



**September 28, 2008**

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Matthew 21:23-32

## “Sassy Sons and Daughters”

Children should be seen and not heard.

Sit still. Be quiet.

Do what your mother said.

Brush your teeth. Comb your hair. Wash your hands. Tuck in your shirt.

Always wear clean underwear.

If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all.

Be polite. Go to church. Be cheerful. Don't complain.

Pick up your room- this place is a pigsty.

Don't talk back.

Enough of that sassing!

God wants you to be good.

Have you ever heard any of these comments? Have you said any of them? How do you feel about trying to follow these kinds of rules? Many of us have decided we want to try to be good people—and we often do that by conforming to standards we were taught when we were young.

Most of us have learned to sit still and be quiet in situations that demand it, like classes, lectures, movie theaters, sermons, and so on. We brush our teeth, comb our hair and maybe even wash our hands with some regularity. I expect we all wear clean underwear nearly all the time. Some of us may seriously try not to say anything at all, if we can't say something nice, although I think that rule is likely one of the harder ones for us. We strive to be cheerful and uncomplaining. We keep our rooms neat- or at least a bit above the level of total chaos. We vacuum our homes, mow our lawns. We have learned not to be sassy with our bosses, teachers, police officers about to give us a ticket and so forth. Many of us try to obey those in authority and follow the standards and expectations for constructive and helpful participation in human communities and in our personal lives.

For those of us who seek to conform to the standards around us for “right living” a question may come to our minds—maybe not in words- perhaps just in a feeling of doubt. We wonder “Am I a good person? Am I doing or being what I ought to do or be?” For Christians the question may be more precise: “Am I doing God’s will? Am I following God’s way?”

We may find ourselves double-checking, almost as if we had a list to follow. Let’s see, ok, I’ve been doing my homework, getting home on time- I’ve been polite and caring with my family, I’ve taken care of my share of chores, I’ve shopped and cooked nutritious meals, I’ve helped with cleaning, doing laundry, walking the dogs, changing the cat litter, I’ve been responsible at work.

Check.

Check.

Check.

We move down our lists.

So, what’s the answer? Are we doing what’s right? Being God’s people?

Well, according to Scripture, the answer to that is- maybe. Maybe yes, maybe no.

All our check marks don’t really tell us much.

They don’t say we’re NOT following God’s will. But they don’t say we ARE following God’s will, either.

Let's think about the story Jesus told which we heard read from Matthew's gospel.

This parable teaches us we have a tendency to confuse two things. We confuse conformity to outward expectations with inward commitment to God's truth and right.

Outward conformity does not guarantee inward commitment. It doesn't necessarily work AGAINST it, but it's not a guarantee.

Consider the outwardly conforming son in the parable. He answered his father courteously, saying "sir" very respectfully. But he didn't go to the vineyard to work. He had no inward commitment to the goals of his father. The other son was sassy; he said, "I'm not going!" He was rebellious, refusing to conform to outward expectations for obedient sons. But his inward commitment was so strong that he just had to go to the vineyard to help his father care for the grapes.

This Bible story teaches us that outward conformity is never enough by itself. If we look back in the book of Matthew, we can see the context in which Jesus told this story. He had entered Jerusalem on a donkey, greeted by the crowds with Palm branches. He had overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the temple. He had shocked the religious leaders of his day. They were passionately devoted to ritual and conformity. To those leaders Jesus must have seemed an upstart, wildly sassy and disrespectful, even blasphemous and dangerous; dangerous enough to be executed as a threat to a peaceful Judea and a strong Roman empire. He was, as a contemporary Christian song puts it, an "outlaw". He was one of those things, one of those people "not like the others" in the old Sesame Street song. And we want to be "not like the others" the way he was.

Jesus broke Sabbath laws to heal and to gather food to eat in the fields. He was rebellious to many rules of his day. Does that mean to do God's will we should be wildly rebellious? Are we called to be sassy sons and daughters, balking at society's demands?

For those of you who like being a bit rebellious on principle, I have bad news. Scripture does not support a continual stance of rebellion. Jesus' life shows he took his culture's teachings very seriously. He revered that which was considered sacred and holy. He learned his people's history, studied their Scriptures, and sought to know their faith. He didn't break rules for the sake of breaking rules, but only when inward commitment to God's will demanded it.

How do we apply his teaching, then, in the regular 9-5, 24/7 world we live in?

First off, there is no shortcut. We can't just decide to always follow expectations of our society, to CONFORM—and be sure that will please God. Nor can we decide to just REBEL against the expectations of our society, to be “outlaws” like Jesus and please God. We have to turn to God in each and every decision, step by step by step, to seek his guidance, to discover his will. It's easier just to take a blanket approach, but God doesn't work that way. It's our LOVE and INNER commitment to Christ that will be our compass and steer our steps. God wants us to lean on him, to turn to him- that's how we grow to be like him. It's all that companionship. All that camaraderie. **If we could just know his will by carrying a checklist with us, we wouldn't need him at all.** That's not how God set things up.

The video “Footloose” has a classic scene, where a young man challenges the authorities in a small community who have set up a law against public dancing. This young man let his heart guide him- and tried to express his convictions in such a way that the law might be changed. He even turned to Scripture as he struggled to lift up what God's will might be, quoting old Testament passages about “dancing before the Lord”.

You see, it's the inward commitment to God and his will that guides us. That commitment will help us to know which rules and expectations to confirm to, and which are not worthy of conformity. We'll be guided by Christ to know WHEN it makes sense for us to stamp our feet and say, NO! When to be sassy and when to conform. Buckle on God's promises of guidance like a secure seat belt. Commitment to God's will may lead us on a bumpy and wild ride, taking us where we've never been before. Just hold on tight, trust in God, and hear the wind whistle in your ears.