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“Tell Me The Rules!” The Rev. Aaron M. G. Zimmerman
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Let us pray, Almighty God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight. O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

One who is new to this church recently asked me, what are the rules of the Episcopal Church? You know, they had been in a tradition where that was really important. There were the written rules, there were the unwritten rules. And I said, you know, it's basically the same as what is true for all Christians throughout the ages. You know, we believe the things that are said in the creeds. We have the moral teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ. There's of course, the Ten Commandments. I said, but we do have one extra commandment. The Episcopalians have an 11th commandment. Thou shalt not be tacky. Right? I mean, look at this. Look at this. Not a fake flower in the place. You know, no industrial carpet in here. That's the thing. It's not really a commandment, don't worry. You can be as tacky as you want. Jesus loves you, anyways. But I do find this to be true that we like to know the rules in almost every sector of life. The church is famous for that, adding rules. But it's true everywhere. Social media, to me, seems to exist primarily to tell you the rules for successful living in almost any sphere. Wherever you get your social media dopamine, there is somebody on there telling you how to live your life. Whether it's giving you career advice, whether it's giving you relationship advice, there are approximately five billion people giving

you parenting advice. Be a better person. How to retire at age 40. How to get the abs that I have, which is how I got them, by the way, social media. You can't see them because of the vestments, but they are there. How to sleep better? I mean, everything is just social media. It's these rules. Do these five things. There are also, if you're not on social media, these things find their way to you in all kinds of places. If you are a student, there are rules that your colleagues are giving you about how to advance in the field that you are in. You need to get this degree and then that certification and go to this conference and publish in that paper, cultivate the relationship with this person, and avoid this political thing for the 10-year process. Maybe you're in law, maybe you're in medicine, maybe you're in manufacturing. In almost every sphere, there's some sort of ladder you have to climb, rules that you have to follow to get to the peak, whatever that is. Whether it's in your personal life or your professional life or your religious life, this fascination with rules, it's exhausting. I read an article that said, if you take all the things we are supposed to do, the rules, meditate, pray, read, work out, spend time with family and friends, have some me time for yourself, sleep eight hours a day, all the things that you're supposed to do, it would take about 42 hours a day. That's why you feel like you're not doing it right. But here's the thing, nobody is. The rules are exhausting and we really can't keep up. And I wonder often, is there a different way? And thankfully, there is. And it's in Matthew, chapter 22, the gospel passage that we heard read today. Thank you for that, Karen. And we heard Karen read what happened to Jesus when a teacher of the law, a religious person came and asked him for the rules. What must we do? And what is the, you know, to be a good religious person, teacher, what commandment in the law is the greatest, is how he said it. You know, there's a lot of commandments, there's over 600 in the Hebrew scriptures, there's the 10 big ones. But really, can you boil it down? Give me the rule, the most important thing. The greatest one. And Jesus says, you should love the Lord of God with all your heart, soul. And mind, this

is the greatest and first commandment. And the second one is like it. You should love your neighbor as your self. Two, quoting Deuteronomy six and quoting Leviticus 19, which you also heard our scripture reading for today. That's where Jesus got it. He didn't make them up. He was a student of the scriptures. He knew them. He said these are the real central ones here. And it's so obviously a perfect answer. The guy is like, okay, sounds good. He's got nothing left to ask. The dialogue continues. And Jesus says, so do you mind if I ask you guys a question? I'm not like sure. Okay, so we all know the Messiah is coming. You know, just changing gears here for a second. I want to talk about the Messiah. The Messiah is coming. We know that the Messiah is coming. The anointed one who's going to save the world and put all things right. He's coming. Whose son will he be? Oh, duh. This is easy. They know the answer. This is a layup. This is a softball question. Every good Jewish person would know that the Messiah will be the son of David. Well done. Son of David. That's right. The guy carved in wood dancing before the ark of the covenant over there on the altar casing. Son of David. So Jesus follows up with this question. So, okay, so if he's just David's son, the descendant of King David, the ancient King of Israel, the best King of Israel, if he's just David's descendant, why does David call him Lord? And he quotes Psalm 110 to him. Hang with me. I want to get to what this is about. But the Psalm that he quotes begins with the following line, David, who's the writer of the Psalm, says, the Lord said to my Lord, wait here until I put all your enemies under your feet. So what Jesus is saying is that when David wrote this Psalm about the Messiah, he said the Lord and in Hebrew it's Yahweh. God said to my Lord the Messiah, wait till all things are put under your feet. He didn't say, God didn't say, David did not say Yahweh. God said to my descendant, wait here until I put all things under your feet. He said, God said to my Lord. So the whole point of Jesus saying this is you think that God is going to send this Messiah to fix the world and make all things right and that it's going to be the son of David. But I have to tell you it's going to be somebody bigger than the son of David. It's not just going to be an earthly king,

someone to make more rules, someone to sit on the throne. It's going to be this great cosmic figure, this Messianic figure, whoever it's going to be. Now I feel your attention spans waiting. I feel the energy just bleeding out of this room like a five-day old birthday party balloon. But the reason this is important is let me back up and say why this all matters, why this whole exchange happens. The person who's asking Jesus about what commandment is the greatest is someone who wants to know what do I need to do to achieve religiously in life in general. He wants to boil it down to something easy and doable. This is what religious people do all the time. They want to make church a list of things we can check off on a list. You've heard what you need to do to make God happy. It's just go to church a lot, read the Bible, don't use real dirty words, say darn and shoot and God will be happy with you. You could sort of sum it up. Modest clothes, clean talk and Christian rock. Those are the things you need to do to make God happy. We want to shrink the law into something doable. So we can get our arms around. Jesus' answer to him is to say, you think you can boil God's law down maybe into something you can handle, but it is so big and so all-encompassing. It is nothing less than loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. How do you do that? It's not even a thing I can do. I can read my Bible. I can go to church. How do I love God with all my heart, soul and mind? How do I do that? It's an emotion. What do I do? How do I do that? And then he says this other impossible thing, love my neighbor as myself. How's that going? Tell me after Thanksgiving. Jesus wants to remind this person and all of us that when we try to boil the law down, make Christianity something doable, we've missed the point. If you heard Jesus say love God with all your heart, soul and mind and you were like, okay, you were not paying attention. This is not something that we can do. So Jesus then wants to offer some help because not only is the law something that we can't really do as he describes it here. Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself. It's also impossible because of life, because of what happens to you. Many of you have had a time in your life where things were going well and you were sort of following God more or less in the

way that you had been taught,
clean modest clothing, clean talk and Christian rock and you were
doing it all and things were
going well for you and then life happened. The greatest Scottish rock
band of all time, as you know,
is simple minds. In 1985, Jim Care, the lead singer, sang in a song
called Alive and Kicking,
his backup vocalist, the great Robin Clark sang most of it. She said,
what are you going to do
when things go wrong? What are you going to do when it all cracks up?
What are you going to do when
the love burns down? When the flames go up. And so if you are someone
who is trying to make God a
project of following rules and you're trying to make the rules doable,
the reason it doesn't work,
not only is the law bigger than you think it is, it's also impossible
to do when life throws its
curveballs at you. This happens to almost every person, there's some
sort of dark night of the soul,
you get divorced, your child gets sick, you lose a job, whatever the
case may be and now the idea
that you would love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength
and love your neighbor is
something you emotionally do not have the capacity to do because
you're so angry, confused,
paralyzed and lost. So for this reason, that's why Jesus radically
changes the subject in a way that
what asks whose son is the Messiah? What he's saying is you think
God's law is something that you
can shrink down and make doable, which you can't because it's too big
and you are too wrapped up
in the difficulties of life which have got you down. So the idea that
you could do this ever is
so let's now talk about the Messiah. You think he's just the son of
David, you think he's just
going to be a king, some human person that can make rules, give you a
list of follow, make Israel
great again, do all these things, kick out the Romans, give you the
path to follow, give you the
latter to climb, but you need something more because God's law is just
not a list of things you can do,
it's your whole self loving God in the world which is so difficult and
so what you need is not
just the son of David, some human figure to give you rules. What you
need is a Savior. What you need
is someone who when you don't love God with all your heart and soul in
mind loves you anyways.
You need someone who even when you don't love your neighbor as
yourself and you can even barely
love yourself. Self-loathing seems to be the name of the game with

most people. You need someone who
loves you first and loves you always and loves you unconditionally.
This is what Matthew 22
is about. We want to make God's law something domesticated, acute pet,
something we can do,
but Jesus says it's way bigger, i.e. impossible, love God with all
your heart, soul in mind,
love your neighbor as yourself and it's impossible too because your
human and life is life
and the good news is that God does not abandon us to this situation,
this untiabile not.
God sends his son. God comes in the second person, the Trinity,
Jesus Christ to love you first, to love you fully and to love you
unconditionally.
People say I talk about grace too much here. Not everybody, some of
you think it, you don't say it
because you know, I'll excommunicate you, but some of you think it or
I get these questions,
I listen to your sermon online and I, when are you going to tell
people to get their act together?
When are you going to tell people to repent and do these things or not
do those other things?
And I say, have you read what Jesus tells us is on the list of things
to do?
It's not do this, it's love God with all your heart, with all your
soul and with all your mind.
If you think you can do that, I'd be happy to tell you, I think you
already know that.
I think what you do need to hear is that when you fail to do that,
there is a God who does not
abandon you, but who loves you and has come to be the friend of
sinners and the one who does
for you what you cannot do for yourself. Let us pray. Almighty God,
help us to believe and know
that you actually love us. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.