

"The Rule of Love"

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⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

¹²"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another." (John 15:9-17)

For more than 400 years, we Presbyterians have ascribed to a guideline of scriptural interpretation called the "Rule of Love." The rule holds that the commandments that Jesus designated as "the greatest" (that we must love our God and love our neighbor) should also be our greatest guides for understanding the Bible. Therefore, if someone offers an interpretation of scripture that is not loving... if someone, for example, were to claim that scripture suggests something contemptuous, degrading, or dismissive of another person... then that interpretation must be wrong.¹ Because the revelation of God in Christ establishes that God is love, the revelation of the God in the written Word cannot be understood in ways that contradict that love.

In one of the most beloved parts of the New Testament, Paul applied a similar rule of love to our human relationships. We read the passage at weddings, but Paul seemed to be more concerned about how people in the church were acting when he wrote:

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

Paul's ethical rule of love is clearly rooted in the repeated admonitions of Jesus in the gospel of John that we "love one another." "I give you a new commandment," Jesus says, "that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (John 13:34). For Jesus, for Paul, and for believers across the centuries, it is impossible to deny that Christians are called to abide, in all things, to the Rule of Love.

Jesus is clearly pushing this rule in this passage from the 15th chapter of John. It comes from a section of the gospel that is often described as the "Farewell Discourse" — an extended monologue in which Jesus passes on final instructions, hopes, and encouragements to the people who will be responsible for building his church. The discourse begins and ends with love. "Having loved his own who were in the world, Christ

¹ Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr. *Christian Doctrine, Revised Edition*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 13.



loved them to the end" (13:1). And his prayer, when all was said and done, was that God's known would be made known to these people he had known and loved, "so that the love with which God had loved [him] might be in them, too (17:26). These words of love are clearly meant for Jesus' friends.

When he uses this word to describe the disciples, it is clear that his relationship with them has changed. It is more than it was. In his words, there is a ***sharing*** — Christ has shared with them everything he has heard from God the Father. There is a ***lifting*** – for the disciples have been elevated from servant or student status, to the point that they are now called “friends” and colleagues with Christ. There is a ***choosing***, just as all true friends must choose one another in some way. And last, but certainly not least, there is a ***calling***, as Christ links his command to love with an expectation and hope that we will live in ways that spread his love and share it with others.

Interestingly enough, our youth were just talking about Christian friendship this past Sunday afternoon. After exploring some of the things that Proverbs has to say about friendship, the youth divided into groups to write their own proverbs about friends. One group framed theirs as a cheer: “Friends are good, friends are great, we have friends. Celebrate!” Another group said “Friends will help you no matter what is the situation.” Perhaps another group was channeling Proverbs 18:24, which says “Some friends play at friendship, but a true friend sticks closer than one’s nearest kin.” They said “Friends come and go... but a best friend is like an octopus that attaches to your face.” As Jesus said, “a little child shall lead them...”

It reminds me of a story I once heard about a backpack program that was very similar to the one that we have with Coltrane Webb Elementary. One Friday afternoon, the mother of one of the children who received a weekly backpack was watching out the window for her child's bus. She saw her son get off the bus with his friend. As the bus pulled away, her son knelt down and opened up his pack of food. He took it all out and lined it up on the ground. And then he helped load half of the food into his friend's backpack. When he came through the front door, his mom asked him what he had been doing. He told her that his friend needed some extra food, too. Word of the gift made its way back to the school guidance counselor, who arranged for extra food to be sent in the little boy's bag, food that could be shared, until they enrolled the little neighbor in the program officially.² “*No one has greater love than this,*” Jesus says, “*to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.*”

Some have wondered if love can really be called love when it is commanded.³ True love, we might imagine, is something given freely, not something mandated by rule. It is a legitimate question, but one thing that helps me is to remember that Jesus, in this command, seems to be talking more about the *why* than the *what*. “*I am giving you these commands **so that** you may love one another,*” Jesus says. He seems less concerned about the commanded action than he is with where that action may lead us.⁴

I once heard Tony Campolo tell a story about a pastor friend of his who was called to a small church in Indiana. Arthur Forbes was a member of that small church. Arthur Forbes, God bless him, was an unattractive, unpleasant, and difficult man who smoked constantly and never bathed. He always came to church, but he was always late. He often talked

² <http://www.ekklesiaproject.org/blog/2015/05/what-is-love/>

³ Barry Chance, <http://jointhefeast.blogspot.com/2009/04/may-17-2009-john-159-17-barry-chance.html>

⁴ <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2012/05/commands-to-love-or-commands-in-order.html>

through the whole service, and — perhaps his gravest offense — he never sat in the same place twice. Arthur Forbes was not an easy man to like, let alone love.

One Sunday, Arthur wasn't in church. The next day he called the church and asked for a visit. So the pastor went to visit Arthur Forbes. When he knocked on the door of the dilapidated shack, no one came to the door. A gruff voice from deep inside just barked at him to come in. The pastor opened the door and stepped into a darkened room. The shades were pulled down. The only light was from an old black-and-white television set flickering in a corner. There was filth everywhere. The stench was horrible. And there in the middle of it all, sitting on a chair with most of the stuffing hanging out, was old Arthur Forbes.

"I've come to bring you communion," the pastor said, "and to pray with you."

"Forget the communion," Arthur growled back. "Just pray!"

It wasn't easy, but the pastor prayed with Arthur Forbes. And after that day, he forced himself to visit Arthur regularly. Every time he visited, the pastor would do a little something to help – he straightened up, mowed the grass, did the dishes, went through the mail and helped pay the bills.

One hot August day, the pastor came to the door and the normal gruff voice told him to come in. When the pastor entered the room, he noticed that Arthur was sitting in his old beat up chair – without any clothes on. It was, the pastor remembered, a repulsive sight. But Arthur was as brash and unapologetic as always. "I'm hot," he said. He demanded that he receive communion. The pastor forced himself to comply, but his hands shook with anger as he gave the bread and wine to Arthur Forbes.

The next day, the pastor came back to make sure Arthur was OK. There was no answer at the door. When he let himself in, he found Arthur Forbes' naked body lying in middle of the floor. The pastor called 911, and then called a friend. The friend came over, and the two of them pulled the filthy, smelly man up on his feet. They sponged him off and got him dressed before the ambulance came. The pastor then rode with Arthur to the hospital, helped to settle him in his room, tucked him in, gave him a glass of water, and said a prayer. The pastor's head had barely hit the pillow at home when his phone rang. The voice at the other end said exactly what he thought it might say: "Arthur Forbes is dead."

That pastor hadn't cried when his own father died. But as he put the phone down, tears began to stream down his face. His crying turned into wailing, and then his wailing deepened into screaming. "I cried, and I screamed, and I howled," he said, "and I realized... I loved Arthur Forbes! I loved him. He had seduced me into loving him... not by anything he said or did for me, but by allowing me to give to him what Jesus would have given."⁵

As he said goodbye to his closest friends in the world, Jesus left them with a Rule of Love, a command steeped in an undying hope for the world. "*I have said these things to you,*" Jesus says, "*so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.*"

Amen.

⁵ Story by Tony Campolo delivered at Windy Gap, NC in October 1989, recorded by Life Giving Tapes, Pineville, NC, as supplemented by text recalling same illustration at <http://www.westminsterauburn.org/Portals/1587/BP17-09.pdf>.