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WHY DOES GOD HAVE SO MANY RULES? Michael B. Beough
Deut. 6:1-9; Psalm 119:1-3; Ephesians 2:8-10 February 22, 2009
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When a child asks why God has so many rules, I suspect he or she is thinking not only of the Ten Commandments but also of all the other things heard from parents, Sunday School teachers, preachers, etc. They may be thinking of all the "shall nots" and "do nots" they hear.

It is easy for a child to begin seeing God as a constant naysayer. God is against everything I want to do. God can become scary, especially if the threat of divine punishment is used to get a child to shape up. How many children have grown up thinking of God as a God of wrath and anger and punishment?

It would be a wondrous thing to help our children see God in a different light. And the question about rules can help us do that.

In simplest terms, of course, we want our children to see that rules are good things. God has established rules. Like the physical laws of the universe. The reason there is something instead of nothing is because of God's rules. I am thankful for the law of gravity, for example. I am glad stars and planets stay put, for the most part.

Then there are moral laws. Like the Ten Commandments. Deuteronomy 6 tells the people that they must never forget these rules. We must teach them to our children so they will know them and live well.

Now that makes sense to me. God who created us gives us the rules for the game of life. The game of life is about relationships with God and with others. Do these things and you will live well and long. In fact, Deuteronomy 6:5 commands us to love God with everything we have. The basis of this love is the realization that God really cares about us and has shown us in his law how to prosper in life. We should mark this passage in our Bibles.

Psalm 119 goes even further. The psalmist says "Happy are those . . . who walk in the law of the Lord." This psalmist is so in love with the rules and commandments of God that he writes 176 verses as a love poem in thanks to God for the rules.

Here is something you may not know about Psalm 119. It is written with 22 stanzas. Each stanza represents one of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, like our A to Z. If you have an NIV Bible, you will see the Hebrew letter that heads each stanza. Furthermore, if you could read Hebrew, you would see that each poetic line in each stanza begins with the letter that heads the stanza. If the stanza is the "A" stanza, each poetic line begins with the letter "A".

Here's one more interesting detail. Of the 176 verses, 172 of them include a word that refers to God's law, like statutes, commandments, decrees, word, torah, etc. So what is he trying to tell us? That God's law covers everything. That all of life hangs on the keeping of God's law. Happiness depends on living by God's law, from A to Z. This psalmist was crazy in love with God's word.

So here is one way to respond to our child's question. What if you bought a game but there were no rules with it? Knowing the rules really helps if you want to win the game of life.

Or think about it like learning to ride a bicycle. You are going to enjoy it a lot more if you know the rules. Someone has to give us the rules. Put your right foot here. The other one there. Hold on here with both hands. Pump with your legs. Keep the steering wheel straight. Get up some speed. Maintain your balance. Put your foot out when you start to fall. Don't pull out in front of a car. Keep to the right. Don't go through the flower bed. Yield to pedestrians. Wear a helmet and maybe knee and elbow pads. Practice, practice, practice. By the way, make sure the wheels are on tight, the tubes pumped up, etc.

Learning all those rules at first seems impossible. And likely you will need someone at first reminding you to do this or do that, keep at it, try again. If you do stay at it, you eventually gain confidence. You will even be able to ride without thinking about the rules. They will become automatic. You will even air up the tires, not because it is a rule, but because it makes riding so much better. You might even try some tricks, like riding without holding on. Or jumping a ramp. Or doing a wheely. You might become a Lance Armstrong. But it all starts with learning the rules and applying them for the rest of your bicycle career.

God's rules establish what is necessary to enjoy life-riding. Break the rules and you crash. Practice the rules and soon you will be enjoying life. No longer will the rules seem tedious or restrictive. They will become as God intends them: to be the moral skeleton on which we grow abundant life. At some point, we might even thank God for the rules.

Okay, let me say it. God's rules are for our own good.

But that is not the end of it. Keeping the rules is harder than you think. There is something inside us that makes us start thinking we can do better than God. We make up our own rules. God says, "Don't eat the apple." What do we do? We eat it. God says keep me first in your life. And what do we do? We find a substitute. Jesus says love your enemies. What do we do? We find ways to justify killing them.

In child development terms, we might call it testing the boundaries. We might call it making mistakes. In theological terms, we call it sin. A child who asks about rules may be experiencing this moral tug of war. The serpent in the Garden of Eden is whispering in the ear. And even if the child wants to be the perfect child, he or she is beginning to realize that the apple looks mighty good. Children, in fact, will cross the boundaries, make mistakes, and sin against God. And may decide some day that rules are made to be broken, even God's rules. In other words, they will grow up to be like us.

Their question about rules leads us to an important consideration. How on earth can we help our children experience the happiness promised in God's law when we know without a doubt that they will break God's law?

The Christian answer to that is to turn them toward Jesus Christ. Through faith in Jesus Christ, by entrusting our lives to him, we experience the forgiveness of God when we fail and receive the grace that produces a righteous life. We ask around here, what is it about our experience with Jesus Christ that others cannot live without? Our answer is "Peace.Purpose.Promise."

God knows that we do not always keep the rules. That is why Jesus came to earth, to give us another way to the abundant life. Ephesians 2:8-10 says it this way. *"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works."* God did not set the rules and then go about condemning us for failing to keep them. Unfortunately, some of you might have grown up with such condemnation. You weren't perfect and heard about it. Punished. Made to feel guilt without any relief from it. But God set the rules and then sent Jesus as a gift of forgiving love to empower us with a grace that produces a righteous life.

I know I deserve God's punishment, but scripture says God does not condemn me. God loves me and forgives me. Now I ask, what do you want with my life, Lord? And the Lord sends His Spirit into my life, not to make me perfect, I will never be that, but to quicken my heart and my mind for the things of God. This is why I love God, why I am a Christian. Whatever good there is in me comes from God. Whatever happiness in life, it is by the grace of God.

It is like riding a bicycle. At first, we fall. But someone holds it up for us, gives us a shove, runs to us when we skin our knees, encourages us to get back on, reminds us of the rules, until we get the hang of it. By the grace of whomever, we learn to ride. And if we are smart, we will never forget the rules.