

Freedom!

1. Warm up: Jeff began Sunday's sermon with a list of the 5 + 2 greatest inventions in the history of the world. If you were creating your own list of the greatest inventions, what's something (serious or silly) that would be on your list?
2. Jesus himself was a great inventor. You might say that Jesus reinvented religion. In Mark 2:22, Jesus says his message was like new wine that, if poured into the strictures of old religion, would explode it. In other words, Jesus came to show us a revolutionary new Way of spiritual living. To fully appreciate the newness of his message, we first have to understand what old religion looks like. In the Old Testament, Moses gave us the Law – 613 different religious rules governing virtually every aspect of life. This was religion as rule-keeping.
 - a. The 15th chapter of the Old Testament book of Numbers tells about a man who gathered sticks on the Sabbath, which was considered a violation of the command to do no work on the Sabbath. Moses had the man stoned to death. Why do you think Moses did that? What motivated his response? What was Moses thinking?
 - b. Have you ever been in a strict, rules-oriented religious community? Why were rules so important to that community? How did it feel to be part of that community? And how did their approach affect your spiritual journey?
 - c. Jeff said that religion as rule-keeping “turns God into a Petty Tyrant, turns religious leaders into Enforcers, and turns us into Religious Robots.” Do you agree or disagree? In what way does religion as rule-keeping turn God into a Petty Tyrant? Turn religious leaders into Enforcers? And turn us into Robots?
 - d. Jeff gave examples of how religion as robotic rule-keeping can lead to great cruelty. As Blaise Paschal said, “People never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.” Have you ever seen or experienced cruelty as a byproduct of religion as robotic rule-keeping?
3. Religion as rule-keeping doesn't just lead to heartless cruelty; it also has a tendency to suck the life out of us. Jeff told how one of his most lifegiving memories as a kid was a night when his Uncle Tom danced the twist using a towel to get his groove on. Before long, all the kids were dancing along with their own towels, laughing and celebrating life. But then, when Jeff began attending a fundamentalist church, he was taught that that beautiful moment with Uncle Tom was a sin because dancing is forbidden. Jeff then told about an experience years later at his niece's wedding when he couldn't bring himself to ask a little girl (who had no Daddy) to dance because of residual uptightness from his fundamentalist days.
 - a. Do you think it's fair to say that religion as rule keeping has a tendency to suck the life out of us? If so, why? Or why not?

- b. Many churches today have fallen back into the trap of religion as rule keeping. Why do you think that way of being religious is so enduring and popular?
4. Jesus taught us a dramatically different way to approach spiritual life, as illustrated in two Conflict Stories recounted in our Gospel reading on Sunday. These are called “Conflict Stories” because they capture the essence of the conflict between Jesus and the old-guard Pharisees. Read Mark 2:23-28 and 3:1-6, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. Let’s look at the second of these two stories first. Out of respect for the Sabbath rule, Jesus could have waited one day, then healed the man with a withered hand. Why do you think he deliberately chose to heal the man on the Sabbath when he knew the Pharisees would be outraged?
 - b. What made Jesus so angry in this story – and why?
 - c. What core values seemed to motivate Jesus to override the Sabbath rule and heal the man in this story? And what should we learn from that?
 - d. Now let’s jump back to the first story. Jesus’ disciples were hungry, but they certainly weren’t starving. Yet Jesus let them pick and husk grain anyway on the Sabbath. In both Mark and Matthew’s accounts of this story, Jesus gives several reasons why it was appropriate for his disciples to break the Sabbath rule. In Matthew’s account, Jesus tells the Pharisees, “If you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy not sacrifice,’ you would have not condemned the guiltless.” Matthew 12:7. What does that mean? What was Jesus’ point here?
 - e. In Mark’s account, Jesus also tells the Pharisees, “The Sabbath was made for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath.” Mark 2:27. Jeff called this a revolutionary statement. What does it mean?
5. In all this, we identified an 8th core characteristic of authentic followers of Jesus. ***Authentic followers of Jesus are not rule-keeping religious robots. Instead, we respond to life’s situations in accordance with the highest spiritual values as we are led by the Spirit.*** Read Paul’s summary of Jesus’ revolutionary approach as found in Galatians 5 and printed on p. 3.
 - a. Verse 18 says, “If you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the Law.” What does that mean?
 - b. If rules are not our ultimate authority, how then are we supposed to decide what’s right and wrong according to Galatians 5?
 - c. What legitimate role should rules still play in the life of Jesus’ followers?
6. Look at the graph on p. 3 giving an overview of key differences between Old Religion and New Religion.

- a. How was Jesus' understanding of God different from the understanding of God in old religion?
- b. What's the difference between religious leaders as Enforcers versus Consultants?
- c. What's the difference between being Religious Robots versus Empowered Partners in Ministry as Led by the Spirit? Have you embraced this second view as Empowered Partner in Ministry? If not, what holds you back?

Mark 2:23 - 3:6

One sabbath he was going through the cornfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴ The Pharisees said to him, 'Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?' ²⁵ And he said to them, 'Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? ²⁶ He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.' ²⁷ Then he said to them, 'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; ²⁸ so the Son of Man is Lord even of the sabbath.'

³ Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. ² They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ³ And he said to the man who had the withered hand, 'Come forward.' ⁴ Then he said to them, 'Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?' But they were silent. ⁵ He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. ⁶ The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

Galatians 5:1-23, selected verses

¹ "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. . . . ¹⁸ If you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the Law. ²² The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control."

Old Religion Versus Jesus' New Way		
	<u>Old Way</u>	<u>New Way</u>
God as . . .	Petty Tyrant	Loving Guide
Religious Leaders as . . .	Enforcers	Spiritual Consultants
Us as . . .	Rule-Keeping Robots	Empowered Partners in Ministry as Led by the Spirit