Do you know the rules? My question is really directed at you men, and I don’t just mean “the rules” I mean “The Rules.” I was introduced to The Rules, for men, by women, about twenty years ago and have found them to hold true ever since. For those unfamiliar with them, here are just a few:

1. The female always makes the rules
2. The rules are subject to change without notification
3. If the female suspects the man know all The Rules, she must immediately change some or all of the rules
4. If the female is wrong, it is due to a misunderstanding as a direct result of something the male did or said wrong

I think I have said enough to remind you of the stunning accuracy of these rules. I had better not go on or I could suffer, as laid out in rule 15: “any attempt by the man to document The Rules could result in bodily harm.” I hope I have not offended the ladies. There are also rules by men for men, like “Never ask for help, even if you really, really need help,” but they are not half as funny.

The point is that we are creatures of rules. We may fight them, mock them, disobey them but really we love them. We find rules irresistible. We demand them. We just can’t help making them, particularly here in the UK. I spend all of my working time making up rules; we call it law when Government does it, to stop people making a mess with radioactivity. That’s the sort of rules we really do need you might think, but we have rules for lots of other things that are a lot less important, like what time the pubs must close.

Now, this demand for rules is nowhere greater than in matters of religion. There are an awful lot of rules in the OT and some of the books are about almost nothing else. Rules given by God for living in accordance with his wishes. That’s what the Hebrews wanted, demanded. They wanted rules so they knew what to do, knew that they were doing what God wanted. And if you read the book of Exodus they got a shed load of rules. Certainly the Ten Commandments, but much more: there are laws like: “When one man’s ox butts another’s and kills it, they shall sell the live ox, share the price and also share the dead beast.” Now a lot of these are good laws for a civilised society, which is what the Israelites were aiming to be. But they do not necessarily have much to do with faith in God, even if the Bible indicates that it was God who made the laws.

This is the point that Paul is trying to convey to the Romans and it is one of his most important messages, indeed one of the most important in the whole NT, what Paul calls justification through faith. Now the Jewish faith was based on laws and the keeping of what was seen as God given law. It was what made Israel special. The Law of Moses did make Israel special and distinguished it from the surrounding, more primitive tribes in Palestine. That was important in keeping the race pure and carrying the memory of how they had been saved from Egypt by God forward thorough the generations. Law was very important, and is very important, just like it is today for a stable, peaceful and enduring society. Law is also important as a basis for religion to survive, but that is not really what faith is all about.

St Paul is desperately striving to get this point over to a rule obsessed Jewish outpost in Rome, by appealing to their original ancestor, Abraham. He says: “For it was not through law that Abraham… was given the promise that the world should be his inheritance, but through the righteousness that came from faith.” His point is that it was not through any goodness in terms of obedience to a set of rules that Abraham was given the promise by God, that his heirs would be God’s chosen people, more numerous than grains of sand on a beach. There were no rules then! The Jewish law had not been written. No, Abraham was blessed by God because of the strength of his faith. He believed God when he spoke to him and set off on a long journey with all his family, leaving his old settled life behind, to seek the unknown Promised Land without knowing whether he would ever see it himself. He also offered his own son, Isaac, as a sacrifice when God asked him to. In short, he held nothing back from God. St Paul is saying that, if their father Abraham needed only faith, then they themselves needed no more than that. Law may be necessary, but obedience to law has nothing to do with faith, or with God’s grace. It is faith and grace that matter, not rules and law.

Are we any better than those Roman Christians? I think not. We are obsessed by rules. And I am not just talking about our Governments who have become more and more active in creating more and more legislation. We church people are also obsessed with rules. We want rules, we search the Bible for them and, if there aren’t any rules, what do we do? We make them up! Our church life is full of rules that we and our predecessors have invented. Often those rules have just reflected the personal preferences of the clergy or other influential people in the church. Rules about dress, who can do what, what to say, when to say it, etc, etc. We just can’t do without the rules.

That is not to say that rules and laws are unnecessary of course. We do need laws in everyday life to ensure that minorities are protected and that the will of the majority prevails. We need rules in church as in other organizations to define what we stand for and what is expected of members. St Paul is not disputing that. What he is saying is that following rules is not to be confused with righteousness, by which we mean putting ourselves in the right relationship with God. We cannot win favour with God however perfectly we obey the rules. All we need is faith and God’s grace, to receive his blessing.

This is a difficult idea for us the grasp, just as it was for St Paul’s audience. Does this mean we are just free to break any rules we want, as long as we have faith? It’s the wrong question really. Perhaps we should ask what our attitude to rules will be if we have faith. We will respect rules and not break them just because we can. We will not break rules for personal convenience or gain. But we may break rules if we genuinely believe we need to help someone or because our faith demands it. Remember, that is what Jesus did when, for example, he healed people on the Sabbath, disobeying the rule. He pointed out that it could not be wrong to do something good whatever the day. The demands of our faith to help those who we can override the rules. But of course, if those rules are the law, we may have to pay the price of that, just as Jesus did. That’s what following conscience is all about, taking the consequences.

I think the important quality here is our attitude. If our attitude is that goodness is about following rules then we are in trouble. Following rules makes us law-abiding, but it doesn’t make us **good.**  It doesn’t gain us God’s blessing. However, if we seek God’s will through prayer above all, but also through scripture and the teaching and tradition of the church, then we will have the right attitude to the rules. We will obey them, unless contrary to our faith, but we will recognize that there is nothing special about that. Being law-abiding is commendable but not the same as goodness.

Another objection to rules as a measure of righteousness is that it leads to comparisons. I keep more law than you, so I am better than you and closer to God than you. That was, of course what happened in Jewish society. Needless to say, it is totally misguided and a source of serious temptation to see ourselves as superior because of our better compliance record.

Finally, we might be tempted to ask; why is the Bible so full of rules if they are unimportant? There are two answers to this. I gave one earlier in the sermon; the laws were for Jewish society, like our statute book, and to set it apart from the surrounding tribes in Canaan. The second one was given by Jesus, when he was questioned about divorce. He said divorce was not God’s intention for man and woman, but Moses had made a law about when it was acceptable because he recognized the people were not capable of accepting God’s will on this. So people needed some guidance, but it was very clear that law was far below the standard expected of someone who was close to God.

That must be our aim, to come close to God. The attempt in itself is brings us closer to goodness and God’s blessing than obeying 100% of the rules will ever do.