

A List of (Self-Imposed) Rules

“All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22:40)

Scripture: Matthew 22:36–40

Song: “Love the Lord”

I used to make a lot of rules for myself. But these self-imposed do’s and don’ts were stifling. I felt trapped by making sure these ultimately inconsequential things were done the way they “should” be.

On the surface, God’s law can also look like one big intimidating list of “do’s and don’ts.” But its purpose has never been to oppress, overwhelm, or shame. God’s law was established to keep His people in relationship with Him and to provide a way for God Himself to dwell among them. When Jesus explains that the Law and the Prophets are summed up in the commands to love God and others, He isn’t negating all other commands or saying that following God’s rules no longer matters (Matthew 5:17). He is showing us that our *motivation* for doing so has changed.

Following rules to be following rules is a far cry from following Jesus based on our relationship with Him. This relationship brings freedom, and it impacts everything we do—and the reasons we do it. Because of Jesus, God no longer dwells in a tabernacle. He lives in us and shines through us as we love Him and others.

Father, help me live in the freedom Your Word provides as I act out of love for You and those around me. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

September 15–21. **Tina Clark** lives in western Massachusetts. She enjoys outdoor activities such as skiing, swimming, and cycling.

The Jar in the Dirt

There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil . . . but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good. . . . For God does not show favoritism.
(Romans 2:9–11)

Scripture: Romans 2:9–16

Song: “Only Selfless Love”

Irena Sendler, a Polish social worker, dug up a glass jar buried in a garden. The jar contained the names and new identities of the 2,500 Jewish children she smuggled to safety from the Nazis. World War II was over, and she could now reunite those children with their families. Irena endured brutality from the Nazis during the war, yet her selfless acts allowed all 2,500 children to survive. Irena remained a relatively unknown figure until the late 1990s, when students from rural Kansas learned about her and created the play *Life in a Jar*.

Irena and those like her are the ones remembered favorably in history—not those in power, doing evil with ulterior motives. When it comes to receiving blessings from God, it is those who do good (whether rich or poor, strong or vulnerable) who are blessed. Attempting to bring glory to oneself through self-serving means ultimately reaps trouble and distress.

Our status in society does not bring God’s goodness into our lives. Selfless acts done without intent to elevate ourselves ultimately bring us the peace, glory, and honor that only God can give.

Father, show me opportunities to do good today. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Alligator Rock

“When you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul . . . then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you.” (Deuteronomy 30:2–3)

Scripture: Deuteronomy 30:1–10

Song: “Wherever I May Wander, Wherever I May Be”

At summer camp one year, another camper and I decided to go off on our own to a spot we called “Alligator Rock”—a rock that looked a bit like an alligator head protruding into the river. We snuck away, never thinking about the potential dangers of doing so. Naturally, this got us in trouble when we returned. Even so, we were welcomed back, and I never felt that I was branded a “troublemaker” for my actions.

In Deuteronomy, God gave laws for the Israelites to follow so that they could maintain a relationship with Him and receive His blessings. Even knowing they would wander away, God promised ahead of time that if they sought Him with all their heart, He would have compassion on them and restore them, which He did.

Just like the Israelites, it is possible for us to wander from God. Sometimes, this wandering may come with feelings of guilt and shame that can make it difficult for us to approach God again. Even so, He welcomes us back, no matter how far we’ve wandered. All it takes is a heart willing to obey Him once again.

Father, You are full of compassion. When I wander, remind me You are willing to restore me to Yourself no matter how far I’ve gone. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Muscle Memory

“No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.” (Deuteronomy 30:14)

Scripture: Deuteronomy 30:11–21

Song: “Lord, Thy Word Abideth”

The first time I looked down the “bunny slope” with my ski instructor in front of me, I was sure I would ram right into her as I practiced. An hour later, I felt confident. By the end of the season, I was skiing the most difficult slopes my little ski area had—and I never knocked over a single ski instructor. Almost 20 years later, I tried skiing again. My mind didn’t remember how to do it but, thanks to muscle memory, my body did!

In Deuteronomy, God told the Israelites it would not be too difficult for them to follow His law and receive His blessings. While there were many commands to follow, with God’s law in their hearts, they would be able to follow it. Just as my body remembered how to ski, the Israelites could remember and obey God’s Word from the heart.

With what on the surface seems like an immense list of do’s and don’ts in God’s Word, following His commands may be a daunting idea. However, God’s law is written on our hearts. When we earnestly seek Him, we will find it easier to make the choices that bring us nearer to God, even if we can’t recite every verse from memory.

Father, when I don’t know what to do, remind me that Your Word is in my heart. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Out of Sight, Out of Mind

We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. (Hebrews 2:1)

Scripture: Hebrews 1:13–2:4

Song: “You Are My All in All”

When an infant’s toy rolls out of sight, the child cries. The child is confused; to them, the toy no longer exists. Psychologist Jean Piaget proposed the idea that young children lack object permanence. In other words, they do not realize that an object continues to exist when it’s out of sight. Children generally develop object permanence at some point before the age of two. Yet, as the saying goes, “Out of sight, out of mind.”

The author of Hebrews implores his readers to pay careful attention to what they have heard concerning Jesus and salvation. This is a deliberate act. It is not that the gospel is of so little importance that it is easy to forget about. Rather, it is such a priceless gift that it’s worth keeping close always. Doing so can protect us from forgetting God’s work in our lives.

Many avenues can help us to keep the gospel close. Reading the Bible, connecting with other believers, and abiding in prayer are some of them. Taking time to be thankful for all God has done throughout the day is another, as is paying attention to how God is working through the situations we encounter. However we choose to keep God’s truth close, the benefits of doing so will become apparent.

Father, I never want to lose sight of all You’ve done. Teach me to pay careful attention to all You’re doing in and through me.

The Most Valuable Treasure

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.” (Matthew 13:44)

Scripture: Matthew 13:44–52

Song: “O That Pearl of Great Price!”

Some things are worth giving up everything for. Harriet Tubman knew this to be true as she escaped from slavery. She had nothing and no one waiting for her in the North, and she knew that obtaining freedom meant risking her life—but it afforded her the opportunity to give the gift of freedom to others.

The idea of something so precious it is worth great sacrifice is expressed by the two parables in Matthew 13:44–46. Two interpretations of this passage exist. The first is that Christians leave everything behind to follow Christ, who is the treasure or pearl. The second is that Christ sacrificed everything for the treasure that is God’s people. Both interpretations exhibit how precious and valuable belonging to the kingdom of heaven is.

Christ bought us at the price of His life (1 Corinthians 6:20). Likewise, Jesus taught that following Him includes sacrifice (Mark 10:17–27). To God, we were worth the sacrifice of His only Son. That gives us more worth and value than we could ever receive from any other source. Just as Harriet Tubman knew freedom for herself and her people was worth great sacrifice, God’s kingdom is too precious for us to pass by.

Father, whatever may draw my attention today, remind me of how precious I am to You and how precious You are to me. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Action Before Motivation

“Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before God . . . I have heard you, declares the LORD.” (2 Chronicles 34:27)

Scripture: 2 Chronicles 34:15–22, 26–27

Song: “Draw Near to God, Whose Steadfast Love”

With the intent to just grab a few books to donate, before I knew it, I had cleaned out the entire cabinet that housed them—a task that I hadn’t gathered the motivation to do for quite some time. I accomplished this task by first taking the action of grabbing books. While it is easy to avoid tasks until we feel motivated, action precedes motivation—not the other way around.

Josiah took action to bring Judah back to worshiping God by removing sites of worship to false gods (2 Chronicles 34:3–7). Josiah took inspiration from that action to have the temple restored. This is when the Book of the Law was found. Hearing the words of the Law led Josiah to humble himself. He and the people then had the motivation to obey the Law, unlike many of the generations before them.

The actions Josiah took before the Law was found paved the way for the humble response he gave, which in turn brought God’s blessings back to Judah. It is common to not be motivated, whether to accomplish a task or take a moment out of the day to pray or read God’s Word. That’s okay! The motivation will come when we take even the smallest action toward our goals.

Father, help me take the actions that will bring me nearer to You today. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.