

Title

WITH is Better than Under

On the cul-de-sac where I grew up, my house was the only one with a basketball hoop so I was the “host” of most of the basketball that happened in my neighborhood. What I remember most about the games were the arguments. We were forever arguing about what constituted a foul or whether or not someone double-dribbled. That was tough for me because I couldn’t just take my ball and go home... I was home! So when I was on a vacation browsing with my mom in a bookstore and found a fully illustrated “How to Play Basketball,” I thought my problems would be solved. Surely this source of authority would usher in peace and harmony on the driveway-turned-court.

I poured over the book and sought to educate my friends on the right way to play. You can guess how that turned out. For them, arguing was just part of the game. Trying to get other people to follow the rules is a great way to get a reputation for being no fun. In frustration, the book got stuck in a drawer, never to be seen again.

Many of us relate to God and others in the same way. This is a life “under” God. If I follow God’s rules – and can get everyone else to do the same – then life will finally be good! And if life isn’t good, then it’s because someone is breaking the rules. The problem, of course, is that life doesn’t actually work this way. The scandal of what Jesus taught – and it is STILL scandalous today, *even and especially among Christians* – is that God doesn’t work this way.

Life “under” God is full of heavy rules that break us down.  
Life WITH God is marked by compassionate relationship that builds us up.

Among Jesus’ contemporaries, the Pharisees were a group that took religion very seriously. They were careful students of the codes given by Moses that described what God-fearing people were supposed to do and not do. They had the rule book down cold, and they were SUPER frustrated with Jesus. He clearly cared about God, and about doing God’s will. The insightfulness of his teaching and his power to heal and cleanse and feed and cast out evil spirits... all of this was clear evidence that he was from God. But Jesus didn’t care about the rules... at least not in the way they thought he should. You can see the frustration and resentment growing through the gospel stories. Frustration and resentment – not to mention a passion for judging others – are really the hallmarks of a life lived “under” God instead of WITH God.

We have the wrong idea if we think Jesus was an anarchist who just wanted to flout the rules and flip the tables. Jesus was explicit in his support of the law. He said that he did not come to abolish it but instead to fulfill it (Matt 5:17ff). Yet Jesus continually got sideways with the Pharisees because they had doubled-down on rule-keeping while completely missing the point of why there were rules in the first place. For Jesus, a WITH-God life is the point. The Pharisees were settling for a life under God, which was making them frustrated and everyone else miserable.

Let's see what that looked like:

Text

Matt 23:1-4; 23-26 NRSV

23:1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 2 "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; 3 therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. 4 They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.

Jesus' critique of the Pharisees goes on for the whole chapter - and it is scathing. But to me, verses 23 and 24 really get the heart of the matter:

23 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. 24 You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!

Some Pharisees might argue that they were so eager to obey the whole of the Law that they cared about even the little details – even such details as which spices should be set aside for the priests. But majoring in the minors is what people under God tend to do. No one can question their dedication, not even God! Like the story we heard last week about Karen and her son who had started using drugs, they can point to the bible verse on the wall about raising up a child in the way he should go and say, "See, God? If I am following your rules, why am I not winning?"

People living under God operate from the assumption that God is angry. God is mad at people for messing up. If everyone just followed the rules, then God wouldn't be angry anymore. But when people under God set themselves up as the authority, the result is always the same: The rule enforcers consolidate power and everyone else suffers.

Are there examples of this we can see today? The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan is a very stark one. For the last 20 years women and girls were free to go to school, play sports, work outside the home, and hold public office. The thought of returning to life as it was under the Taliban in the 1990's has left the Afghani people feeling only despair. All of this is done because a relatively small group of men believe it is God's will that people should live this way.

It is easy to see how terrible an "under" God life looks when we are critiquing other cultures and faith traditions. The real question is: Can we see it in ourselves? Are we willing to deal with the plank in our own eye before fixating on the speck in someone else's? Consider the effort to post the Ten Commandments in court rooms, or social media posts urging us to "share if you agree" that we should return prayer to public schools. Anytime being a patriotic American and being a faithful Christian are seen as the same thing, we have succumbed to the "under" God

heresy. And anytime Christians in power limit the freedoms of non-Christians who don't have power, comparisons between us and the Taliban will surely be made.

If I could convince the American church of one thing in hopes of changing our trajectory of decline and death, it would be this: *We live as Pharisees far more than as Jesus-followers.* Thanks to the New Testament, we know how that turns out. So repent!

Here is my challenge for you this week:

Find someone you know who doesn't go to church or who used to go to church. Ask them: "What is one way you wish Christians were more like Jesus?" Use their answer as a prompt for your prayer time this week.

What we need is a different agenda and a different program. Or, to put in the terms Jesus' first audience would have understood, we need a new yoke. A yoke is a harness used to guide oxen. It is also the metaphor rabbis used to describe the way of life they were modeled and taught. We just got a glimpse of what Jesus has to say about the yoke of the scribes and Pharisees. And we remember what Jesus in Matt 9 about the people who were coming out to hear him: They were hapless and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus offers a different kind of yoke. When he does, he extends an invitation to a WITH God life. Notice how Jesus' invitation to weary people to enjoy a WITH God life is anchored in—and is an extension of—Jesus' own intimate relationship with the Father:

Matt 11:25-30 NRSV

25 At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants;  
26 yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. 27 All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

28 "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.  
29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Do you notice the contrast between the "easy and light" yoke Jesus offers here and "heavy burden" that the Pharisees have laid upon the shoulders of others? Do you notice how Jesus challenges us Pharisees to attend to matter of justice and mercy and faith, and offers his own yoke to accomplish that. He says, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me." What will we learn if we accept his yoke? He tells us in verse 27: We will learn to know the Father, just as he does! We can have the same deep, abiding, life-giving and ease-taking life Jesus enjoys. Yes, there is a cross (see Matt 16:24-26). We aren't forgetting that. But before the cross is the yoke.

Let us pray.

