



“Rules For a New Life”

**Brenda Loreman
Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California**

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Ephesians 4:25–5:2 (NRSV)**

When my friend Valerie’s now-grown children were small, I used to admire how well-behaved they were and how well they seemed to get along—in public, anyway. Valerie told me her secret was that she kept the rules simple, straightforward, and few in number. “There’s only three rules for anything,” she told me. “For example, there are three rules for squealing: they may squeal on each other only if someone is about to get seriously hurt, if something is about to be broken, or if something is on fire. Otherwise, they have to work it out on their own.”

Like my friend Valerie, the Bible offers guidelines for behavior that are intended to make it easier for us to live in community with each other and to maintain a relationship with the one we call our parent. Unfortunately, over the several thousands of years of their development, those rules have gotten more complicated, rather than simple and straightforward, and following them all can seem like a daunting task, rather than an easy one.

Just ask A. J. Jacobs, the editor-at-large from *Esquire* magazine, who decided to follow all the rules in the Bible over a period of one year. Yes, all of them. As he details in his book *The Year of Living Biblically*, Jacobs scoured the Bible for every rule, guideline, and behavioral suggestion, and wrote them all down. There were 72 pages’ worth, or something like 700 rules. And Jacobs—who grew up as an agnostic in a decidedly secular Jewish family—attempted to take them all as literally as possible, from the famous rules like the Ten Commandments and “Love your neighbor,” to the lesser known rules from Leviticus, like “You shall not trim the corners of your beard” and “You shall not marry your wife’s sister.” This last rule was especially easy for Jacobs to follow, since his wife doesn’t have a sister. But other rules were absurdly difficult to abide by in modern society, such as the prohibition against uttering the name of any other god; consider the fact that our days of the week are named after Norse and Roman deities.

Now, part of Jacobs’ goal in attempting such an experiment was to point out the absurdity of taking the Bible so literally, to confirm his suspicion that people who claim to follow the Bible literally merely pick and choose the rules they want to follow, and follow the parts of the Bible that fit their own agenda—whether they were on the right or

the left end of the political spectrum.¹ What Jacobs didn't expect to have happen, however, was to discover how life-enhancing some of the biblical rules can be. A devoted workaholic, Jacobs discovered how beautiful and glorious keeping the Sabbath can be. Giving thanks reminded him how often things go right in our lives. And refraining from gossip made him realize how often our conversations include negative speech about others.

The rules we find in today's reading from Ephesians were no doubt among those 72 pages of rules on Jacobs' list, and it is likely that Jacobs struggled a bit with consistently abiding with them. I know I certainly have. Although I don't tend to be an angry person, I have certainly allowed the sun to go down on my anger, and I know my words do not always give grace to all who hear them. I would also be willing to bet that each one of us has struggled with the concept of forgiveness at some point in our lives. It's not easy to live in community. This passage from Ephesians acknowledges this.

It's interesting to consider that most scholars agree that Ephesians was probably not written by Paul, but by one of his disciples. Many scholars also believe that, despite its title, the letter was not written to a specific church, but was meant as a sort of open letter that was appropriate for any of the early churches. Paul's authentic letters, such as those to the churches at Philippi and Corinth, always address the specific behaviors that were problematic in a particular congregation. If Ephesians is an open letter, it is acknowledging that we *all* have trouble with anger and bitterness and negative speech, and it is a reminder to us all that we need to take on those behaviors that build up the community and strengthen our relationships.

This sounds simple enough, and on one level, it is. But if we only look at this text as merely a list of rules for good behavior, then I think we're missing the deeper, life-enhancing point of this passage. A clue comes in the three lines that precede this section. Verses twenty-two through twenty-four read, "You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, [...] and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness." The image of taking off the old self and clothing ourselves in the new self is a direct reminder of what happened during the ritual of baptism in the ancient church.

Although there are varied accounts of the baptismal rite, most ancient sources offer fairly similar descriptions of how the early church practiced baptism. After a period of instruction and fasting, a new convert would strip off his or her clothing, symbolizing the shedding of the old life, would be anointed with oil, and would be totally immersed in the baptismal waters. The newly baptized would then be offered a new garment of white, and be welcomed into the community of faith. For the early church, this powerful ritual symbolized a person essentially dying and being reborn.²

¹ <http://www.ajjacobs.com/books/yolb.asp?id=excerpt>

² Paul Bradshaw, *Early Christian Worship* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press), 24.

For the early Christians, then, the guidelines offered in Ephesians are not just rules for behavior in community, but rules for living as the baptized—having been reborn through their baptism, they were truly beginning a new life, a life created in the likeness of God and dedicated to the ministry of Christ.

If you were baptized as an adult believer in a tradition that practices immersion, then you may have experienced something very close to those ancient Christians. For many of us in the mainline Protestant church, however, having been sprinkled with water as an infant, our own baptismal rites were a far cry from that ancient one. But though the modern ritual may be streamlined and simplified, its power and meaning in our lives is not.

Water is a symbol that has what my Christian Worship professor Andrea Bieler would call “sacramental permeability.” This is her fancy way of saying that water is a holy symbol that is present in our physical life and that offers a many-layered way to experience the sacred. Just as water inhabits our very bodies and is necessary for life, the grace we have received through baptism is ever-present and accessible to us. Each contact with water, be it washing our hands, or bathing, or walking in the rain, or swimming in the ocean, can be a reminder of our baptism and an opportunity to mindfully consider that we are given new life through our relationship with Christ Jesus.

The more we are mindful of our baptism, the more able we are to “put away” those behaviors that keep us from our relationship with God, that keep us from imitating Christ, and that keep us from living in true community with our brother and sisters. The more we are mindful of our baptism, the better able we are to clothe ourselves in right speech, in generosity, in kindness, and tenderheartedness.

Towards the end of our text from Ephesians, there is a wonderful play on words that you miss if you don’t know Greek—or don’t have a Bible with good footnotes. In Greek the word *kind* is *chrēstoj*, an aural pun on *Christos*, the Greek word for Christ. So when the apostle says, “be kind to one another,” he is essentially saying, “Be Christ to one another.” If, like my friend Valerie, I wanted to simplify the rules in Ephesians, this would be the way I’d do it. There would be just one rule: *Be Christ to one another*. Be Christ to one another: live fully into the grace present through baptism. Be Christ to one another: know deeply who you are and to whom you belong. Be Christ to one another: welcome the stranger and the outcast. Be Christ to one another: heal the sick and feed the hungry. My friends, this is the good news of the gospel: every day is an opportunity to be renewed through remembering our baptism, to recall our relationship with God, and to live in love as Christ loved us. Thanks be to God. Amen.