

## ALWAYS PUT OTHERS FIRST

Are you a rule keeper  
or a rule breaker?  
By nature do you tend to follow the rules  
and do what's expected?  
Or are you more likely  
to see the rules as suggestions?  
Something to consider  
but not something to be bound by.

This semester of Quest we are going to look at the rules  
that Christians are expected to live by.  
And when to break them.

Some of you hear that and you get excited.  
That's because you're more of a rule breaker  
and you're hoping I'll give you permission  
to keep breaking the rules for yourself and  
making problems for everyone else.

Others of you,  
you're getting nervous.  
It's scary to hear me talk about breaking the rules,  
especially when we're speaking about the rules  
that Christians are expected to live by.

That's the problem, you think.  
People don't follow the rules anymore.  
No one respects authority,  
people think they know better than everybody else –  
including God –  
and the result is chaos,  
whether it's a family, a community, a denomination or a country.

Just for the record,  
I am a rule follower by nature.  
At times to the point of absurdity.

If an event starts at 10:00,  
I'm there at 10:00 – or before.  
And you should be, too.  
That's the rule.

Barring an emergency,  
showing up late  
because you didn't watch the clock or  
because you decided to have a second scone before you left or  
because you couldn't press record on the DVR and walk away  
from a television show that you can finish later –  
that's disrespectful.  
And you're probably a bad person.  
Not evil – but bad.  
Really bad.

We go to dinner together  
and you want the salmon,  
but can you have a different sauce on top,  
and can you exchange the broccoli for winter vegetables,  
and can you have extra lemon for your tea –  
good grief, man,  
I can't tell you how irritating that is for me to watch.

Order off the menu –  
like everybody else.  
You don't want what they serve,  
go to another restaurant.  
But don't think the whole world has to revolve  
around you and what you want.

I go shopping with a woman.  
I'm not saying I'm going shopping with my wife,  
because every time I mention my wife in Quest,  
one of you tells your wife and she tells my wife,  
and I get in trouble.

By the way,  
that should be a rule with no exceptions.  
You don't tell your wife what another dude  
told you about his wife.  
I would think that's one we could all agree upon,  
if for no other reason that self-preservation,  
but evidently not.

So, I go shopping with a woman,  
maybe I know her,  
maybe I don't,  
maybe I'm married to her,  
maybe this is the first time we've ever met –  
but I'm out shopping with her  
and before she decides to buy the item she has picked off the rack,  
she asks a sales person,  
“Do you have any coupons for this” or –  
“Is this going to be on sale any time soon –  
and if so, I'd like that price” –  
I am cringing with embarrassment.

The store lists the item at a price,  
you want to buy it,  
you pay the price that's listed.  
It's a rule.  
It's a social contract.  
Don't try to change it.

And even when the salesperson says,  
“Yes, ma'am, here's your 15% discount,”  
and I end up saving money because I'm paying for the purchase  
this woman I may or may not know is making,  
I still get irritated.

I'm just saying, by nature, I'm a rule follower.  
 And I'm a Christian.  
 That means I believe God wants good for us  
     and the rules he gives us to live by don't take life from us  
     but bring life to us.  
 But here I am saying,  
     there are rules that Christians are expected to live by  
     that sometimes we need to break.

Which ones?

Some of the rules we'll address in this series are:

Be kind.  
 Put others first.  
 Always have faith.  
 Speak the truth.  
 Don't get angry.  
 Never give up.

Why would I say we ever need to break those rules?

Lots of reasons.

### **1. Sometimes life is more complicated than a rule.**

Be honest.  
 That's a rule.

"Darling, does this dress make me look fat?"  
 Be honest  
     and say "it sure does"?  
 Be honest and say,  
     "No, dear that dress doesn't make you look fat.  
     You look fat because you are fat."

See, it's complicated.

Or how about this rule.  
 2.45 -- 3.28/29

<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=dmitir+martin+glass+house&pc=U316&sp=-1&pq=dmitir+martin+gla&sc=0-17&qsn&sk=&cvid=9B51F4EBF54345E883EF94ED7076DFE1&ru=%2fsearch%3fq%3ddmitir%2bmartin%2bglass%2bhouse%26pc%3dU316%26form%3dCHRDEF%26sp%3d-1%26pq%3ddmitir%2bmartin%2bgl%26sc%3d0-17%26qs%3dn%26sk%3d%26cvid%3d9B51F4EBF54345E883EF94ED7076DFE1&view=detail&mmscn=vwrc&mid=7F03420476F72F991F857F03420476F72F991F85&FORM=WRVORC>

Or, opposite end of the spectrum.

You're in Nazi Germany,

you're hiding Jews in your basement,

the SS knocks on the door and asks if there are any Jews in the house.

You're supposed to be honest.

But you also have a moral obligation to protect innocent life.

Two rules that are in conflict with each other.

What do you do?

See, life is more complicated than a simple rule

when you have what's referred to as

“competing moral claims” upon your life.

## **2. Sometimes the rules Christians are expected to follow aren't all that Christian.**

They sound Christian,

but they're not.

Always put others first.

Never give up.

If you can't say something nice,

don't say anything at all.

Don't hurt anyone's feelings.

Forget the fact that it's impossible to be a Christian and not to offend anyone –  
 say the most basic truth of the Christian faith,  
 “Jesus Christ is Lord,”  
 and somebody will be offended.

Though it sounds nice –  
 in fact, it even sounds like Jesus,  
 at least the Jesus we have constructed in our heads –  
 but statements like “never hurt anyone’s feelings or  
 “never say anything that’s offensive,”  
 just aren’t Christian.

Jesus called the Pharisees hypocrites and a brood of vipers.  
 I’m guessing they were offended.

He called Peter the devil.  
 He told people to stop sinning.  
 And he once asked a crowd,  
 “How much longer must I put up with you?”

This doesn’t give us permission to be jerks.  
 But it does mean that at times it can be Christlike  
 to speak the truth even if it’s unpleasant or offensive for others to hear.

One more.  
 Sometimes we break the rules because

### **3. Sometimes the rules don’t mean what we think they mean.**

So, we’re not really breaking the rule,  
 but our wrong understanding of it.

For example,

**Matthew 7.1:** Judge not; or you, too, will be judged.

In that same passage Jesus refers to some people as false prophets  
 and he also refers to other people as swine.  
 Sounds pretty judgy, doesn’t it?

So did Jesus break his own rule – judge not –  
or does “judge” mean something differently than we think it does?

All that is to say,  
there are rules that God gives us for living.

Don’t judge.  
Be kind.  
Put others first.  
Be honest.

Good rules,  
rules that bring life and joy and meaning.  
And we need to obey them.

But it’s not as easy as it sounds.  
And sometimes to do God’s will,  
we’ll have to break some of the rules that Christians  
have come to believe we must obey.

Here’s the first rule we’ll look at: Put others first.

That seems to be a very Christian thing to do.

You may have even seen the formula for j-o-y joy.

Jesus  
Others  
You

Jesus, first, of course.  
Others next.  
And then you.

The rule is live that way  
and you’ll live right  
and you’ll experience joy.

Does the Bible teach this?

I think so.

**Philippians 2.3-4:** Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility **value others above yourselves**, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

Value others above yourselves.

Other versions translate that phrase as:

“Count others better than yourselves”

and as

“Treat each other as more important than yourselves.”

Looks like a rule, doesn't it?

Put others and their needs ahead of your own.

Seems pretty iron clad.

When could we ever make an exception  
and break it?

My goal in this lecture is not

to convince you to ignore the needs of others or  
to give you a pass for being a self-centered jerk.

In fact, I'm going to spend a significant amount of time  
telling you why this is an important rule for us to follow.

But then we'll look at when we should break the rule of putting others first.

First,

## **WHY DO WE PUT OTHERS FIRST?**

Several reasons.



## 1. Because Helping Others is One Way We Love Jesus

Do you remember the judgment scene in Matthew 25?  
 On one side are the people who are barred from eternity with God.  
 On the other side are those who are invited into heaven.

And Jesus tells us those who are shut out,  
 “When I was hungry you gave me nothing to eat;  
 when I was thirsty you gave me nothing to drink;  
 when I needed clothes, you gave me nothing to wear.”

But those who are invited into the presence of God are told  
 just the opposite.  
 When I was hungry, thirsty and naked  
 you gave me food, drink and clothing.

And both groups ask the same question:  
 “When did we see you in need?”

And Jesus tells them

**Matthew 25.40,45:** “Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me. ... Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.”

Why do we put others first?  
 Because as Christians we are called to put Jesus first.  
 And Jesus tells us that one way we put him first in our lives  
 is by loving and serving others,  
 especially those who are in need.

You and I may not get it,  
 but think we are more important than others,  
 and we think we are more important than Jesus.  
 We simply cannot love Jesus  
 without loving others  
 and putting their needs ahead of our own.

Second reason we put others first.

## **2. So We can Become More Like Jesus**

The goal of the Christian life is to become more like Jesus.

That's it.

That's the goal.

To think, love, serve and live like he did.

And Jesus put others first.

How did he describe his mission?

**Matthew 20.28:** The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his  
life as a ransom for many.

The life of Jesus was a life of service.

He came to give his life away.

And that's who we are called to be like.

**1 John 3.16:** This is how we know what love is – Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.  
and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.

The example that Jesus set for us is the example of love.

Not a love that is sentimental –

but a love that is sacrificial.

And we are told that's how we should live.

And we will never become like Jesus

if we make our lives about ourselves.

## **3. Because God Commands Us to Help Others**

**Galatians 6.2:** Carry each other's burdens, and in this way obey the law of Christ.

The Greek word for burden in this verse  
 refers to an overwhelming weight.  
 It's a boulder-sized problem that someone carries  
 that is large enough to crush them.

And what this passage assumes is that  
 it is not unusual for people to be burdened with problems  
 that are too immense for them to carry on their own.

And because God loves people,  
 he tells us,  
 he commands us to help people who are struggling.

A life that is not concerned about others –  
 or that is not concerned enough to  
 serve others and suffer for them –  
 is a life that is disobedient,  
 as it is put in Galatians 6.2,  
 to the law of Christ.

It's not a suggestion that we put others first.  
 It's a rule.  
 It's a requirement for those of us who want to be obedient to God.

Last reason we put others first.

#### **4. Helping Others Makes our Lives Better**

This is not surprising.  
 I said earlier,  
 God's rules do not take life from us,  
 they bring life to us.

A University of Michigan study followed 2700 people over a decade  
 to see how their social relationships affected their health and well-being.  
 Those who performed regular volunteer work  
 showed dramatically increased life expectancy.

As a matter of fact,  
men who were not involved in helping others  
died at a rate two and a half times greater than those who were.

The length of life is made longer,  
but more importantly the quality of our lives is made better  
when we say yes to the needs of others.

Educational reformer Horace Mann wrote

**Horace Mann:** We must be purposely kind and generous, or we miss the best part of existence. The heart that goes out of itself gets large and full of joy. This is the great secret of the inner life. We do ourselves the most good doing something for others.

What did Jesus say?

**Matthew 16.25:** Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.

Hang onto your life, and you'll lose it.  
Let it go, and you'll have more than ever before.

In 1994, South African photojournalist Kevin Carter won the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography.

## Picture

The photograph that brought him fame depicted an emaciated Sudanese child crawling through the dirt toward a feeding center. Ten feet away on the ground, waiting and watching is a vulture.

The image, which so powerfully captured the horror of famine-stricken Sudan in the early 1990s, drew international attention to both Sudan's suffering and to Kevin Carter's career.

But with Carter's acclaim came the questions.  
 What had happened to the child?  
 After taking the picture,  
     what had Carter done to help?

Painfully, Carter admitted that  
     after spending about 20 minutes framing the shot,  
     he had simply walked away.

Within two months of receiving journalism's most coveted award,  
     the 33-year-old photojournalist  
     attached a garden hose to the exhaust pipe of his truck, and  
     breathed in the fumes until he was dead.

"I'm really, really sorry," Carter wrote in a note left on the seat beside him.  
 "The pain of life overrides the joy to the point that joy does not exist...."

We'd like to think we'd never make that mistake.  
 But the truth is, it's so easy to get into ourselves and our careers,  
     that we think or act as if life is  
     get the shot,  
     make the deal,  
     climb the ladder,  
     get ahead,  
     get the things that come with success.

Make life about ourselves,  
     and we don't experience the fullness of life,  
     we lose everything that makes life truly good.

We can pretty much sum up everything I've said  
     with this command of Jesus.

**Mark 12.31:** Love your neighbor as yourself.

There you have it.  
 Four good reasons to follow the rule  
   love others and put them and their needs first –  
     not just when it's convenient  
     but even when it requires self-denial and sacrifice.

How can it ever be ok to break this rule?

I do think there are exceptions –  
   times when we should break the rule of putting others first,  
   or at least what appears to be putting others first.

## **WE DO NOT SAY “YES” TO THE NEEDS OF OTHERS**

### **1. Because We Feel We are the only Person Who Can Meet Someone Else's Need**

Because we're not.

Usually, not always,  
   but usually people have all kinds of resources.  
 We are not their only source of help.

Years ago, before he was on staff with us,  
   Cliff Ritter, our pastor of caring ministries,  
 was working for a crisis hotline.

A young man called in the wee hours of the night  
   and wanted a ride home to be arranged for him.  
 This was before Uber and Lyft.

He had no money  
   and he said he had no one else to call.

Cliff asked a number of questions and  
   determined that the young man had family in town.  
 As a matter of fact,  
   he lived with his parents.

“Why not call them?”  
Cliff asked.

“Well, that’s the problem,”  
the caller responded.  
“I should have been home a long time ago,  
and if I call them to come get me,  
they’re going to find out that I’m still out  
and they’re going to be really, really mad.”

May I suggest that the most helpful, most Christ-like  
thing to do at that moment was not to answer that boy’s cry for help?  
He needed to face the consequences of his actions.  
And he had other people who could help him –  
he didn’t need Cliff or  
whoever Cliff could send at that point.

Just because someone needs help,  
that doesn’t mean they need your help.  
Or that it will be best if you’re the one to help them.

When I was in Atlanta, Texas,  
I was good friends with a man  
who had worked at a factory in Houston when he was young.

Whenever the foreman told them that something had come up  
and they needed to work faster or later,  
Jimmy told me they would often respond,  
“Boss, a failure to plan on your part,  
does not create an emergency on our part.”

There will be many times when people have failed to plan or  
they have made poor choices and  
they want you to think their problem creates an emergency on your part.  
And it’s possible there may come a time  
when out of the nearly 8 billion people on planet earth,  
you are the only are the only person in the world who can help.

But there are many other times  
 when people have all kinds of resources  
 and you just happen to be the most convenient.

That does not create an emergency on your part  
 or mean you are the right person to help them.  
 It's ok to say here's a better resource to help you,  
 you should reach out to him or her.

We don't say yes to the needs of others

## **2. Because We Can't Say "No"**

Some people say yes to the needs of others  
 because they don't have the ability to say no.

Some people can't say "no" to the needs of others  
 because of their own needs.

They have a desperate need to be needed.  
 They have a need to be loved.  
 They have a need to be seen as a spiritual person  
 or to think of themselves as a good person.

Some people can't say "no"  
 because of their fears.

They are afraid of hurting someone's feelings.  
 They are afraid of being abandoned.  
 They are afraid of someone else's anger.  
 They are afraid of feeling guilty or ashamed.  
 They are afraid of disappointing someone.

They look like they're saying yes because they're Christ-like,  
 but truth is they're saying yes because they are co-dependent.

In his book Margin Richard Swenson wrote:



**Richard Swenson:** The ability to say “no” without guilt is to be freed from one of the biggest monsters in our overburdened lives. If we decline, not out of self-serving laziness but for God-honoring balance and health, then this level of control will not only protect our emotional well-being but will actually increase it.

Jesus said

**John 10.17-18:** I lay down my life ... No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again.

Jesus says,  
I have the ability to lay my life down.  
It’s a decision I am free to make it.

If you can’t say no,  
if you’re saying yes out of  
your need to be needed or  
your hope of being loved or  
your fear of being rejected –  
if that’s where you are,  
then I think the most faithful, Christ-honoring thing you can do is  
forget about helping others for a while and  
focus on killing the monsters  
that have robbed you of the ability to love and serve freely,  
out of strength and character,  
rather than weakness and co-dependency.

Last one, but it’s a three-parter.

We do not say yes to the needs of others

### **3. When Saying “Yes” Will be Harmful**

First we don’t say yes to the needs of others,  
or what they perceive as their needs,  
when saying yes

## A. Harms the person asking for help

You don't give a child a loaded gun.

Not even in Texas.

### Picture

You don't give an alcoholic a drink.

You don't give drugs to a drug addict.

That's obvious.

Even if they want it,

you don't give people what is likely to harm them.

Remember Galatians 6.2 which we read a moment ago.

**Galatians 6.2:** Carry each other's burdens.

But here's what Paul wrote just a few verses later.

**Galatians 6.5:** Each one should carry his own load.

How do we put these two together?

In 6.2 the word for burden is an overwhelming, crushing boulder-sized problem.

In 6.5 the word for load means the daily cargo of life.

Your normal responsibilities, duties and struggles.

Who is supposed to carry your everyday responsibilities?

You are.

Who's supposed to carry your neighbor's load of everyday responsibilities?

Your neighbor.

Who's supposed to carry your child's load of everyday responsibilities?

Your child.

Who's supposed to carry your wife's load of everyday responsibilities?  
Whoever the heck she says is going to carry them,  
that's who.

Carry someone else's load for them  
and what happens?  
They lose the strength to carry it themselves.

Which is more loving?  
Giving your children enough money to get whatever they want?  
Or teaching them to work hard, save their earning and value what they purchase?

So, we can harm someone by giving them what they ask for  
that will be unhealthy and destructive in their lives.  
And we can also harm someone by protecting them  
from what they need to grow and learn.

You step in and keep a friend, a co-worker, a child from the consequences of  
not planning their schedule,  
not preparing for the future,  
not seeing to their own affairs,  
and get this –  
you're not helping them and  
you're not loving them.

You're keeping them from  
learning lessons and  
developing strengths  
that will make them confident, capable, strong and successful.

And that not helping them.  
That's harming them.

We don't say yes to the needs of others when saying yes

## **B. Harms ourselves**

Again, there's the obvious.

If someone is out to harm us or others,  
and they ask us to give them the physical or emotional ammunition to do it,  
of course, we don't do it.

Giving it to them is not being spiritual.  
It's being stupid.

But sometimes it's not that another person means to harm us.

Look at Dr. Swenson again.

**Richard Swenson:** When the rain barrel is full, it is full. We cannot put another drop  
in unless we first take a drop out. As elementary as this principle is, its application  
escapes the majority of people.

You and I are finite.  
We are limited.  
It's not just ok to admit that,  
it is imperative that we admit that.

We can do a lot for others,  
probably more than we're doing now.  
But there are times  
when we will need to say "no"  
not because we don't want to do more  
but because it's not healthy for us to do more.

Catch this.  
This was even true for Jesus.

**Luke 5.15-16:** The news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people  
came to

hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.

People are coming to Jesus.  
They have real needs.  
They are diseased and lame  
and they are asking Jesus to heal them.

And he says,  
I have to take a break from people  
so I can take care of myself.

I need to be refreshed and strengthened.  
I need to be renewed spiritually and emotionally.  
If I don't do this,  
I won't have anything for others.

Wow.  
It's ok to say no to the needs of others  
so you can take care of yourself.  
Especially when you are much more limited than Jesus.

We are all limited in some ways.  
Some of us are more limited in the emotional support  
we can give others.  
People and their emotional needs are overwhelming to us.  
So, we can't do as much as others.

That's ok.  
We still try to help  
and give as much as we can,  
but we don't do what is emotionally unhealthy for us.

Finally, it's ok to say no to the needs of others  
when saying yes

### **C. Harms our mission**

God has something he wants you to accomplish with your life.  
Something that is important.

He has given you the gifts and the talents  
to accomplish your mission.  
It is your responsibility to fulfill God's purpose for your life.

And if you say yes to  
every need,  
every request for help,  
every good cause that comes your way –  
you are very likely not to have the time or the energy  
to fully and rightly complete what God has put you on this earth to do.

You know this quote.

“The greatest enemy of the best is the good.”

It means when we are tempted to do something wrong,  
all kinds of warning bells go off.  
And we know to say no.

But when we are asked to do good things,  
it is so easy to say yes over and over,  
and only later realize that we became distracted  
and failed to do what God most wanted us to do.

It's ok to say no to someone's request  
when saying yes keeps us from something more important.

I struggle with this every day.  
Preaching.  
Doing Quest.  
Heading up our adult discipleship ministries.  
Being the president of Good News  
and working on all the problems our denomination is having on a national level.  
Requests to speak outside of the church.  
People I need to see in the hospital.  
People wanting to see me with their problems.  
Funerals I'm requested to do.

A wife I need to love.  
A ninety-one year old mother three hours away,  
alone in a senior citizens home.

Emails.  
As I was writing this,  
I decided I'd count how many emails I receive.  
I picked Thursday  
and counted them up.  
120.

I've had to make peace with this:  
I can't do it all.  
I've had to learn to say no to requests –  
good requests.

Not because I don't care,  
but because I do.  
I care about fulfilling God's primary purposes for my life  
and that means sometimes I have to say no the requests and the needs  
of others.  
I hate it,  
I struggle with feeling guilty,  
but I'm making peace with it.  
And you may need to, as well.

The rule – put others first.  
And it's a good one.  
One that we need to obey.

When do we break that rule –  
only when we have to –  
for the good of others or for our own health or for the good of our mission.

