

**“Rules for Radicals”**  
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Romans 6:12-23

On first hearing, the passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans seems complicated and esoteric. It lays out principles, not in the sense of moral laws, but in the sense of an ethical framework. But this passage is radical. It turns the world upside down.

Paul’s letter to the Romans is peppered throughout with two phrases: “**What then**” and “**Therefore.**” After laying out a long argument or thesis, Paul asks repeatedly, “What then shall we say to this?” And then, several sentences or paragraphs later, he draws his conclusion: “Therefore, brothers and sisters, ...” We hear both these phrases in our passage this morning.

Paul began chapter six, “**What then** are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?” And he quickly answers, “By no means!”

And by the time we get to verse 12, Paul is ready to draw his conclusion, so it begins: “**Therefore**, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions.”

And three short verses later, Paul is at it again: “What then?” he asks. “Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace?” And once again, he quickly answers his own question: “By no means!”

Paul is trying to change our thinking. He wants us to get out of the mindset that holds our religion as a narrow set of obligations and duties. He wants us to stop thinking that being religious means trying to be good or trying to improve our character. If salvation depends on our ability to fulfill our obligations or on our ability to be good people, then we’re all in trouble, deep trouble.

Let me ask you a question. Is it easy or hard to please God?

Israel tried all kinds of things (fasting, fighting, sacrifices of all kinds), but regularly missed the mark. Remember the passage from Micah?

“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before God with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

We ourselves try all kinds of things, individually and collectively, to please God. And we, too, regularly miss the mark. Some of us try to avoid controversy or conflict. “Christians don’t get angry,” some of us believe. But Jesus himself got angry, and sometimes provoked controversy with his teachings or responses to questions posed by the curious and the conniving.

Some of us try to distinguish ourselves from others, like the Pharisee in Luke’s Gospel, who thanked God he was not like other people -- thieves, rogues, adulterers, and especially the tax collector. “I fast twice a week,” he said. “I give a tenth of all my income.” But Jesus remarked that it was the tax collector and **not** the Pharisee who went down to his house justified because he had humbled himself rather than exalted himself.

Will Campbell is a white Baptist minister, from the rural South, who preached his first sermon in his community’s church after reading from a pulpit Bible that had been presented by the Ku Klux Klan. But he could never embrace his society’s preoccupation with keeping people segregated and groups apart. He reached out to civil rights workers and avowed racists alike. He was the only white minister present at the creation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He escorted nine black students through angry mobs at Central High School in Little Rock. He was present at sit-ins, civil rights demonstrations, and strategy meetings with Martin Luther King. He also reached out to the KKK, despite harsh criticism.

In Campbell’s memoir, *Brother to a Dragonfly*, (nominated for a National Book Award) he explains simply why he chose to live his life the way he has.

For years Campbell had been prodded by his long-time friend, P.D. East, to explain to him in ten words or less, what's the Christian message? Campbell's response was this: "We're all bastards but God loves us anyway."

P.D. tested Campbell's explanation when Jonathan Daniels, a young seminarian friend of Campbell's from Cambridge, Massachusetts, came down to Alabama for the summer to register black citizens to vote in the early 1960s. One day, moments after being released from a county jail along with several dozen other civil rights workers, Jonathan was shot dead by a local deputy named Thomas Coleman.

(I'm reading from the book now)<sup>1</sup> "Was Jonathan a bastard?" goaded P.D.

I said I was sure that everyone is a sinner in one way or another but that he was one of the sweetest and most gentle guys I had ever known.

P.D. came at him again. "But was he a bastard?" ... Now, by god, you tell me, right now, yes or no and not maybe, was Jonathan Daniel a bastard?"

I knew that if I said no he would leave me alone and if I said yes he wouldn't. And I knew my definition would be blown if I said no.

So I said, "Yes."

"All right." Is Thomas Coleman a bastard?"

That one was a lot easier. "Yes. Thomas Coleman is a bastard."

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So, "Which one of these two bastards do you think God loves the most? Does he love that little dead bastard Jonathan the most? Or does He love that living bastard Thomas the most?"

Suddenly (Campbell writes) everything became clear. Everything. It was a revelation. ... And I began to whimper. But the crying was interspersed with laughter. It was a strange experience.

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Campbell confesses that his ministry had become one of law, not of grace. While he had tried to keep in mind all along that the central theme of the triumph of grace over law was clear in the New Testament, he had come to act as if he didn't believe it.

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<sup>1</sup> Will D. Campbell, *Brother to a Dragonfly*, (New York: Seabury, 1977), 221f.

St. Paul makes it clear that to abide *in* grace was more radical than to abide *by* law. And such law as Paul did emphasize was not law in the sense of entreaties of the State to make us behave, but an ethos, a way of being, *In Christ*.

Before that moment, Campbell, like many of us, had not quite accepted that freedom. Instead, he had been marching under the banner and umbrella of social science and legislation, Caesar and politics, with a kind of litigious gospel that falls sort of being truly Good News.<sup>2</sup>

Will Campbell and Paul come to the same conclusion: Faith asks more of us than just being religious. Paul wants us to realize that in Christ there are no rules to follow, no laws to obey. What pleases God is not our adherence to a set of doctrines and values and practices, but our willingness to listen to God's voice and to act in new ways. Micah's answer was this: "Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with your God."

Both Jesus and Paul counsel those who think God is some far-off figure with little concern for the world, to think again. God loves the world, then and now. God loved the world so much that he gave his own Son to redeem it, to reclaim it, to restore the relationships that were so badly broken. And God continues to love the world so much that he continues to summon us, to beckon us, to pour out his Holy Spirit upon us so that we will live in the way that God desires, doing the things that please God.

So, the integrity of our lives, the health of our community, the compassion of our society, the justice in our global economy, the peace among nations -- these are the things that matter to God. God wants those who love God to love our neighbors, the world, and ourselves with the same kind of love with which God himself loves the world.

To accept this free gift of God's love is to become a radical in the most basic sense. A radical is someone rooted in a fundamental idea and devoted to the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 227. The two paragraphs above were taken directly from the book, but modified slightly and changed from first person to third.

transformation of the world. By definition, anyone who follows Jesus becomes a radical.

But the rules for radicals are not a set of laws to be obeyed. Rather, the rule is this: become obedient to the Spirit of Christ. That means seeking justice, working for peace, pursuing reconciliation. It means giving hungry and poor people the tools they need to feed their families and build a better life for their children. It means fighting racism, sexism, homophobia and all forms of discrimination. It means embracing people of other religions and faith traditions, and caring for ourselves.

Ultimately, it's about making sure that each and every person is fully respected and has an unshakeable sense of dignity. This is what God desires for each and every one of us. This is what we open ourselves to, when we treasure the things God treasures and love the world the way God loves the world. **This** is what pleases God.

AMEN.