



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

November 1, 2015

"The Joy of Commandments" (The Vine Series) - John 15:7-11

The Rev. Dan Chun

John 15:7 - *If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.*

John 15:8 - My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

John 15:9 - As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.

John 15:10 - If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.

John 15:11 - I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

Author Tim Keller tells the story of an English teacher he knew who one day walked into his class full of 15-year-old boys and girls. He didn't say anything. He just went up to the chalkboard and wrote a series of words and then just waited...silently. He wanted to see their reaction.

Here is the series of words he wrote on the board: *Nobility, chastity, valor, courtesy, virtue, splendor, purity and grace.*

And what happened? The teacher said his students began to snicker. "Yeah, right!" Smiles, laughter, chortling. (Our youth are here with us this morning. And, no, they wouldn't giggle!).

Why would that happen? Oh,

perhaps they were nervous. Or maybe because that specific class found those concepts laughable. What teenager today says, "Yes I am going to live for nobility, courtesy, splendor, purity, virtue, chastity, grace?"

What if it were the locker room of a Division I football team? How would a team respond if the coach said, "I don't care if you win one game. But if there is one thing we are going to get in our heads when we run out there, it will be grace, nobility, splendor, purity, virtue, chastity!" And the players would say what?

I don't care if you win a championship; don't care if you play pro ball. I do care if you learn about life and do well in school and graduate and give back to the community.

Now there are some schools like Stanford, Northwestern, and Notre Dame who really aim for that and last year had the highest graduation rates in the nation of 86% to 92% of their college football team players.

Interestingly, all three are in the top tier for student community service also along with places like the University of Washington, UC San Diego, and UCLA. So if you are looking for a university like that, check it out: www.washingtonmonthly.com/college_guide/rankings_2013/national_university_rank.php

There are many criteria in choosing a college and community and service should be one of them.

But what if a different word was put on a blackboard for teenagers or for college students such as: *Achievement.*

Ahhh, in our culture, achievement that is not laughable. We get that. Society lives for that. No snickering from kids about that. Achievement. That's what the young are told to go for.

But here's the kicker. As Tim Keller says, "When the soul is full of achievement and is absolutely devoid of those other words on the blackboard, the soul shrivels up and dies because the soul is too great for 'just' achievement." (*Introduction to the Ten Commandments*, by Tim Keller, 9-24-89).

We don't want just achievement alone for our kids, nor for ourselves. The soul longs for and needs for its nurture and growth those other words like virtue, nobility, valor, courtesy, and grace.

Today we continue our series on Jesus' words on The Vine—about how Jesus is the Vine and we are the branches and how we need to be connected to Him all the time. And if we are continually connected to Him, I believe in our veins will flow virtue, valor, nobility, courtesy, grace etc. And the greatest chance we have for this is if we keep God's commandments and stay connected to Jesus the Vine. Keeping God's commandments keeps us connected to God and brings forth the character we have always wanted.

As we go through Jesus' discourse on The Vine in the 15th chapter of the Gospel of John we come to our verse for this morning: *"If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in His love."* John 15:10

I contend that when we hear the word "commandments"—and if that word were written on a blackboard in front of us—many of us we might feel the same uneasiness.

Commandments? Suddenly we think of don't do this, don't do that...rules, regulations, and rituals that suppress, stifle, smother, suffocate, strangle, or shame us.

Commandments? Who wants that? I want to do what I want to do. Who dares to say there are even absolutes that I should follow? Everything is relative, isn't it? And as teenagers or adults, why would we want commandments in our lives?

But Jesus is saying, "IF you keep MY COMMANDMENTS...IF your branches keep connected to Me, who is the Vine, you will find true love and joy."

And there may be a voice in us that says, "No way! How can following commandments bring the joy and love I have been yearning for?"

Let's remember it is Jesus who is saying this, so let's give Him a listen because MAYBE He is telling the truth. After all, He happens to be the Son of God who gave His life for us.

If someone like Jesus gave His life for me, I think He would deserve a listen. And that He is God, well, duh, maybe He will be right on this.

And think about it, with all of the millions of laws in this world, did it ever occur to us that if we just seriously followed the Ten Commandments then perhaps we wouldn't need the other millions of laws?

Basically commandments are the guidelines, principles and mandates God tells us to follow so that we can live a really fulfilling and cool life! They are for our good.

When we are told by the Lord for example, to love one another, to be kind and generous, to share the faith, to not want what other people have, to not lie and forgive, and to not have sex outside of marriage—that is for our benefit.

Tim Keller would say that God gave us commandments for three reasons, and the first one might be a shocker:

God gave us commandments so that:

1. We might have intimacy with Him.
2. We might be free.
3. We might know it's about the heart and not behavior.

Let's unpack these one by one. **First, God gave us commandments that we might have intimacy with Him.**

Wow, that's a new thought. I might have intimacy with God if I follow His commandments. Now we need to be careful with this thought and get the order right. It's not *if* we do certain things God's way, we will find intimacy with God.

Sometimes we might think, even as youth, that only if I do certain things will my parents love me. But that is not how it works and especially with God, it doesn't work that way. No, it's that God offers us His intimacy and then we want to follow His commandments and we then experience even more of His love.

Let me give an example. In Deuteronomy, a book in the Old Testament that gives a historical narrative of the Israelites leaving Egypt and going to the Promised Land, we find in the fourth chapter,

the words of Moses who led them out, who said: *"Remember the day you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb, when He said to me, 'Assemble the people before me to hear my words so that they may learn to revere me as long as they live in the land and may teach them to their children.'" Deut. 4:10 (TNIV)*

Now this is really important. Here's the sequence. The Israelites were in Egypt as slaves. They didn't have the commandments then.

God then saved them! He rescued them! And He had Moses take them out of Egypt and gather them in front of Mt. Horeb. And there God says, "I want you to really know Me, and follow Me, and experience my love and so NOW I give you the Commandments.

See the order? It's not, IF I follow God's commandments, THEN God will like me, and love me, and help me, and rescue me.

No, it's the other way around. Our Heavenly Father says, "I have helped you in more ways than you will ever know. I have been with you and rescued you from slavery and death and hardship. I fed you and gave you water, and now I want you to follow My commandments so that in following them, you might REALLY know Me as more than a spiritual ATM machine.

That's what a good parent says. "I want an intimacy with my children that is not based on all the things I buy you or give you."

God is also saying, "For if you don't follow My commandments, it will not be that I have left you...but you have left Me and strayed far away from My love."

God is saying, "Because I want to set up a life of intimacy and close friendship with you, I am NOW going to give you My commandments."

Too many people think in the opposite way—if I obey God, then He will hear my prayers, then He will finally accept me because I am following the rules. So now that I am a good boy or good girl I will go to heaven and be rewarded.

But surprise! That is not how it is with God. What He is hoping we would say is, “Now that I realize that God loves me and He is my Savior... that He has saved me and rescued me so many times; that He has forgiven me, answered my prayers so many times; that He has died for my sake and gone through a lot more pain than I have ever sacrificed for another. NOW I want to really know Him and have an intimacy with Him...always; forever.

You see if you are in the first camp that if I fulfill the Law, God will then love me...then you will be utterly crushed by the Law. You can't do it. You will never be able to fulfill all of the Law.

Or you may become one who thinks you have gotten a high score because you obeyed the Law. Or worse yet you become smug, spiritually cocky and judgmental thinking, “Look I am better than you because I have kept the Law. In fact, I might want to keep impure people OUT of the church because you don't measure up like I do.”

But if you follow the commandments out of love for God, you will find intimacy.

As we have studied so far in our Vine series, Jesus says: *“If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”* John 15:7-8

That's the kind of friendship I want with God...abiding in Him and He in me—Him blessing me out of love and not due to a performance.

I want to obey His commandments. As Ray Stedman wrote: “Jesus

said to His disciples ‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments.’ They listened to Him and we must listen to Him as well. We can see that obedience grows out of our love for Jesus, and it is shed abroad by the Holy Spirit within us.

“The Holy Spirit awakens our love, and when we are moved by love it is easy to obey God's Word. It is natural to obey those whom we love. We can now see a complete cycle which keeps producing deeper and deeper experiences of love for the Lord.” (“Discovery Bible Study Book”, “Expository Studies in John 13-17”, “Secrets of the Spirit”; by Ray C. Stedman Publisher is Word Books in cooperation with Discovery Foundation, Palo Alto CA ,p.83)

This all leads to the second point.

God gave us commandments that we might be free.

It sounds crazy but we are actually more free when we follow Gods commandments. Commandments are fences for freedom. By following rules, by being disciplined, by initially having to do one thing over and over, one becomes free.

The musician who has the freedom to play jazz or classical or pop music, has that freedom because of the discipline of countless hours of playing the scales. Same for dancers who seem so free as they soar in the air and jump and twirl due to many hours of practice. Same for any athlete...whether surfing or playing tennis or football.

If it looks easy, then know it is the result of countless hours or practice and discipline, and following the rules or commandments of the sport.

And if you think about it historically, it was the Christians who saw freedom as an essential right within the context of God's commandments. By understanding the commandments of loving your

brother and sister, Christians freed the slaves.

Oh yes, at one point there were Christians who had slaves but when you think of the freeing of slaves, where did the idea come from that people should be free? It was out of the Commandments and that is why if you look at who the abolitionists were...they were Christians!!

It was a Christian like William Wilberforce who started the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. The Clapham Sect was a group of church of England reformers. And in America it was the Abolitionists made up of Quakers and Methodists—people who read the Bible and knew the commandments.

When you follow the commandments you are free, and you fight for the freedom and respect of other living beings on the planet. Following the commandments makes you a huge advocate for social justice! Commandments create a safe place for us; a haven for us and we want that for others as well.

And now to the third point:

God gave us commandments that we might know it's about the heart and not behavior.

In the first point I mentioned that we are not saved because we do good works or follow the Commandments. God is ultimately hoping that His principles or laws are embedded in our hearts and are not just some external rules we follow.

This might help. In the Bible, in the Book of Jeremiah, Jeremiah wrote this: *“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.* [Jer. 31:33](#)

God wants to write His commandments on our hearts so that it will be second nature for us to want to do them.

Jesus says God wants it to be as natural as branches connected to the Vine...so interconnected...so joined...so intimate...that we want to do what God wants us to do not because it earns us His love, but because He loves us and we love Him and we *want* to do it.

Some of you might have come here today thinking that religion or Christianity is all about using the law or the commandments as a stairway to heaven—that if I am a pretty good guy or gal, then I am in with God.

But we can't keep the law. Jesus is saying, "No, it starts with Me—a personal relationship with Me. And as you know Me I will write what I want you to do on your heart."

Maybe some today thought it was all about **your** work and good deeds... and now you know it's actually about **Jesus'** good work not yours, and this fact brings great intimacy with God. And if you follow God's principles, it doesn't save you and it's not to earn God's love, but your relationship with Him will be even more intimate and close.

It will be, as Jesus says, like the best of friends who want to hang out and talk and pray. And we will have joy and will do good deeds together, bearing fruit, and we will feel so good about it because we know that God had us grow that fruit.

If we have intimacy with God, we will be fearless; we will be courageous. When we see God's commandments on how people need to be free and creative, we won't care if people are criticizing us as we try to free people from the bondage of hardship.

Today is a special day. It is the first Sunday of the month. It means we are going to share communion together.

Why do we share communion? Well, it all has to do with a commandment from Jesus that we are choosing to obey.

We celebrate only two sacraments in our church—baptism and communion. Why those two? Because they are specifically the two that Jesus commanded us to do. He commanded all of his followers to be baptized...and second to remember Him in the sharing of the bread and the cup.

Interestingly, for centuries the church has called the Thursday before Easter, Maundy Thursday. Why? What does Maundy mean? Maundy is from the Latin word "Mandatum" which means Commandment.

For it was at the Last Supper that Jesus told His disciples: "A new commandment I give to you all – that you love one another as I have loved you."

So when we take communion, it is no small thing. The Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians chapter 11 that some who took this sacrament lightly got weak sick and died. It's a serious time of introspection and how we treat others and our relationship with God.

When communion happens, it is a supernatural time. It is a time of intimacy. Jesus is right now somehow more present than at other times. He wants to be real to us and wants us to be real with Him.

And we honor Him in this way because He commanded us to. And as we stay close to Him and obey Him, we will have a close intimate relationship with him.

Let us say this responsive reading together:

PASTOR: The Lord be with you.

ALL: And also with you.

PASTOR: Lift up your hearts.

ALL: We lift them to the Lord.

PASTOR: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

ALL: It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Eternal God, holy and mighty, it is truly right and our greatest joy to give You thanks and praise, and to worship You in every place where Your glory abides. In Christ's Name. Amen.

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Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at fpchawaii.org. The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: fpchkoolau@gmail.com