

Rules of Engagement

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Text: Exodus 19:3-7,20:1-17

Over the years, as a dad, I've spent some time thinking about rules. I think about what rules are reasonable, which are worth fighting over, and which can give way. There are rules that have to do with safety, when the kids are really young, such as not walking in the street or a parking lot without holding a grown-up's hand. There are rules that have to do with respect, like what kind of tone of voice is allowed when talking to parents and other adults. There are rules that establish routines and provide regularity and predictability, like what time the TV needs to be shut off. (There's nothing inherently right about these times—it's just helpful to have a clear expectation.) All relationships need rules. All relationships *have* rules, whether or not they're spoken aloud or written down. In order to feel safe and at home with another person, we need to know what's expected of us, and what we can expect in return.

But the relationship always exists before and above the rules. Your children are your children before you ask anything of them, and they're still your children even if they run into the parking lot on their own, even if they talk back, or if they do anything else to raise your blood pressure. The rules that parents make aren't there to provide a way for their children to win their love—at least, I hope they aren't! The rules themselves are a way of expressing love, providing a home for children to be safe and grow. And in healthy relationships between adults, the rules are negotiated, rather than imposed. In most couples, the partners each need some time to themselves, but there's no one right answer to how much alone time is enough or too much. (One older woman I know has a busy schedule between a half-dozen clubs and her church, and she tells me the saying in her circle of friends is, "When you get married, you promise to take your husband for better or for worse, but you don't promise to take him for lunch.") So you negotiate a rule that works, because you care about each other. The rules serve the relationship, rather than the other way around.

This fall, we're reading through stories of the Bible in order, to get a sense of the story of God and God's people in the order the Bible tells it. Today we hear about the Ten Commandments, maybe the most famous rules there are. But it's really important to notice that the story of the Bible doesn't begin with the Ten Commandments. You could imagine the story being told a different way. God could have breathed life into Adam and Eve in the garden and had them awaken to find the Ten Commandments right next to them. God could have approached Abraham and Sarah and told them, "I'm looking for a family to be my special people, but these Ten Commandments are my conditions. Look them over, and if you agree, then I'll be your God and you will be my people." God could have made acceptance of the Ten Commandments the price of freeing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. But God didn't do any of that. God created the world and established a relationship with its people long before the Ten Commandments came along. God rescued the Israelites from slavery and, as we heard last week, led them in a miraculous escape from the Egyptian army through the sea,

before God asked anything of them.

This practice of saving and blessing people who did not deserve or earn it, just because God loves them, has a name. We call it “grace.” God says, “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself,” says God. God is gracious. God wants to bless and save. The purpose of the rules that follow is not to get God’s attention or earn God’s blessing. All that is already baked into the relationship that God established, when God heard the cries of the Israelites and liberated them. But precisely because of what God has done for them, this is a special people, and God wants them to be set apart. Precisely because they have been blessed and favored by God, it wouldn’t be proper for them to be indistinguishable from all the other peoples of the world.

God tells them, “You shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” The purpose of all the rules that follow is to set apart the people of Israel, to mark them as a distinct people, dedicated for service. They are a priestly kingdom. The job of the priest was to represent the people before God, to make offerings for them, so that God’s blessing would flow not just to the priest, but to all the people. The people of Israel are being given the commandments, the rules, because the distinct way of life they are going to lead will be part of God’s plan to bless the whole world. When God tells them to have no other gods, make no images, respect God’s name, keep the sabbath, honor father and mother, not to kill, not to commit adultery, not to steal, not to give false testimony, and not to covet, the people are being commissioned for service. The rules exist for the sake of the relationship between God and the people of Israel, a relationship where God is blessing them in order to provide blessing to the whole world.

We celebrate a God whose grace embraces the whole world. Jesus came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. In him the blessing given through the people of Israel was extended to all of us. And so the apostle Peter uses God’s words in Exodus to talk about the church. In his letter to the church, he tells us, “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” (1 Peter 2:9)—in other words, we are set apart too. We’re set apart so that we can tell others what God has done for us, and so that, as they see the difference God has made for us, they will come to glorify God themselves.

In a moment we’ll be installing Dave Voss, Sandie McDonald, and Jill Welter as church officers, leaders chosen to help guide this community, and we’ll also be receiving Antonio as a new member. As each of you step into this new commitment, I want you to remember that before you have taken on any obligation, any discipline, God has lavished mercy and love on you. That looks different for each of you, and only you know all the details of what it means in your story. But I want you to remember that God’s love is your starting line for the race, not the finish. You are running *with* God’s grace, not after it. So there is no way you can miss it or fail to reach it. We each run our race not to win God’s love as a kind of prize, but out of the joy and gratitude God’s love has already brought us.

So we can embrace God’s rules, we can embrace the Ten Commandments, not because we need to win God’s blessing, but because God has already given it. We can embrace our calling to call attention to the ways our lives have been transformed by grace, how we’ve been healed and given purpose and new life through Jesus Christ. We can live as a people set apart by grace. May all of you, loved by God, be a beacon for others to be drawn to the love that found you first. May you, blessed by God, be a blessing to others. May you live as the beloved child of God you are, set apart as one

loved and saved and transformed, so that everyone might see and glorify God in you.
Amen.