

## **“From Observing Commandments to Living Commitments”**

September 17, 2017

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church; Butler, Pennsylvania  
The Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, and the 300<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Synod of the Trinity

Text: *“We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.*

*(Romans 14:7-8 NRSV)*



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Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.

The Rev. Ignacio Castuera, a pastor in California, shares this story with which we begin today's message:

"A Rabbi and a Roman Catholic Priest were sitting next to each other at an inter-faith event. When dinner was served someone thoughtlessly had placed a slab of ham on the Rabbi's plate. The Rabbi did not protest but simply proceeded to eat other things his faith and his physician permitted. The Roman Catholic padre leaned over in the direction of the Rabbi and said, 'Rabbi Cohen, you and I know that the dietary laws from the Old Testament were

developed a time when pork meat was indeed dangerous due to lack of refrigeration and low heat in cooking. Of course trichinosis was rampant and your ancestors in the faith were right in prohibiting eating pork in order to save the lives of many Israelites. Those days are gone, pork is safe and there is no reason to cling to outmoded ancient practices. When will you eat your first mouthful of ham, Rabbi Cohen?' The Rabbi paused briefly and then responded, 'at your wedding, Father Maguire, at your wedding.'"<sup>i</sup>

Wow . . . We do have our observances! Some of us are pretty specific about them, too. There were prohibitions in our family growing up; we were part of that Presbyterian mainstream that bordered on being Baptist in our zeal. You didn't play cards on Sunday, or loud games; there was never any drinking . . . I went to a Christian College, Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts -- I don't know how similar the campus life there was to nearby Grove City College. We didn't permit dancing on campus. We were permitted to have square dances, but that was it! How about ballroom dancing, or Swing? "No -- you crazy liberals!"

Of course there were a whole bunch of us undergrads at Gordon that thought there was a discrepancy in the dancing prohibition in the face of the permissiveness of square dancing: "*Square dancing is okay, but ballroom and swing, among other forms, was not okay . . . HmMMM.*" Digging deep enough and pushing far enough into this conundrum and one would probably find the purse strings of a well-funded and influential alumnus that is at the head of it no doubt! There was no good reason for this position, none.

But we observe our commandments. And sometimes we observe our commandments to the exclusion of our commitments!

Let me ask you this question: are there any commandments that you observe that have gotten in the way of your commitments; that is, your commitments to God and to your neighbor? Now, as I ask that question, I have to ask the opposite question also. Because some of us, you see, are beyond commandments . . . "*Well, you know, some folks need commandments because they need help in living their lives; they can't quite figure things out for themselves. But I am free of all that, I'm beyond the*

*need for restricting behavior . . .*" I have to ask people like you this question: Does your freedom ever put a stumbling block in the way of a fellow disciple? I'm not going to let you off the hook either. And maybe the resolve for either side of that point is to stop thinking about having to observe commandments or letting them go and start to live commitments!

Peter is the one that got it started with Jesus. Peter was always a big show! He's that big ham-fisted guy that kind of puts his arm around you and leans in . . . "*How ya' doin, Okay? . . . So Lord, how often should I forgive? -- as many as seven times?*" You can imagine the other disciples looking on in wonder, "Whoa . . . Seven times?" Seven was a big number. It is also a Biblically perfect number; it's -- ahhh! God's number! So Peter's offer is -- wow!

I can almost imagine Jesus stepping away from him, maybe to gain a little distance from him, walking along the way a little further . . . "*No, you should forgive seventy-seven times. . .*" Of course if you do the math on that it is 490 -- but if you are doing the math you still don't have it right. Because the math is absolutely observing a commandment; it is taking an action and quantifying it in order to legalize it! Jesus isn't legalizing anything, he is simply saying, "*FORGIVE! . . . Forgive.*"

*"How often should I forgive, seven times?"*

*"I tell you be in relationship, forgive."*

you would have thought that that was simply an early problem of the church; first starting out -- technically the church doesn't really exist at that point; Jesus is still with the disciples, in tow. And here we are, it's 2017, and we are still dismissing churches from our fellowship of the Presbytery who wish to leave -- and doing so off and on over the years, and decades, and in the greater Church for centuries . . . I am very grateful that we celebrate, today, 300 years of the Synod of the Trinity's existence. I believe we have lasted this long because people kept commitments. People made commitments to be in relationship to one another; to reach out to one another; to embrace one another; not to walk away

from each other -- not to pick up their marbles and go home. The anniversary we celebrate today is an anniversary of commitment making.

The tendency to break faith with our commitments is something we do all the time. And part of that is our need to observe commandments -- as long as I am doing that stuff (observing commandments) I can go on autopilot. Peter's inquiry is as if he wants to check it off the list -- "*How much should I forgive, seven times? Seven's good isn't it? That's alright, right?*" But Jesus says, "*Stop it! Forgive!*" And that answer drives us crazy because you and I both know there are situations that you just don't want to forgive . . . There are times when it feels better to hold onto the grudge.

There are stories in and around the life of this congregation of past hurts. . . But it is a different day, a new day, so let it go -- for Pete's sake -- for Peter's sake, let it go.

On the one hand, observing commandments is about living by the Law. Of course, there are any numbers of people who can tell you -- including your own soul -- that is an impossible task. Just start with the ten original commandments on the list -- How many of those ten have you kept faithfully? I'm not permitting someone to say, "*Well, I've never killed anybody . . .*" But have you ever wanted to, down there in your heart? And that list is only Ten Commandments long! And we break them often. But what happened in Israel's life was that the ten original commandments became -- ready for this? 613. In the five books that comprise part one of the Hebrew Bible there are a total of 613 commandments! These five books are called TORAH (the LAW). And this part of their Bible is an expression, in LAW, how they should live their common life together. The LAW became a way to live together -- "*Well, we have to have a law for that to keep people in line.*" And the Law ultimately became the means of dictating behavior. . . But God has always wanted his people, instead, to be living in commitments and in relationships with one another! This became the message of the prophets, time and again. They knew this truth: that quite frankly, living in commitment will often take care of observing commandments!

To emphasize his words to Peter, Jesus tells a story -- perhaps as a way to answer Peter's crestfallen look in hearing Jesus' reply to him. So Jesus tells a parable about relationships and legalisms. What is interesting is the one who is owed the most in these stories of debts is the most interested in preserving relationships.

Understand what a "talent" is. It is a quantified expression of a life-time of paid labor. A talent of gold for the ordinary servant was an impossible sum to pay as a debt; and the first servant in this story owed his master a sum equal to 10,000 life-times of pay; an impossible, ridiculous figure to repay (We would call such a trope used, "hyperbole.") -- "*A gazillion dollars!*" we might say. The owner in trying to settle accounts says, at first, "*Sell him, sell everybody in his family, their possessions, everything . . . I have to get some money back on my investment.*" The fellow who owes the debt falls on his knees, moaning, crying . . . "*Ohhw, please don't. I'll pay you back everything!*" And the owner has pity on him and forgives him! 10,000 talents of gold . . .

But on the way out of the door, the slave sees that guy who works with him; they sometimes talk over coffee . . . And there's always been something about that guy He didn't like . . . *You know I gave him a \$100 bucks; a denarius was equal to a day's wages . . . Boy, he's got to get his money back! And how soon he forgets what he has been forgiven! "Pay up!"* He has the fellow thrown in prison!

How often do we do that from our heart in our relations with others? Because the relationship we had with another has stopped over one thing or another; because we have already imposed the debt to be paid; a violation of a commandment too deep, too great; "*I am no longer in relationship; I am no longer in commitment!*" Hmmm . . .

What Jesus' parable is about is God's grace that leads to us enthroning him as Lord in order for us to be in relationship with him and with others; that's the paradigm of the Gospel. Instead of a law that's imposed, that somehow we observe very legalistically; that becomes part of a whole body of

rules; that become the commandments by which we live; that get in the way of our commitments to one another -- especially if the commandment gets violated for one reason or another. . .

There are some of you who may be saying, *"Yes, but a commandment is a commandment."* It is, but there is not a lot of life in commandments; there is a lot of life in relationships; especially if we believe and trust that God is at work in those relationships, in the commitments we make. The opening of the commandments -- the preamble of the Ten Commandments -- begins with the words, *"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt . . ."* And what follows is a recitation of all of the ways that God has been in relationship to them. Commitment is built into the very first commandment, *"therefore you shall have no other gods before me."*

Privilege the relationship and the rest will follow.

We can move from observing commandments to living commitments. Interestingly enough, the other side of that coin is our freedom. Sometimes we feel we are so free, in Christ, that we can do anything that we want -- It's okay! No big deal -- but we can get in the way of others who are trying carefully to live their lives within the commandments; the prescriptions they believe are part of their discipleship. Paul uses a word in the passage from the Romans 14:13 that we talked about last week. *"Just be aware of how you live your life that you do not become a stumbling block to others -- don't be a scandalon" -- a stumbling block, a scandal -- remember that? Your freedom comes with a tag that declares, "I have relationships in my life that I need to honor; I have commitments to others that I need to keep."* To what extent do the things I do become a stumbling block to others -- Just as much as the person who is meticulously observing a fastidious little law of church order uses that as a little wedge saying, *"You're not being the Christian you ought to be . . ."* At some point you both have to settle -- out there -- to be in relationship! Neither one of the other ways is quite good. It is about Jesus and his Lordship. That is where we get to move from observing commandments to living commitments. I think that is how people live 300 years of Presbyterianism up and over the wild Allegheny Mountains, and in

those hollers 'n hills in West Virginia, and making a way out on the new frontier that extended beyond the reach of Eastern Ohio; because they had a relationship with Jesus they thought was pure enough, big enough, inclusive enough to be engaging others in his name.

I am going to leave you with a story, told by Mark Reasoner, that goes to the heart of what we have been saying today. He says that *"differences in how we follow our consciences always have the potential to threaten our fellowship as believers in Christ."* Ruth Graham, the wife of the Rev. Dr. Billy Graham, had an encounter that *"illustrates how differences can threaten our unity."*

*Mrs. Graham, dressed and made up as would seem fitting for any American woman in the 1970s, attended a luncheon with wives of conservative pastors in Germany. These German Christians had more conservative ideas regarding how women should look. They did not believe that married Christian women should wear makeup or clothing that made them look too much like the world. As a result, a German pastor's wife, sitting across from Ruth Graham, became very upset. She thought it was shameful that the wife of this famous evangelist looked so worldly. Why, Ruth Graham was even wearing mascara! The German pastor's wife became so angry that she started crying right into her beer. Meanwhile Ruth Graham couldn't understand why the woman was crying, although it bothered her that a self-respecting pastor's wife was drinking beer at a meeting to prepare for an evangelistic crusade where Christians come together as the unified body of Christ."*<sup>ii</sup>

Do you see how silly it is? . . . It's silly! Let's stop it . . . And let's be in relationship with one another instead.

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> The Rev. Ignacio Castuera, Pomona, CA; "From Commandments to Commitments", at [www.Day1.org](http://www.Day1.org)

<sup>ii</sup> Mark Reasoner, in Commentary on Matthew 18 at [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).