



"What are rules for"

**Sermon by Rev. Doug Throckmorton**  
**Galatians 3:23-29**

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We made a new friend several years ago, and we fell in love with her. She was a storyteller like none we had ever heard in our lives.

She spoke quietly, her soft voice inviting one's close attention. She described things with a rich imagination that even if a handful of roadside weeds was sticking out of a jar on a table in front of the pulpit from which she was preaching, we soon were, as she spoke to us, gazing at a bouquet of lovely wildflowers and appreciating how this gift from God was intended to gladden our lives.

She saw more deeply into life, in a simple — not simplistic, not a simpleton, simply deep, in depth — and carried us along on her vision.

She told us her stories and we learned about life in this world that God loved, the world we were living in; she opened our eyes to see it more clearly. We all loved her because she led us into our better selves with her stories.

We recognized also that a respectful, respecting love — appreciation, something more than just tolerance — was emerging as a bonding agent that held together in some sort of remarkable community "a most amazing, diverse" grouping of people.

We were really a varied crew of church attenders who gathered every Sunday morning to hear her stories. Fiercely independent, free thinkers, skeptics, curmudgeons, true believers, far Right, way Left, happy, sad, hopeful, hurting, haughty, humble — what in the world could bond a bunch like this together, other than a love that transcended our diversity holding before us a higher cause, an appreciation, a service, a ministry?

No it wasn't Camelot—don't let me exaggerate. But there was a love that enabled us to understand, to appreciate, even to support each others gifts and recognize them as special gifts. And work with each other, as each one cared to do, to reach out to share this love with others.

No, our friend didn't bring the love. Our friend just nurtured the love. The love was already there. In a place like that, in a group like that, the love is there because one way or another God has planted it there.

Jesus kinda starts the ball rolling down the alley when he says "The really great law, the summary of the laws, is love God with your whole being, your everything. AND Love your neighbor as yourself."

And that's the point I want you to help me find this morning. Somehow, in any church, in every congregation, it's recognizing the love God has planted there that makes the whole thing work, this business of church.

OK preacher, it's wake up time! There is a world out there, right outside those big heavy doors. A world of hurt, a world of pain, a world of disappointment, a world where people are not nice to each other. A world where people take advantage of each other, and lie, and cheat, and steal, and do all sorts of irresponsible self-centered things. And they will take advantage of you, they will hurt you, they will not be nice to you if they get the chance. And you can have your love stuff if you want, but me...I WANT LAWS! I WANT RULES! I want some order to protect me and see to it that I get treated nicely, respected, protected. That's what rules are for. Rules are to make people be nice to each other...aren't they?

Without rules people don't be nice to each other, right? You gotta have em! Stop signs, traffic lights, lane markings, Can't have people driving into each other. Need rules.

Respect people's property. Can't have people taking each other's stuff all the time. Don't steal my car, my bike, my money. Gotta have rules! Make people be nice to each other. Yeah we do.

Even the Bible has rules, to let people know how to be nice to each other. It works — sorta — most of the time.

For everybody? I asked, For everybody?

Yeah, well the rules are needed. I had a good friend who evangelized for the United World Federalists. He and his wife have a wing named after them on the headquarters building in Washington D.C. They argued convincingly that the only way people all over the world would ever live in peace and unafraid was in a world under law and everyone agreeing to live by those laws. So that would work for everybody?

Every time I start trying to think about it I stumble over this kind of new phrase, Privilege, most recently, White privilege. And white privilege sounds so awful, so unfair. The words EQUAL and Privilege just don't seem to fit together in the same sentence. And white privilege — I can recognize what advantages white privilege has meant in my life. In fact, I can recognize how it has made all the difference in the world in my life. And I know that I didn't have a lot to do with it. I was white privileged. It was done to me by my white parents, in my white community, schools, etc. etc.

But I really kinda, sorta, plain out downright know that white privilege is NOT a good thing. White privilege is a BAD thing. But most of the people I associate with, who

are advantaged by white privilege, are not bad people. They are good people. They are most of you. And I would call most of you good people. Benefiting from a privilege you did not consciously seek. How does that work? And what does it have to do with rules?

Here is my postulate. Do rules work for everybody? My conclusion: It depends on who's got the bread.

Let me tell you my story of how I came to understand both white privilege and how rules work according who is making them, and it's not a story I am really very proud of.

Several weeks ago I was volunteering in the church kitchen as I pretty regularly do. Barb or Sue have the bread dough made and rising when I get there and I shape it into loaves, bake it, slice it, and serve it.

The lunch had gone well. The dough was "fool proof" and had turned out quite tasty, especially near the center where the sprinkling of herbs and seasoning was concentrated. Personally, I rather admired the well-rounded crust that formed around the edges. It was a Focacia bread. A raised sheet bread.

The lunch was over. I had divided the remaining bread into four or five bags and was twisty-tying them, when a young woman came to the pass-through window and asked if there was any bread left. She said she liked especially the part with the sprinkle on it. She was having difficulty choosing just the exact words she wanted, so, reflecting back now I assumed she was, what's the phrase? "Not from around here." I was the person with the

bread. I like to think I am a nice person. That's kind of my default setting. I carefully chose for her what I thought looked like the very best package of bread. The bread with the nicely raised, rounded, crispy crust.

As I handed it to her she attempted to ask if there was a package with more ... something???. Please don't quiz me about the rest of this. I said to her, "It's all the same." A voice from behind me echoed, "Yes, it's all the same."

Then the young black woman said "Oh!" Took the bread, and thanked us, and left.

Slowly my white privileged, male (probably entered in there too) conscience asked me, "What did you just do? You, wanting to be Mr. Nice Guy, chose FOR HER, what you determined BY YOUR STANDARDS, what you thought was the nicest-looking and tasting piece of bread. You didn't lay them all out there and give her a chance to choose the one she preferred. You were the person with the bread! You got to make the rules!

And slowly I began to understand how something so bad as white privilege is so insidiously bad for all of us, even though those of us who don't think twice about benefiting from its built-in advantages don't think of ourselves a bad people.

And I realized at the same time why rules are not really the preferred facilitators for making people be nice to each other, because it depends on who is making the rules how "being nice" gets defined.

THE PERSON WHO HAS THE BREAD MAKES THE RULES!

Wasn't it George Bernard Shaw who demurred on the Golden Rule saying, "Please don't do unto me as you would have me do unto you. We may have different tastes."

You see, love has to include respect. And respect has to include trust, and if one takes time to check in on those things with another before treating them as they would want to be treated — that all takes time and effort. Rules are faster!

An immigration official was being interviewed on TV. "I just enforce the law," he said.

The interviewer said, "but the people you arrest are being detained in inhumane conditions after you arrest them."

"I just enforce the law," he replied.

Rules are to make people be nice to each other. Don't we need to look more closely at whose "Nice" is being served by those rules?

The Southern Baptists in their Annual Conference recently, struggled mightily with the question of "How do we stop this far-too-frequent sexual abuse committed by our MALE, (they are all male, by the rules) pastors?" While adamantly refusing to address their rules forbidding women to preach to men, or preach at all, on Sunday. "Congregants prefer to hear the gospel proclaimed by a MALE voice, AMEN."

It's the rule?

The Catholic Church issued a proclamation just in time for Pride month, clarifying that children may not choose their

gender identity. In order to prevent confusion they must submit to the gender identification with which God created them. What kind of a confusing clarification is that? I ask on behalf of my transgender great grandson.

The person who has the bread makes the rules.

Just this past week, Minnesota Methodists meeting up in St. Cloud voted overwhelmingly to act against the recently adopted rules of the Methodist denomination world wide. They said, in effect, "We choose love, respect, an inclusive stance which is more important than RULES. We are going to do unto others...but we are going to be sure we respect how they wish to be done by."

"...Before the time for faith came the Law kept us all locked up as prisoners....The Law was in charge of us until Christ came in order that we might then be put right with God through faith. Now that time for faith is here. The law is no longer in charge of us."

Wait a minute! What am I supposed to do with this bread? I don't want to leave you on a sad note, but what happened to our new friend whom we still love so very much?

For some reason, she, or some folks who had her ear, decided things would move more smoothly in the church if some simple rules were put in place to bring a little sense of order to this incredibly diverse, wildly-free thinking, ruggedly independent, group of lovers and doers of Christ's mission in that place and throughout the world.

The rules started poking in like the swords on the Magicians box, only this time

each sword as it got shoved in was felt, and brought pain. And soon the pain in the box became unbearable, and the love fled.

And now we are told, our storyteller is gone. And the people? They are trying to get the love back. Jesus said, "Love one another, as I have loved you." Share that privilege! Amen.