

## THE CHECK LIST

As I mentioned in the newsletter, I plan to have the Sundays in July and August that I preach be less formal and more interactive—reflective of the relaxed summer feeling.

One thing on my list has been to do an overview of the Bible—highlighting translations, the background and ways of using the Bible. I will do that July 4. I think it is good to do this periodically.

Speaking of lists: lists can be a great tool to help us remember what we WANT to do, so we can free our mind up for other things.

There are many different types of lists, such as a “do list”, a grocery list, a volunteer sign up list, a job description and even the bulletin.

Some lists are embedded in our minds and not on a piece of paper.

We have a list in our head for how to drive our car and laws to obey. We keep track of what food we eat or need to eat.

There is an ingrained duty list to call our parents,.... or our children.

We have lists/ rules for how to behave, how to speak, how to appear, how best to relate to people, for being a good church member, for being a model Christian, and there is a tacit list for being a good Mennonite.

Imagine if all these lists were on paper? [Show stack of papers ]

There is an intriguing attribute of observing lists, aside from keeping track of things, and that is when we can abide / check off duties done...we tend to feel good. Reward can go beyond the direct accomplishment on the list. Satisfying the list can be a motivation, in itself.

Successfully, knowing the answers to 9 out of 10 questions is given the extended reward of a letter grade, and too often the grade is the goal.

The value of a list depends on the reason.

And, no doubt, a *do list to help remember* can come in handy.

Back in the 1980s, a friend and colleague of mine, right out of seminary, became a pastor of a large prestigious church in Dayton, Ohio. This church was in an affluent neighbourhood and was full of powerful people. He was a very charismatic person and people liked to be around him; however, on one occasion, he should have had a *do list*.

He had been very busy preparing for a Saturday wedding, for the daughter of a very prominent member of the church, and that Saturday morning, **his** own young daughter asked him if he would take her to a movie. Without thinking, he said “YES”, and it wasn’t until near the end of the movie, that he remembered the wedding. He was over an hour late for the wedding, and that oversight was not forgiven.

Within a month, he was fired.

He was fired for not doing his duty, and this makes sense.

He was fired for making his own daughter a priority, and that doesn’t make sense.

Rules and expectations are usually deeply affected with the flavour of the dominant culture.

On one Sunday, in Kansas, our guest speaker was a Native American, or as the locals called him, an Indian. I'd been told that *Indians* are always late, and I scoffed at that stereotype. Worship service began, and he still had not arrived. The ushers shrugged their shoulders at not seeing him, yet. During the hymn right before the sermon, I began to ponder what I could come up with to say. I asked if we could sing another hymn, and the selection was wonderful. Near the end of the song, the ushers waved to me, and within seconds the guest speaker came walking down the aisle.

I noticed people rolling their eyes at each other, and I knew what they were thinking. With grace and dignity, he stood behind the pulpit and began to preach. At the moment, I realized that we were controlled by the old rail road mentality of clock watching, and that perhaps, he had arrived at just the right moment. Maybe he arrived when he and we needed him most.

While in Ohio, I was helping a young man get back on his feet. He finally had a decent job, yet after a couple of months he was fired. He explained to me that he called his boss and in full honesty told him that he wasn't going in to work because it was too nice a day to NOT go fishing. His boss told him he had to work and fishing was not a good excuse, yet to this young man, a nice day was too precious to waste in a windowless factory. He went fishing, and the dominate culture, with all its obligatory rules and lists, demanded submission or punishment.

I wonder who the fool was?

Those in power make the rules.... that work for them, and often those rules are also intended to keep the order / to keep the weak down and the powerful in place. We feel good and are rewarded when we obey the rules, and abiding is easy for us. The rules fit us, the dominate culture, and conformity is satisfying. Conformity is affirming and does NOT petition introspection. Don't make waves, and the sailing is smooth.... for those with boats, and little thought is required, expect for obeying the rules.

Even so, just to make sure, the powerful often seek out holy affirmation.

They want their theology to fit in, and often they want the blessings, by association, from religious leaders.

For example, Billy Graham was a frequent visitor at the White House, another is the popular "Prayer Breakfasts" that the politicians host.

I saw this first hand, while my father pastored a church in Toronto. A number of very rich and powerful people attended that church. Occasionally, we were invited to very nice and spacious homes. I recall one experience. I was about ten, and I had to sit perfectly still for a very long time, on their fine chesterfield, as the adults visited. The hosts made no accommodation for a child, and so my mother had to constantly remind me, in her gentle way, of the rules of expected behaviour—be still and

silent. I keenly understood that the only reason we were in their beautiful livingroom was because my father was the pastor of “their” church.  
(We are fortunate those situation don’t happen in our church).

Near the end of the torturous visit, they gave us a tour of their home, including their impressive, large, in ground, heated swimming pool.

With lavish pomp, intended to present sacrificial generosity, they said to me, in front of my parents, ... that I could come and use their pool *anytime I wanted*.

Silly me, I believed them. Their house was down Riverside Dr, only a 15 minute bike ride away from my house. So, I started going swimming their regularly. They weren’t home and nobody was using the pool. It all made sense to me. Yet, a maid must have reported my regular visits, and I was told, “Don’t wear out your welcome.”  
And, I was smart enough to know what that meant.

Funny thing about money: the more you have the more it is worth, and thus it becomes a lot harder to share.

It seems that the value **and** expectations for money moves up on the priority list when we have more money.

For example, if a person with only \$10 donates ½ their money– \$5.00 we may be modestly impressed. Yet, if a person with 10 million dollars donates one million, we’ll name the building after her.

Here are some statistics: Households with an average gross income of less than \$13,000/year give an average of 11.6 percent of their income to charity.

Households of around \$50,000, donate an average of 4 percent.  
And, those making over \$100,000 donate only 2.5 % on average.

Remember what I said about those in power set the rules so that they can keep the power?  
The system rewards those with money, and rewards those who follow expectations–the lists.  
Rewards and the assurances from conformity can make us feel good, and ..... they can cover up many things.  
In addition, there can be a stiff judgement for those who don’t obey.

In churches there is pressure to conform.  
Schools teach conformity, and children learn to fit in or be ostracised at a young age. Most parents and the dominant culture expect it.  
And, much can be overlooked by those who follow the rules.

An executive can steal millions from a pension fund, and spent a year in jail. A street thief will get many years for stealing much less.

Yet, where would we be without those who follow the rules / without the obedient / without the dutiful?

Who would attend our meetings? Who would volunteer?

Is it good to do things because of expectation, pressure, reward and guilt?

It is good to mandate prayer in school if the teacher and students really don't want to pray or understand prayer?

Perhaps, there are other motivations? Perhaps there is more to life ????

Another story:

Thanks to John the Baptist and Jesus' own actions, Jesus' reputation was getting around. In many ways, he was becoming like a pop star. He was in demand, even by those with power, such as the Pharisees... who likely wanted to be associated with him / to say to their peers, "*Oh, yes, Jesus had supper at MY home.*"

Pharisees were the ultimate conformers. They had a check list 613 commandments long, and if they followed all those rules, then.... they believed that they were in good shape. And, they worked hard at obeying those laws.

One Pharisee, named Simon, invited Jesus to his home for a meal.

In those days, there was an open door custom. Meaning, anyone off the street was welcome to come in and join the meal.

One of rules was to be hospitable.

The pharisee likely boasted to others that this *famous* Jesus was coming to dine at his place, because a certain "questionable" woman came to the meal, too. Tradition believes she was Mary Magdalene, but the passage doesn't say that for sure. It does note that she was obviously ritually impure—which means she didn't follow the rules. That is what the term "sinner" implies. She was, ... well, ....not an *Indian*, but it was visible that she wasn't a part of the respected establishment.

She came prepared. She brought an alabaster jar with oil used for anointing. She knew what she wanted to do, and evidently, she really knew who Jesus was.

There were others in the room, too, some watching and some eating.

People didn't sit at tables, they had adopted the Greek custom of reclining on couches as they ate. Jesus politely reclined with his feet behind him, away from the table. Jesus graciously accepted the Pharisees' invitation and was a humble guest.

With his feet behind him, the woman was able to approach him unobtrusively, and pour the anointing oil on his feet.

Apparently, she was overwhelmed by being in the presence of Jesus, for she began to cry. It was a cry of relief and delight.

Suddenly, she realized that her tears were dropping on Jesus' feet, so grabbing the only loose item she had, Her own hair, she began to wipe the tears off Jesus' feet. Then, the moment became even more intimately tender..... and... intense: from the heart she started kissing Jesus' feet. It was a spontaneous response. She didn't intend to do that. She didn't mean to do that.....it was merely an outpouring, ...and eyes were watching. Things were getting awkward,... and so she included the pouring of oil, as she tried to re-gather self control.

Her actions, to say the least, were a bit out of the ordinary.

Washing feet and politely kissing feet was on the list for accepted actions to show humble hospitality, but her extravagant outpouring with way off the charts. Moreover, she wasn't the host and she.... well.... was someone to avoid.

The Pharisee assumed Jesus was like himself.

*Conformers expect others to conform, too.*

He was perturbed by the lady, and quite disappointed and amazed that Jesus allowed it... and received her actions without reprimanding her for the uncontrolled encroachment.

The Pharisee thought to himself, "If Jesus was really a prophet, he would have discerned who and what type of woman she was. He wouldn't have allowed an impure "outsider" to touch him."

The logic was: Good persons don't associate with the lowly.

Prophets have a knack for knowing people, and prophets are good.

Therefore, Jesus was not a prophet.

*We often apply that same logic to those who don't meet our expectations.*

The Pharisee didn't say anything, but it was obvious what he was thinking.

Jesus spoke out and said, "Simon,.. I have something to say to you."

That got Simon's attention.

Jesus continued by presenting an illustration.

A certain man had lent money to two other men. To one it was \$500,000, to the other \$50,000.

Neither man could pay back the money.

*And, understand, if you can't pay back the money, it really doesn't matter how much it is. Either way, you're in big trouble.*

Jesus continued by noting that the creditor forgave both the debts, and Jesus asked the Pharisee, "Which one would will love him more / be more grateful?"

The Pharisee correctly answered that it would be the one with the greater debt.

Then Jesus firmly said, "DO YOU SEE THIS WOMAN?"

Do.... you... SEE this woman.

Because you have not been a good host. When I entered your house, you neither provided me with the customary water to wash my feet, nor did you give me a welcoming, polite kiss.

On the other hand, this woman was not the host, but she "bathed" my feet with her tears and has NOT stopped kissing my feet.

Therefore,..... {in the Bible, it is wise to duck when you hear a “Therefore.”}  
“Therefore, I TELL YOU, her sins which were many (Many sins is code for a prostitute; she was more than just impure)....

Therefore, all of her sins have been forgiven; the great love she has shown proves that her many sins have been forgiven. [better translation]

BUT,.... the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.”

Jesus then said it to the woman, “YOU Sins are forgiven.”

Those in the room forgot everything and only heard Jesus’ declaration, “Your sins are forgiven.”, and felt he was way out of line.

NOW, it was Jesus who was NOT following the rules.

Ignoring them, Jesus told the woman, “Your faith has saved you, now leave in peace.”

We know that it is God who forgives sins, and Jesus was stating the obvious. It was her faith in the love of God through Jesus that saved her.

In this story, Jesus treated all with respect, yet Who was of superior status in that room? Who acted out of love? And,...Who was the one who was more concerned with appearances? Who had hidden sins that HE couldn’t even see? Which one lost out?

Moreover, as Marcus Borg suggests, this episode is very revealing about the nature of God.

Does God keep a check list to see if we are behaving correctly, to monitor if we are conforming and following the rules?

Or does God respond to love and to genuine acts of devotion that flow from love?

Paul noted that the laws can serve as a tool for self evaluation, but they are not to be used to judge others. We are not invited to judge people. We may not use the laws to condemn anyone. Following the rules/ obeying the laws and conforming to expectations will not bring salvation. They may bring public affirmation and self-pride, but that is about it.

I believe John Dominis Crossan was correct with his definition for sin: sin is what separates us from God. Sin is what hurts our relationship with God, and sometimes that can be the bondage to being obedient to rules for the sake of the rules.

I would guess that the Pharisee had more sins than the woman. His relationship with God was really hurting, and trusted duty more than love.

And, I imagine that he didn’t get it, either. Life is about how we love and how our life is shaped by love; it is not about going through the motions.

Our lists for conforming can truly hide a lot of things, and they can cloak our real relationship with God. In addition, those cultural and religious expectations can hurt people because they are damning in their exclusiveness. And, hurting people is not living in love.

And, God knows how hard it is to let go of those comforting rules and expectations. Perhaps, that is why Jesus had supper with the Pharisee.

Those of us in the dominate culture have a easy thing going. We know how to behave and what to do. We've got things under control..... or..... are we under control?

Is it duty and obligation..... or is it love?

I think if you don't want to volunteer or go to a committee meeting, then don't. Honesty is a good place to be begin the process of self awareness and the journey to discovering the grace of God.

So, what would it feel like to get rid of all the expectations and the lists of things that Should be done? List to help remember are fine, but the lists that control are not. What if we got rid of them?  
[crumple papers (lists) and toss over shoulder ]  
Is that freeing or scary?  
Is love enough?                      Is love enough?

I suppose the answer is a matter of faith.... faith in the God of love.

Here NOW, Jesus' declaration to everyone, including those out of synch with the majority culture:

For those who trust God's love and grace, **LET no one judge you.**

For those who trust God's love and grace;  
For those who strive to live by love,

“All of your sins are forgiven!”

All of them.  
Amen.