

“The Do-Do’s and The Don’t Do’s”

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

<http://www.devotions.net/bible/00bible.htm>

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Far away, across many rivers lakes and oceans; past dense forests and over arid deserts, a lone paved highway becomes a street and that street turns into a cobbled stone road. And that road is the main artery that divides the small isolated town of Vida.

Vida is a small town with a grocery store, two churches, several gas stations, a post office and an assortment of other boutiques and shops huddled around the quaint city hall.

But as charming as the town appears, Vida is a town divided.

On one side of the cobblestone road live the “Do-Do’s” and on the other side live the “Don’t-Do’s.” By looking at a Do-Do and a Don’t-Do, you can’t really tell the difference. No, you have to talk to them to figure out their history. That’s when you can figure out what divides them.

At one time everyone in the town of Vida was a Don’t-Do; and a Don’t-Do believed the best way to structure one’s life was to live according to laws and commands that began with the phrase, “Thou shall not...” Thou shall not be greedy. Thou shall not be jealous. Thou shall not kill or hurt your neighbor. Thou shall not lie. Thou shall not hate.

In fact, they probably would have loved the passage we just read before this sermon began. You noticed there’s an awful lot of “shall not’s” in that passage.

“You shall not reap to the edge of your field or strip your field bare.”

“You shall not steal or be dishonest.”

“You shall not defraud your neighbor, keep your employees wages for yourself, trip a blind person or ignore the deaf.”

“You shall not be unjust or slander others.”

“You shall not hate in your heart, embrace revenge or bear a grudge.”

Leviticus has a lot of these kinds of rules and laws – and the Don’t-Do’s would have loved it.

Don’t-do phrases and rules are clear and prohibitive. They are swats on the bottom. They’re hands in your face. They’re bright red, octagonal signs with big, bold desperate letters. Don’t-do’s put the fear of God in you. Don’t do’s remind us that there are consequences.

Tiger Woods got smacked upside the head with a Don’t-do this past week when he was fined for spitting on a putting green. The message was clear: It doesn’t matter how dry the air may be - Thou shall not hock a loogie on or near the 16th hole!

In Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, there is a sect of Mennonites who split from another group of Mennonites because there was a disagreement over the number of windows on your black, horse-drawn buggy. The original group believed that “you shall not have more than one window,” and one liberal, rabble-rouser (a Mennonite Hippie) thought there was nothing wrong with having two.

“Shall not’s” are certain and clear. They are the boundaries that fence us in. But the thing about “shall not’s” is that they multiply. This is what the people of Vida discovered.

At first there was a general list of “Don’t-Do’s.” There was a common understanding, a general respect for what people could not do. And then people started thinking these weren’t specific enough.

And so, other things got added to the list of don’ts; like don’t drink. Don’t smoke. Don’t vote this way. Don’t watch this movie. Don’t swear. Don’t eat food with high fructose corn syrup. Don’t wear two-piece bathing suits. Don’t listen to Justin Bieber. Don’t buy an iPad. Don’t raise Irish Setters. Don’t buy Toyotas. And definitely don’t cheer for the Green Bay Packers.

It got to the point where there were so many don'ts on the "Don't Do" list that people were getting in trouble for the smallest of infractions.

Soon a small but vocal faction began organizing rallies at City Hall and staging Do-in's. Why couldn't Vida residents do what they wanted to do? Why couldn't enjoy a glass of wine, a bowl of Lucky Charms or wear a Packers T-shirt? They were sick and tired of being told what they couldn't do!

So, they were arrested, thrown in prison and sometimes they were beaten. But the movement grew, and soon they began purchasing land on the other side of the cobble stone road. They formed their own neighborhoods and their own police department that let them do what they wanted to do.

They established their own laws. These laws, in their eyes, were more positive. Instead of beginning with "You shall not..." they began with "You shall..." They would look at the passage that we read earlier and say, "Sure there are a lot of 'shall not's' in this passage, but look at the 'shall's.' We should be focusing on those.

"You shall leave your excess for the poor."

"You shall fear your God."

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

I was in Panera the other day and I looked at all the signs throughout their tidy, bustling, brightly lit store. And I noticed that that there wasn't one single, "Do not..." or "Shall not" sign in the entire store. I saw a sign that said, "Our Panera stores are smoke free zones. Please be respectful to those around you." Another said, "We're glad you've joined us, please start the line here." Even the bathroom had a sign above the hand dryer that read, "Please wash your hands." Makes you want to order a warm Cinnamon chip scone and a hot coffee doesn't it? Do's make you feel good, but don't's make you feel restricted and handcuffed.

And that's exactly what some of the residents of Vida thought. They liked the positive vibe of these new rules, and so they started adding other "shall" rules. You shall honor your father and mother. You shall be kind. You shall be helpful. You shall be honest. You shall be faithful to your wife.

And the population on the new side of Vida exploded. There were no property lines, no locks on the doors, no fences and no rules about what you could or couldn't do.

And then things started getting nasty. The new side started calling their stuffier, more restrictive neighbors the "Don't-Do's." And the "Don't-Do's started calling people living on the newer side of town "The Do-Do's," which, yes, I know, sounds gross and disgusting... but it's better than being a Don't-Do. At least they could do whatever they wanted to do.

A couple of years ago, Bill O'Reilly and Jon Stewart were debating on The Daily Show after the November elections. Bill O'Reilly argued that America is a center-right country. Americans are moderate to conservative because they believe that there are certain traditions that this country has always stood on. Jon Stewart at that point jumped in and vehemently disagreed saying that this country does not stand on certain traditions. America, he said, thrives on the tradition of expanding its list of personal liberties.

In other words, Americans are a bunch of "Do-do's!" We don't like being given boundaries and told what we can't do. We like being given access and told what we can do. But this kind of freedom has consequences. The people of Vida discovered this.

The Do-do's became gluttonous because they could eat anything they wanted. They cared little for community because after all, living in a community meant you couldn't do what you wanted to do. Nothing was wrong, but as a result, no one knew what was right either.

Parents were unsure of how they could discipline their children without saying "No!" Jenny Craig went out of business. Dogs ran free with no collars or leashes to hold them back. Privacy was non-existent and police officers? Well, they were just bored.

Some of the Do-do's started their own church based on the Do-do philosophy of action and freedom. They set out to focus on doing rather than not doing, but the members became proud of their good works. And the religious Do-do's became competitive in their righteousness and judgmental of anyone who didn't measure up.

The Do-Do's were looking less and less like a community.

And today, if you drive down that cobble stone road that Vida residents call Main St, you'll notice a town with two sides.

There's the older side where the Don't-do's live. It's eerily quiet, neat, orderly – but lifeless and scary. And then there's the newer side; occupied by the Do-do's. It's happening alright – but it's disorganized rowdy, noisy and chaotic.

Where would you like to live? With the Do-do's or the Don't-Do's?

Now, you may say that this is just a story, that the town of Vida is just a figment of my strange imagination. But, I think you can see that Vida is really a reflection of the tension we all feel as humans, and the struggle Christians daily face when they ask themselves, "What does it mean to follow Jesus? What does it mean to obey God?"

Is it defined by what you don't do? Is it defined by abstinence; keeping yourself from enjoying the pleasurable things of life? Or is it defined by what you do do; enjoying freedom and activity?

The answer is "Yes."

Several years ago, Nashville songwriter, Allen Shamblin, walked into a church and heard his pastor say that people would know a whole lot more about us if they knew what we were for rather than what we were against. He thought that would make a pretty good song and so he wrote what would later be a hit song for country music star, Pat Green. And the lyrics go like this:

*I'm for wildflowers in the window
Mechanics you can trust
I'm for crackers in my chili
And leavin' grudges in the dust*

*I'm for drive thru order takers
Who can muster up a smile
I'm for takin' in that stray dog
That's been hangin' 'round for awhile*

*I'm for turning off the TV
Gettin' off the internet
I'm for learning all the words
To the Gettysburg Address*

*I'm for dusty pawn shop guitars
And boxers passed their prime
I'm for soakin' up the wisdom
When an old man speaks his mind.*

*I'm for laid off factory workers
When the wolf is at the door
You don't have to guess what I'm against
If you know what I'm for*

*I'm for Texas Margaritas
Gettin' outta debt
I'm for havin' faith in something
That hasn't happened yet*

*For the shy kid in the corner
Afraid to ask the girl to dance
For the ex-con outta prison
Who just wants a second chance*

*For the inner city teacher
With her heart stuck in her throat
Can still see God in every child
And never gives up hope*

*I'm for dusty pawn shop guitars
And boxers passed their prime
I'm for soakin' up the wisdom
When and old man speaks his mind*

*I'm for Detroit factory workers
When the wolf is at the door
You don't have to guess what I'm against
If you know what I'm for*

I love the lyrics to that song. And I love the encouragement to begin with what we're for rather than what we're against. But you know, saying "yes" to one thing means saying "no" to something else. Deciding to do means I will have to decide to don't. That's what the Do-do's and the Don't-do's couldn't understand. They couldn't understand how doing and not-doing went hand in hand.

And this is what it means to follow Jesus. It means we are compelled to do acts of service, that we choose to worship God, we confess our sins, and submit to each other. We enjoy each other's company, we are curious about the Bible so we study it. We celebrate and we pray. The Christian life is a life of doing!

But our activity pulls us away from other things and forces us to make decisions.

Jesus said to his disciples, "Follow me." But that meant they had to leave behind their nets. Jesus said to another man, "Follow me." But that meant that he would have to leave his parents and his livelihood. Jesus said to a rich man, "Follow me." But that meant he would have to sell his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor.

Following Jesus means saying “no.” It means that we change the way we spend our money. It means that we sometimes withdraw from the bustle of life to listen to God’s voice. Sometimes it means giving up food to fast, sometimes it means giving up personal rights in order to serve. Following Jesus means we stop doing some things so we can do the work God has called us to do.

So Being a Christian and obeying God isn’t about being either a Do-do or a Don’t Do. It’s about being both as we follow Jesus.

So, really, who are you most like? Are you a close cousin of the Do-do? Are you prideful in your religiosity? Are you living life like you can have your cake and eat it too?

Or maybe you’re a Don’t-do, so concerned about being tainted, so focused on not doing things that you can’t even see what you should be doing.

Wherever you find yourself, know this: You don’t have to live on either side of the cobblestone road. You can get on that road and get right out of town, heading off in a new direction of following after Jesus.

LIFE APPLICATION QUESTIONS
For Sunday, February 20, 2011’s Sermon
Foundational Scripture: Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18
<http://www.devotions.net/bible/00bible.htm>

Featured Scripture Reflection: “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.” – v. 18 (NRSV)

Opening Icebreaker: Recount a risk you took that had great results. Now, recount a risk you took that had a poor return.

Scripture Questions

What is the scripture saying?

- What is the focus of these commands?
- What is the purpose of the command stated in verses 9 and 10?
- In verse 17 it says that one should “reprove” their neighbor (NRSV) instead of “hating someone in their heart,” what does that look like?
- Who do these laws protect? Who are the most vulnerable people in our culture today?
- Many of these laws are negative (“you shall not...”), what laws are positive in their approach (“you shall...”)?

How is your life touched?

- Are there enough laws to protect those who are most vulnerable in our society?
- Look at verse 9 and 10 again. Do we have any laws today that are like this command? Should we have more laws like this command?
- Many of these laws are focused on creating a fair, just and honest society? What would make our society more fair, just and honest?
- What is a positive command counterpart (you shall...) to each negative command (you shall not...)? (Example: Leave some for those who are poorest among you)
- What does it mean to be holy? (v. 2)

What is God’s invitation to you?

- Take an inventory of your life. What do you need to stop doing? What do you need to leave behind? What do you need to start doing? Do you see how the stopping and starting go hand in hand?

What can you pray for?

God, give me the courage to stop doing things I have loved but are in the way making progress. Give me the strength to start walking the difficult path of holiness.