4. The Admonition to play by the rules.** Why was it so important for the man to go to the priest? There were two reasons. The first is the obvious one: The word of God commanded it. Again, we live in a time when people don't think it is all that important to obey the commands of God. Many of us would like to keep the Bible at a distance. We don't want to be tied down by a noose of legalisms. It's much easier to pick and choose what we will obey. But consider this: The Bible is the very revelation of God given to us. This is a holy book. For his part, Jesus completely endorsed the Bible. Jesus commanded the man he had healed to do what the Bible said. Because the Bible said it! Go to the priest, Jesus ordered him, because that is what God has told you to do.

Now, I must say this: When Jesus died and rose from the dead, he fulfilled the ceremonial law of the Old Testament. That is why a person healed from leprosy today doesn't need to go to a priest. You and I are not bound by the ceremonial law of the Old Testament, or by the legal code of ancient Israel. We are, however, bound by the moral code of the Bible summarized in the Ten Commandments, because Jesus and his apostles explicitly endorsed and in effect reissued the moral code. Don't play fast and loose with this. What took place in Luke 5 was perhaps two years before Jesus died, so the ceremonial laws were still in force. And Jesus was not about to short circuit God's commandments. He endorsed the Bible. He upheld what God had commanded, so he ordered the man to obey what God said. For us then, we must obey the moral laws of the Bible. If for no other reason than that God has commanded us to obey. You won't be saved by keeping the moral laws because you can't do that perfectly. You can be saved only by faith in the mercy of God. But you and I are still under obligation to God's moral law. We must do what God commands and we must teach our children also to obey God's word.

There is a second reason Jesus sent the man to the priest. It was so that he might be restored in his relationship to God. Remember, he couldn't go to worship. He could not participate in the sacraments. He could not offer a sacrifice in order that his sins might be forgiven. He couldn't even read the Bible because the Bible was kept at the synagogue. Sure he could pray, but I've read the stories of persecuted Christians who have been placed in solitary confinement. They could pray. But oh, how they longed to read God's word, to worship with other believers, to enjoy the blessings of fellowship with fellow Christians. They have felt cut off and alone. When the healed leper brought his two birds to the priest, one of them was killed and its blood was placed upon him. What do you suppose the bird's blood represented? It was the blood of Christ! If you and I are to be restored to God and admitted to the fellowship of his church, it will happen only if the blood that Jesus shed on the cross is applied to us. Jesus died to pay for our sins. What does the Bible say? *"He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross that we might die to sin and live to righteousness, for by his wounds we are healed."* (I Peter 2:24) What Jesus desired for the leper he healed was for him to be fully restored to his family, to the community, and most important of all, to God. That was why Jesus sent him to the priest. It was this man's way to find Christ as his savior.

George Washington came to this point as a young man. He wrote in his journal, *"Thou gavest Thy Son to die for me; and hast given me assurance of salvation, upon my repentance and sincerely endeavoring to conform my life to His holy precepts and example."* George Washington understood. If we are restored to God and forgiven, we will desire to obey what God has commanded. Al Hsu tells how he had such bad vision that when he went to the optometrist, the only letter he could read on the chart was the big "E." Finally he decided to have corrective surgery. The result was close but still not perfect, and the doctor scheduled follow up surgery. Al was attending an Inter-Varsity staff conference. They were singing a hymn and he squinted, trying to make out the words on the screen. The hymn was a call to obedience, and Al was overcome by Christ's command to serve him. He was weeping as he looked up again at the screen, and suddenly the words were crystal clear! He wondered if he had been miraculously healed, but then realized that the water from his tears had created a correction to his lens that enabled him to see clearly for the first time in his life. He says, "When God moves me to tears, I begin to see more clearly." That's the purpose of God's commandments. Our failure to keep them should move us to tears, and then we will see the restoring mercy of God. Is there a place in your heart where you are resisting God? Is there a spirit of rebellion in you? This is the point where we need Jesus to touch us and heal us. Jesus said, *"If you love me, you will keep My commandments."* (John 14:15) Do you love Jesus?

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