

"Does God Keep God's Own Rules?"

(MATT. 25:24-30 NIV) *Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; ²⁵so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' ²⁶But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? ²⁷Then you ought to have invested my money with the*

bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. ²⁹For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. ³⁰As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

"So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed?" I don't know about you; but I have trouble with this verse. I keep remembering what Paul wrote in Galatians: *"Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows."* (GAL 6:7 NIV)

Doesn't that sound like a double standard? "You humans reap only what you sow; I can reap wherever I choose to reap." Is that where we are with God? I hear my Dad: "Jimmy, do 'thus-and-so'." "Why, Daddy?" "Because I said so."

I always resented that. It always felt so arbitrary and unfair; and I always suspected that when he said that it was because he was covering up the fact that he didn't really have a good reason; he was just bigger than I, and exercising his power.

And the ever-famous: "Do-as-I-say-not-as-I-do" [That was my Mom.] Is that where we are with God? Are God's rules just for us? Does God keep his own rules?

I recall my first real crisis of faith in my first year of college; in a dormitory room "bull-session". Some of us were taking philosophy, and the unit we were studying was "Logic." The conversation eventually got around to the Bible.

Now, I grew up in a church that taught that we never questioned God or the Bible. I didn't realize it at the time, but what **really** was being said was, "Never question what **we tell you** about God and the Bible." There's a difference. Now, my mind was always—ALWAYS—full of questions. I'm sure I drove my teacher nuts!

I remember one Sunday School teacher when I was, or ten or eleven. Poor woman! How I must have tried her patience. One Sunday I was in particularly good form, and the questions were flowing. I don't recall a single question; but I vividly recall what happened next.

Finally, in complete frustration, she said, "Jimmy, there's just some things we're not supposed to know!"

To which I replied, "Then why did God give us a brain?"

And she slapped me—right across the chops!

She told my dad I was disrespectful, and when we got home... Yup. If anybody did today what he did to me that day, he'd be in jail.

But, I learned my lesson, and it was many years later before I questioned anything in church again. But my mind still was **full** of questions. The intention of course was to "protect" me: to make sure I got it right. But the result was that I was totally unprepared the first time I was exposed to a challenge to what I was taught.

That dormitory bull session focused on parts of scripture that **appeared** to be contradictory: The "law of just retribution" in Deuteronomy 19:21: "... life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot," contrasted with Paul's teaching: "Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else." (1 Thessalonians 5:15 NIV)

Or, here's a tougher one: Ten Commandments: Didn't God say "Thou shalt not kill"? ["Yeah."]

"Well, what about this over in 1 Sam 15:3 (NIV) Samuel is prophesying to Saul and says, "Here is what the Lord says":

Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys."

Really? Same God that said, "Thou shalt not kill"?

And over and over again in the Bible there are stories in which the very same God who said, "Thou shalt not kill" commanded—**rewarded**—the act of killing: David and Goliath; Samson, Jephthah, Gideon, Deborah, and on and on and on and on.

Double standard? Inconsistent? Out-and-out contradiction? Does God inflict rules and laws on us, and then claim divine immunity to those same rules? Or does God set rules and then suspend them when it's convenient to do so?

A lot of people are very comfortable with a theology that says, "Don't question anything. There are some things we're just not meant to know." I'm not one of those persons. If the Bible can't stand up under **my** feeble-minded questioning, then that means I'm stronger than the Bible; and I don't believe that for a minute!

So, let's look at the law of "limited retaliation" in Deuteronomy. Until that time, "business as usual" would have been something like this: I kill your cow in a hunting accident; you retaliate by killing my cow **and** my bull; then I retaliate by burning your barn and killing both your plow horses; and you retaliate by killing my wife and all my kids and burning my barn **and** my house... Do you see how "eye for eye, tooth for tooth" is a step **forward** from "business as usual"?

And that story of Saul and the Amalekites. Remember? Saul was instructed to

kill every living thing. But listen to "the rest of the story". After the battle, Samuel went out to see Saul, and when he reached him he found that, instead of killing every living thing, Saul had captured the king of the Amalekites and some sheep and some cattle. Samuel challenged him and said, "*Because you rejected the word of the Lord, he has rejected you as king.*" (I SAMUEL 15:23)

"Business as usual" meant not only bloody destruction, but also looting and pillaging. War was profitable business—if you won! But this time God's message was: No looting, no pillaging—there will be NO PERSONAL GAIN to war.

When we take the Bible seriously and enter into sincere dialogue with it, raising honest questions when we have them—we find in its pages a consistently faithful God who *lets his people write their own story*, but is always calling them to new and unexpected levels of understanding and faithfulness.

What to us, in **our** setting, seems a harsh command from God, when placed in **their** situation, actually is a step **forward**. It seems savage to us. Brutal; but if we lay all God's commands along a time-line, I think you'd see a consistent movement—a trajectory—from the primitive, brutal savagery of the early bronze (Neolithic) age, toward the compassion and love-of-enemy Jesus taught.

The Bible must be read in this way; otherwise, we end up imposing our own cultural perspectives and biases on ancient stories and the logical conclusion is that they are inconsistent and contradictory; and God comes across as schizophrenic!

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says the contradictions are intentional. They are honest representations of the traditions of the rabbis as they struggled to understand the Scriptures and the nature of God. The testimony/counter-testimony nature of the texts is a part of the process of biblical formation.

Diverse traditions were brought to the table and debated; and the resulting texts reflect that debate, contradictions and all. We must choose sides: old school, vindictive, militant, jealous God of judgment and harsh punishment, or the newer school of the later prophets, in which God is presented as a nurturing, healing Spirit of reconciliation and unity. Jesus choose sides; and I choose Jesus.

But sometimes, even with our honest questioning, there's no clear understanding. Sometimes we **do** just have to accept the master's words: "...you understood that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? So, why don't you live out your understanding?"

So, **are** the rules different for God? Or is it that God is God and we're not? We don't see things as God sees them. We don't see the whole picture. [*Garth Mansion—Hannibal—old window panes*] Paul says we see as if through a flawed pane of glass. But, isn't it wonderful that God sees beyond our vision, and calls us into his own vision—into new ways of understanding and faithfulness?