

May 10 – Mother's Day

Scripture: I John 5:1-6

Sermon: Following the Rules

Rules - we hate them and yet we cannot live without them. Rules give predictability and security to our existence. For instance: We have rules called speed limits. Now we all resist those limits a bit, but think about what driving would be like if they weren't there. You would have some people driving 60 mph or faster through residential neighborhoods while others drove 10 mph. There would be carnage everywhere. So we grumble about rules, break them maybe just a bit, but hope all follow them, in general, most of the time.

Think about the rules that you learned when just a little thing that still direct and organize your life. Let me give you just a few examples: Wash your hands after you go to the bathroom, say thank you and please, eat your vegetables, turn off the light when you leave the room, pick up after yourselves and so forth. Now we have to admit that even some of these rules we don't follow as well as we should! But we know they are the rules and we should be doing them. Why? Because we know life goes better when we follow these rules. In many cases those early rules help us to be healthy and maintain a healthy lifestyle. Others make it easier for those who live with us. They foster community. After all, no one enjoys picking up after another all the time.

I want you to continue thinking about how and why you learned those rules when you were little. Some of the time you objected to following them but most of the time you did them without complaint. Why? In some instances it might have been because you feared the consequences for not following them. But mostly, deep down, even at a very young age, you knew that things went better for you and for everyone when you followed them. When your parents were pleased with your following the rules and praised you, this made you feel good about yourself and you began to realize that following them was a way of showing your love. Also, you knew that whoever was making the rules had some good reasons behind them even if you did not appreciate the reasoning! And the rules you followed with the least complaint were those within

your ability to do, they weren't that difficult, and you saw the immediate benefit to following them.

This understanding of benefit usually came after we tried defiance and found that it never worked well as a strategy. I recall one time being told I could not leave the table until I had eaten my vegetables. It wasn't an unreasonable request. That particular night I decided to defy the order. I sat at the table until bed time. When I went to bed I felt I had triumphed because I had not eaten my vegetables. Then I thought of what I had given up for my victory; my favorite television show, a game with my dad and books with my mom. All of a sudden it didn't feel like much of a victory. The next time there was an issue about vegetables I ate them quickly because I really didn't hate eating them and I wanted to go play. I share all of this to get us in the proper mindset to hear John's discussions about rules.

We know the rules. But you might say, "What rules?" We have the Ten Commandments; we have the laws in the book of Leviticus. We have other rules that came to us from the prophets. We have the commands of Jesus and then those that came to us from the Apostle Paul. Those are only the Biblical ones and then we have all these other rules that the church has added over the years. It seems as if our religion is nothing but rules and to say they are not burdensome... Well it just isn't true.

We need to go back to Jesus. When he was asked to sum up all the laws of the Jewish people he said, love God totally and people as well or better than you love yourself. All of the other laws are based on these two principals. When you begin to think about that long list of rules found in the Bible we realize that Jesus was correct. The Ten Commandments are really talking about how we honor, or love God and how we show respect to others. All of those rules in Leviticus, most having to do with purity and worship are also about respect to and for God and for others. So we know the rules, Love God and Love others.

John realized that we have a choice about what to do with those rules. Before we talk about that choice let us remember John's words that these commandments are not difficult or burdensome. This doesn't mean that they are easy to keep but they are

doable and achievable. As we recalled learning rules when we were little we realize that the commands to love benefit us and we see where defiance isn't a good strategy.

So we have the choice, do we follow the rules or are we in defiance. Let's begin with a simple example. Think about why you are here today. On a simple level you might say, "To worship and to honor God." We understand that this is part of what it means to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. Was it that challenging to get here this morning? Now I am not saying you might not have grumbled just a bit at having to get going a little quicker than usual but you are here! It was a choice. You could have decided not to come. That type of defiance won't cause a lightning bolt from heaven to come and strike you down. But you know that not coming to church can get to be a habit that weakens our faith. And, we think of all that we miss, our friends and fellowship and opportunities to care. This is part of how we love our neighbor.

There are many, many ways we are to show how much we love God and love our neighbor and we do it gladly. We don't think about the sacrifices, we are not weighed down by the choices, we do it because we realize how much better our day and our week goes when we do these things. We hope others see our love for God and give thanks to our heavenly parent for our witness. If all of our faith was as easy as coming to church or helping a friend we would be happy. But we know that following these rules to love can also be challenging.

Think about some of the commands of Jesus that are summed up in his commands to love our neighbor. We are told to forgive another as much as 70 times 7. Do we forgive or do we hold resentment in our hearts? It is our choice. We remember how Jesus, the last time he ate with his disciples, took a towel and washed their feet and afterwards reminded them that they are to serve. Do we willingly take the role of servant or do we need to be in charge or get credit? Do we freely give of our time or are we resentful when asked. Serving is how we live in community. It is a way to love our neighbor. It is our witness to the world. It is a choice.

Sometimes we will be in open defiance of the rules. When we do, we act just like I did when I refused to eat my vegetables. I was defiant, I didn't eat, I felt victorious but

ultimately things did not go so well. The same is true when we openly defy God's rules. We can refuse to forgive but the anger will eat away at our soul. We can decide not to help others and guilt will wrap its fingers around our lives. We cannot attend church and feel the loneliness of being cut off from community.

God loves us just like a parent loves us. We are given rules to help make our lives go better and for the community we are in, to live together in peace. We have a choice whether to follow or not. We are challenged to obey, knowing the rules are for our benefit, they come from a loving parent and are a way of showing our love. And in following them we grow in peace and grace.