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Exodus 12: 1-14; Romans 13: 8-14

Life and/or Death

For more than sixty years, developmental psychologists have been trying to answer a simple question: what actually produces confident, secure, flourishing kids? Diana Baumrind's research — still considered a standard reference in the field — found it comes down to two things: warmth and structure. Love, and clear expectations.¹

And here's what's interesting: neither one works alone. Parents who give their kids plenty of rules but little warmth tend to raise children who are anxious, or who rebel the first chance they get. Parents who give plenty of warmth but no real structure tend to raise children who are anxious in a different way — because nothing tells them where the edges of their world are. But put warmth and structure together — clear expectations, held by someone who loves you, and is gracious with you when you don't meet those expectations — and that's the combination that consistently produces the most secure, most confident people. Clear boundaries, enforced with love and grace, prepare young people to be happy and successful later in life. Structure without love breeds fear. Love without structure breeds chaos. But *together*, they produce people who flourish.

I want to suggest this morning that this isn't just good parenting advice. It's the pattern woven into how God has related to his people from the very beginning. The Passover isn't the end of a story, but an act of preparation to enter into something greater. God also invites us to an act of preparation for a journey today, as well.

Let's take a look at Exodus 12: God is about to deliver his people from four centuries of slavery in Egypt—arguably the single greatest act of love and deliverance in the Old Testament, and one that would define the people's own sense of identity moving forward.

And how does God bring this about? Not with a vague assurance that everything will be fine, but with a series of definitive actions through the plagues that afflicted Egypt, culminating in the death of the firstborn and the Passover. An act of judgment paired with grace and forbearance. When we read of the plagues that God sent on Egypt, we might get an image in our head of God as a vengeful, capricious being. This is particularly

¹ Baumrind, D. (1966). *Effects of Authoritative Parental Control on Child Behavior*, [Child Development](#), 37(4), 887-907.

compounded when we read that God caused the heart of Pharaoh to be hardened when Moses demanded that he let the Hebrew people go.

But God had already provided repeated calls for the release of the Hebrew people to Pharaoh, including increasingly harsh penalties for disobeying the decree given through his prophet, Moses.

What we see is that disregarding God's decrees leads to consequences. Taking advantage of God's grace to continue to ignore His instruction leads to increasingly punishing consequences. God doesn't start with the death of the firstborn—this is the culmination of repeated instances of a call to change (or repent), a refusal to do so, and judgment being issued.

Taken as a whole, the narrative of the plagues shows that God is remarkably patient and gracious, but will not fail to uphold the promise he has given to Moses and his people: he will see them delivered not only to safety, but back to the promised land in accordance with His word. And so we arrive at this final judgment that will at last break Pharaoh's intransigence.

Notice that God does not give Moses or the people any kind of vague assurances that everything will be alright: instead, they are given very specific instructions for how to proceed. They are told precisely how to select an animal to serve as a sacrifice; how they are to prepare a meal from the meat and use the blood to mark their homes. They are instructed how they should dress and prepare their belongings, so they will be ready to leave the instant the opportunity is presented. They are told how to protect themselves from the judgment that would be leveled against the entire land of Egypt, sparing the faithful from the consequences of the willful defiance of God's will (or, to put it another way, sin.)

God packs just about as much structure and boundary-setting as you can into such a short bit of scripture outside of the Ten Commandments themselves. But notice that this structure and these boundaries are in no way in tension with God's deliverance—they are, in fact, the very *vehicle* of God's deliverance from Egypt!

The sacrifice of the young lamb isn't just a gesture of faithfulness; it utilizes the livestock that would be least likely to make the swift trip out of Egypt to both honor God and feed the people for the difficult journey ahead of them.

The blood on the doorposts isn't some kind of bureaucratic formality or red tape—it is the marking of the very boundary that shows where safety begins and ends, just as surely as that yellow line in the middle of the highway does for us when we drive.

God's instructions—though they might seem immediately burdensome and specific—aren't a boundary meant to keep the people *from* freedom, but instead a lifeline to lead them into *greater* freedom!

And we can extrapolate from this example in Exodus that God's instructions, decrees—and indeed, God's laws—are likewise intended not to be a fetter on our freedom, but boundaries that keep us from harm and destruction, while providing an abundant life within the lines they lay out for us. God's law isn't a fence built to shrink your life. It's structure, given in love, so that our life can be all the more joyful.

Even so, there is something in us that chafes against restrictions, isn't there? Whenever our personal freedoms are limited or restricted, there is something in the human spirit that rails against having limits placed on us.

As just about any parent can tell you, as kids, we push against our boundaries. When our parents set down the rules, we have a natural tendency to systematically see how far we can push them. That's normal. It's a very human thing to do. But when we push boundaries in an unhealthy way, the consequences can be dire.

We see that in the Garden of Eden, when the serpent speaks to Eve and says, “What *exactly* did God say you could and couldn't do?” We experience it in our own lives when we see, again, kids push right up against the limits and look for loopholes to get around the rules. We do it ourselves when we try to justify doing things that we know all too well we shouldn't do or indulge in things that we know aren't good for us.

While testing boundaries can be a normal part of our growth and development, there are times when it hurts us. Looking to childhood again, many of us can probably think of a time when, despite repeated warnings from our parents, we touched a hot stove, or had a similar mishap. The instant result is pain. If we are fortunate, it won't leave a lasting mark, but it will almost certainly be an experience we won't forget.

Sometimes, the only way we learn is through pain, but that's not God's **desire** for us. Indeed, in Ezekiel 33:11, even as God reminds Ezekiel that prophets like him are charged with warning “the wicked” that they must repent or die in their iniquity, he instructs Ezekiel: “Say to them: As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the

wicked but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?”

The thing that we should always keep in mind when we read of God’s law in scripture or consider how Jesus taught us to live is that these boundaries are set for us not to limit us or punish us, but to enable us to have the structure we need for an abundant life. Without a baseline, without some kind of framework for life, everything devolves into chaos.

On the other hand, when the structure and the boundaries are too restrictive, we begin to really struggle, because we fall short of what is demanded. Throughout the Old Testament, there are over 600 laws, rules, and regulations for the people of God. Jewish teachings refer to the “613 mitzvot.”

Now, I have a feeling that if I were to put one of you on the spot to list the ten commandments right this second, some among us might struggle to get all 10 named off the top of our heads. (I would have to sing through a song I learned as a child to make sure I didn’t miss any!)

If I asked you to list all 613 commandments from the entirety of the Old Testament, I doubt that *any* of us could do it! So how are we supposed to be righteous before God if there are so many things to keep track of? After all, scripture also tells us that those who cannot keep the law—all of it—are deserving of the penalty of death! The boundaries it sets would be worse than suffocating—they would be an eternal death sentence. So what can we do?

This is where Jesus brings us great grace. He simplifies all 613 of the laws and the commandments into **TWO** instructions: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength... and love your neighbor as yourself.”² Paul expands on this ever so gently in our reading from Romans today: “Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has *fulfilled* the law.” All of the rest of the commandments that speak to specific restrictions point us in that direction: of love for God and love for neighbor.

Just as it was for the Hebrew people during the Passover, those commandments are meant to be an act of preparation for a journey into a place of promise and plenty. And we find in the New Testament that there is further grace for many of these strictures: just as the Gentiles are not required to embrace every aspect of Jewish life and practice to become Christians, so there is grace for each of us when we don’t live up to every stated

² Mark 12:30-31

expectation—so long as we strive to live into those two simple commandments: loving God with all we have, and our neighbors as ourselves.

Even in strict Jewish practice, not all of those 613 laws apply to everybody; they are limited in some cases by location, in others by gender, and in still others by individual circumstances. There is a recognition that upholding the entirety of the law perfectly simply isn't feasible for any human being

But that is precisely where God's grace intersects with the law, and those deadly dividing lines become borders set in pleasant places, as the Psalmist puts it. Just as good parenting requires a balance of boundaries with love and grace, so it is with God's law. Apart from God's grace and forgiveness, the law would indeed be death for us... but because of the grace and mercy of God shown at the Passover, it becomes a guide to abundant life now and eternal life to come. We would be wise to notice that God reveals something of his own nature as our heavenly father in the ways successful parents raise children.

Now let us note that just as the Apostle Paul would remind us, God's grace does not negate the law. We are still called to learn and love the boundaries that God has set out for us. But that is part of the joy of understanding the law in conjunction with God's grace.

The Passover wasn't just a one-off example of that grace, after all—it was, in fact, a *prototype* for the cross. The people were separated from the promise of God by human sin. Salvation from that circumstance was brought about through the sacrifice of a lamb without blemish, providing the blood that would spare the faithful from judgment.

And we also find in the Passover the source of our practice at the Lord's table. It is a meal shared in preparation of a journey to be undertaken. It is spiritual sustenance for the road ahead, just as a meal sustains our bodies for a journey.

But just as the people had to prepare themselves and their households for the first Passover, we are also instructed to prepare ourselves for the Lord's table. We are to cleanse ourselves through confession and repentance. If we have conflict with a brother or sister in faith, we are to seek to be reconciled with them, either through working it out one-on-one, or with the help of others in the church. By doing this, we seek to uphold those two essential rules: loving God and neighbor. We prepare ourselves to come to the table; to receive the bread and the cup prepared for the journey that follows.

The boundaries that have been set around us prepare us for the freedom to which we are called. Just as the Passover was the start of a journey toward the holy land, the table we

approach today is a reminder of the start of our journey toward the promise of a new heaven and a new earth; of God's kingdom that is already amongst us and not yet fully realized.

So let's bring it back to where we started. That research from way back in the 60s has largely held up until today: structure without love produces fear. Love without structure produces chaos. But held together — that's what produces people who are secure enough to actually live, and prepared to actually love others well.

That's like Israel, obeying instructions down to the smallest detail — not because God was picky, but because on that particular night, the details were what stood between them and death. The blood on the doorframe wasn't decoration. It was the boundary line, drawn in love, that told the angel of death exactly where his people were safely hidden. That's like Paul, writing to a church he loved, reminding them that keeping God's law and loving one another are not two different things, but two sides to the same coin.

Maybe you've had times where you've thought of God's law like a fence built to keep you locked into a small, confining space — something to *resent*, to test, to work around, to *resist*. Or maybe you've drifted the other way, so focused on the gift of grace that you've let go of any structure or sense of personal responsibility or need for spiritual growth at all, and found that the freedom you were chasing turned out to feel more like *drifting* than *living*.

Here's the invitation this morning: stop treating law and grace like they're competing for territory in your life. They're not opponents. They're both part of the same love, like those two sides of a coin — one that marks out where you're safe, and one that embraces you when you fall short. The law without grace is death. Grace without the law is destructive in a different kind of way. The two, taken together, bring life.

Owe no one anything, except to love one another. Let the structure of God's rules for life hold you. Let the love and grace God gives us carry you. And after we come to this table together, go — like Israel did on that first Passover night — trusting that the God who gives the instructions is the same God who does the rescuing. Let's ask for him to help us understand and thrive in the paths he lays out for us. Let's pray.