

**More Than Rules**  
**John 8:1-11**  
**October 2, 2016**  
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There are many things I love about my job. I love planning worship and preparing sermons. I love watching people use their gifts in every area of the life of the church. I love walking alongside people in times of grief or illness. I love thinking about the future and discerning how God is leading us to grow as followers of Christ. And, I love getting to know people, especially getting to hear their stories of faith—where they've come from, how they got here, and the journey they've been on with God through the years.

There is much to celebrate in our collective faith journeys. Together we have remarkable stories to tell of God's faithfulness, God's guidance and God's mercy that has redeemed much that has gone wrong in our lives. But, there's another thread I hear—not from everyone, but from enough of us that it is a recurring theme—and that is how frequently people experience the church or Christians in hurtful, negative, judgmental ways. For some, our hurt, frustration, or disappointment was so deep we needed to step away from church for a while. We needed time to heal, to find our equilibrium again and to rediscover faith and God without all the trappings of religion that didn't bear much resemblance to the person and work of Jesus.

I want to say two things to those of you who have had painful experiences of church. First, I want to say I'm sorry. I apologize on behalf of the Church Universal for all the ways we have failed to live up to the mandate Jesus gave us. We, the church, must never stop naming our own sin and failures and then repenting of them. Just because we won't be perfect followers doesn't excuse us from honestly confronting all the ways in which we fall short. Secondly, I want to thank you. Despite our collective missteps and at times egregiously unchristian behavior, you have, by the grace of God, not given up totally. Your sabbatical from church might be measured in months or years or decades, but somehow you found your way back, and I don't believe that is an accident. Fortunately, one of the ways God redeems us is to continue to call us back to himself and eventually, back to his people, too.

How is it that we Christians so often get it so wrong? It seems that Jesus makes things pretty clear: love is to be the defining characteristic of our lives.

That's so because God has loved us first, and our gratitude and response to God's love for us is to love everybody else—without reservation or judgment. When we really grasp what God in Christ Jesus has done for us, we won't be able to live any other way. So, how is it that we get things so twisted, so backwards? Love demands so much of us that it's easier to just substitute a bunch of rules. Instead of focusing on our relationship with God, we come up with a list of rules that tells us "who's in and who's out" with God. That's exactly what the Pharisees were doing in John 8.

Jesus is in the courtyard teaching one morning when he is interrupted by an angry mob. This mob, made up of the religious leaders of his day, bursts in on Jesus with a woman in tow. She may have a sheet wrapped around her, or she may be naked; we're not sure. Someone shoves her to the ground in front of Jesus. One of the religious leaders spits out the accusation, "We found this woman in bed with a man that was not her husband. The Law says we stone her. What do you say?"

This was a pushy move by these Pharisees. They are using the rules to try to trap Jesus. Rules can do that to us, turn us into an angry mob of sorts. We might not parade a sinner around town, but we still feel angry—and even point it out to others—when someone gets away with something that's against the rules. That's not right! That's not fair! I play by the rules; so should they. They shouldn't get ahead by taking advantage of others or skirting the rules. Sound familiar?

This rule business is a tricky thing. This time last year we were working our way Sunday by Sunday through the Ten Commandments. There are some rules that God gives us that are for our own protection. They are good rules, and when we use them well, they lead us to joy-filled lives which is why we called the Ten Commandments "Signposts to Freedom."

But, none of us can follow the law perfectly. Every single one of us blows it. The real problem is not that we fall short; it's *why* we're trying to keep the rules in the first place. I'm afraid too many Christians in too many churches have somehow gotten the idea that following the rules is what makes you a Christian, that obeying the law perfectly is what makes you "okay" with God. We've got this formula in our heads that says, "rules = relationship." But, that formula is not found anywhere in scripture, not in the OT or the NT. And it's a good thing it's not.

For one thing, that kind of formula is exhausting and it makes us neurotic. If the relationship is dependent on how well I can keep the rules, then I am always

tense, always wondering if I'm good enough, if I'm doing enough, if I can ever be enough. It's no wonder that if this is how we present the Gospel, if this is what we make a relationship with Jesus to be, that people will leave church in droves. Nobody can keep this up. It just frustrates and wears people out.

Secondly, to equate rules with relationship doesn't inspire grace. Author Kyle Idleman who pastors a church in Louisville, Kentucky, tells the true story of something that happened during his senior year at the Christian high school he attended. His class had been preparing for months for a major chemistry test. On the day of the dreaded exam, the students filed in and as they received their test, Mr. Hollingworth, their chemistry teacher, told the students to read through the entire exam before beginning to take it. Kyle says that as he started reading the test, he realized he was in trouble, but after several pages, when he got to the end, this is what he read at the bottom: "You can try and make an 'A' by taking this test or you can just put your name on it and automatically receive an 'A'"

Kyle immediately signed his name, walked to Mr. Hollingworth's desk, laid his exam paper down and left the classroom. He found out later that one of the boys in the class, a kid named Patrick, didn't read through the test—he just started answering the questions—and despite most of the class turning in their tests within just a few minutes, poor Patrick never caught on.

Then there was Makayla who got very upset because she had spent so much time studying. What kind of a teacher gives an "A" for nothing, anyway? She stayed in the classroom and took the test on principle. If she was going to get an "A" she was going to earn it.

I think there are a lot of people filling church pews who are a lot like Makayla. Jesus says, my grace is all you need and it's free; I love you just because—there's nothing for you to earn; I've done all the work for you—my mercy and forgiveness are yours for the asking. For a follower, that's the best news in the world. But not for the fan. Because a fan wants to stay in control and not have to rely on God, a fan says, "I'm not taking any handouts. I can do this on my own." And so fans spend their lives carrying around the burden of religion, of trying to keep all the rules and earn their way to God.

The woman in John 8 is looking down—humiliated, guilty, and ashamed. She's been caught breaking the rules and this may be the day that breaking the rules costs her everything. Jesus kneels down and begins to write something in the dirt—we have no idea what. Meanwhile, the Pharisees are waiting. They know

they've caught Jesus by surprise, and they're ready to hear him submit to the letter of the law. They're waiting for him to shrug his shoulders and say, "Well, those are the rules."

Finally, Jesus looks up at those religious leaders and says, "If anyone of you is without sin, he can cast the first stone." And one by one these rule-keeping bullies drop their stones and walk away, leaving Jesus alone with the woman. "Is anyone left to condemn you?" he asks. Maybe she thought, "Well, there is still one. You might be the one to condemn me." And then Jesus says with pure love and tenderness, "Neither do I condemn you. You go now and leave your life of sin."

The grace of Jesus that saved that woman from being stoned is the same grace that calls to those who have been hauling around a long list of "do's and don'ts" and says, look, if you're tired of all that, you can set it down any time. If you're tired of pretending to be more than you are, if you're tired of dragging around the guilt and fear of never being enough, if you're tired of going through the religious motions that you've done for so long you can't even remember why you're doing them anymore, you can let it all go. Instead, "come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

Rules, divorced from relationship are exhausting. They don't inspire grace. And, finally, rules won't keep us around. Think for a minute about the relationship between two committed partners. When we love someone there are some rules that we agree to live by, some of them written, some unwritten. We agree to be faithful, to provide for one another's welfare, and to be supportive and committed in the good times and the bad. Then there are some rules that we learn as we go along—I am never to speak to my partner before their first cup of coffee. I will put my dirty socks in the laundry hamper rather than dropping them on the floor where I take them off.

If we saw our relationship as a bunch of rules that had to be kept, that wouldn't make for a very happy or harmonious relationship. But, because we love that person and we genuinely care about their welfare and happiness, we willingly put the seat down on the toilet or change the oil in the car or pack their lunch. Most of the time, those things are not burdensome rules; they are acts of loving sacrifice that we make willingly and joyfully. A relationship that becomes nothing but a bunch of rules to keep soon breeds resentment that kills the joy you once shared. And, usually, the relationship can't survive it.

For a follower, being a Christian is first and foremost, about loving God. If we love God we will want to please God. We care that our lives reflect the image of Christ to the world. We want our lives to honor God, to speak to the world about who God is and how much God cares about them. In the end, the grace and love of God frees us and inspires us to live for Christ. It's not about following a bunch of rules. It's about a relationship that changes us, because that's what love always does. Amen.