



Pastor's Pen

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- Fr. Tom Wilson, Pastor

THE RULES

I have never been much of a gum chewer. It just wasn't that attractive to me, and the few times I remember doing it I recall ending up with a painful jaw. Despite my lack of affinity for chewing gum, one of the first rules of class I remember as a grade school student was "no chewing gum in class." It went right past me because I simply didn't understand why anyone would want to chew gum in class. But some did. Teachers' responses would range from asking the student to throw it out to the more painful fine for getting caught. With no attraction to gum, I was confused why anyone would want to risk getting in trouble or forking over hard-earned cash. I think I was labeled a "rule follower" and was even invited by an unsympathetic classmate in an uncomplimentary way to "join the administration" of the school.

The gum chewing rule never bothered me, at least in part because it didn't affect me. Later, I grew to believe the rule was essentially arbitrary and used as a way for us to learn some discipline and be able to follow the rules established by reasonable authority, which seemed like a noble lesson to be learned. Then, I started speaking in front of people. Especially in smaller groups, people chewing gum became a terrible distraction to me, and often caused me to lose my concentration. There was at least some observable data that the rule had a purpose and was not simply arbitrary.

Therein lies the challenge of living in a world awash with rules. Most of us know we need them. Most of us are willing to follow them. But an awful lot of us feel overburdened by them. Being overburdened by them easily leads to an attitude that all rules are arbitrary, and worse yet, are placed there for the benefit of those making them, rather than those of us who follow them.

I have written in this space before that the Church is often critiqued for having "too many rules." Yet in our organization of over a billion people, we have fewer rules than one typical law passed by U.S. Congress in one session. If the Church has too many, what does that say about the world around us?

As people of faith, we have rules given to us by God that provide boundaries and direction to our lives and help us to move toward God. Some of them are absolute and divine and can never be changed. Some of them are simply to help create an orderly process that can be substituted or eliminated if the process is no longer needed. The truth is, if we followed what God planted on our hearts in the first place, there would be no need. Alas, we don't follow, and so we do get them from God. They preserve our freedom, and hopefully establish some order in our families and communities.

While it's not hard to realize that we need some rules to maintain order, both in the Church and in the world, the reaction to rules is also leading us to a place where rules, important ones, are ignored, scoffed at, or attacked as being part of a conspiracy. That is scary and an attitude that can easily lead to chaos, where no rules are in place or followed. It sets the game in favor of those in power... the polite version of "Might makes right."

Rules multiply for a lot of good reasons. They also multiply for not so good reasons. Sometimes they are used to gain or maintain power. A friend of mine once served in a country, in which the rules for building were so complicated, that the only ones who really knew them were the corrupt authority enforcing them, effectively making them a system of rewards and punishments. Although rules are often misused, it is not a reason to abandon the concept all together.

God has given us a plan that includes rules for our betterment and freedom. They are not about gum chewing, and they are not arbitrary. They are given to us out of love, so we can live in predictable order. Despite the labyrinth of rules through which we find ourselves winding around, and the understandable frustration we may experience, treating God's laws as arbitrary is done at our own peril. Rejecting His laws has us effectively trying to be our own gods, violating the foundation of all law, to have and honor "no other god" but the true God.