

**LIFE**

**is NOT a GAME**

Rules, Rebellion, and Freedom  
as a follower of Jesus

**Rich Dixon**

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## Life Is Not A Game

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If you know someone who might like to read this material, please pass it along.

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# Introduction

When I was a kid we played a popular board game called *The Game of Life*. Players moved through “typical” life stages and circumstances according to the roll of the dice. Along the way they got married, had children, and accumulated possessions. The game tended to reward players who bought insurance, invested conservatively, saved their money, followed directions, and planned ahead.



*The Game of Life* painted an idyllic Norman Rockwell portrait of middle class America in the late 1950’s. We pretended that life progressed according to fairly predictable rules. The American dream looked something like: Get a good job, have a family, buy a car and a small house, get promoted, buy a bigger house, send kids to college, pay off the mortgage, and retire with a reliable pension. Along the way there were two-week vacations, bigger cars, and color television. It was a pretty idealized vision of the way the world worked.

And it was complete baloney.

I suspect that we’d all prefer certain parts of life to operate according to a sort of cause-and-effect logic that would allow us to predict the outcomes of our decisions with some degree of certainty. We seek the rules that link behavior and consequence. When we don’t find them, we make them up.

And it doesn’t work, because life is not a game. But that doesn’t prevent many people from pretending they can approach choices and interactions according to some artificial code. This false assumption leads to confusion, disappointment, violence, and broken relationships.

Our culture places great value on games. Sporting events attract enormous amounts of attention and generate (or consume) vast resources. Video and online games, as well as traditional board games, occupy a significant portion of leisure time for many people. It’s easy to understand why we tend to blur the lines between games and reality.

I want to examine some of the ways we try to force life to behave like a game and the incredible harm that results. I hope to explain what I see as a better model.

I do believe life's designer provides a structure that cannot be captured in a list of rules or an instruction manual. I believe life operates best when we understand and operate within that structure. I hope to explain how I perceive the design.

I like this ebook format because it's readily changeable as new insights appear. I hope you'll send your thoughts and comments. Perhaps you'll help me clarify the discussion for others and for myself.

I'd love to hear from you. Please send me a comment via email ([rich@richdixon.net](mailto:rich@richdixon.net)) and [stop by my blog](#).

*Rich*

# Games

A game is an artificial environment defined by rules.

Rules create a game. They define the objective and the limits for permissible behavior. Rules provide boundaries for effective strategic choices. Proper tactics and requisite skills depend on understanding and applying rules.

Rules create an simulated, self-contained situation that arbitrarily restricts behavior. In basketball, for example, players “cannot” run with the ball. Why? Because the rules say so, and that’s the *only* reason—nothing outside the game makes running with the ball impossible or undesirable.

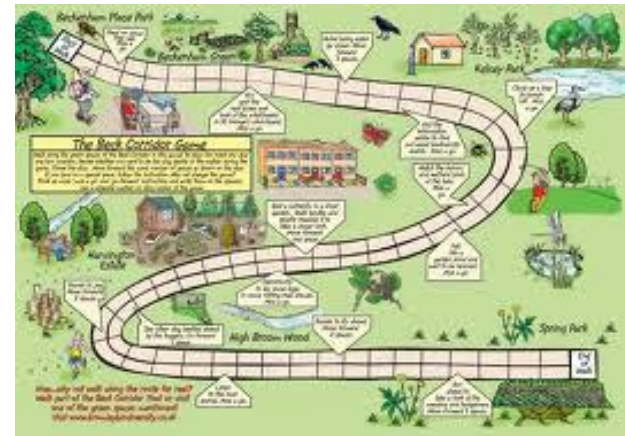
One could play *Monopoly* with 8-sided dice or checkers on a 10x10 board. Chess could permit two successive moves by each player. Soccer players might bat the ball with their hands. Restrictions on equipment and behavior matter only within the game itself.

Rules aren’t just part of the game; they’re its essential defining element. Even a small rule change alters the game dramatically. Fair and right depend entirely on the stated rules. That’s the principle danger of treating life like a game.

In the context of the game there are three possible courses of action:

- Operate within the rules.
- Accept the prescribed penalty for unintentionally violating a rule—if you’re caught.
- Cheat—intentionally violate a rule, hoping to avoid detection.

Cheating really means you’re not playing the game. A player may break a rule, “get away with it,” and be credited with a win. That player may win something, but it’s not the game.



As an example, suppose I'm playing chess. When my opponent leaves the room, I rearrange the pieces to create an advantage. If my opponent returns and fails to notice my cheating, I may subsequently prevail. My opponent may believe I won, but I didn't win a game of chess.

If players don't agree to a common set of rules, there's no game. Imagine playing Monopoly or soccer if each player made up her own rules. Whatever occurred certainly wouldn't be a recognizable game.

The game provides a black-and-white environment in which the rules determine right and wrong. Any decision that's allowed by the rules is acceptable. Cheating (operating outside the game) is the only immoral choice.

***A game is an  
artificial  
environment defined  
by rules.***

A player may dislike or disagree with a particular rule. She's free to request a change or to choose not to participate. Otherwise, aside from cheating (which is really a choice to not participate), each player must agree to operate within the rules. No rules, no game.

Games encourage and reward skillful deception and secret strategies. In a well-constructed game, there's really no such thing as a "loophole." The rules clearly define "fair" and "unfair" behaviors. If a behavior isn't against a rule, it's fair. If it breaks a rule, it's not fair.

In most everyday games, players monitor their own behavior. High-stakes games include referees and judges to enforce rules and administer penalties. But the presence of officials doesn't alter the morals of the game. Intentional violations of a rule—detected or not—constitute cheating.

***Do you agree with this description of a game? What would you change or add?***

***What's your response to the statement (below) about rules and fairness?***

Now let's take a look at a few of the ways in which games differ from life.

***If a behavior isn't against a rule, it's fair.  
If it breaks a rule, it's not fair.***

# Games and Life

Games provide an unambiguous moral environment. Players abide by (or officials enforce) clearly-defined standards of right versus not-right. I'm free to devise any strategy and make any choices within the rules that help me achieve the well-defined goal.

Pretending that life works like a game deludes me into harming myself and others while hiding behind the pretense that I'm just "following the rules." It's an illusion that allows me to justify and rationalize, using false assumptions about rules and rights to mask deceit, deception, and dishonesty.

Life isn't a game. It's just not that simplistic.

## Goals

Every game includes a clear goal. Usually it's to win by scoring points, reaching a particular position, or creating a certain situation. Every player seeks the same goal and shares a common definition of success.

***Pretending that life works like a game deludes me into harming myself and others while hiding behind the pretense that I'm just "following the rules."***

It's true that players participate for different reasons. Perhaps they enjoy the social interaction, a break from routine, or a sense of competition. They may do everything possible to win, play half-heartedly, or even allow a less able player (such as a child) to succeed. But these considerations are extrinsic to the game itself. For a game to make sense, each player must understand and strive for the same goal.

Life's much more complex. Each individual either creates a unique definition of success or defaults to someone else's standard. Either way, definitions of success vary across and within cultures.

Differing benchmarks of success lead to widely varying goals or perhaps no goals at all. It's quite possible to drift along with no discernable objective.

Many who view life as a game chafe at this notion. They believe that others should seek what

they seek, value what they value. These folks feel threatened when others ignore what they consider to be clear, necessary requirements.

Or they pretend that everyone can invent their own game and make up their own rules. These folks presume that they're free to do whatever benefits or makes sense to them, because life's a game. My game, my rules, my definition of morality—no standards except what defines my particular game.

That may be a convenient notion, but it's wrong. Right and not-right are not matters of opinion.

## Rules

Games have clear, universally accepted rules that define acceptable behavior. As much as many people would like life to operate like that, it doesn't.

***Incredible pain results when people equate legal with moral in life. Some choices that are technically legal are decidedly not moral.***

Certainly an organized society requires some limits, but society's laws offer wide latitude for individual choice. Unless I wish to rob banks or sell heroin to children, "what's legal" doesn't impact my day-to-day choices.

Opinions differ significantly about what sorts of limits can or should be imposed. These differences generate a good deal of political and religious conflict. But it's obvious that people operate in widely different ways within the limits imposed by society. Laws cannot, do not, and should not define "right" behavior.

We'll look at this in more detail later.

## Morality

In a game morality equals not-cheating.

Incredible pain results when people equate *legal* with *moral* in life. Some technically-legal choices are decidedly not moral. So society tries to legislate morality through a political process. We argue, compromise, and impose ever-increasing restrictions on more aspects of behavior.

This approach never works, because morality is a heart issue that cannot be codified. Attempts to define morality spawn black markets and entire industries devoted to discovering and exploiting loopholes.

Individual professions attempt to address this problem by implementing ethical standards. Such codes help, but they don't really solve the problem. Creative or unscrupulous individuals seek and take advantage of so-called "gray areas."

A wide gap will always remain between legal, ethical, and moral. Those who insist on approaching life as a game will be frustrated by attempts to close that gap or misguided in their belief that "what's legal" rationalizes immoral behavior. The "letter of the law" makes a poor substitute for "what's right."

## Referees

When officials enforce the rules, an undetected violation incurs no penalty. *Didn't-get-caught* has the same effect as *didn't-do-anything-wrong*. The legal system is an elaborate game that replaces referees with police officers, judges, and juries. In the legal game, *can't-prove-I-did-it* and *didn't-get-caught* equal *not-guilty*.

**Right and not-right  
are objective  
realities.**

Society's officials can never enforce its rules completely and impartially, and they certainly can't impose morality. Those who see life in game terms congratulate themselves for avoiding detection. They mistakenly believe that it's not wrong unless you get caught.

*Right* and *not-right* are objective realities. Rationalizing or getting by with not-right behavior doesn't transform it into right behavior.

## Diligence

In a game I'm expected to take advantage of others' mistakes and oversights. Part of the game involves devising clever ways to use the rules to my advantage. Diligence is each player's responsibility.

Imagine approaching relationships with that mentality, taking advantage of a friend's error or using legal technicalities to gain the upper hand in marriage. Such relationships would be characterized by fear, guarded hearts, and suspicion.

Quality relationship relies on trust. Friends and spouses must believe that I care for their interests, that I'll "watch their backs." Others will be vulnerable and transparent only when I demonstrate that I won't exploit their weaknesses.

In a game I trust others only to obey the rules. Relationships require something much deeper.

When Jesus was asked to state the most important commandment ( [Matthew 22](#) ), the first word he uttered was "love." The Greek word is *agape*, which connotes unconditional, sacrificial love.

## Deception

God created us for relationship. That value is hardwired into our hearts; we reach our potential only in authentic, intimate relationship with God, others, and self.

Deception, deceit, and clever, surreptitious motives generate success in games; they're toxic to relationships. Those who attempt to deploy the "life as a game" model encounter confusion when strategies that are rewarded in games lead to conflict, isolation, and alienation in real-life relationships. Transparency may be a poor game tactic, but it's essential to the intimacy for which we were designed.

## Competition

***Deception, deceit,  
and clever,  
surreptitious motives  
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games; they're toxic  
to relationships.***

Games are inherently competitive. No matter how friendly or low-key, winning is the goal—and there can be only one winner. I win—you lose.

Competition fosters a scarcity mentality. It's a zero-sum situation in which I gain only at others' expense. Success is scarce.

Sensible alliances must ultimately benefit me or my team. Regardless of "win-win" rhetoric, competitors gravitate to and adopt tactics that prioritize personal success. I help you only if I get something in return that advances my agenda. Great for winning games; deadly for constructing a full, rewarding life based on *agape*.

I don't accept scarcity as a viable world view. Certainly some physical resources are limited, but the essential elements of life are abundant, overflowing, boundless. A false belief in scarcity leads to the tragic lie that we must compete for and earn forgiveness, respect, self-worth, and love at the expense of others.

God created a world of abundance. Grasping that reality frees me to embrace service and generosity. An abundance mentality liberates me from the false notion that I must strive for that which is given freely.

I enjoy competition—in games. I like strategizing, developing skills, discovering and foiling opponents' tactics. I also derive (probably too much) vicarious pleasure from watching others compete.

But competition and scarcity lead to flawed views of the world. Life is not a game.

## Results

***Each of us was created as an eternal, spiritual being. Any model that fails to incorporate and promote long-term, principled choices must lead to damaged relationships.***

Games reward short-term results at the expense of eternal principles. In the artificial environment of a game, truth is meaningless beyond the rules.

Many folks believe games and sports can enhance character. That's true—as long as the immediate goal (winning) is viewed as a by-product of more essential, long-term elements.

Duke University basketball coach Mike Krzyzewski (Coach K) says, "Solid character has little to do with winning games. It has everything to do with winning championships."

Championships are long-range goals. Teamwork, personal sacrifice, confronting fear, accepting and dealing with failure—these and other elements of long-term achievement require pursuit of a goal beyond immediate success.

I don't want to become too poetic about Coach K's analogy, because high-stakes, big-money organized sports inevitably rewards too many selfish, manipulative, and dishonest behaviors. There's certainly no guarantee that success in sports translates to high-character relationships and behaviors.

But we can learn from his general principle. In any endeavor, focus on immediate results unavoidably encourages self-centered, short-term decisions that fail to account for long-term consequences and principles.

God created each of us as an eternal, spiritual being. Any model that fails to incorporate and promote long-term, principled choices must lead to disappointment, frustration, and damaged relationships.

## **Rights or Right**

A game's rules define and equate *my rights* and *what's right*. Success demands that I make the most of those rights. That toxic notion spills into life-as-a-game.

Life is less about *my rights* and more about *what's right*. Quality relationships require me to care for others at the expense of my rights.

It's a cliché, but it's also a fundamental truth:

**Possessing the right to do something doesn't make it the right thing to do.**

Life was not designed to operate like a game. Strategies and tactics that lead to success in games are frequently detrimental in life. Games are inherently short-term, results-driven, and competitive.

Life, as God intends it, is not.

***This chapter lists some aspects in which games differ from life. Can you think of any others?***

***Do you disagree with any of the distinctions? Which one(s)? Why?***

***What's your response to the statement that "right and not-right are objective realities"?***

***What are your thoughts about the stated distinction between "my rights" and "what's right"?***

***Life is less about my rights and  
more about what's right.***

# Two Case Studies

What's the right thing to do?

I suspect we've all asked ourselves that question—many times. I also suspect we'd all like some clear, explicit guidelines or a sign that marks the correct road. But life often drops non-black-and-white problems in my lap. I seem to have misplaced the directions.

I'll share two true stories and examine how the “right thing to do” is affected by our views of life and rules. I've altered names and details.



## Story #1

*A friend (I'll call him Greg) coaches cross-country at a large high school. A few years ago his team ran in the state meet. My friend and his team were elated when the scores were tallied and they were proclaimed State Champions!*

*As the athletes celebrated, Greg looked over the results sheet. He felt pretty certain that one of his runners had been accidentally misplaced.*

No one else noticed the mistake. Neither Greg nor his runners broke any rules. Greg wasn't a race official. The judges compiled scores and handed out trophies. According to the rules, Greg wasn't required to check scoring or report errors.

## Story #2

*“Kristopher” was shopping online at a large company web site when he discovered a “mistake price” on an item. A misplaced decimal point transformed a \$900 item into a \$9 bargain!*

Kristopher didn't post the wrong price—he wasn't even looking for it. \$9 is the official listed price. One click saved him \$891. He didn't violate any laws. He simply purchased an item at the price posted on the company's web site.

## **If life's a game ...**

***If life's a game,  
players should take  
advantage of the  
rules and the  
mistakes of  
competitors and  
officials.***

Greg's team won. He and his team complied with the rules and met their obligations.

Players in a game take advantage of opponents' and officials' mistakes. The other coaches should have been more diligent, the race judges should have been more aware. Nobody expects a coach to correct an official's error. It's not his job.

Coaches and athletes work a lifetime to earn a state championship. And besides, who knows how many other errors passed un-noticed? The other coaches wouldn't report this sort of mistake, right?

If life's a game, Greg and his team won fair and square.

Kristopher's also a big winner—if life's a game. In fact, he should probably grab several of the bargain items before the seller discovers the error. The company is responsible for listing the correct prices and checking accuracy. In a game, exploiting this kind of mistake is legal, clever, and smart.

It's a big company—they won't miss the money. He certainly needs a few extra dollars more than some greedy corporation. If he doesn't take advantage of this opportunity, someone else will. And besides, that company never gave him a break. If they had the chance to stick it to him, they would.

If life's a game, why shouldn't each guy use the rules to his advantage?

## **If life is not a game ...**

Greg and Kristopher might reach different conclusions.

***Is there a "right" response? How should each story end?***

*As his kids accepted the trophy in jubilation, Greg asked the officials to take another look. That's the only reason they discovered the mistake.*

*Greg gathered his runners and explained the circumstances. Joy turned to confusion and then tears. Greg's team found the rightful winners and handed over the cherished trophy.*

From my perspective, he did the only right thing. He demonstrated courage and character. Greg's a hero, because life is not a game.

*Kristopher sent an email and urged his friends to grab this sweet deal before the company caught its error. I clicked on the link, and stared at the opportunity to save \$891.*

I was tempted. That's why I don't want the job of morality cop for others. I have too many issues with the logs in my own eyes to judge the specks in others' eyes.

I've made plenty of bad choices and cut more than my share of corners. I've justified and gotten by with plenty of not-right behavior. Painful experience convinces me that complying with technicalities or not-getting-caught don't substitute for doing what's right.

***What would you do in similar situations?***

***What's a circumstance in which you've been unsure about the right decision?***

***What's a circumstance in which you've made a choice you knew to be wrong?***

***(We've ALL done it!)***

***Why do you think you made that choice?***

***Painful experience convinces me that complying with technicalities doesn't substitute for doing what's right.***

# Leaders and Rules

Just tell me the rules!

Have you ever reached that point? You can't see a way forward or you're not sure which way to turn and you just want a step-by-step guide.

The Internet thrives on this human desire for an instruction manual. You can get rich without labor, lose weight without sweat, and find the perfect mate without risk. Just send \$19.95, and if you hurry they'll throw in a set of steak knives.

We all know it doesn't work that way, right?

The only person who gets rich is the guy selling the *get rich quick* scheme. But when the water's rising around us I suspect we'd all appreciate *Seven Simple Steps To Drain The Swamp*. (If you'll send me \$9.95, I'll be happy to write my directions for swamp-draining and send them along. Sorry, no steak knives.)

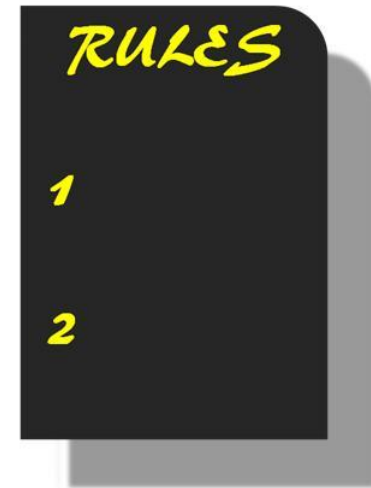
People take interesting approaches to rules and laws. Some folks follow any rule just because it's there, either out of fear or some sense of obligation. Some will break any rule just because it's there.

Some folks pick and choose which rules to violate or follow. I'm not sure if their choices depend on momentary convenience or some unstated criterion. Some rule-breakers justify their actions, and some don't bother.

Leaders understand and capitalize on our misconceptions about rules and life. I want to take a look at two general types of leaders: *rulers* and *rebels*.

## Rulers

**make rules.** They construct elaborate codes to address every contingency and then add new layers of rules about rules to close loopholes. Rulers derive power and a sense of order by controlling others' behavior.



## Rebels

defy authority. They actively, and sometimes aggressively, resist any attempt to limit their choices.

***Rulers and rebels  
need followers,  
communities, others  
to join and support  
and validate.***

Rebels often have a peculiar relationship with rules. They believe rules were made to be broken and loopholes to be discovered and exploited, yet they're quick to assert their rights and demand the protection of laws when it's expedient. They frequently justify choices by citing technicalities that make their behavior "legal."

Kristopher (from the previous chapter) claimed in his email that the company was legally obligated to honor the advertised price even though it was obviously a mistake. I'm not sure about that, but I found it to be a curious rationalization. I wonder how he'd react if he mistakenly paid \$9000. My guess—he'd expect a refund plus some consideration for inconvenience.

## Communities

Rulers and rebels need followers, communities, others to join and support and validate. I picture a community as a circle, and both rulers and rebels expend a lot of energy defining and consolidating their circles.

Rulers obviously need compliant subjects—not much sense in crafting intricate systems of laws if no one pays any attention. Rulers can't exist without someone to rule.

Some rulers genuinely believe they're helping, sort of a "benevolent dictator" model. They've discovered THE answer, THE correct path, and they're certain that others will become lost without direction. They insist on conformity "for the good of the people."

Some rulers drown in insecurity and uncertainty. These folks desperately need reassurance that only comes when others do it their way. For them, group agreement or compliance justifies any thought or behavior, and they'll deploy any coercive tactic to validate their particular set of rules.

All rulers depend on power and control. The desired result—compliance with their rules—is their sole concern. Relationships, tolerance, diversity, individual needs—none of those matter. Rulers need subjects, and they’ll do whatever’s necessary to get them.

Despite this need, rulers struggle to create unified, growing communities because their circles are based on coercion and force. People tend to enter and remain out of fear. True rulers retain control only by fostering apprehension and anxiety.

***Rulers and rebels  
both derive identity  
from their  
relationship to rules.***

Circles based on coercion cannot develop the transparency and trust required for committed relationships. Those who see an opportunity to escape will do so, so rulers must constantly reinforce the consequences of disobedience.

On the other hand, articulate, charismatic rebels attract incredibly cohesive communities. It’s apparently much more effective to rally people around resistance to actual or perceived authority.

I’m amazed and impressed by the skill with which accomplished rebels identify and demonize the enemy. Rebels adroitly amplify the threat of an amorphous “they” who wants to compel “us” to adhere to their expectations.

**Rulers and rebels have a lot in common.**

- Both derive identity from their relationship to rules. Rulers create and enforce, rebels defy and resist. Rules unite both communities and define the borders of their circles.
- Both are highly invested in identifying “us” and “them.” *They* undermine proper order and trample obvious moral standards. *They* demand arbitrary compliance with random, unnecessary expectations.
- Both rely on an enemy to unite their communities. No enemy, no one to fear. No enemy, no one to defy. Rulers and rebels need each other.

I wonder whether ruler and rebel leaders who succeed in building and growing circles are really all that different. Both seem primarily concerned with creating followers. They seek power, business and financial

success, or influence in public attitudes. Whatever their stated or hidden motives, success depends on developing circles of zealous, committed followers.

**Rulers aren't just about rules—they're about THEIR rules.** Passionate rulers frequently oppose alternatives more than they advocate for their own. They grow and consolidate their circles primarily with impassioned rhetoric that fosters fervent hostility. In this sense, the distinction between ruler and rebel diminishes.

***Any community that forms in relation to rules, whether the stated goal is conformity or non-conformity, ends up looking pretty much the same.***

Religious and political personalities, pundits, talk show hosts, and celebrity media types impose control by fostering a sense of ideological antagonism. Their angry, negative rhetoric capitalizes on and manipulates our tendency to unite against an evil foe.

Opposition ultimately defines an effective ruler's agenda and therefore the borders of his community. The eventual result is the ruler's desired goal of compliance and control, but resistance and common disagreement solidify and expand the circle.

**Many self-described "rebels" are just rulers in disguise.** They claim to advocate freedom, but they skillfully create communities based on strict enforcement of rigid standards. These pseudo-rebels use the language of rebellion to form highly-controlled circles characterized by fear and mistrust.

It seems to me that **any** community that forms in relation to authority and rules, whether the stated goal is conformity or non-conformity, ends up looking pretty much the same. If that community forms around a charismatic, articulate leader, the likelihood that followers will emulate and conform increases dramatically.

***What's your take? Agree? Disagree?***

***What's your personal attitude toward rules?***

***Which kind of community do you gravitate toward? Why?***

## Enemies

Chris Guillebeau is one of the most influential and convincing rebels out there. Chris claims that every community “needs” an enemy. The enemy may be a person, a group, or an idea, but it’s a required element.

I believe strongly in the value, and in fact the necessity, of community. I believe we learn, grow, and actualize within healthy communities. I don’t want to believe that an enemy, along with its inherent discord, is necessary for the existence of community. I want to believe that manipulative leaders invent enemies to gain and retain control.

I’ve tried for several months to think of a counterexample, but I’ve been unable to find a cohesive community that doesn’t have an enemy. If you can come up with an example, I’d love to hear it.

Meanwhile, I’ve accepted the disagreeable reality that human communities have enemies.

However, I don’t believe that’s the intent. Enemies and conflict were not included in the original design. We were created to live in intimate, transparent communities based on love rather than opposition.

*Does a community need an enemy?*

*Can you think of a counterexample?*

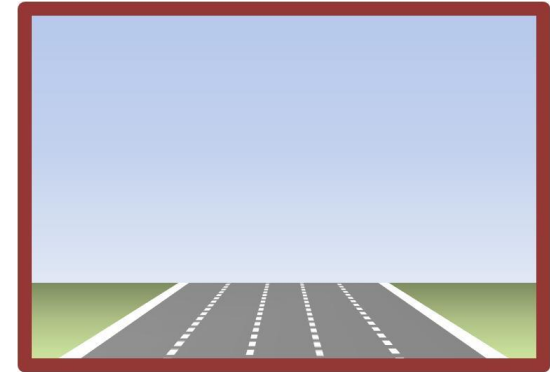
*What are the enemies of the circles to which you belong?*

*I’ve accepted the disagreeable reality that human communities have enemies.*

*However, I don’t believe that’s the intent.*

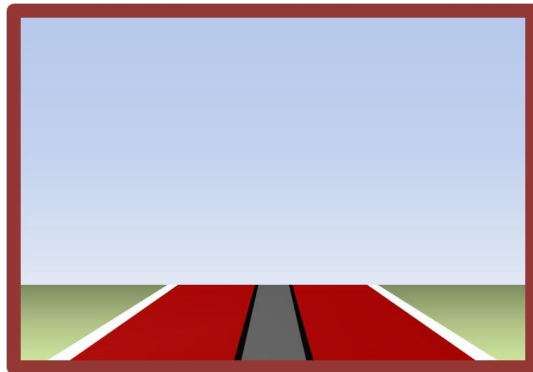
## A Third Option

To me, life seems like a very wide road with a lot of latitude for choice. Yes, there are boundaries, those white lines that define the edges. But unless I want to rob banks or sell heroine to kids, those lines don't limit my choices much. I don't find myself frequently wanting to commit murder or cheat widows out of their savings, and I'm betting that you don't either. Most laws could disappear with very little impact on my behavior. So "what's legal" doesn't really impact most of my decisions.



The point is that I'm relatively free to choose my own lane.

Rulers use fear to narrow the road.



They'd like us to believe that anyone outside their particular lane is on the road to hell and wants to take the rest of us along. Followers remain in the "straight and narrow" due to fear and obligation.

To me, their arbitrary restrictions seem irrelevant. Acknowledging their silly lines only feeds their sense of power. Their doom-and-gloom rhetoric is just so much illiterate babbling unless I buy into their imaginary demons.

I'm amazed that so many rebels actually take the rulers' imaginary markings seriously. They purposely live at the edges and congratulate each other for violating borders that don't even exist. Rebels allow the rules to dictate their behavior, and effective rebel leaders organize their circles around an "outside the lines" attitude.

That's the contradictory aspect of the rebel mentality. One must acknowledge authority in order to challenge or defy it. Acknowledgment lends its own measure of credibility, so the act of defiance actually legitimizes the opponent.

***Authentic liberty  
must involve making  
and accepting  
responsibility for my  
choices based on  
core values.***

I understand the value of examination. Society has a way of creating and imposing subtle, unwritten expectations that blend into the background. I believe it's important to identify and question those expectations. True personal freedom demands a measure of scrutiny and even skepticism without pre-determined reactions.

However, freedom diminishes when examination slips into reaction. Whenever I decide based on a rule, whether in compliance or intentional opposition, the rule controls my behavior. Active non-compliance is a valid and effective tactic for drawing attention to an unjust law, but giving any rule power cannot lead to personal freedom.

Like most human characteristics, Rebel/Ruler forms a continuum. We take notice of those at the extremes, while most people probably live somewhere in the middle. Freedom is NOWHERE along the scale. Neither rebels nor rulers are free.



Freedom involves ignoring the rulers' fear-mongering. Their lines have no relevance unless I choose to acknowledge their existence. This also makes rebellion sort of silly. What's the point of intentionally challenging imaginary limitations?

Authentic liberty is a personal commitment that must involve making and accepting responsibility for my choices based on core values—*independent of external guidelines.*

## **WDJD?**

We've all seen *WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?)* on bracelets and t-shirts. It's a good question when I'm making a tough decision.

"Follow Me" invites me to emulate His behavior, so I like to ask, "*WDJD—What DID Jesus Do?*" Walking in His shoes requires me to study His actions and the principles that informed them. My goal is to do what He did.

Believers and non-believers characterize Jesus as either ruler or rebel.

For some He's associated with a laundry list of *Thou Shalt's* and *Thou Shalt Not's*. His church has been framed within a variety of harsh, judgmental restrictions and merciless punishments. *Jesus the Ruler* is the ultimate cosmic control freak, demanding strict compliance in the shadow of the ultimate, eternal threat.

***Jesus lived in a perfect freedom that cannot exist on the Rebel/Ruler continuum. He invites us to follow Him in a third option that's not on the line.***

Others depict Him as the consummate rebel, unwilling to conform even to the point of death. His entire mission is portrayed as turning over tables, defying religious authorities, and exhorting His followers to emulate His rebellion. *Jesus the Rebel* defiantly lived outside the lines.

Neither picture is accurate. Jesus lived in a perfect freedom that cannot exist on the Rebel/Ruler continuum.

He invites us to follow Him, to live in harmony with a third option that's not on the line.

**Jesus steadfastly refused to provide a list of rules.** He taught with parables that required listeners to think deeply about eternal principles. Those who refused to look beyond literal interpretations missed the point.

In [John 3](#), a Pharisee named Nicodemus engaged Jesus in a clandestine conversation and acknowledged that He was a teacher sent by God.

*Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."*

*"How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"*

Jesus explains that He's talking about spiritual rebirth. Nicodemus failed to understand because he wasn't thinking in spiritual, eternal terms. I fall into the same confining trap whenever I construe Jesus' teaching in terms of concrete criteria and incorrectly transform His principles into the rules of a cosmic game.

Jesus reserved his harshest words for those who turned worship into exhaustive, detailed lists of expectations and requirements. [Luke 11](#) records His rejection of the spiritual rulers who focused on a pristine external appearance while neglecting internal wholeness.

*Jesus replied, “And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.”*

He knew that following rules out of fear precludes open, authentic relationship. His response to the burdensome regulations of the religious leaders appears in [Matthew 11](#):

*“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 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. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*

***In contrast to the overwhelming demands of the self-righteous religious leaders, Jesus promises that following Him brings rest and relief.***

A rabbi’s “yoke” was his teaching, his interpretation of God’s word, the requirements for being a follower of that particular teacher. In contrast to the overwhelming demands of the self-righteous religious leaders, Jesus promises that following Him brings rest and relief.

He rejects and offers freedom from the restrictive, fear-driven, human-created rules of organized religion. He refused to be *Jesus the Ruler*.

It’s natural to view one who rejects rule-making as a rebel. That’s the human continuum on which we operate.

Jesus rebuffed attempts to cast Him as rebel.

In [Matthew 5](#) He makes a strong claim about His relationship to the law:

*“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ... For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.*

That’s not a rebel position. Jesus didn’t reject the rules; He insisted that they be understood, interpreted, and followed from the heart with a spiritual perspective. He didn’t advocate disobedience; He insisted that our righteousness must *surpass* those who lived according to rules alone.

## Agape

To understand and follow Jesus, I believe I need to hear everything in light of this interaction from [Matthew 22](#).

*One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”*

*Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”*

Jesus’ first word in summarizing His teaching was “love.” *Agape*—unconditional, sacrificial, intentional love—is the foundation of following Jesus. He explicitly states that “all the law and the prophets” are based on *agape*.

WDJD? He wasn’t a ruler, and He wasn’t a rebel.

He demonstrated that **Life Is Not A Game**.

***Do you typically think of Jesus as either ruler or rebel? Why?***

***What’s your reaction to the claim that He was neither?***

As I said in the introduction, it’s not very productive to explain what it *isn’t* unless I offer an alternative.

***Agape—unconditional, sacrificial, intentional  
love—is the foundation of following Jesus.***

# Life Is ...

... a relationship.

Wait. Don't you mean life is *about* relationship?

Well, that would be closer than the analogy of life as a game. Life is indeed about relationships more than rules. Those who make choices that value people and relationships will be closer to the mark than those who seek personal gain, victory, and legal advantage.

But I believe life is not just “about relationships.” If life is about doing the things that enhance relationship, then those things become the rules of a game.



***True abundance can  
be found only in  
relationship with  
Jesus.***

Doing the right things, doing good things, however it's expressed, is just another set of rules. The rules define the objective, and we're back to life as a game. Surely some games are better than others, depending on individual standards and judgments, but they're still games.

And life—as God designed it—is not a game. It's not defined by human-created rules.

**Life is a relationship with Jesus.**

I'll do better if I'm kind, if I treat others with respect. I'll do better if I'm generous, if I assist the poor, if I advance the cause of peace. Obviously it's better to earn money honestly than to steal it.

But none of those—no action, no attitude—can lead me to the abundant life for which God created me. True abundance can be found only in relationship with Jesus.

*I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. [John 10:10b]*

Theologians have debated and dissected Christian theology for two thousand years. The discussion hasn't always been friendly or peaceful. Details major and minor have divided Christians into entrenched camps.

I believe right theology is important and that some theology is simply wrong. But I also believe that most theology isn't as central as it's portrayed.

Following Jesus is not about a collection of neatly organized ideas. It's not about a logically consistent system of premises and conclusions. Following Jesus is not primarily conceptual.

**At its core, following Jesus is relational.**

***Following Jesus is not about a collection of neatly organized ideas. Following Jesus is not primarily conceptual. At its core, following Jesus is relational.***

I need to repeat: right theology matters. But much of the theology that creates so much division and conflict is simply not fundamental to following Jesus.

Concepts, ideas, whatever we call them, are the rules that define our Christian circles. In this circle we do this and believe that—over there, it's different. But rules are valid in games, and life is not a game. Following Jesus is not a game.

In our culture there's definitely a game called *Christianity*. The game has a number of variations, each with its own rules, rulers, and rebels. People play for any number of reasons—social, political, or financial. The game creates power struggles, financial empires, and all sorts of emotional and physical violence. Most of the culture, even some of the serious players, doesn't understand that the game of Christianity has little to do with being a follower of Jesus. Some players follow Jesus, some don't.

It's possible to know the Bible forward and backward, to quote appropriate scripture in any circumstance, to do everything that would identify one as a Christian without really following Jesus.

I don't want the responsibility of deciding who's just playing the game, who's serious, and who doesn't even see the distinction. There are no jerseys to identify who's on which team, because life is not a game.

Life—for a follower of Jesus—is a relationship. It's not a game, which means...

...there are no rules!

*“For a follower of Jesus, there are no rules” is a fairly radical statement.  
What’s your immediate response?*

*When you picture a world with “no rules” what do you see?*

*How would people act in a world with no rules?*

*How would YOU act in a world with no rules?*

*Life—for a follower of Jesus—is a  
relationship. It’s not a game, which means...*

*...there are no rules!*

# Freedom

That's right. I believe Jesus came so I could have the life God intends—a life of perfect freedom. Life is not a game with artificial rules and restrictions and punishments. It's exactly the opposite.

I want to explain my thoughts using a metaphor (or analogy—I'm never sure which is right). Anyway, I hope you'll test and stretch the metaphor, see where it works and where it doesn't, and use it to challenge your own ideas. Just remember that it's a metaphor and not the real thing.

Imagine wanting to play a beautiful piece of music written by a great composer. I don't HAVE to play it his way—I'm free to play any notes I wish. I may completely ignore his score if I choose.

But why would I do that? He's the expert. I love the music. Why would I choose to play my own notes just because I can? Why would I choose to play an unturned instrument, insert my own sharps and flats, and play notes that wreck the performance?

I think that's sort of how life works.

God's the expert. He knows how the music works, because He created it. He knows the perfect notes. But mostly I ignore God's score. I tell Him my way's better. I protest that I don't want to play His notes, that it's MY life and I'll do it my way.

And when I complain when the song doesn't sound right, He smiles patiently and invites me to try His version.

## Rules?

So what's the point of the law and all of those restrictive rules?

I think those were God's childhood music lessons. Learning the scales and practicing simple songs isn't the final goal, but that's where you begin. When God revealed Himself through history, He didn't begin with a complex symphony. First He had to teach them the basics—in C.S. Lewis' words, "...that He was God, that there was only one of Him, and that He cared about right behavior."



So He gave them the basics—the Ten Commandments—and told them to practice for a few centuries. But that wasn't the end. He was getting them ready for something much better.

***He gave them the basics and told them to practice for a few centuries. He was getting them ready for something much better.***

Unfortunately, their leaders did what so many teachers do—they removed the joy from the music. They turned the practice into drudgery until the music became synonymous with playing the same boring, lifeless scales all day every day. Those sorts of teachers discover that they can force a kid to play the notes out of fear, but they can never compel them to play from the heart.

No heart—no music.

Those rulers turned life into a game with rules and restrictions and punishments. Some folks played along, some rebelled. An entire culture developed around meeting minimum requirements and exploiting loopholes. They did the sacrifices and performed the rituals out of obligation and fear.

No heart—no life.

Then along comes Jesus with this crazy notion that the music isn't just about dreary scales and basic notes. He says there's a whole beautiful symphony and a bunch of great rock and blues and even country just waiting to be performed and celebrated with passion and joy. He says we can't throw away the basics, but we can go beyond them. He says God didn't create all of this so we could play "Three Blind Mice" forever.

And then He shows us how to do it.

And maybe—to push the metaphor a bit—God's music is a little like jazz. There's a basic structure, some underlying principles that make it music instead of noise. But within that structure there's freedom to create and improvise and make my own version of the music.

Great jazz musicians don't just play random notes, and they don't adhere to the structure because it's a rule. They know the structure gives them the freedom to play the music that lives in their hearts.

## Community

Great music, like life, happens mostly in community. It's not a requirement. It's possible to play alone. People gather to make music because it works better that way.

Bands and orchestras don't play exactly the same notes on exactly the same instruments. The same tune played on a trumpet and a violin creates different senses and feelings. Melody, harmony, and rhythm blend to create richness and depth.

Each player contributes a unique element. Whether they're playing a meticulously scored, carefully rehearsed symphony or freeform jazz, each instrument, each part, and each individual adds something that makes the music. That's what Paul said in [1 Corinthians 12](#).

***The notes, scales, octaves, and keys are not arbitrary rules imposed to restrict freedom and inhibit creativity. Knowing and working within their boundaries doesn't restrict, it liberates.***

Musicians are completely free to play any notes they wish. They *choose* to surrender to a structure because they understand that's the way the music happens. The notes, scales, octaves, and keys are not arbitrary rules imposed to restrict freedom and inhibit creativity. Those elements are intrinsic to the music itself, part of its design. Knowing and working within their boundaries doesn't restrict, it liberates.

Great music can be highly scripted or mostly improvised around a theme. Great music can be made with all sorts of traditional or newly-invented instruments in all kinds of combinations. Style, volume, and content vary as widely as culture, creativity, and preference. Different communities make and enjoy different fashions, techniques, and sounds. It's all music played with the same notes within the same structure.

That's how human circles work. Each group has its own preferences and styles, its own way of doing things. Nothing wrong with that, as long as we don't pretend that our way is the *only* right way. That's as silly as forcing a rock band to play symphony music.

But that doesn't mean there's no structure. A bunch of kids with electric guitars can make noise without creating music. Circles work the same way—it's not an "anything goes" environment. Circles of every kind work best when they develop qualities like trust, transparency, service, and respect. These are the notes and scales of community. Without them, what happens is just noise. It isn't community as God intended. It's less.

## Tuning...

***Following a human leader, no matter how charismatic or compelling, will always lead in the wrong direction. The only way to know you're following the right path is to follow the One who lived perfectly.***

isn't required. You're free to play an unturned instrument, and a group of players doesn't *have* to be in tune with each other. But you don't need a trained ear to cringe when the right notes are even slightly out of tune.

The "A" note above "middle C" is a certain frequency (440 Hz). That's not an arbitrary rule; it's in the design. You can ignore it, but your music won't sound its best. A correctly tuned instrument, one that's aligned with the standard, produces the best music.

Life's like that. Life was designed by God to operate according to certain universal, eternal truths. Those truths are the "what's right" we seek in difficult circumstances. *Right* isn't up for debate and it isn't determined by majority vote. *Right* is a standard, as immutable as the 440Hz of an "A" note.

Ignoring it, believing it can be changed by mutual agreement, or being unaware of its existence—none of these change *right*. A life out of tune with these universal truths will always be less than its best. That's not a rule; it's part of the design. It doesn't restrict; it liberates me to be all I was designed to be.

## Standard

Sometimes musicians tune their instruments relative to each other. They choose one player who sounds most correct, then player #2 matches player #1. The process continues—#3 matches #2, and so on.

Each step in the process creates small errors. By the time it's repeated several times, the last is likely to be quite a bit away from the first.

To avoid this issue, each player can match the same instrument. This increases the likelihood that the entire group will be in tune with one another. But it's no guarantee that they'll match the standard. If the leader's off, the entire group will be mistuned.

In music that's solved by matching each instrument to the well-known standard frequency. In life, Jesus is the standard.

Following a human leader, no matter how charismatic or compelling, will always lead in the wrong direction because every person is flawed. The only way to *know* you're going the right way and following the right path is to follow the One who lived perfectly.

Read the following passage from *The Message*, out loud if possible, and hear His gentle voice inviting you to let go of the games and the rules and the rebellion.

***"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."***

*[Matthew 11:28-30 Msg]*

Walk with me. Work with me. Watch how I do it. Learn the *unforced rhythms of grace*.

He's inviting us to play the music of life as it was intended, in tune with Him, freely and lightly and joyfully and passionately. He wants us to be creative—that's part of the image in which He made us. No arbitrary rules or artificial limits, just our own beauty created within the structure that makes it work.

WDJD? He played the music perfectly, exactly as God intended from the beginning. He invites us to play along in the peaceful, unforced rhythms of grace.

***What's your reaction to the "music" metaphor for God's design of life? What fits or doesn't fit?***

***What are your thoughts about the "community" nature of music and of life?***

***What image did you see in the passage above?***

# Agape

Am I claiming that followers of Jesus live in a world where “anything goes?” Does *no rules* mean there’s no *right* and *not-right*?

Of course not, because God designed life for relationship. And relationships, like music, are decidedly not “anything goes.”

But they’re not games, either. Just try to write the definitive rules for a healthy marriage or great parenting. Great way to sell books—especially if you include free steak knives—but we all know human interactions can’t be learned from an instruction manual. The specific behaviors that build strong relationships vary as widely as individual personalities and interpersonal dynamics.

But there IS a structure. Solid relationships always rest on qualities like respect, trust, transparency, service, sacrifice, grace—they’re designed for *agape*. That’s how they work best, and nobody can write the step-by-step rules for *agape*.

That’s why Jesus is the Word. Words couldn’t capture *agape*, so God sent love in human form. We don’t follow lists of rules written in words; we follow the Word who lived the path of *agape*.

This diagram represents my options in life as a game. No matter how narrowly the lines are drawn, I’m still free to wander anywhere within them. This is how my path looks when I follow the rules.

I even managed to sneak outside the lines a few times without getting caught. No harm, no foul, right?

That’s why political solutions to moral issues cannot work. The lines are always compromises. There’s always room to maneuver within them. And for many folks the risk of punishment never outweighs the thrill of living outside the lines.



If you don't believe that, wander through your local jail. 75-80% of the residents are there for crimes related to substance abuse. A huge portion of them are repeat offenders. Stricter laws, harsher punishments, narrower lines—they don't work. So we make more rules and build more jails and pretend we're addressing the problem.

***Courage is the  
willingness to do  
what's right,  
regardless of risk to  
self.***

***Gus Lee***

We're not. Those folks have been taught that life is a game; they just don't play as carefully as the people who don't get caught. We'll never make a dent in the problem with rules.

I'm not maintaining that society needs no laws. Of course we must confine those who murder and steal and harm children. We obviously need traffic laws.

But let's not pretend that the rules will stop harmful behaviors. Everyone in prison knew they were breaking the law. Murderers, drug pushers, thieves—they know all about the rules and penalties. Their behavior flows from damaged hearts and flawed character that cannot be repaired with more rules.

I'll repeat something I said earlier. Unless I want to rob banks or sell heroine to kids, the lines don't limit my choices much. I don't find myself frequently wanting to commit murder or cheat widows out of their savings, and I'm betting that you don't either. Most laws could disappear with very little impact on my behavior. So "what's legal" doesn't really impact my choices.

I'm relatively free to choose my own lane within the law, but *what's legal* can never help me determine *what's right*. *Right* and *not-right* are not open to debate and compromise. They're not established by majority vote or who's got the strongest army. *Right* cannot be established or imposed politically. *Right* is a heart issue.

Slavery was legalized in the U.S. by majority vote for decades. In eighteenth century Britain children were hanged—by men with Bibles in their hands—for stealing bread. Those actions were not made wrong by changing a law—they were *always* wrong.

In his marvelous book *Courage: The Backbone of Leadership*, [Gus Lee](#) defines courage as "the willingness to do what's right, regardless of risk to self." Gus goes on to note that *right* can be difficult to discern, but it's never a matter of opinion. *Right* is always right.

That what Jesus says in His invitation to "Follow Me." He walked the right path, and following Him is the only way to play the music, to live the life God intended.

I believe God wants my life—my music—to be an expression of worship, my best effort to play the music with focused awareness on Him. Life-as-a-game diminishes worship by changing the focus to the game’s artificial limits and imaginary permissions. Both are tragic forms of idolatry prompted by fear.

## Artificial Limits

Life-as-a-game deludes me into worshiping human-created codes. When I acknowledge the game’s artificial limits I deny the power of God’s Spirit to reveal the music in my heart. I relinquish my power to create, express, and accept responsibility for my worship. I become a slave to religious ritual and tradition.

No one has the power to arbitrarily define the proper lane for me. Their opinions don’t matter; their rules have no relevance unless I choose to recognize them. Trusting the Spirit requires courage and the discipline to remain focused on pleasing the audience.

## Imaginary Permissions

Life-as-a-game encourages me to follow the rules, but laws, conventions, and traditions can never adequately define *what’s right*. The game’s imaginary permissions encourage me to pretend that off-key notes sound right because the rules say so.

***Agape means real freedom. Life as God designed it is about doing what’s right. It has nothing to do with rules.***

Imaginary permissions deny God’s absolute holiness. They trick me into pretending that human approximations are good enough.

Life and worship are not games. When I stop worshipping—following or defying—human-created rules, an interesting transformation occurs. It’s a change that seems paradoxical in the arbitrary environment of a game.

First, I’m free of the game’s artificial limits, free to explore and discover the boundless joy for which God created me.

Second, I’m free of the game’s illusion of permission. I’m free to follow the narrow path of *agape*.

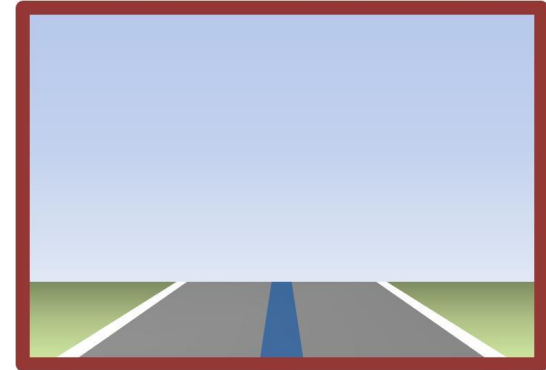
*Agape* means real freedom. It’s not about conformity or non-conformity. It’s not about following or challenging the rules. Life as God designed it has nothing to do with rules.

I believe Jesus invites us to follow Him along the blue line, the line of love. I believe it's the path for which we were created, the path to intimacy, trust, respect, and authentic freedom.

Jesus doesn't ask us simply to follow the rules and play silly children's songs. He invites us to play the music with passion and joy and freedom and love.

I often try to play the notes my way, forgetting that the music sounds horrible when I forget to live in tune with His example. I'm like the kid in a garage band, pretending that I can play any old notes and wondering why it sounds so terrible.

But when I do it His way, when I follow the path He walked, when I listen to those *unforced rhythms of grace*, it sounds and feels pretty sweet and pure.



## Community and Enemies—WDJD

**Ruler/Rebel leaders  
mistakenly believe  
that the mere  
existence of a large,  
cohesive community  
reflects God's favor.**

Enemies exist because *THE ENEMY* exists. Life, the music of God's design, is spiritual. We face a determined spiritual enemy whose goal is to prevent the music from bringing peace and joy.

Our enemy subtly maneuvers many Christian communities and their leaders into the Ruler/Rebel paradigm. Churches become fear-centered, rule-oriented circles of power and control that define and enforce proper behavior rather than encouraging pure hearts.

Ruler/Rebel leaders mistakenly believe that the mere existence of a large, cohesive community reflects God's favor. They lose sight of the enemy's ability to attract people with small, subtle twists of truth.

Despite brash rhetoric, Ruler/Rebel communities cower within strictly-defined, highly-fortified borders. Individuals, groups, or ideas that refuse to conform are vilified, condemned, and excluded. It's *us* against *them*; *they* are the evil enemies that must be identified and crushed at any cost. You're either with us or against us, and if you're against us then God wants us to destroy you.

They fail to perceive that the true enemy lives inside the walls.

This enemy attends church every Sunday. He's in every committee meeting and Bible study. He whispers that we must reinforce the barriers and focus on what's outside. He quietly directs attention away from God and toward battling God's enemies.

He reassures us when we use political manipulation, fostering the lie that short-term results justify violating eternal principles. "Christian" politics become negative, vicious, judgmental, and personally demeaning, all rationalized because "we're fighting God's battles."

***We don't exist to  
defeat the enemy—  
He already did that.  
Jesus loved our  
spiritual enemy into  
irrelevance.***

This clever enemy desperately wants us to forget that the battle's already over.

Jesus does not invite us to live together in fear. We're united by love, not opposition. Enemies do not define our mission or the border of our circle. We don't exist to defeat the enemy—He already did that. Jesus loved our spiritual enemy into irrelevance.

Jesus invites us to a community that stands for, not against.

Those who don't like our music, or those who don't know about it, or even those who try to silence it are not our enemies.

Jesus said a crazy thing about our worldly enemies. He told us we should love them and give them the shirts off our backs. We're supposed to invite them in and eat with them. We're definitely NOT to create reinforced barriers to keep them out.

We invite everyone to join the band. We're not about creating a polished performance in which only experts are welcome. God's our audience, and I think He's like the proud parent who beams with pleasure while the sixth-grade band plays a squeaky, off-key version of Silent Night.

I think He sent Jesus to play the notes I'll never get right. I'm thankful that He already played the music perfectly, and that *the unforced rhythms of grace* wash away my mistakes and produce the music God intended.

That's the reality of following Him. Even when I try, even though the model's right there for me to follow, I still get it wrong. Lots of things intrude—cowardice, selfishness, lack of faith and trust, pride. Sometimes I can't see what's right; more often I just don't do it.

***I'm thankful that the unforced rhythms of grace wash away my mistakes and produce the music God intended.***

I picture Him smiling patiently as I fumble with unstructured notes played on an out-of-tune instrument. I think He shakes His head when I grumble that my music sounds horrible. I think He's happy on the rare occasions when I occasionally get a passage right, but I think He cares more that I'm trying.

I'm thankful for grace, for the knowledge that He forgives my futile rule-making and silly rebellion. I'm thankful that Jesus never leaves His path of unconditional love, that He knows exactly how to make the sort of music that God intended.

I'm thankful that He continually, gently invites me to play along.

***What are your thoughts about life, games, and rules?***

***What still doesn't make sense?***

***What questions are you asking?***

# INFO

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Rich Dixon writes and speaks about overcoming adversity, moving forward in hope and faith, and accomplishing dreams. He's published more than three dozen articles in both Christian and general-market periodicals. He blogs at [www.richdixon.net/bouncingback](http://www.richdixon.net/bouncingback)

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