

Sermon August 9, 2015 Ephesians 4:25 - 5:2 "Rules For the New Life"

Rules for the new life. As was mentioned last week, the Christians in Ephesus were giving the apostle Paul a run for the money, as they competed with and criticized one another. This was especially true between the Jews who had become believers in Jesus and the Gentiles who had become Christian...there was a lot of conflict between them.

So Paul struggled to lay out the rules, with the hope that the rag-tag bunch of Christians could become united and strong as disciplined and faithful followers of Jesus.

The new life Jesus offered had as its foundation God's forgiveness of our sins. So the early church often attracted folks who had been making a living stealing and lying and cheating others. So when Paul ordered them to stop stealing and to get an honest job so that they could help others, and to stop using foul language, he was speaking to real challenges the church was facing. He was basically telling the church folks that they needed to RE-PATTERN their lives: Look to Jesus to clearly see God's love and learn how to imitate that love in your dealings with other people.

Now we who are Christians today may find ourselves in a bit of a quandary when it comes to trying to re-align our lives with the ways of Jesus. After all, most of us were probably brought up not to be wimps, but to defend ourselves if somebody tried to bully us. And we've been raised in a country that has made national defense a huge priority; we don't like it when another nation makes us feel weak or threatened. I can hear to this day my parents telling me, "Stand up for yourself! Don't let others walk over you!"

But along comes Jesus, with a totally different kind of teaching, one that can be really hard to deal with in our day and age. "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," "If someone strikes you on the cheek, offer him your other cheek." Whoa! This could get a person killed in Hartford!! In this society here in the USA where there is an average of more than 8750 murders by firearms every year, how can we see any sense in Jesus' teachings?

An old Persian legend tells of a certain king who needed a faithful servant and had to choose between two candidates for the office. He hired both at fixed wages and told them to fill a basket with water from a nearby well, saying that he would come in the evening to inspect their work. After dumping one or two buckets of water into the basket, one of the men said, "What is the good of doing this useless work? As soon as we pour the water in, it runs out the sides."

The other answered, "But we have our wages, haven't we? The use is the master's business, not ours."

"I am not going to do such a fool's work," declared the complainer. Throwing down his bucket, he went away.

The other man continued until he had drained the well. Looking down into it, he saw something shining at the bottom that proved to be a diamond ring. “Now I see the use of pouring water into the basket!” he exclaimed. “If the bucket had brought up the ring before the well was dry, it would have been found in the basket. Our work was not useless!” (p. 144, *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*, Green) Even when we wonder if following Jesus’ ways makes sense, God sees that there is value in it for us, whether we see it or not.

The other night I watched the 9:00 p.m. Republican debate, which featured the ten men whose poll numbers gave them a preferred status for the first debate of the series. One of the participants, John Kasich, who is presently governor of Ohio, surprised me several times with his rather compassionate stance. When asked about gay marriage, Kasich, who admits he is not supportive of it, offered the following statement: “Well, look, I’m an old-fashioned person here, and I happen to believe in traditional marriage. But I’ve also said the court has ruled...and I said we’ll accept it. And guess what, I just went to the wedding of a friend of mine who happens to be gay. Because somebody doesn’t think the way I do doesn’t mean that I can’t care about them or love them. So, if one of my daughters happened to be that (gay), of course I would love her, and I would accept her, because you know what, that’s what we’re taught when we have strong faith. Issues like that are planted to divide us... We need to give everybody a chance, treat everybody with respect, and let them share in this great American dream that we have....I’m going to love my daughters no matter what they do, because you know what? God gives me unconditional love, I’m going to give it to my family and my friends and the people around me.” Grace and the appreciation that we ALL rely on God’s grace came through louder than this man’s struggle with a difference of opinion.

Listen again to what Paul was saying, from *The Message* translation:

“Don’t grieve God. Don’t break his heart. His Holy Spirit, moving and breathing in you, is the most intimate part of your life, making you fit for himself. Don’t take such a gift for granted. Make a clean break with all cutting, backbiting, profane talk. Be gentle with one another, sensitive. Forgive one another as quickly and thoughtfully as God in Christ forgave you.” (Ephesians 4:30-32, *Message* trans)

And from the first two verses of Ephesians 5: “Watch what God does, and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents. Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with him and learn a life of prayer. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn’t love in order to get something from us but to give everything of himself to us. Love like that.” (Eph. 5:1-2, *Message*)

So here we are, members of the Body of Christ in 2015. Lots of people who say they are Christians spend a lot of energy cutting people down and telling them they’re going to hell and saying they’re not worthy to be part of the church. Lots of people who love to say they are Christian don’t seem to be all that concerned about the poor and the hungry. They seem more concerned about their own rights than they do about the welfare of the powerless in our world.

So what are we to do? According to Paul in verse 1 of Chapter 5, “Keep company with God

and learn a life of prayer.” Keep your eyes and hearts on Jesus.

William Willimon had a powerful comment about Paul’s teaching when he said, “Please note. Paul doesn’t tell these Ephesians to do all these good things in order to *be* Christians, but rather he tells them to do all these things because they *are* Christians. He urges them to do good things not to *become* Christian but because they *are* Christian....This text says not, “You ought to act like somebody.” It says, “You *are* somebody, so act like it!” (*Pulpit Resource*, vol. 43, No. 3, p. 27)

One more story, offered years ago by William Willimon: *The other day I watched a young man, home for the summer from college, as he worked on a building site. He has had no previous construction experience. Yet there he works, as a bricklayer, a beginning bricklayer to be sure, but still a bricklayer.*

“That young man’s quite a natural bricklayer,” said the proud foreman.

Now how did a young man, fresh out of college, learn to be a bricklayer in a month? Well, his father is a lifetime layer of bricks. When the foreman says that the young man is a “natural bricklayer,” he does so in the knowledge that the young man has watched his father lay brick all his life. He has the same physique, much the same personality as his father, therefore he really is a “natural bricklayer.”

*If it is true that in Jesus Christ, through baptism, all of us have been made God’s beloved children, then it is not so far-fetched to expect us to act somewhat like the Heavenly Father, even to “imitate God.” When we show unselfish love toward someone, it’s not so remarkable because, in Jesus, unselfish love has been shown toward us. When we are gracious toward brothers and sisters in the church, even those with whom we disagree or who offend us in some way, all we’re doing is imitating our parent, reflecting some of God’s graciousness in our own graciousness.... We don’t do this in order to get somewhere with God; we do these things because, in Christ, we already belong to God; God is with us. (Edited and somewhat altered from *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 43, No. 3, p. 28)*

To Recap the Rules for the New Life each of us is offered in Jesus Christ:
God loves us, God is with us, God has a claim on our lives, and because of God’s unconditional love for us, we can offer the same to others! We do not have to be afraid, because our Lord is always with us! Thanks be to God!! Amen.

Now we sing “You Are Mine,” # 2218. As we sing it, let it be God’s loving Offer to YOU.