

reSTART: 4. Rules
Exodus 20:1-17
October 1, 2017
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Everything has a starting point, even faith. Most of us heard about faith in children but later one we faced questions and experiences that chipped away at that childhood faith until that faith no longer fit the challenges in our adult world. So in this series, I've asked the question: what if we hit the restart button on faith and were to start over? How would we begin? In week one, we looked at the starting point for the first Christians which was a question – Who is Jesus? Then we acknowledged that there is a problem that we all face, and it's something deeper than just mistakes. It's called sin. Last week, we discovered that faith itself began with Abraham when God asked: Will you trust me? This morning, I want to talk about rules, because they touch every aspect of our lives. This summer when I felt ready to play my first round of golf, I asked someone to take me, who I thought would be gentle about the rules. Some people are sticklers – play by the book, keep score, and let's see who wins – and if that's the case, I will always make you look better than me. But I wasn't sure I could handle a round of golf if I had to hit the ball and then take my next shot wherever that ball landed. I was looking for someone who was willing to make up our own set of rules for that round of golf. But in nearly every aspect of life, we don't have the privilege of making the rules – and often we bump up against the rules or get caught breaking the rules. Do you know about traffic rules? After years of wishing this driver or that driver would get pulled over for breaking the rules, a few months ago, I was pulled over and my thought – that's not fair.

Rules touch every aspect of our lives. Every religion has its own set of rules. And in Christianity we have different versions of rules. Growing up, I was glad I didn't have to follow the rules of the Baptists – they couldn't go to dances or to movies, and they couldn't play cards. And the Catholics couldn't eat meat on Fridays. The Lutherans had their rules. And we Methodists had our rules. And at some point, haven't we all rebelled against the rules. And some have walked away from religion entirely, because they felt religion was mostly about rules – do this; don't do that – and if you break the rules, you don't belong. Is God really that interested in rules? And, what's the relationship between rules and faith?

Rules always assume some sort of relationship. Wherever there are rules that we are accountable to, there is a relationship. Most rules and relationships fit within one of three models. There is the **family model**. You were born into or adopted into a family, and your parents made the rules. They didn't make the rules so that you could be part of the family, but they established the rules because you were part of the family. And once you grew up and left home, you no longer had to follow them, but you were still part of the family. What's interesting is that the rules only applied to the people in your family. You don't call next door to ask if their kids finished their homework. Or to say, I see your lights are on – haven't your kids gone to bed yet. Your family rules don't apply to another family. Sometimes we wish they did! We've all met kids from other families for whom we'd like to set the rules. In the family model, you have rules because you are part of the family.

Then there is the **club model** where you agree to keep certain rules in order to get in. I joined a health club, but the only way that club lets me stay part of the club is if I follow the rules – namely, pay the monthly fee. If I break the rules, I'm out. Or when you are hired by a company, you are given a set of rules (“Here's how we do things here.”) And once you agree to the rules, you get in. That's when the relationship begins.

Then there's a third model – the **neighborhood**. When you move into a neighborhood, you don't know the rules (unless your home comes with a neighborhood association fee). You may not know the rules, but if you do something you get a note in your mailbox. Try installing a swimming pool in the front yard or deciding to let your yard go wild and stop mowing for a few months – and suddenly there are rules you didn't even know existed. The neighborhood can't force you to move, but you can be treated in such a way that you want to move.

Wherever there are rules that you are accountable to, you are in a relationship. When it comes to religion, which model is it? Are you in with God no matter what, and there are rules to live by? Or, if you behave, you get in and need to keep behaving to stay in? Or, you are in because all humans are in, but you get reminders in the mail when you mess up and the reminders keep coming until you change your ways – and only then will God be happy with you? Which is it, and how do we know?

This morning, I want to go back to one of the oldest and best known set of rules in history that were given to Moses 3500 years ago. Last week, we looked at Abraham as the starting point of faith. God promised Abraham a nation, but he had no children. So, Abraham and Sarah devised a plan to use a surrogate and Ishmael was born. Later, Sarah became pregnant and she had a son, Isaac. 600 years after Jesus, Mohammed would look back and pull together a narrative around Ishmael as the father of the Arab nations. Isaac would have a son named Jacob, and Jacob would have 12 sons. One of the 12 was Joseph who was sold into slavery and ends up as the prime minister of Egypt. During a famine, Jacob, his 11 sons and their families go to Egypt in search of food, and the family is reunited. These 12 families increase in number until the Egyptians become afraid that there are too many of them, so they are enslaved for the next 400 years. The Hebrews would remember how there was a man named Abraham who received a promise of a nation, and how the whole world would be blessed through them – but they were slaves (here's the story and here's reality and the two didn't fit).

One day, God calls a man named Moses who goes to Pharaoh and says, "Let my people go." And Pharaoh says No. Which leads to horrible consequences until one night through Moses, God says to the Hebrews, "Will you trust me? Tonight, before you go to bed, I want you to slaughter a lamb and have a meal, and then I want you to take the blood of that lamb and smear it all over the door to your home. God, why would we do that? And God says, trust me. That night Hebrew families all over Egypt slaughtered lambs and prepared meals and then took the blood of the lamb and smeared it over their doors and then they packed their possessions, because Moses said they would be leaving the next morning. 400 years they had been slaves, and now do this? God says, trust me. And that night the angel of death descended on the nation of Egypt but death passed over every home that had the blood of the lamb on the door. And the next morning, Pharaoh said, Go! And the people ran toward freedom – and every year to this day, Jews gather to remember this night when God said, trust me and you will be free. Three weeks later, they are free and in search of the Promised Land, but for 400 years all they knew was slavery and now chaos is setting in – they had no rules. And they stop at the foot of Mount Sinai, Moses climbs the mountain and God provides the Ten Commandments.

But before we hear these commands, God says this: **I am the LORD your God...** God starts from God's point of view. I chose you. When did that happen? **who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.** Remember how you got from slavery to freedom? I sent you a deliverer when you crying for relief. After 400 years, most of you lost hope, but I heard your cries. God wants the people to know – You are mine, and I am yours. That sounds like a relationship. Only when the relationship is clear does God provide the first rule/commandment: **You shall have no other gods before me.** In other words, consider all that I have done for

you. You didn't get here by accident. I have been working in your lives, because I claimed you long before you claimed me. This is the first command because God has their interest in mind. God knows they are headed to Canaan and when they see the people there and how the people seek the help of other gods to make their crops grow and their animals and families fertile, God knows they will be tempted to follow other gods. So, God is saying, Remember. Remember what happened when I said Trust me and you did.

The Ten Commandments were a confirmation of and not a condition of Israel's relationship with God. The rules were not conditions. God was not saying, get these ten right and then I will be your God and you will be my people, and if you don't I will look for other people. God is saying, even though you have done nothing to deserve this – even though you have given no indication of what kind of people you will be – all I asked was “Trust me” and in that moment we had a relationship – and now I want to show you how to live together. God gives rules to people who are already in a relationship with him. You can rebel and break the rules and give up on the family, but God never gives up on you.

One more thing. Remember when last week when we learned that God made a promise with Abraham and that was the starting point of faith. That moment when God said, trust me, and it all began. God made a promise which turns out not to be about Abraham but you. ...**all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.** (Genesis 12:3b) This is bigger than Abraham and Moses and the people of Israel. And 1500 years later when Jesus arrives and says, will you trust me?, the gospel writer, John, would say: **To all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.** (John 1:12) He gave the right to be in the club? In the neighborhood? In the family. It's all about a relationship.

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of October 1, 2017

Weekly Prayer: O God, our walk with you is a journey, with many stops and starts, hesitant pauses and uncertain steps. You have given us the framework to live with faith. Forgive us when we lose our way and stray from your path. Place your commandments on our hearts that we might reconnect with you and restart this great journey of faith. Amen.

Monday, October 2

Scripture: Exodus 20:1-17

Then God spoke all these words: I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You must have no other gods before me. Do not make an idol for yourself—no form whatsoever—of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. Do not bow down to them or worship them, because I, the LORD your God, am a passionate God. I punish children for their parents' sins even to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me. But I am loyal and gracious to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. Do not use the LORD your God's name as if it were of no significance; the LORD won't forgive anyone who uses his name that way. Remember the Sabbath day and treat it as holy. Six days you may work and do all your tasks, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. Do not do any work on it—not you, your sons or daughters, your male or female servants, your animals, or the immigrant who is living with you. Because the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and everything that is in them in six days, but rested on the seventh day. That is why the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. Honor your father and your mother so that your life will be long on the fertile land that the LORD your God is giving you. Do not kill. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not testify falsely against your neighbor. Do not desire your neighbor's house. Do

not desire and try to take your neighbor's wife, male or female servant, ox, donkey, or anything else that belongs to your neighbor.

Observation: In the saga of how God relates to people, the Ten Commandments came at a pivotal moment. The Israelites had been slaves in Egypt for 400 years. They had learned the Egyptian culture and the brutal, dominating behavior of their masters. God led them out of Egypt and gave them freedom, but total freedom is chaos without boundaries. God called them into a relationship and provided rules: a confirmation of and not a condition of this relationship.

Application: Murder's harmfulness is pretty clear. Think about the ways that adultery, stealing and giving false testimony against your neighbor cause harm. How can breaking these rules bring harm or even break a relationship with God? How have these behaviors harmed you, or someone you knew well?

Prayer: God, thank you for offering me a relationship with you. Help me to trust in that relationship. Thank you for providing ways that I can strengthen and keep from doing harm to the important relationships that I have. Amen.

Tuesday, October 3

Scripture: Leviticus 19:9-18

When you harvest your land's produce, you must not harvest all the way to the edge of your field; and don't gather up every remaining bit of your harvest. Also do not pick your vineyard clean or gather up all the grapes that have fallen there. Leave these items for the poor and the immigrant; I am the LORD your God. You must not steal nor deceive nor lie to each other. You must not swear falsely by my name, desecrating your God's name in doing so; I am the LORD. You must not oppress your neighbors or rob them. Do not withhold a hired laborer's pay overnight. You must not insult a deaf person or put some obstacle in front of a blind person that would cause them to trip. Instead, fear your God; I am the LORD. You must not act unjustly in a legal case. Do not show favoritism to the poor or deference to the great; you must judge your fellow Israelites fairly. Do not go around slandering your people. Do not stand by while your neighbor's blood is shed; I am the LORD. You must not hate your fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your fellow Israelite strongly, so you don't become responsible for his sin. You must not take revenge nor hold a grudge against any of your people; instead, you must love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD.

Observation: Jesus said Leviticus 19:18—"Love your neighbor as yourself"—is a vital life rule. An expert in the law asked him, "Who is my neighbor?" In reply, Jesus told the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). But the expert could have known that Leviticus, in the verses before the command, already listed many "neighbors" God's people shouldn't harm.

Application: Have you ever heard the phrase "Don't leave any money on the table," urging you to squeeze every penny out of someone else in a business deal? How did the commands in verses 9-10, 13, and 16 urge the Israelites to deal with others? How can you as a Christian decide whether guarding your interests does or does not harm others?

Prayer: Thank you, God, for loving me. Help me to let your love for me overflow in the ways I speak and treat the people around me. Let me see when my actions fall short and strengthen me to be the loving person you believe that I can be. Amen.

Wednesday, October 4

Scripture: Ephesians 2:4-10

However, God is rich in mercy. He brought us to life with Christ while we were dead as a result of those things that we did wrong. He did this because of the great love that he has for us. You are saved by God's grace! And God raised us up and seated us in the heavens with Christ Jesus. God did this to show future generations the greatness of his grace by the goodness that God has shown us in Christ Jesus. You are saved by God's grace because of your faith. This salvation is God's gift. It's not something you possessed. It's not something you did that you can be proud of. Instead, we are God's accomplishment, created in Christ Jesus to do good things. God planned for these good things to be the way that we live our lives.

Observation: John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, listed three general rules: Do no harm; Do good; Stay in Love with God. We don't do these rules to "get on God's good side." Through creation and salvation, God has already lovingly provided all we need for life now and forever. When we do good, we are simply living into the purpose for which God made us.

Application: What is your life's purpose? (If you say "I don't know," that doesn't mean you don't have one. Even if you've never given it conscious thought, you make choices each day based on some inner vision of who you are and what you're here for.) Spend some quiet time today reexamining your life's purpose in the light of what this passage says.

Prayer: Dear LORD, as you asked Abraham and Moses if they would trust you, help me to hear that same question – will you trust me? Give me the certainty this day that I am known and loved. Amen.

Thursday, October 5

Scripture: Luke 6:27-35

"But I say to you who are willing to hear: Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on the cheek, offer the other one as well. If someone takes your coat, don't withhold your shirt either. Give to everyone who asks and don't demand your things back from those who take them. Treat people in the same way that you want them to treat you. "If you love those who love you, why should you be commended? Even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, why should you be commended? Even sinners do that. If you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, why should you be commended? Even sinners lend to sinners expecting to be paid back in full. Instead, love your enemies, do good, and lend expecting nothing in return. If you do, you will have a great reward. You will be acting the way children of the Most High act, for he is kind to ungrateful and wicked people.

Observation: In his book, *Three Simple Rules*, Bishop Reuben Job asks, "Where are the boundaries?...what if my gift of goodness, small or large, is rejected? Suppose I were to seek compromise in conflict and my efforts were ridiculed? What if my efforts were seen as weakness and my concerns were overlooked?" Jesus said, "Do good to your enemies. That's what God does."

Application: List all the ways you can think of that God "is kind to the ungrateful and wicked." Jesus said God's example gives us a pattern to follow. What "enemies" or "ungrateful and wicked" people can you impact? Using your list, think of ways you might do good to them this week. Who might think of **you** as an "enemy"? Do good to them, too!

Prayer: Help me, LORD, to see others as you see them – not as friend or foe, but as a child of God. Help me to follow you so that others will see your love through me. Amen.

Friday, October 6

Scripture: Psalm 119:97-104, Deuteronomy 17:14-20

I love your Instruction! I think about it constantly. Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies because it is always with me. I have greater insight than all my teachers because I contemplate your laws. I have more understanding than the elders because I guard your precepts. I haven't set my feet on any evil path so I can make sure to keep your word. I haven't deviated from any of your rules because you are the one who has taught me. Your word is so pleasing to my taste buds— it's sweeter than honey in my mouth! I'm studying your precepts— that's why I hate every false path.

Once you have entered the land the LORD your God is giving you and you have taken possession of it and settled down in it, you might say: "Let's appoint a king over us, as all our neighboring nations have done." You can indeed appoint over you a king that the LORD your God selects. You can appoint over you a king who is one of your fellow Israelites. You are not allowed to appoint over you a foreigner who is not one of your fellow Israelites. That granted, the king must not acquire too many horses, and he must not return the people to Egypt in order to acquire more horses, because the LORD told you: "You will never go back by that road again." The king must not take numerous wives so that his heart doesn't go astray. Nor can the king acquire too much silver and gold. Instead, when he sits on his royal throne, he himself must write a copy of this Instruction on a scroll in the presence of the levitical priests. That Instruction must remain with him, and he must read in it every day of his life so that he learns to revere the LORD his God by keeping all the words of this Instruction and these regulations, by doing them, by not being overbearing toward his fellow Israelites, and by not deviating even a bit from the commandment. If the king does all that, he will ensure lasting rule in Israel for himself and for his successors.

Observation: Deuteronomy told every king to hand-copy a scroll of God's word. He was to shape his heart and actions by reading it "all the days of his life." (How Israel's story might have changed, if the kings had done this!) We have pocket Testaments, and Bibles on our smart phones. These tools can help us deepen our love for God —as we use them to open our hearts.

Application: Deuteronomy said if the king read the Bible daily, he would "not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites and turn from the law to the right or to the left." How could absorbing the Bible's message keep a king tuned in to God's ways? How can your Bible reading shape your life by keeping you aware of God's love and God's values?

Prayer: Gracious and loving God, I turn to you again today, reading and reflecting on these words that have been preserved for thousands of years and still find a place in my heart. May the meditations that flow from my heart be acceptable to you, my Lord and my God. Amen.

Saturday, October 7

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, John 6:47-58

I received a tradition from the Lord, which I also handed on to you: on the night on which he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took bread. After giving thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this to remember me." He did the same thing with the cup, after they had

eaten, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Every time you drink it, do this to remember me." Every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you broadcast the death of the Lord until he comes.

I assure you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate manna in the wilderness and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven so that whoever eats from it will never die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever, and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." Then the Jews debated among themselves, asking, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Jesus said to them, "I assure you, unless you eat the flesh of the Human One and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in them. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me lives because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. It isn't like the bread your ancestors ate, and then they died. Whoever eats this bread will live forever."

Observation: In 1 Corinthians, Paul gave the earliest written report of Jesus and his disciples sharing a last Passover meal. Two or three decades later, John's gospel didn't need to repeat the familiar facts. Instead, it focused on the meal's meaning. In highly graphic images, John showed Jesus saying that the Supper is a way of taking his spiritual life into our inner self.

Application: In the account of the Lord's Supper Paul shared, Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me." The meal functions, he added, to "proclaim the Lord's death." Does taking part in Communion help you to focus on what Jesus did for you? In what ways can this simple sacrament "proclaim" something important about your faith to others?

Prayer: O God, my walk with you is a journey, with many stops and starts, hesitant pauses and uncertain steps. You have given me the framework to live with faith. May the grace given in Jesus' life fill me so that I can be your witness in this world. Amen.