

In my home, when I was growing up I didn't have specific rules that I was told repeatedly to follow. But since I was child #4 and my parents had already been married 15 years, there were many unspoken rules I caught on to as I grew up. One of those was - Don't mess up the kitchen!

My home was pretty traditional, so since the first three kids were boys, Mom had gotten used to taking care of everything when it came to food planning, preparation & clean up. Though I might have been expected to help in the kitchen if I had been the firstborn as a girl, by the time I came along, the unspoken rule was "Don't mess up the kitchen!." Everything had its place and if I used something, it was to be cleaned immediately and put away so it looked exactly the way it did before. I probably gave my Mom ulcers when I was in high school and started a habit of making brownies to take to school the next day for my tall flag team and other friends at 11:00 p.m. at night. Though the "kitchen was closed" I was awake and finally had the space to myself so I thought it was a great plan to bake at that hour.

I'm sure my Mom groaned in the mornings when this or that would be either out of place or not cleaned quite the way she would have done it.

You might have had clear rules lined out for you growing up. Maybe you're thinking of those right now. Or maybe you had many unspoken rules you found out about when you did something wrong.

Most rules are meant to keep us safe. But sometimes they wind up tempting us instead. Like the common story Sharon Brandenberger shared about her daughter - when Sharon told her daughter as a child not to touch the oven because it was hot and would burn her, her daughter just had to try it and - yep, there they went to the emergency room with a bad burn on the hand. There the doc said, "Well, you see next time!" - realizing this child was bound to test more boundaries in the near future.

As we've been moving through the 1st half of the Old Testament in this seven part sermon series, today we're looking at Leviticus, which is all about the laws or rules God laid down for his people in the very beginning.

Last week we talked about the book of Exodus where God first gave his people, the Israelites, the 10 commandments as the first set of rules and

extended his original covenant with Abraham. The original covenant, or unconditional promise, was that Abraham's descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and would be God's people. Then in Exodus God extended that covenant by calling them to be a nation in relationship with him - a new political entity of people following specific laws that would set them apart from every other people group.

These sermons build on each other, so if you need to catch up on any of these sermons since the first one May 1st, you can watch on our YouTube channel or the transcripts are on our website under "Sundays".

Today, though, in Leviticus, God takes those 10 commandments and expands them to very, very specific rules - he "Lays Down the Law."

Steve Dempster told me last week that in preparing for leading the Children's Time he read further into Exodus than just our Bible passage for worship. I love that. I encourage you also to read more of Leviticus for yourself this next week than just the 5 verses we heard today. If you have a study Bible, the notes there will help you understand more of what you read.

But if you would read more of Leviticus, you'll see that it's chock full of instructions about the life and practice of being God's people - the Israelites. Though it has 27 chapters, there are only 3 narratives or stories. The rest are very detailed instructions like 19:32 - "You shall rise before the aged and defer to the old."

Some of you are saying - Yeah - that's a good one! But before you get excited about making that instruction a firm rule, realize there are many others like in 19:27, "You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard." Choosing to claim the first instruction about the aged, but not this second about grooming is called Proof Texting and is something most mainline churches try to avoid in their theology or understanding of God & life as explained in the Bible.

A few weeks ago in my sermon I asked if anyone had read through the whole Old Testament front to back. I think there were one or two who nodded yes. I think most of us who sit down to read the Bible from front to back get to about Exodus 25 and either get discouraged, or confused or frustrated

and then we stop. If you did read through the rest of Exodus and all of Leviticus, though, you'd see that there is almost no aspect of life that isn't regulated there by some law - the food to eat, what clothes to wear, business practices, how we treat others and yes... physical intimacy and sexuality is addressed quite a bit. Because of Leviticus, a new group of scholars was created just to know and interpret the laws - they were called Pharisees in Jesus' day, but they were basically lawyers.

Did you know there is a guy named A. J. Jacobs who, a few years ago, decided to try to follow all the laws to the letter and wrote a book about it called "The Year of Living Biblically", with a subtitle of "One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible". In fact, when I looked up the year it was published - 2008 - I saw they also made it into a TV series on CBS called "Living Biblically". The description in Amazon is hilarious -

"Raised in a secular family, but increasingly interested in the relevance of faith in our modern world, Jacobs decided to dive in headfirst and attempt to obey the Bible as literally as possible for one full year. He vowed to follow the Ten Commandments. To be fruitful and multiply. To love his neighbor. But also to obey the hundreds of less publicized rules; like avoiding wearing clothing made of mixed fibers; playing a ten-string harp; and stone sinners - which his version of that was sheepishly throwing pebbles at certain people."

The reality is that most of us pick and choose which Biblical laws to emphasize - which isn't a bad practice. In fact, Jesus is asked in Matthew 22 to name the Greatest commandment. Jesus doesn't say - "they are all equally important - follow them all just as they are written", no he makes two selections. He says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (which comes from Deuteronomy 6:5) and, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (from Leviticus 19:18).

There are sections in Leviticus about being honest in business, impartial in judgment and mindful of the elderly and the poor - of course these laws make sense for us today. But there are some that can be easily used as a politicians speaking stump - like Leviticus 19:34 "The foreigner who resides with you shall be to you as a citizen among you; you shall love

the foreigner as yourself, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt." Or like Leviticus 19:26 "You shall not practice augury or witchcraft" and some would use that in support of banning books like Harry Potter or the Wizard of Oz. Though no one seems to be worried about Leviticus 19:19 "you shall not put on a garment made of two different materials" or Leviticus 19:26 - "You shall not eat anything with its blood"- especially when deciding whether to have steak cooked rare or well done.

But what's the REASON for all these laws? God tells his people there in Leviticus - "I am the Lord your God - do not do as they did in the land of Egypt that I brought you out of - or as they do in the land of Canaan where I am bringing you - do not follow their laws."

By describing specifically how God wanted his people to live, we also see how the other nations were living just the opposite - that their gods, with a little g, and there were many little gods - their gods permitted or commanded them to live opposite ways. But the One true God was saying - I care for you so much, I want to communicate clearly what I expect. I want you to know me and I want to know you. No more guessing how to be in relationship. I AM the God of Israel - I can be known and want to be known. The little gods of other nations - it can't be known what they require - it's trial and error.

But our God didn't play games and wasn't unreachable. Our God laid out his regulations as clearly as possible - and they were meant to protect and keep his people more safe. That was the message.

Unfortunately, as God continued to be in relationship with his people since these laws were given, it became obvious how impossible it was for us to follow them. In fact, when we look at the laws today, instead of motivating us to be obedient, they turn us off from taking this part of scripture seriously. We throw up our hands and say, "What's the point?" These rules don't apply to life today. Rather than bringing us to repentance, they make us feel disconnected and feel that God is out of touch.

So - as the story we know so well goes - God became human to see what we see, feel what we feel, walk with us and connect us permanently to Him in relationship. God's unconditional love for us, His

grace, perfected the law and made it complete. So
now we no longer live under law, but by the grace of
God through Jesus the Christ.