

RULES! RULES! RULES!

There has always been a tension between rules and results. When I was little, I had a "Paint By Numbers" set. I am sure that many of you remember them. A set had a piece of white board, with lots and lots of little squiggly lines with numbers in between them. Each number corresponded to a color. Two was green and four was black and fifteen was red and so on. I had several of them over the years, because I really enjoyed doing them. And, if I do say so myself, I got rather good. The pictures of sailing boats and landscapes and horses came out reasonably well. I followed the rules and the results were fine. But I was no Picasso or Rembrandt

One thousand years before Christ, God gave Moses and the nation of Israel the Torah and the Ten Commandments. They were meant to show God's love and grace. They were meant to show what divine love looked like on earth. In time, however, they became a set of rules. In time, the nation of Israel came to believe that if they followed all the rules, they would be living a godly life. Further, by following all the rules, the life they lived was not bad. However, it was not the perfect, loving life that God wanted for them, or us.

As a young man, Paul followed all of Israel's rules. After his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus, however, he came to see his error. The way to God is NOT through following all the rules. In fact, exactly the opposite is true. Rules just show what a godly life is like. In Paul's letter to the Romans (12:9-16), we hear what sounds like a lot of rules. "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil." But these are not rules! This is the big picture of God's creation. This is Rembrandt painting on a blank canvas. Paul is describing what God's grace looks like. He is giving the Romans a way to gauge whether they are living as God would have them live. It is like viewing a speed limit as a gauge of whether we are driving safely instead an absolute number, beyond which we are breaking a rule. Paul is painting a picture of the Grace of God, a picture of life lived as God would have us live it.

Live life in the Spirit and the life Paul describes will just happen. We try so hard to make it so difficult. It isn't! "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things." (Galatians 5:22-23) That is what life looks like when we live life as God would have us.

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