

Love Rules

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on August 10, 2003
Scripture: Ephesians 4:25-5:2

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

A woman went to the deli counter in a grocery store – the kind where you pick up a number and wait to be called. No one was waiting in line so the woman walked directly up to the counter to place her order. The person behind the counter said, “Take a number and wait.” The woman said, “There’s no one else here.” “I’m sorry but that’s the rule.” So she picked up a number and the clerk called her. What a stupid rule when there’s no one waiting. There are lots of stupid rules. But not all rules are stupid. Our epistle lesson contains love rules – rules that enable us to love one another. Far from being stupid, they’re indispensable to the New Society. Saint Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, says God is creating. Open your Bible and let’s take a look at the six rules Paul spells out.

tell the truth but keep it soft

Love Rule 1. Putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another (verse 25). It’s an art to be honest without hurting people. The most common fibs are

~~told to avoid hurting feelings, like telling a friend she looks fine in a dress when you don’t think she does. In~~

work situations, lying is generally linked to stepping up the success ladder, for example, misrepresenting yourself on a resume (e.g., the ND coach scandal). Excuse making also is popular for explaining your lateness, why you parked in a no parking zone or why you didn’t get your homework done. As adults we may even come to believe that certain types of dishonesty are accepted, or even expected. But in God’s New Society all falsehood will be put away and we will speak the truth to one another in love.

Love Rule 2. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil (verse 26, 27). Anger is sometimes justifiable. There’s such a thing as righteous anger. Unfortunately a lot of us define righteous anger as *my anger* and unjustified anger as *your anger*.¹ But there’s something seriously wrong with us if we don’t get angry at child abuse, racism or poverty. Jesus got angry. He drove moneychangers from the temple because they were ripping off poor people. He condemned the Pharisees as a “brood of vipers” because of their hypocrisy. He declared those who put stumbling blocks before little ones to be better off drowned. But Jesus didn’t angrily curse the woman taken in adultery. He didn’t rage at Judas when he betrayed him. He didn’t angrily shout at Peter when he denied him. Jesus didn’t scream angrily at the

crowds calling for his crucifixion. On the cross Jesus said, "Father, forgive them." On Good Friday the sun did not go down on an angry Jesus.² Nasty, petty, malicious anger gives the devil a foothold in our community.

Maybe you've come to church feeling wronged. Don't hang on to your anger and give the devil a foothold.³
Guy Heger: Hold on to anger like drinking poison

Love Rule 3. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy (verse 28). In a recent NPR program the question was asked of an ethicist, Tom Morris, "Is it all right to take one grape from the produce aisle in the grocery store and eat it?"⁴ He responded that all the great ethical thinkers from Aristotle to Immanuel Kant have said that if you take a grape, you become a thief. Morris went on to say that nowadays ethics is basically about staying out of trouble. In other words, if you don't get caught don't worry about it. But, he said, ethics is about building strength and trust within your self, between people, and in organizations. If we can't be trusted with something little like a grape how can we be trusted with bigger more important things? Notice why we should work honestly: *so as to have something to share with the needy.* Of course we work to provide for our family, and ourselves but Paul doesn't want us to forget others less fortunate. A church that shares its wealth substantially with the needy is on the way to God's New Society.

Love Rule 4. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you (verse 29-32). It's a very comprehensive command. Don't let any evil talk come out of your mouths. *Evil* literally means 'decayed, rotten.'⁵ Sometimes we say, "Wasn't that a rotten thing to say?" meaning that what was said was mean and destructive. In God's New Society we avoid talk that tears down others. Instead, we speak only what's helpful for building others up. Why? – because we grieve the Holy Spirit (verse 30). 'Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.' After I baptize someone, I say, "Child of the covenant, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever." In baptism, God seals us by the Holy Spirit. Christ says to us, "You belong to me including your tongue." Are we able to

say that every word that came out of our mouth last week was calculated to build up others? How do we speak to our children or spouse or friends *or enemies*? Before we speak we are to *put away all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.* Words have tremendous power to build up or to destroy. Gossip and slander rip at the fabric of our communal life and can destroy churches. Who wants to be involved in a church filled with bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling and slander? The Gospel doesn't tear down people. It's meant to make us kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving because Christ's kindness and tenderheartedness has forgiven us.

Love Rule 5. Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (5:1-2). What does God want from us? Nothing less than to be Christ like; to be willing to give ourselves up; to put others before ourselves for the sake of Christ's New Society.⁶

Let me close with a brief story. There was a dying Benedictine monastery. The elderly monks had become discouraged. They couldn't understand why their community wasn't attractive to other people. Now in the woods outside the monastery there lived an old rabbi. People came from all over to talk to him about the presence of LORD in creation. Years went by and finally the abbot himself went into the woods telling his monks, "I've going out to speak to the rabbi." The old abbot felt humiliated that he, a Christian monk, was going to a Jewish rabbi. When the abbot found the rabbi's hut, the rabbi welcomed him with open arms. The abbot told the rabbi that his monks were good people but they weren't attracting anybody to the Gospel and the community was dying. "Do you have any insight into the work of LORD in their lives?" The rabbi replied, "I have the secret and I will tell you just once. You may tell the monks and then *none of you is ever to repeat it to one another.*" The rabbi looked at him long and hard and said, "The secret is that among you, in one of you, is the Messiah!" The abbot went back to his community and told his monks the secret. And as they began to search for the Messiah in one another and in themselves they grew spiritually. As each monk looked for the hidden Messiah in others and in themselves they began to imitate Christ. They put away falsehood. They refused to let the sun go down on their anger. They worked hard and shared with the needy in the town. They

built one another up. The love of Christ began to rule in the hearts. "From that day on, the whole community saw Christ in one another and began to flourish!"⁷

Grant, O Lord Jesus, that the ears which have heard the voice of your songs may be closed to the voice of dispute; that the eyes which have seen your great love may also behold your blessed hope; that the tongues which have sung your praise may speak the truth in love; that the feet which have walked in your courts may walk in the region of light; and that the bodies which have received your living body may be restored in newness of life. Glory to you for your inexpressible gift. Amen.

¹ Steve Midgely, Vicar, The Round Church of Great Saint Andrews, Cambridge, UK.

² Ibid.

³ Midgely

⁴ WHYY, National Public Radio, Thursday morning, August 7, 2003.

⁵ A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, σαρπος, "literally of spoiled fish... Of plants and their products... of decayed trees."

⁶ Midgely

⁷ Homiletics, August 11, 1991 -- Story told by Joan D. Chittister, OSB, *Living the Rule Today: A Series of Conferences on the Rule of Benedict* (Erie, Pa.: Benet Press, 1982), 98-99, as quoted on pp. 82-83 of Wolff-Walin.