

This 'rant' appeared in the Rant and Rave section of the Seattle Times two weeks ago (2/14/10):

To people who still have their Christmas lights up and continue to turn them on. It's February, for Pete's sake! Don't use the excuse that your children still enjoy them; they need to learn that the lights come down after the Christmas tree is taken out. Leaving lights up looks tacky and lazy.

Last Sunday as I was driving in to church there was a news item on the radio about a town just outside of Chicago that has passed an ordinance making it illegal to have Christmas decorations up 60 days after Christmas (that date fell sometime last week). Failure to take your decorations down could result in a fine. A local leader was quoted as saying, "Who wants to see Rudolph on Memorial Day?"

Now my first reaction to the second was to wonder if they were also going to pass an ordinance that forbade putting up Christmas decorations before Thanksgiving? My reaction to both was, "Who cares?" "Why can't we mind our own business?"

Jesus is quite succinct in this matter: "Do not judge." Isn't judging someone else just another way of minding their business? Jesus could not have been more succinct: "Don't do it." Jesus is more concerned with our ability to forgive than he is with our ability to judge. We have judging down pat. He states that the criteria we develop to judge others will be used on us and we can put up some pretty tough standards. Look at the questions or statements he makes.

- Can the blind lead the blind?
- Is a student greater than their teacher?
- Why do we try to remove a speck in our neighbor's eye when there's a beam in our own eye?

Whenever I read this passage I think of a phone call I received many years ago. The caller said that there was an emergency and could I come as soon as possible. I immediately left the house and headed up over the hill to where the call came from. As I walked in I saw the problem. There on the kitchen table was the alternator of the family car, in pieces. Now I am not sure I had ever seen an alternator before and was certainly positive I had never seen one in pieces. It had stopped working and needed new brushes. The family could not afford to get it fixed but they could afford the parts and how hard could it be? Of course, he had never taken apart or repaired one either.

We stood gazing at the situation, got a hot cup of coffee and started to work – the blind leading the blind. God was with us, we got it put back together, installed and he was able to make his shift at work.

Now I could have judged him. Said he had made a poor decision and headed back home. But that would not have done either of us any good.

Jesus tells us that we need to clean up our own act before we start working on others.

But, we love to mind other people's business. This is nothing new. The Apostle Paul deals with it in the 14th Chapter of Romans. There are some in Rome who feel more "spiritual" than others because they hold to special days, don't eat meat offered to idols or engage in some other practices. There is a concern about vegetarians. There is a concern about fasting days. We are more spiritual because we ... (You fill in the blank.)

I grew up in a very Catholic area of Maine. In fact, most of my cousins were Catholic and they and most of my classmates observed Lent. Now we Protestants had never heard of Lent let alone gave up things for it. We, though, were always being asked, "What did you give up for Lent." (We Baptist boys usually gave up dancing since Baptists were not allowed to dance anyway! At least we did not break our promise.) We gave something up so we would not be considered different.

Paul responds to the situation in Rome the way I believe Jesus would have. If one chooses to be a vegetarian, great. If one chooses not to eat meat offered to an idol, great. If one chooses to observe a special day for fasting, great. But if another doesn't that is great also. Each one is responsible for their own actions. Let each one be led as God leads them and mind their own business about how God works in the life of another.

Now I want to mention here that I believe Jesus and Paul are dealing with issues of customs and not the issue of sin. There are sins that need to be pointed out and confronted. However, again, our task is to point them out, then it becomes the decision of the "sinner" to decide what to do about the sin. We are called to warn the world but not necessarily to force the world.

A recent article discussed about what it means for a Muslim to become a Christian. There are some who think certain things should be done to "prove" they are sincere in their faith. They should eat pork. Women should give up traditional clothing. What different does it make? It is the heart that has been changed and that needs to be changed. Why try to make others conform to our idea of how one should live, dress and eat. It is none of our business.

Yes, there are rules: forgive, love and be at peace. If we look honestly at the Ten Commandments we soon see that these three principles are the major foundation of them. If we love, forgive and live at peace with one another we will fulfill these requirements.

But if there are laws the laws have to be defined and that is where we get in trouble. In Sunday School this morning Harold pointed out some "laws" that I had not run into. Did you know it is okay to ride a donkey on the Sabbath but it is not okay to take a switch with you. For if you use the switch on the donkey you are forcing the donkey to work and thus you are working. A church I served in Maine was incorporated in 1820 and still had the records from those early days. Reading them was like reading a local police blotter. Mrs. So and So was denied communion

for three months because she had her wash on the line on the Sabbath day. On and on they read – they were minding other peoples business.

Now again I am not talking about “sin” – although we need to understand that there are no degrees of sin. We have all sinned. We have all fallen short of what God expects of us. Sin is sin. If someone is being hurt we need to call 911. If a home is being broken into we need to call 911. If someone is sinning we need to call GOD. But if someone has their Christmas decorations up longer than we like...

Why should I care if you go to movies or dances? Why should I care whether or not you observe Lent? If you want to be a vegetarian and I don't, so what? If you want to put Christmas decorations up in July (and I have! We celebrated Christmas in July one year in the church) what should it matter to me? Why do we put so much energy in the actions of others?

Lynnwood has passed an ordinance that does not allow your lawn to be higher than 8". Now I wonder how many blades have to be higher than 8" to qualify for the whole lawn to be in violation. And, who is going to be running around with a ruler to measure? What about the widow who can't mow her own lawn or afford someone to mow it for her? Is the city going to provide someone to keep her from violating the law?

We pass laws to keep people from doing things we don't like. We mind other peoples business.

Jesus calls us to be Christ-like in all our actions. That means we are to love, to forgive and to live at peace with one another. It is hard to live at peace when our nose is always in the others' business. We are called to go the extra mile, to share our faith, to point out the follies of the action of others with Christ-like love. Jesus is concerned that our actions are tempered by love and forgiveness. Our concern should be about how the widow, the poor and the orphan are treated but not about whether Christmas decorations are up too long.

Back to the rant. I recall Evlyn telling about one Christmas when Gordon was delayed in coming home from duty. The family decided to put up the decorations, etc. but not to celebrate Christmas until he was safely home. It was a daily reminder to them of the hope that their loved one would soon be home (others have said the same thing). The decorations are a reminder of what is to come. And we want to judge them!

It we love as Christ loved, if we forgive as Christ forgave then the world will know the power of the one who has come to redeem and set free. We have not been called to make clones but to make disciples – those who follow Christ. We have not been called to keep an eye on our neighbor but to keep an eye on ourselves and make sure we are doing what Christ has called us to do.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quoted is from NRSV, NCCC/USA 1989
NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1989