

Beyond do's and don'ts

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In my Bible, this week's reading from Ephesians bears the title, "Rules for the New Life." The text reads like a laundry list of more or less unrelated instructions. Put away falsehood. Speak the truth, be angry but don't sin, and do not make room for the devil. Give up stealing and work honestly. Speak only what is useful for building up; do not grieve the Holy Spirit. Put away bitterness, anger, slander, and malice.

As I look more closely, however, I realize that this text is more than a simple list of do's and don'ts. The last instruction in the list is to forgive--"as God in Christ has forgiven you" (4:32). Then chapter 5 continues the thought:

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

The word "therefore" points to the summation that follows: "be imitators of God." And how shall we do this? "Live in love." That's the one rule for the new life in Christ, that we are to live in love just as Jesus himself lived and taught his disciples. Because Christ loved us, because we are God's beloved children, we are called to live in love.

When I think of Christian living in terms of do's and don'ts, I start to lose heart. There are so many instruction lists to keep track of, from the Ten Commandments to the Sermon on the Mount to this text in Ephesians.

At the same time, there aren't enough. Where is the do and don't list for dealing with grief and loss? Or for responding to a person with mental health challenges? For walking with someone through the valley of the shadow of death? As I've faced these situations in my life and ministry, I've sometimes longed for a simple, foolproof list of instructions to follow.

I suppose that's why blog posts in list form are so popular. But the Bible resists such oversimplified solutions--and gives us something better. In this text and elsewhere, what's most important is not following some new rules, but being a new person; not some sanctified list of do's and don'ts, but being sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit who fills us and empowers us to live in love.