

Message: It's About Love

Are you a rule-breaker or a rule-follower?

I'll bet if we went around the room, we'd find we have a mix of both kinds of people here today. Maybe you haven't thought about it much. Here's a quick way to check and see.

Here's the scenario. You're in a car, driving by yourself in the afternoon. You're driving in a rural area. There are no houses or businesses nearby. Up ahead you see a cross street. There are no other vehicles anywhere in sight. At the cross street is a stop sign.

Do you stop or do you continue without stopping?

If you stop at the sign, you're a rule-follower. If you keep going, you're a rule-breaker. Now this isn't an exercise in morality. It isn't an exercise in civil law. It's not a “who's right and who's wrong” exercise. It's an exercise in human nature. We all like to do things our own way, according to our world view and personality. When we explore questions like this, it helps us to understand there are different perspectives in how we live.

This is true when we read Scripture as well. Jesus knew: we have different perspectives. It's one of the primary reasons we don't belong to one, great big Christian church. Instead we have Catholics, Baptists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Methodists, Mennonites and many more. Our common belief in Jesus unites us, but we have a lot of different opinions, too.

Regardless of our differences, we're all seeking the same thing. We feel a spiritual hunger and thirst. We want life to be more than failures, disappointments, frustrations and occasional mountain top experiences. We want something we can hold on to that gives us meaning and purpose. We want a reason for getting out of bed in the morning.

Jesus changes lives. We may not understand that, but we feel it to be true. There's something deep down inside us that responds. Prayer touches us in a way we can't deny. Our experiences and the experiences of others speak to our heart and mind. We hear stories of miracles and lives changed and we want to share that experience of God's presence. We're surprised to find ourselves encouraged, comforted and fulfilled

when we care for others. When we help those who are hurting and in need, we find new perspective. We learn what it means to live and love as Jesus did. We find life.

There’s a whole spectrum of beliefs. Some of you here today may not really understand why you’re attracted, but you are. Some of you here today know you’re attracted, but there’s so much more you don’t understand. Some of you here today are depending on your attraction; you’re freely committed to following Jesus wherever the path may lead. That’s the place where Jesus’ third commandment lies.

That leads to the question: what’s a commandment? Here are two ways of looking at it. First, the words ordinance, law and command are synonyms. At the heart of this view is the sense that it’s given to us by an authority. Commandments differ from civil law in that the authority is divine, not by the people. Second, another way to look at it is to consider commandments to be instruction. The Greek language used implies that it’s something focused on the end result. That means that God is giving us instruction on how we can become who God made us to be, reaching our full potential as children of God who bear fruit.

These views help. Remember the stop sign scenario? If you’re a rule-follower, having a rule of law is helpful. We like to know where the boundaries are. It helps us to understand that God is protecting us by clearly marking the way we’re to live. If you’re a rule-breaker, it helps to know there’s a goal. This empowers us and gives the freedom we need to thrive. God gives us free will so we get to choose how we’ll follow the path. Regardless of our lifestyle or viewpoint, God is with us.

Jesus gave us commandments. But he didn’t ignore the Law. Jesus honored all of the commandments God gave to Moses. Jesus traveled from synagogue to synagogue, preaching and teaching. People marveled at the authoritative way he spoke. Jesus’ words touched their heart. However, Jesus also clashed with the system. Jesus wants us to examine our intent. The way we live matters, not just the end result. That’s because the end result isn’t just about our human potential, it’s about being fruitful in God’s eyes. That means helping others understand the apparent tension between rules and free will. Guess what? Love wins.

Jesus said, *“You didn’t choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you could go and produce fruit and so that your fruit could last. As a result, whatever you ask [God] in my name, [God] will give you”* (John 15:16). We’re chosen and given a life-long task: producing everlasting fruit. That’s what branches in a vine do. They bear fruit. But they don’t do it separately or alone. They’re one of many branches, working together, all connected to the vine. Everything we need to bear fruit is given to us by God.

I know this from personal experience. Whatever you invest into others, sharing God’s love with them, multiplies and grows. That’s what it means to empty oneself, pouring love into other people. Our connection to God grows stronger each time we empty ourselves. We help everyone around us. And those who believe because our love invites, connects and engages them, will be filled with life and light.

There’s different about Jesus’ commandments. Jesus isn’t giving us a burden. His instruction isn’t boring. Jesus is asking us to live in a way that leads to spontaneity and joy. When we follow Jesus’ command, we accomplish what God intended. That’s what it means to obey. It’s a way of life we freely choose because it makes us better. We’re filled with joy when we’ve done something good and when we see the fruit that comes from it. People will want to believe in Jesus and spend time with us. Our joy is even greater when the good is something we realize we couldn’t do on our own. Our joy is deep when we realize Jesus gives us the strength and help we need to do good work.

What I’m saying is this: God’s Spirit is already at work in people. When we join in with love, we play a part in someone finding new life. When we look in someone’s eyes and we see hope, or we listen to someone’s voice and hear excitement, or when we see someone’s posture change showing their engagement, we’re touched deep down. The Spirit connects God-the other person-us. Even if we don’t see any new behavior or we don’t receive appreciation or we walk away wondering if we made an impact, we can be assured that the Holy Spirit is at work. It may be at a deep level where words don’t have meaning, just like a seed buried in the soil, waiting to germinate.

Jesus reminds us what to do, no matter what: “Remain in my love” (v9). Stay connected. Remember, you aren’t Jesus. You need God’s love to grow and become who you’re made to be. Jesus is the vine, the source of life and light. We’re the branches. We rely on God’s generosity. “And God is a generous giver, but we can only see and enjoy God’s generosity when we love God with all of our heart, mind, and strength. As long as we say, ‘I’ll love you, God, but first show me your generosity,’ we’ll remain distant from God and unable to experience what God truly wants to give us: life in abundance.”¹

Jesus’ third command “love each other just as I have loved you” is brought home in a powerful way (v12). Jesus calls the disciples friends. They aren’t servants or substitutes for the real thing, sitting on the sidelines. They’re in the game. They’re on the first string! They’re the real thing. Jesus invites us to join him. The difference between a servant and a friend is important. Friends know why. They know what their friend is doing and why. They’re part of it, freely and willingly. Servants follow instructions, doing things, without understanding the reason or the goal. They have no skin in the game. Friends have a deeper relationship based on love.

A friend is more than a simple acquaintance. Jesus is talking about the kind of friend who has takes the time to know. They’ve got their friends’ back. They’re willing to sacrifice their personal interests, time and money for the benefit of their friend. That’s what we’re called to be as those who are friends of Jesus. We have Jesus’ back. We have each other’s back. We know why we’re here. Even better; we’re looking to invite new people to the party, so we can have more friends.

What does this mean for the way we live? It means we’re there with Jesus and our friends during good times. We’re there with Jesus and our friends when hearts are broken. We’re there with Jesus and our friends when we’re frustrated and disappointed. We’re there with Jesus and our friends when we don’t know where to turn.

¹ Henri Nouwen, *Daily Meditation*, May 4 2018, <http://henrinouwen.org/resources/daily-meditation/>

Our connection to Jesus and our love for him and our friends is non-negotiable. I know, it sounds tough. But there’s great news: we love a God who forgives us when we fall down, make mistakes and even when we intentionally do wrong. That’s because we can trust God. We know Jesus’ love is true. Jesus helps us get back up, brush ourselves off and get back in the game – resume life. Jesus said so, “*I give you [this instruction] so that you can love each other*” (v17). Trust Jesus. It’ll change your life.

Jesus wants us to be friends, not servants blindly following.

Jesus loves you and he’s ready to change your life.

No matter whether you’re a rule-follower or a rule-breaker,

Jesus is calling. He’ll show you the way. Will you follow?

If you want to know Jesus’ love, pray with me ...

“O God, I have gone my own way for too long. My way hasn’t helped me with my problems, my life seems empty. I need a new way. I want to know your love. I have done wrong. Forgive me. Come into my life and save me through your mercy and grace. I pray this in the name of the One who rose from the dead, Jesus Christ. Amen.”

If you prayed that prayer for the first time, welcome to the kingdom of God. You are God’s child and you are loved. Please share that good news with us.

John 15:9-17 (CEB)

As the Father loved me, I too have loved you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I kept my Father’s commandments and remain in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy will be in you and your joy will be complete. This is my commandment: love each other just as I have loved you. No one has greater love than to give up one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I don’t call you servants any longer, because servants don’t know what their master is doing. Instead, I call you friends, because everything I heard from my Father I have made known to you. You didn’t choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you could go and produce fruit and so that your fruit could last. As a result, whatever you ask the Father in my name, he will give you. I give you these commandments so that you can love each other.

1 John 5:1-6 (CEB)

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born from God. Whoever loves someone who is a parent loves the child born to the parent. This is how we know that we love the children of God: when we love God and keep God’s commandments. This is the love of God: we keep God’s commandments. God’s commandments are not difficult, because everyone who is born from God defeats the world. And this is the victory that has defeated the world: our faith. Who defeats the world? Isn’t it the one who believes that Jesus is God’s Son?

This is the one who came by water and blood: Jesus Christ. Not by water only but by water and blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.