

Did you have rules growing up, at home or at school, that you couldn't make sense of, or made you want to rebel? Oh, I can remember some. Let me tell you about this small Christian college I attended, where we weren't permitted to go barefoot in the student union building, no shorts anywhere except in the gym or during intramural sporting events; beard and hair length restrictions. The women really had it bad: no slacks or jeans anywhere on campus except on Saturdays. On Sundays at lunch in the school cafeteria, women had to wear dresses- which they would have done anyway if they had come from church, but even if they hadn't attended worship services, still *it would look like they had*. Of course, there were skirt length rules, I think two inches above the knee- you should have seen the cheerleaders' outfits! But even these rules were better than the old days at that school when women were forbidden to wear polka dots, because it made men want to poke, and a coed couldn't sit in a chair vacated by a male student until it had cooled down.

Rules and laws are important. I'm glad we have them. I suppose they make us safer, although the people who broke into my house and stole my camera and stereo and TV, or the other thieves who broke into my storage building and took golf clubs and tools, or the people who stole either of my pickups, have never been

caught. And even though I try to obey the laws, I hate waiting at a traffic light late at night when no one is coming. There must be a good reason for a law. And regulations must not simply protect the status quo, but must benefit all citizens as much as possible, members of whatever society they are part of, whether a conservative little private college scared to death of alcoholic beverages and female flesh, or a powerful, prosperous nation, that in some periods of its existence, has attempted to outlaw different ways of expression and silence different peoples and groups lifestyles. Or even a church that may want to keep its members thinking alike. I'm sure you know of some congregations where faithful Christians were invited to leave because they didn't fit exactly in the mold.

But who gets to choose which church rules we must abide by, and who interprets the biblical commandments? Let's just take for granted that none of us will perfectly obey all the laws, so each of us should give every other one of us a break, and understand and forgive and remember that what the other does wrongly is no worse than the wrong thoughts I have and the wrong actions that I do. Let's look at our list, these "works of the flesh" in verses 19-21: are you ever angry? that is just as sinful as sexual sin; are you ever jealous of someone else's success or possessions? just as bad as if you had gone out drinking and listening to loud

music. In other places, just as here, Paul equates what we would usually think are the big sins to little things like gossip or envy. What makes these big and little sins wrong is that they show a lack of concern for other people.

Here is what we need to keep in mind: that rules are not put in place just to make us toe the line, or even to keep us on the straight and narrow. Rules and laws and commandments are made and given *to help us live together*. In the Christian society we call the church, we live as a community, and rules are the boundaries of our words and thoughts and deeds may not cross, and they exist for the benefit of the other persons in the community of faith. So, this list of “don’ts” in verses 19-21 is not an arbitrary list, nor is it a complete one, but merely a beginning point-examples of kinds of behavior that do not display the love that one follower of Jesus should have for another. Look at what verse 14 tells us, “the entire law is fulfilled in this one word, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” All the rules and commandments of relationship between God and God’s people, and between God’s person and another person, are founded upon God’s love for each of us. And if it is relationships that are so important, we should be cautious in making judgments that certain kinds of sins are worse than others; what is more damaging to a brother or sister, or the entire community, than a prejudicial mindset

that thinks another person is a lesser Christian, or that I have “special” insight or know the better way? That is the meaning of some of these words in our list like, dissension and party spirit. Behind them is the idea that I am better and smarter and closer to God and to the truth than you. It is a denial of the fact of God’s love and grace for those who are unlike me.

Now, it may seem like this is a sermon we don’t need to hear at First Christian. We are small; we all get along very well. Let me tell you, as your minister I am so grateful for the spirit of humility and togetherness I feel in this place. But this message still is one we need to hear and remember, because it is a big world out there and many people don’t agree with you or me in so many aspects of our lives. I want to say this kindly and delicately. There are Christians whom you will never agree with politically; Christians think all along the political spectrum, from ultra-conservative to ultra-liberal, and it is sin to think that only those on my end of the spectrum are right with God. Followers of Jesus should simply get past that! We do not have to agree about everything, but we must agree to love one another, and think and behave in a manner that builds up the community of faith and builds up relationships within the community- not just our individual congregations, but within our denomination all around the country, and

between all denominations, build up relationships and love one another because one group does not have the right to demonize another. Think back; you've seen it happen. And those who do such things- party spirit, dissension, strife, anger and selfishness- "shall not inherit the kingdom of God," as our passage says. That kind of attitude tears down the unity of believers, which should be bigger than almost anything else in all of Christendom. Jesus Christ died for each of us, and he died for all of us, not just for those of us with powerful friends and loud voices.

There is a word in verse 19 we should note: the works of the flesh are *plain*. That doesn't mean only that these works are obviously wrong or sinful, but more, that they are visible. People see the sinful deeds and attitudes, the world sees and Christian witness is impaired; brothers and sisters see, and the fellowship of God's people is fractured. That is the reason that these "works of the flesh" are things we must not do, and attitudes we must not possess, for those who think and do like this have decided that other people God loves are of little account, and so God's work in Jesus Christ to call all people to himself, to forgive and save and love, is seen as a little thing. But what we want is to display righteous deeds and the same attitude of selflessness our Lord displayed in his life on this earth.

But the “fruit of the Spirit” is love and peace and kindness, etc. Let us remember that the “graces” in this second list of our passage are not things to make us super-Christians, nor things only super-Christians can do, but are like the ingredients in a recipe that are mixed together and make one thing: a community of people whose focus in life is the praise of God as they love one another. And in loving, of course, to grow closer to one another, but also in loving one another- and *only in loving one another-* to grow closer to God in Jesus Christ, who has shown us by his words and actions what loving means.

Freedom begins our passage. We love that word, don't we, and the idea behind it, that people have privileges and freedoms which governments have no right to infringe upon? But we as the church of Jesus Christ should develop an even wider and larger concept of freedom. The Declaration of Independence states that all people are “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights,” inspired words, and a stirring rationale for representative government. But it is not enough for the church. The church believes that freedom is a gift from God through Jesus, (through his bondage and sacrifice) “Christ has set us free,” verse 1 of this chapter; and verse 13, “you were called to freedom.” But let's continue the thought of the

Apostle, “do not use your freedom for selfish purposes, but through love be servants of one another.” In the church, freedom cannot be associated with mere individuality, but is expressed within the context of the community for which our Lord died; where freedom is defined by the love we have for one another, where every person is important because each of us is the servant of everyone else. That concept would surely change the manner by which some religious leaders wield authority, and the way some so casually condemn those who disagree with their interpretations of scripture. Freedom is not in doing what we want, not even what we think is right, but is displayed in what we do for others. The whole law is fulfilled in one word, “You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself.” Let us have a little humility. Let us practice this graciousness which comes from God, the fruit of the Spirit that abides within us: love and peace and patience and kindness. And let us rejoice because Christ has called us to be free, free to worship him, and free to love one another.