

RULES OF THE ROAD

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One of the great rites of passage in our culture is when a teenager gets their driver's license. It takes the patience of Job to stand through the endless waiting at the Driver Test Centre and Service Ontario, nerves of steel to convince the tester that you can actually drive a vehicle while avoiding the impulse to text message and that you have a basic knowledge of the rules of the road when writing the written test.

If you successfully navigate that labyrinth of bureaucratic stress, you become the proud owner of a laminated card that demonstrates that you're a licensed driver (and also that you're quite capable of having a bad hair day).

While most of Canada observes most traffic laws in common, like driving on the right side of the road and actually stopping at stop signs, some of the rules vary from province to province.

Consider these rules if you're planning a road trip:

In Saskatchewan, it is illegal to hold onto a moving vehicle.

In Ontario, sleighs must have at least two bells.

You must honk before passing on Prince Edward Island.

In British Columbia you cannot coast downhill on neutral.

Section 173 of Ontario's *Highway Traffic Act* strictly asserts that "no person shall race or drive furiously any horse or other animal on a highway."

And regardless what your parents or driving instructor told you, driving barefoot is completely legal.

It is hard to imagine any circumstance where you'd need to use a duck for a hat or drive a camel on the highway (both are illegal in California), but there are still plenty of rules of the road that are essential if you're going to make it safely to your destination. The key, however, is to translate those rules from the driver's manual and into practical experience so that obeying them becomes second nature. That takes practice.

The traffic laws in Jesus' day were a lot less stringent and weird since most people of the poorer classes traveled by foot. Jesus may have walked thousands of miles in his lifetime, all without ever honking a horn. But, as he traveled, he began to define a different set of rules for those who would follow him on those ancient roads and for those who follow him today.

The story we heard in today's reading illustrates that Jesus' rules of the road are timeless and important in following him.

The story opens with Jesus on the road along the Jordan River. It was the main north-south route through the region, and Jesus and his people would have traversed it many times on the way to and from Jerusalem for the various festivals and feasts.

Even though Galilee is the destination, we know that Jesus has a much longer journey in mind. He encounters two men to whom he will also teach the rules of the road -- three rules to which everyone since has been compelled to adhere if they're going to become licensed followers of Jesus

Rule #1: FOLLOW.

Note this first rule is always said in the imperative -- not a suggestion or a request but a command. It's not simply "believe in me," "think about me" or "consider me." It's "follow me." To be a disciple of Jesus is to leave the route you were on and take a narrow, one-way road behind him.

Philip is the first to hear this clearly-stated rule in John's gospel, although we hear Jesus using those two simple words of command to the disciples elsewhere in the gospels. Unlike in those other stories where the disciples drop their nets, or get up from the table and start falling in behind Jesus, Philip's first response to this rule is to go and get another follower. So compelling is this rule, that Philip recognizes it's one that everyone needs to observe in order to make it safely.

The first person Philip tells is Nathanael. who doesn't appear in any of the other gospel lists of the Twelve. John's point might be that Jesus' command to "follow me" isn't just for those original 12 disciples but for everyone. Philip immediately sees that Jesus is the one, the one to whom all the ancient Scriptural rules of the road point.

Following Jesus means picking one direction -- better, one *person* -- to follow. It's the equivalent of veering off the superhighway and driving down a dirt road, which is why it's a major deviation from the rules everyone else is following. Later in John's gospel Jesus will say, "I am the way, the truth and the life. Too often we've defined the rules of Christian faith in terms of what we believe *about* Jesus instead of focusing on actually following him. The only way we can really know what Jesus is about is by following him, which leads us to the second rule:

Rule #2: COME.

Philip responds to Nathanael's skepticism with an invitation to "come and see" what Jesus is about. Philip doesn't try to argue or coerce. Rather, he invites him to come and meet Jesus. Nathanael accepts the invitation and, to his amazement, discovers that Jesus already knows him.

We're all invited to follow one who already knows everything there is to know about us. Philip sees everyone as simply needing an invitation and will spend most of his life on the road inviting others to "come and see". Who can you invite to "come and see?"

Rule #3: SEE.

Nathanael was amazed that Jesus knew him, but if that in itself was amazing, Jesus told Nathanael that he hadn't seen anything yet. The rest of John's gospel reveals the amazing things. Those who accepted his invitation witnessed healings, exorcisms, miracles, the transfiguration and, especially, resurrections of the dead. Following Jesus was a ticket to a wild ride with many twists and turns.

Later in John's gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that even the miraculous things they witnessed were nothing compared to what they would do when he was gone. Those who take the invitation to come and see have the potential to do the things that Jesus did.

Often, however, we are content with doing only what we can do; following the rules that are easy and taking the roads that are clearly marked, safe and smooth. The disciples of Jesus learned that following Jesus is a journey filled with strange and exciting opportunities to rewrite the rules of the way things work in the world. It's an invitation to run off the map and to flout the self-imposed rules that keep us, and those around us, from experiencing true and abundant life.

You do have to obey the rules, both goofy and great, whenever you strap into the car.

Strapping into the life of discipleship, however, is a much wilder ride!
Are you ready?

Amen.

