

COMMITMENTS
of
THE
CHRISTIAN LIFE

A Series of Sermons
from
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FIRST AND MOST IMPORTANT

INTRODUCTION

Today is the beginning of a series of sermons in which I will attempt to lay before us some of the major commitments of the spiritual journey. We are doing shoptalk, and we cannot be a strong faith community if we do not share some things about who we are and what we are about.

Many people today do not realize, sometimes for years, that Christianity is a WAY of Life, a WAY to walk. They do not know that progress can be made by taking certain necessary steps. When people come to a church, they are looking for something. I suspect that when we come to church, knowingly or unknowingly we are looking for this Way of Life that the church represents. If in this church we do not know the Way *and walk it*, people will go away empty. Or they will conclude that there is no Way. Or, perhaps worst of all, they will stay here but it will be years before they figure out where the good stuff is. So we need to review from time to time what we are doing, and how we go at it.

Christianity is a wondrous thing – actually the only thing I know that, over time, makes life worth living. But Christianity is also a serious and sometimes dangerous journey, as is made clear by watching anybody who has ever walked the Way. So here comes this series: COMMITMENTS OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE.

Two disclaimers:

1.) Do not go on a guilt trip! If this series turns into a guilt trip, it will accomplish very little for us. So here is the real WARNING: None of us (including me) will sit through this series of sermons on the basic commitments of the Christian Life and go home comfortable with the way we already do them all. I will from time to time try to remind you about the Gospel: We are not saved by doing all the disciplines – we are not saved by perfect performance. We are saved by the mercy and love of Jesus Christ our Savior. Walking the Way is our *response* to this love and mercy, not a substitute for it. Therefore,

taking on any of these commitments – taking any of these steps of the pilgrimage – will backfire if you try to do it out of pride or duty or any motive other than as a response to God’s love and mercy. I hope you believe that. I hope you know I believe that.

So here’s the deal: Try to listen to the whole series with interest and a willingness to consider the possibilities. But actually be watching for one commitment that may be worth adding to the others you already have. Personally look for *just one* of these commitments to walk up, tap you on the shoulder, and say, “May I have this dance?” And if something in you does not respond with eagerness – with some interior excitement – do not do it! It is not time yet.

Of course, part of you will always object to any commitment, no matter how good it is – no matter how much your soul wants it. Any new discipline requires time and energy and effort, and all of us tell ourselves we have no more time right now ... for God or anybody. So I do not mean you should wait until all your excuses go away. That is never going to happen. But watch for the discipline that calls to you and says, “I’m the one you are missing or neglecting. I’m the one that can bring you closer to God and help you make progress on the Path *right now*.”

So no guilt trips. Watch for the inner calling that is laced with an eagerness to be more faithful. If there is no sense of joy, it does not mean the discipline is wrong; it just means it is not time for you. Maybe the next dance.

2.) There is a difference between the fundamental commitments for walking the Christian Life, and the truths and disciplines and principles we discover while walking the Christian Way itself. Frankly, it is a lot more interesting and exciting to talk about the truths and the disciplines and the principles. The basic commitments are a lot more mundane, pragmatic, foundational. For example, there is a difference between considering the commitment to pray every day, and talking about all the things we discover from prayer itself. There is a difference between the commitment to get married, and all the sharing, love, children, squabbles, growth, and learning that take place if you do get married. Only, you cannot get to these unless you commit to the marriage in the first place.

So the commitments are necessary or the rest of the adventure never really happens. I mention this because lots of people in our time do not know this anymore. They are trying to test and taste and experience Christianity without making any of the basic commitments. It cannot work that way. We live in a culture where people are trying to have a “one-night stand” with God. It is working just about as well as we would expect it to – just about as well as one-night stands ever do.

FIRST AND MOST IMPORTANT

In the annals of earth history, who do I know of who has walked through the mists and mazes as if they had a built-in compass? Not very many. Most of them were not perfect, yet no matter how many distractions or how much opposition or confusion, they kept heading back on the same bearing, as if they were seeing what most people around them were not seeing. How did they do it? They all had tradition and community and things they were trying to accomplish, as well as things they were trying to escape from. And thousands of others have too, yet only a few have walked with a very high degree of clarity and commitment.

Your list may be different. Mine is longer than I have time to share with you, but just for a hint: Jacob is on my list. Moses is huge. Jeremiah. Jesus, of course. Peter is fun because he started out so scattered and grew more and more focused as he went. Paul, after he got his aim straightened out, became so focused that even though half the world was shooting at him, it just made him focus all the more. Augustine, Luther, Jonathan Edwards, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln. There are people on my list who are completely out of our tradition. But let’s not get sidetracked while talking about clarity and focus.

What’s the common denominator here? You may have a different list of heroes, so maybe the common denominator for those on your list will be different. But it is obvious to me that the one thing my heroes had in common was prayer. They all spent a lot of time in prayer. They had various things going for them, and various things holding them back. But what is really true of all of them is that they were getting guidance from beyond themselves. They prayed – continually and sincerely.

The first and most important of all our Christian commitments is prayer. If you try to delete prayer from the biblical record, as of course many people do in our time, the result is ludicrous. Have you read the biblical accounts of Moses recently? He was constantly off alone with God. It became a problem and the people resented it. They built golden calves, planned rebellions, and did all sorts of things to punish Moses for neglecting them. But Moses knew he could not lead the people if he did not follow God.

In our time, many people have deleted serious personal prayer from their own lives, and the result is obvious. They have no peace. They are scattered, over-busy, exhausted. Everybody likes them because they are busy being useful to everyone but God. But their own lives are scattered, and on the inside they often walk close to depression or despair.

Prayer is the first and most important of all our Christian commitments. It is important for us to know this, to put it this way, and to keep remembering that it is true. Why is prayer more important than the Bible, more important than neighbor love, more important than the church or anything else about our Christian WAY of Life? Prayer is the most important because PRAYER IS THE SOURCE. Did people write the Bible first, or pray first? Did Abraham become the Father of Faith, and then start praying? Did Moses free the Children of Israel and give them Torah, and then start praying? Prayer is the source. Everything that matters in our tradition, in the church, and in our Faith comes out of prayer – from communication between God and human beings. We are not smart enough, brave enough, mature enough, or spiritual enough to do this LIFE on our own. We have to have guidance and reassurance and help. We need it constantly. Bible, church, friends, study, and lots of other things can be helpful and huge in their proper place. But core and key to it all is the personal relationship with God. And there is no living relationship with God apart from prayer.

It is true that in America today, people are frequently trying to reverse the order and let prayer be the caboose instead of the engine. Get yourself into a deep hole first, and *then* pray. Go to college, get a job, get deep into a vocation, and *then* start asking God to bless it. Choose a mate, get married, have children, and *then* start praying. Probably none of you will believe this, but I actually know people who grow up, fall in love, propose marriage – even get married – and never ask God what he thinks about it. They never ask the Holy Spirit if this is the right

decision. Unbelievable! (I mean, we're all doing so well with marriage, who needs God's help?!) The secret of secular life is to never let God in on the planning. We do it our own way – by our own best light – and then invite God to come bless it. That is not prayer. That is superstition – wishful thinking. God is our mascot, our genie in a bottle, here to serve us and make us happy and successful.

All genuine prayer is the reverse: We are God's servants. God is the Creator, and life belongs to God, not to us. What does God want of us? How can we spend our lives to please God? "This day and all my days belong to You, O God. Anything You ask of me – if I can get it clear enough to understand what you want of me – I will do it." That is where the Bible came from, as well as the church, neighbor love, and all things truly Christian. PRAYER IS THE SOURCE.

GUIDANCE PRAYER

The trouble with talking about prayer is that a huge array of approaches and practices come under that one word. When we mention prayer, what another person means and what I mean may be worlds apart. And how do I talk about what I mean without seeming to disparage what they mean? Well, many different kinds of prayer have their place and purpose. But primary to all other kinds of prayer is what we will call the PRAYER FOR GUIDANCE. It is an invitation for the Holy Spirit to come direct and guide our lives. With well-deserved humility – aware of all the foibles and booby-traps involved – it is a desire and willingness to let the Holy Spirit out-vote us on the inner council of our lives. True prayer gives God rights – first priority over all our choices and decisions.

I know that red flags just went up all over the place. I know all the abuses of such principles at least as well as you do. I know all the excuses because I have them and use them as much as you do. I know how hard we fight to keep out of the clutches of the God we neither trust nor love. But I also know better than some that bondage goes both ways. Either we are bound to Christ, or we are in bondage to Satan. And insofar as it is to Satan, we pretend not to notice. When we do notice and turn to a new WAY, it is, as Paul says, in fear and trembling.

Nevertheless, Guidance Prayer means I am trying to find out what God wants me to do with my life – and not in a vague, general, generic

way. We are talking about the present tense: Today, one day at a time, I am trying to turn my will and my life over to God – seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit – sworn to allegiance and obedience ahead of time. That is: If God can make it clear to me, I will do it. I can throw a little dust in the air – act dumber than I really am – but it never works for long. Not in the presence of the Holy Spirit.

There is nothing grandiose or eloquent here. We are just trying to let the Holy Spirit in on the actual planning and deployment and execution of our daily lives. Other kinds of prayer are mostly talking; this kind of prayer is mostly listening. Other kinds of prayer take a few minutes; this kind of prayer takes more time than we ever have to give it, and it never really shuts down for long. (I Thessalonians 5:17) Other kinds of prayer order God around; this kind of prayer invites God to order our lives, insofar as we are able to understand and keep ourselves from running away. Other kinds of prayer can occur from time to time and that's fine; if I neglect Guidance Prayer, my whole life reverts from Life in Christ Jesus ... back to me running my own affairs. Sometimes that happens in only a few minutes; certainly in a day or two of neglect, I am back to the old life.

Clearly this is the most important, and also the most difficult, of all the commitments of the Christian Life. It is constantly frustrating to realize how willful I am – how undisciplined and forgetful and rebellious and ungrateful. On the other hand, nothing is as exciting, fulfilling, and full of surprises and gifts and opportunities and blessings as LIFE in the presence of the Holy Spirit.

COMMUNICATION WITH GOD

If you want to know how important prayer really is, start to notice how hard Satan fights to interrupt it, undo it, mock it, discredit it. The most important thing you can do – never mind for the moment what Christ is doing for you – the most important thing YOU can do is set aside extra time each morning to invite the Holy Spirit to direct and manage your day. If you do that (those of you who are not doing it already), you will quickly run into the fight of your life. You think at first that it is an accident, but it is planned and strategic interference. Children, spouses, phones, work – and mostly an unruly mind – all conspire against *true* prayer. Not talking *at* God, but listening for what

God might want to say to us – that is the core of prayer. When we try to do this, we quickly discover that we have no time for God – that God is really quite low on the priority list. We do not really want God messing around in our personal lives. “Get out – keep off” is something we would never normally say to God, but we do not have to say it. We can rig it so that God can never get a word in edgewise. And if he does, we can be sure that we are not listening.

Sometimes I call it the “noise conspiracy.” The Enemy tries to contrive things so that there is never a possibility of silence between us and God. Not always, but most often, the Holy Spirit speaks in the silence – when our hearts and minds are still, and waiting, and listening. This is no secret in our tradition. Jesus gave God lots of silence – time to break through all the distractions, fears, problems, pressures. Forty days and nights. Undivided attention. Little time out, even for eating. The top Ace of all time knew He had to get truly emptied and willing and ready, or God could not make it clear enough for Him to go on with His ministry. Some of us have never given the Holy Spirit one clear hour.

Forty days and nights were only for openers with Jesus. Over and over we hear that afterward, Jesus was all night in prayer; or going apart to a desert place; or heading up to Caesarea Philippi on retreat; or going off to Sidon, clear out of Israel. So what of Jesus’ followers? That is, what of the people who try to follow Jesus by building into their own lives the principles which obviously guided His? Are we people of prayer? Well, yes ... sort of ... maybe. We say some prayers. Only, Jesus did not just *talk* at God – ordering up world peace and justice and fair play for everyone, and offering His own various schemes for fixing all that is wrong down here. Jesus *listened* to God! He listened for – and He listened to. There was not much about fixing everybody else; it was mostly about “What do you want from me?”

The truth is, Christendom is founded on the assumption – the working principle – that there can be communication between human beings and God. You – every single one of you – can be in conversation with the Omnipotent, the Numinous, the Holy One who calls all the worlds into being. All miracles pale to insignificance beside this one. You cannot always get through to the president of the company or to the President of the United States, and sometimes not even to your wife or your children. But you can always get through to the Holy Spirit. The God who created us ... wants to talk with us. The channel is always open

from God's side. The real truth is, God runs around after us all day saying, "Please, please – could I just have a word with you? I can really help if you will let me."

History is replete with evidence that people do not want to let God get through to them. When it finally dawns on us that God *is really God* – and that maybe God really might communicate with us – well, that is understandably terrifying. Then we have to declare war on silence: Fill every day with noise and activity. Focus on generalities, making sure none of it has very much to do with us personally. Go to bed so tired that if you start to pray, you instantly fall asleep. Fill your schedule so full that even if God wanted to ask a favor, it would obviously be out of the question. Wake up each morning running, so that you cannot even remember your dreams. You can still say your prayers, of course, but do all the talking. And say "Amen" fast at the end so that God has no chance for any input. If we do all the talking, that is not prayer – that is a filibuster. And of course, the purpose of a filibuster is to stop communication – freeze all the processes. Lots of prayer is intended to stop any real communication, not to open ourselves up to it. Some of us even know that studying the Bible can be a way to avoid God. "Don't bother me, Lord. I'm busy studying Your Word." *But I'm right here – in person. I'm truly resurrected, and here with you.* "Sorry, we only pay attention if it's printed on the page."

Humans are afraid to communicate with God because all of us know (somewhere deep inside) that if we start a true relationship with God, God will take over our lives. It is not, after all, a relationship between equals. Our religion tells us that God loves us, and Jesus tried to make this clear beyond any shadow of a doubt. But what about the possible changes and overhauling that God might consider helpful to us? Like my friend Garland once said: "I had to stop praying for a while. Every time I tried to pray, this voice in my head kept saying, 'It's time for you to stop smoking.' I've tried before and never made it, so I had to stop praying." There are infinite variations on this theme, and all of us know a few of them.

Every person here is afraid of God on some level. That fear is our problem with prayer – and with all our faith. The level of that fear is the ceiling of our prayer life. When we come to realize that this is the real issue, all the confusion starts to clear away. The issues remain, but the confusion clears away. Only to the degree that we truly believe God

loves us, can we open our lives to God's influence. That is why the Gospel of God's love is central to the Christian Faith. And it is not what we *say* we believe – it is what the soul within really *believes* about God's love. That is what counts. If the Cross is just an ancient theory to you – if on the inside you think God is just the Great Chessplayer and you are merely a pawn in the game – expendable, not truly and deeply loved – then you cannot put your life and your will into God's hands, no matter how hard you try. Every time we go to our prayers, it is as if God says TRUST ME. If we cannot say, "Okay! I'll do anything You say," all we get is silence. The problem is, there is no cheating or pretending with this precept. If we do not trust, we cannot pray. We can only filibuster.

Now, let us be very clear: If there is no communication possible between God and human beings, all the rest of Christianity is ridiculous. All the ritual, hymns, creeds, sacrifices, and Christmas pageants do not mean a thing if humans have simply made them all up – if we are merely playing with pretty theories. Either God really does exist and really is trying to get through to us, or nothing in our religion matters. If there is no communication possible between God and human beings, all the rest of Christianity is play-acting. And if there is no communication going on between God and you, then your spiritual journey has not yet begun.

TO PRAY EVERY DAY

Prayer is the first, the most difficult, the most important, the most joyful of all the commitments of the Christian Life. It is also the secret of the New Life in Christ Jesus. It is the source of the joy and inspiration that turned the world upside down those many generations ago. And it still changes the life of any person who tries it. "*Your life is not your own – you were bought with a price.*" (I Corinthians 6:20; 7:23) We cannot really know that and stay the same. We cannot really know that and go on running our own lives.

As noted above, there are lots of different kinds of prayer, and some of them do not need to be done every day. But today we have been talking about one specific foundational kind of prayer: TO PRAY EVERY DAY (Guidance Prayer). We cannot control the Spirit's coming, but we can provide the time and the invitation. Every morning, before the first cup of coffee, before breakfast, certainly before you leave the house, you check in with God. It is God's day and God's life, and God is the *only* one

you have to please. If you do not start the day remembering it and clearing the decks, the day will be over and it will not have had much room for God.

So essentially, this every-morning daily prayer is a time to go over your schedule and agenda for the day – in God’s presence. It is essential that we start the prayer reminding ourselves and saying to God: “My life is yours. It is my top priority to live like You want me to – to do what You want me to. If You make anything clear to me, I will respond and obey.” Then you take a little time for God to put thoughts in your mind, if he wants to. Then you think about the day’s obligations, the people you will see, the tasks you have before you. And you give the Holy Spirit a chance to make any additions, deletions, or corrections. You then try to align your attitude and motives to God’s will. And you ask God to go with you through the day, because there will be surprises and interruptions – and maybe some of them will even be coming from God. And you try to leave the channel on “open” for incoming messages throughout the day. And *then* you move into the day.

There are lots of other fine and wonderful things you can add to your morning devotions. I am merely talking about the primary kind of prayer – the hard-core, essential, and basic prerequisite for walking the Christian Way.

Now, I know as well as any of you do that none of us have time to do this. The Almighty, Omnipotent, Omniscient God is not important enough for us to give him a few minutes of our undivided attention each morning. But you *do* have time to get dressed; you wouldn’t dream of leaving the house physically unclothed. Do you really think you can afford to go through your days spiritually unclothed?

Time in The Presence. Do we really have more important things to do? Is there any place on earth more comforting – more exciting – more joyous? It seems so to many who have never tried it. PRAYER is the first and most important commitment of the Christian Life. It is *necessary* for us as Christians to pray every day.

INSTRUCTION DEFICIT (Failure to Read the Instructions)

We are talking about the basic commitments of the Christian Path or Way. Last week was prayer. This week is THE BIBLE. Remember, this is not supposed to turn into an exercise in guilt-tripping. Nobody does it all. Most of you do more than you think. This is a series about the basic – meaning, the most helpful – commitments for getting on, and staying on, the Christian Path and growing in the Christian Life. We are not trying to save ourselves – meaning, get good enough for God to care about us. We are only trying to respond to the realization that God in Christ Jesus has made it incredibly clear that God *does* care about us.

Last week, you heard me say that prayer is more important than the Bible. That is true. Spirit outranks Scripture. God is more important than the book about God.

In my own opinion – and I never assume that you have to agree with my perspective – there are lots of places today where the Bible is being worshipped as if it were God, and even to the neglect of God. I believe that is called “idolatry” – the worship of a “thing” instead of a relationship with the living God. Strange and recent doctrines are being taught about the Bible being inerrant – perfect – without any errors or mistakes in it. By the way, the Early Fathers challenged, debated, and argued over our New Testament writings with eager interest. But if you had tried to tell them that these writings were inerrant or perfect in some way, they would have thought you were nuts. Now some people are trying to tell us that anything and everything in the Bible is beyond challenge or question: Don’t even try to understand – just hold your nose and swallow. If you read it, believe it, and get it right, you will be saved. And never mind understanding any of it – just believe it. Presto chango, we have a new savior – the Bible. And indeed it is a savior much clearer, less troubling, and ever so much less personal and caring than Jesus.

If you look closely at these doctrines, you will see that the Incarnation and Love and the Cross are really just seen as formulas. “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” It is all neat and tidy and clear, and you can fit it into a four-page pamphlet. Besides, nothing Christian should ever go deeper than a twenty-minute sermon on a Sunday morning (mixed with lots of jokes and inane platitudes.)

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Some people tell me I shouldn't be so sarcastic. Well, Jesus was more sarcastic than I am capable of being (He was always very good at what He did). Paul had a bit of a nip in some of his remarks too. I love the Bible as much as any person you have ever known. I just hate it that in so many places in our time, it has been turned into a mindless insult. If we think we have God all figured out, that is insulting! Both to God and to us.

A couple of men found themselves sitting together on an airplane bound from New York to Los Angeles. After a while, one man put down his newspaper and decided to try a conversation. Before long it came to the inevitable question: "What is your profession?" His companion replied, "I'm a minister." There was a pause. Finally the first man said, "You know, as far as I'm concerned, all religion can be summed up in the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Another pause. Then finally from the other: "And what is your profession?" "Oh, I'm an astronomer. It's an incredibly exciting field in our time." "Well," said his companion, "as far as I'm concerned, all astronomy can be summed up in that profound phrase: Twinkle, twinkle, little star."

Doubtless those who teach inerrancy and simplex formulas for salvation or damnation are only trying to encourage greater faith and give the Bible greater authority so that more people will come to believe. But falsehood drives some of us away, however much it may comfort the ignorant. If we have a book we cannot question, we also have a book from which we cannot learn. If you think there is any possibility of the Bible being inerrant or coming to us straight from God without possibility of human error or human misunderstanding or human perspective, you lack important information about how the Bible came to be.

When Paul wrote to his friends in Corinth – some of them quite contentious – did he have the remotest notion that his letters would end up being canonized as Scripture? Up in Heaven, Paul still apologizes to Jesus every morning for that crack about women keeping silent in the church. We only have translations of copies of copies of copies of what people wrote. Nowhere in the world is there an original text of any biblical writing. Not even close! So even if Paul *were* sinless, perfect, and incapable of changing his mind about something, we would still not have an "inerrant" Scripture. In fact, by his own word, Paul was not sinless. I am always eager to hear what he had to say about anything,

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but I would be silly indeed to assume that he was right about everything – any more than I assume that you are right about everything or that I am right about everything. I happen to believe that Paul was growing and learning all the time. In fact, he had a fierce learning curve. And that means that what he wrote in A.D. 48 will not match up perfectly with what he wrote in A.D. 60. Twelve years of prayer and experience and working with different churches gave him new perspective. Either that or he was brain-dead. So which is inerrant: the letter to the Thessalonians, or the letter to the Romans? Or maybe the book of James, which disagrees with most everything Paul believed or wrote?

In any case, you heard me say that prayer is more important than the Bible. What none of you heard me say – what nobody has ever heard me say – is that the Bible is not important. I do not know anything in this broken realm that is perfect. Therefore, the Bible does not have to be perfect for me to honor, revere, and study it with earnest and grateful attention. I am even grateful for the errors and inner inconsistencies because they are proof of authenticity, and because they teach us many things.

So with all the magic and superstition set aside, we have in the Bible the essence of all the written records the faith community has considered most authentic and most helpful regarding what happened, how it happened, and what it means to us. That does *not* answer all our questions or solve all our problems. Sorry! But it is wonderful common ground from which we can learn and grow and be pilgrims on the WAY together.

Are we better Americans if we know nothing of the Constitution, or the Declaration of Independence, or the Gettysburg Address, or Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address? The parallels between a nation that no longer remembers its heritage and a church that no longer studies the Bible are shocking. The issues and the urgency are compelling, even self-evident (to borrow a phrase).

So we do not have to jump up and down, wave magic wands, or threaten anybody with extra or unusual hells. The truth is clear and simple: If we want to preserve the Union and our way of life, we better know and keep pondering our roots – where we came from – and what it means in our present situation and to our present ways and goals. Ditto the Christian Faith and what it means to BE the church. Not just to GO

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to church (that's pathetic), but to BE the church in our time, as those who came before us WERE "the church" in theirs.

And so: Though the Spirit outranks Scripture, not much else does. At least not for Christians. But what always amazes me is that so many churchgoers in our time know so little about the Bible. That's scandalous! Wouldn't you think that one thing we could be absolutely sure of is that every member of a Christian church would own a Bible and read it every day? If you were an outsider and heard about an organization of Christians who were serious about their faith, isn't that one thing you would expect to be true of every member? It might scatter from there; the members would be doing quite an array of different things as they felt drawn or called to them. But at least you would expect that all of them would pray every day, and that all of them would read their Bibles every day. Two basic commitments of the Christian Life: keep reporting in, and read the manual.

It is one of the characteristics of conservative Christianity that its people read the Bible and quote the Bible constantly. From my perspective, they do not always know very much about what it means. They quote it constantly as if that were a sufficient excuse for some very ridiculous and very unChristian opinions. They are told ahead of time what it means, and then are instructed to memorize some passages to support that meaning. Quite often it feels like a wooden recitation rather than a living dialogue. "You have to do this. Hebrews 13:8." Like that says it all, end of discussion. I usually turn to a friend and say, "Genesis 22:5." (*"You stay here with the ass; I'm going on ahead."*)

In any case, it is not enough to know that Adam and Eve ate the apple. It is also important to know that it was not an apple – it was the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And we must know that "Adam" means all mankind, in every age. And that the story means we have all been given free will – and that once we have it, we rebel against God and run our lives in our own way and apart from God. It is important to realize that God knew this would happen – that it was necessary, and that we were created this way on purpose because otherwise God would end up with robots instead of human beings able to choose and capable of love. It is even important to know that Jesus Christ came to reverse the curses of our being thrown out of the Garden. He came so that we could finally use our free will to turn again and choose God

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on purpose – to repent and turn toward HOME. And if you know anything about life, you know that we cannot do that unaided or all by ourselves just because we finally realize we need and want to. We need a Savior! (But hey, we never get everything from only one story ...) That is a far cry from the usual “Eve ate the apple and they had sex, and you shouldn’t.” If that is all you want from the Bible, far better not to read it at all.

Well, conservative Christians have their problems – and we have ours. In the last fifty years, it has become one of the characteristics of liberal Christianity that its people are biblically illiterate. It is not because they cannot read; they are highly educated in other ways and in other fields. They simply do not read or study *the Bible*. And it is not an exaggeration to call them biblically illiterate.

As an aside, but not very far aside: The vast majority of liberal Christians are afraid to engage conservative Christians in serious conversation about the Faith because they think that the conservatives know their Bibles, and they know that they themselves do not. Who suffers for this? Jesus! He comes off looking more like Satan than Satan himself. He loses endless potential followers who want nothing to do with a Savior who delights in throwing thousands into the burning fires of Hell. And where are His friends, who should know better yet are afraid to stand up for Him? Perhaps on the inside they know better, but they do not read their Bibles enough to be able to say so with any conviction or authority. So they let others tell the world about Jesus and His Kingdom, what it is like, and what it is all about. And they let them tell it wrong.

In our denomination – the United Church of Christ (Congregational), the so-called “mainline” wing of Christendom – over ninety percent of our churches have no Bible Study groups whatsoever. And it shows. It is the same in most liberal denominations. Over the last fifty years, church leadership has learned to push programs, not Christian Life. (Just one more variation on the ancient theme: Back to the Law – forget the Gospel.) Of course, the programs dry up after a while, because spiritual growth and life with Jesus are what inspire and energize us. So, not everywhere, but in general, we are dying across the land. Apparently most members of liberal churches think the Bible is optional, or a side show, or a hobby for those who like that sort of thing. I am not scolding, just describing. As always, if we cannot admit our true condition, we cannot repent – cannot change – cannot go beyond where we are.

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So please do not be embarrassed, but indulge me in a little foray into honesty. Nobody is going to remember how you respond; they will be too busy thinking about themselves. Besides, we are a faith family – we do not have to pretend any perfection with each other. The second greatest barrier to adults learning about the Bible is their fear of looking foolish because they do not already know the Bible better. All of you will know, after today, that you need never be embarrassed about your knowledge of the Bible. If you ever want to get into a class or study group, you will be with lots of others who are just getting started. So let it be what it is – maybe even interesting, and in-family fun.

Okay: Gently, calmly, honestly ... so we know where we really are – bearing in mind that I might call upon you to prove it – will each of you who can name all ten of the Ten Commandments please raise your hand. The Ten Commandments are the core of the Old Covenant, of course, apart from which we have no chance of understanding the New Covenant. Now, will those of you who can name all of the Beatitudes please raise your hand or keep your hand raised. The Beatitudes are the core of the New Covenant, or at least the summation of what Jesus came to teach us. Next: How many of you know for sure whether Elijah came before or after King David? How many of you have read the Bible from cover to cover at least once in your life? How many of you like the Book of Hezekiah?

Let's see if we can get more hands in the air. How many of you know for sure which book of the Bible tells about Jesus being born in a manger? How many of you know who built Noah's ark? (The correct answer is probably Shem, Ham, and Japheth, but I will accept Noah.) I am very appreciative of your patience in this. Thank you. [Hands down.] They say a picture is worth a thousand words, and while we might not all draw the same conclusions from what we have just seen, it has nevertheless saved me thousands of words. You can at least be grateful for that!

Now, with one exception, these were not trick questions. These were not obscure or minor categories. My point is that this was not an IQ test. It did not separate the good people from the bad people. It was clearly and simply an indication of exposure. Many people simply have not spent very much time with the Bible. It is not that they have rejected it; they do not know it well enough to do that. "You can't get a divorce if you ain't never been married." Many people have never been properly introduced to the Bible, never mind courted it or fallen in love with it. Whose fault

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is that? I'm not sure, but I blame the leaders of the church. The liberal church has been so busy with other things for the last fifty years, it has taken very little time to teach its people the Bible. Our children have grown up with the barest smatterings of biblical knowledge, and now many of *us* are those children. So we get further and further away from the only objective source of our Faith. It is a major instruction deficit. We do not read the manual anymore, or study the instructions. And everywhere in the liberal church today, we are living with assumptions and claims that are wrong, ludicrous, and even dangerous – because we have stopped reading OUR BOOK. Here are just a few of those false assumptions:

If you do good, everybody will love you ...

All religions are the same ...

Jesus teaches inclusivity and unconditional love ...

Nobody who is rich is truly Christian ...

It doesn't matter if you are conscientious, honest, dependable, care about your family, and are loyal to your friends – the only thing that matters is how much you give to the poor ...

All Christians are supposed to forgive everybody because God has forgiven them ...

If you believe any of these things, you have paid no attention to the story of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament. Who makes up this tripe?! It did *not* come from the Bible. It's a good book – you should read it sometime.

This instruction deficit has resulted in a growing anarchy within the churches. We no longer speak a common language or share a common source. More and more, we each “make it up” as we go. Then we are unable to help each other along the Path, grow in the Faith ourselves, or check our opinions and prejudices against those who have walked the Way before us. So we rave about the great virtues of diversity, yet keep getting more isolated and lonely all the time. Diversity is not the goal, it is the situation; it takes no great skill or genius to disagree. It is the bond of God's love in Christ Jesus that draws us together *despite* our differences. *That* is the goal. *That* is the hope. We are not here to brag about our differences – we are here to celebrate a love that is *bigger than* our differences.

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Today the liberal church is looking more and more like many American families. They seldom sit down to a common meal, and when they do, instead of saying grace they chant: “Isn’t it wonderful that none of us can ever agree on anything ... that we don’t like to do anything together ... that we have no common cause ... and in fact, that we don’t even like each other! But of course we are very loving people – we love vague and general humanity *out there* somewhere, people we will never see or meet.” Up-close love gets much too demanding – too messy and sticky.

If you are a Christian – if you want to walk the Christian Way, grow in understanding, make progress on the spiritual Path – one of the basic commitments you can make is the commitment to read and study some portion of the Bible every day. By the very nature of the culture and time in which we live, we are all being bombarded every day, all day long, with attitudes, appeals, information, causes, and beliefs that are not Christian – that do not honor God or care about God’s Kingdom. If we do not find some way to counter this constant barrage, we will not stay on the Path for very long. Reading the Bible every day is one way to do that.

We walk along and the days get busy, there are too many demands, there is too much pressure, and the values are out of kilter in some places. No matter who we are or how strong, staying in that atmosphere all the time starts to get to us. If we have a commitment to read the Bible – that is, sometime during the day (whether we feel like it or not, or have the time or not) we open it to read a chapter or two – then even a few verses can call us back to who we are and what we really care about. If we are committed to a different Way, it does not take much to remind us of it – but how refreshing and helpful is that reminder.

In addition, a daily habit of reading the Bible will help us grow more familiar with the common language of Christians. Every group of any significance has its in-group language. It is not only fun and a common bond, it saves enormous time and confusion in communication. “I think she just walked the Damascus Road.” “Send it into the pigs.” “Maybe you forgot the mantle.” “Have you been to the wilderness with it?” “I’ve been hearing the rooster crowing.” “He’s acting like the Elder Brother on this one.” It would take me two hours to explain the dimensions and implications of just those few phrases. Yet every Christian should be able to pick up all two hours in the few seconds it takes to say them. It is our common language – our code.

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Some of you may be noticing, even with alarm, that I am staying away from the more important statements: The Bible is the Word of God. The Bible is holy and sacred. The Bible is our canon scripture. (“Canon” means “measuring rod,” by the way – that against which we measure all other things.)

I believe these things are true. But if *you* believed these things, you would already be reading the Bible every day. So why would I start out with what I know you do not really believe? My hope is that if I can get more of you to start reading and studying the Bible every day, then maybe you will come to such conclusions for yourselves. What I *am* telling you, and what I can promise you, is that if you make a serious commitment to read and study the Bible every day, over time it will make a huge difference in your spiritual life. It will help you to keep walking the Christian Way, and it will make a big difference in how much you grow and learn along the Way. If you want progress on the Path, patient but steady Bible Study is one of the time-tested and best-documented ways to get it. It is also true that the Bible is one of those rare books that gets more and more exciting the more you read it.

So for the moment, never mind all the highest and best claims and conclusions. But know this: The Bible is the best and most carefully preserved record we have about the people who claim to have encountered God from about 2000 B.C. until A.D. 100. It contains the only useful records we have about the life of Jesus. Essentially, if you want to know where Christianity came from, how it got started, what it is about, or how you yourself can walk its Way, you must read and ponder the Bible – and talk to others who read and ponder the Bible. Then the Bible becomes a Living Word, and you yourself get built into the ongoing story when you also begin to pray. I think we mentioned prayer last week.

It needs to be mentioned that reading the Bible devotionally every day is not enough. It is also important to *study* the Bible: to share with others what you are understanding, to listen to what *they* are finding, and to delve into the context, the tradition, and the background. I fervently hope that you will each start reading the Bible individually, and every day. But I must mention that you will not get very far – you will not make much progress – if you *only* read the Bible alone. If you study the Bible with others and also read it alone, then the benefit of both will increase exponentially. Especially if you are devout and earnest, it is

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dangerous to read the Bible without the perspective of other pilgrims. (*“And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.”* (Matthew 5:30)) It’s nice to have other sincere pilgrims to consult with before doing anything brash. God will cause you problems enough, if you are serious about following the Way. But the Way itself is intended for community, and without the perspective of Christian friends and the wisdom of our past experience and traditions, it is easy to become fixated on items that can sidetrack us, sometimes with serious consequences.

To be clear then, this commitment about the Bible has two parts. You can, of course, commit to one or the other, or both. If you have never made the commitment to read the Bible before, here is a suggestion: Promise God that you will read two chapters six days a week – one chapter from the Old Testament, and one chapter from the New Testament. Keep it simple: Start in Genesis and Matthew and keep going, one chapter a day from each. If you stay on schedule, you will read the New Testament through a little more than twice as often as the Old Testament.

I hope, of course, that you will promise yourself to get into a Bible Study group as soon as you can make that work with your schedule. It is essential for us to read and study the Bible together, as well as alone. For those of you who cannot do that right now, maybe you can get a friend or a spouse to agree to talk with you for one hour each week so you can talk about the most interesting things you have discovered in your Bible readings that week. And you can also decide to set aside a special time once each week to read a commentary or Bible dictionary that gives a little background to one of the passages you have been reading.

Well, I know it is really strange for me to be standing in a Christian church, on a Sunday morning, urging church members to read the Bible. Down through the ages, thousands of us have lived and died for this book, or at least for the One it reveals. For all the years of the church – up to about the time of Luther – nobody had a Bible of their own. The only way to read or study it was to come to church, where you could hear it read to the gathered group. People looked forward all week to the chance to come together, and one of the big reasons was that it would allow them to hear more from the Holy Word. Now it is rare to find a household that does not have at least one Bible, and rarer still to find a household where anybody is reading it. Who could have imagined that persuading you to

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read and study the Bible would ever be necessary? It makes about as much sense as me preaching a sermon urging all of you to breathe – wondering how to convince you of the benefits of breathing in and breathing out. It should be impossible for me to prevent you from reading the Bible. It should be impossible for any person on earth to prevent you from reading the Bible. But we live in strange times.

Make the commitment to read the Bible every day. Make the commitment to get into a Bible Study group. That is the message of this sermon. When we do that, we play right into the Spirit's hands.

THE CALL OF GOD

It is no secret that if we do not know what we are doing, we waste huge amounts of life and time. Nevertheless, many people live as if this were a secret. If we have no goal or purpose for our lives, we walk and choose and live in aimlessness – a synonym for SIN. Before it became theological, the word “sin” meant “to miss the mark.” If we are aimless, we always miss the mark. If we are aimless, we are separated – alienated – from God, and from every true purpose or goal. In my tradition, the Statement of Faith says point-blank: “God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.” If then we mix aimlessness with the strange notion that “My life is my own – I can do anything I please,” we have a true definition for disaster. We see it destroying individual lives all over the landscape. And it will destroy our nation and our way of life unless a significant number in each new generation realizes it is Satan’s Creed – a freedom designed to enslave us. True freedom is only the right to choose what and whom we will serve. True freedom leads to genuine commitment.

My suspicion is that most of you know and agree with such precepts. Sometimes we get careless, though that is not news. But since we are talking about the basic commitments of the Christian Life, it is a blessed and happy thing to remember that we have switched from bondage to Satan ... to bondage under Jesus Christ. Well, sometimes we clean up the wording a little. Actually we are *slaves* to Christ – which is our only hope and our only true freedom – but we prefer to say “servants.” And in some ways, that is more accurate, since it is a chosen slavery. We put ourselves under Christ’s authority on purpose. In fact, He will accept our service and our lives on no other terms. There are no secret police in Christ’s Kingdom. There are only willing citizens in Christ’s Kingdom. We like our new Master better than Satan, better than ourselves, better than anything or anyone else who has ever tried to run our lives. The first person to get really unhappy when I start to stray out of the Kingdom ... is me!

That said, if I were to try to pick the most neglected subject in modern American Christendom, it would not be politics or ecology or anybody’s rights. It would not be abortion, affirmative action, world hunger, or racism. Huge problems dog our steps as a species and as a

civilization. We have not solved them, and both the quality of life and the probability of life are endangered. I suspect that all of us know this. Which is not to say we are all responding correctly. Nevertheless, the church of my experience is not silent on these matters. If we have not always been effective, at least we have been noisy. And indeed, there have been many serious, sustained, and even sacrificial demonstrations of concern from the church and its people.

There is, however, another subject that comes up in the church somewhere between rarely and never. That subject is VOCATION. The conclusions we draw from silence are always suspect, but it is as if the church does not think of vocation as an important part of the Christian Life. “God is about weekends and holidays. The Holy Spirit cares about you, your relationships, your prayer life and your beliefs, but not about your WORK.” Such a statement is truly blasphemy, and far more damaging than most of the things we call blasphemy. “Good works” is even a dirty phrase for some Christians. But there is a difference between doing good works to try to impress God – to earn our ticket into the Promised Land – and doing the work God has called us to.

We are in the midst of a series of sermons about the basic commitments of the Christian Path or Way. I will not review the introductory comments and warnings, though they are as important as ever. Some of you will notice, more and more, the interplay between the commitments, and also how they might enhance each other. The commitments of the Christian Life are not about something we *have* to do to get “saved.” They are about what we *want* to do to move our lives into the passion and excitement and joy of the Christian drama – the Christian WAY. Your own personal awareness and participation in the Kingdom are directly related to how many of these commitments you have made and how well you have made them. The commitments do not mean God loves us more, but they do dramatically affect the ways in which we respond to God's love, and how much and how easily God can reach us. In other words, the more of these commitments we make and keep, the more excited and enthusiastic we become about the Christian Way itself. None of us make and keep them all, or even make and keep any one of them perfectly. That does not mean we should hate them or resent them or get all negative or guilty about them. They are there as beacons – they help us make progress on the Way. Every time we are ready, we can add a commitment or take one we already have to a new dimension. And every time we do that, the joy, the excitement, and the interior satisfaction increase.

The first, and most important, of all the commitments is the commitment to pray every day. The second commitment is to read and study the Bible every day. The third commitment is the commitment to find our true vocation and move into it.

- This involves discovering who we are and what our best gifts and talents are.
- It involves the constant training and honing of our gifts.
- It involves the continuing search for better ways, better approaches – any and every way we can find – to enhance, design, and increase our ability to fulfill our vocation.
- It is the constant dedication – the turning over – of our efforts and our labors to God.
- Whatever other dimensions are involved, our work is done for God. As Paul said: *“Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.”* (Colossians 3:23-24)

The key element, of course, is this: A true vocation is an assignment from God. We do not make it up. It is given to us. We are called into it. As we discover our vocation – our assignment from God – we are also given authority to accomplish it. I do not mean in any final or perfect way; where do you think we are?! But much will happen as we find and move into our true work. Jesus said, “My yoke is easy – it is *chrestos*.” Do not be fooled by English words that no longer carry their true meanings. Jesus was a carpenter; He doubtless made many yokes for oxen in His time. If a yoke fits right, an ox can haul an enormous load. A good team loves to haul, but if the yoke gouges or rubs their shoulders raw ... well, lots of people are in jobs that do that to them. Jesus said, “My yoke is *chrestos*.” Not “easy,” as we use the word today – meaning, no effort. That kind of “easy” means it is not worth anything. Is that what you expect from Jesus? No effort, no struggle, no problems, no significance, no importance – nothing matters? Is that how *His* life was? No, when Jesus gives you a task, you will carry it with ease – with grace – because it is tailor-made just for you. *Chrestos* means “it fits right.” A true vocation matches your true identity – your purpose here. And we love doing what we have been designed to do (most of the time, for the most part).

A true vocation is a life-long assignment. It usually goes through many phases and expresses itself in different structures. But the major theme is recognizable throughout. We never retire from a true vocation. If you are seventy-eight or eighty-six or one hundred and three, do not cut out on this commitment. It is never time to quit on what we were called to accomplish. Christians never, ever stop working. It's too much fun. And God has been so involved in it that the **task for God** and the **relationship with God** become all mixed in together.

One lady in a past church had a terrible time whenever the subject of this third commitment came up. Instantly there would come into her mind an image of herself in stocky brown shoes, off in some remote village in Africa. This was not a rational fear; it was some nightmare left over from childhood. In any case, she could not pray about it because she was sure that if she did, she would end up as a missionary in Africa. I thought it would pass in time. Many people in her support group said the right words, but she could not shake this fear. And so her prayer life was frozen.

One evening in the group, somebody realized how much she was suffering with this thing – for nearly two years it had been. They said, “Linda, I truly don't think you would make a very good teacher or preacher anywhere in Africa. I want you to go around the group and ask each one of us if we think that's your gift.” When Linda had asked each person and each person had seriously denied this perception of her gifts, her friend continued: “Linda, I don't know the mind of God, but if nobody here would send you to Africa, I suspect God isn't foolish enough to do that either. But one thing we all do know: if that's where God wants to send you, you would end up being absolutely delighted that you went.”

That broke the spell. Two years later, Linda was in Africa. I'm kidding! It *did* break the spell, however, and Linda was able to pray again. God sent her back to a job at the bank where she worked, and she started being much happier there, improving relationships and getting better positions as she went. But the real assignment was sewing. She was an expert seamstress and had nearly forgotten how much she loved it. Now she discovered that she was under orders to turn her home into a sewing shop and to switch, as quickly as she could, from banking to sewing.

There is nothing in this world that God is not interested in. Get God out of the box! You cannot pray if you have boundaries and pre-conceived notions over and around everything before you begin. God wants you doing what you can do best, and usually that turns out to be what you love the most. Stop worshipping the cosmic imbecile. I have friends who do well in Africa, but Linda was never designed or intended to be one of them. Lots of people think that being a missionary to Africa is a great thing but that designing and making clothes have nothing to do with the Kingdom. The way some people go at it, neither one has anything to do with the Kingdom. But God has lots of children who wear clothes. **There is nothing in this world that God is not interested in.** There is no gift or talent anywhere that God cannot use, if we dedicate it to him.

* * *

A couple of stray remarks and then we will get serious: If we could somehow take an honest survey of church members across the land and ask them, “What is it that your church actually wants you to DO?” – what would we find? In general. Here is my hunch:

- Attend worship services faithfully.
- Give more money to the church.
(However much you give, more would be nice.)
- Be willing to serve on a board or committee,
or maybe teach Sunday School.
- When possible, respond to special needs we bring before you.
(We want our church to have the reputation of being loving
and generous.)
- Live an exemplary life in the community.
(Have good personal morals.)
- Be nice to each other. At least be friendly and welcoming
to newcomers.

Did I forget anything? Obviously, every church has some faithful members who go far beyond these. But the question is, “What does my church actually want me to DO?” What does the average church member think the church expects? We are trying to pick up on the vision most churches set before their people. What sort of life are we really being called to live?

Where the vision and the expectation are anywhere close to the list above, the church is dying. Most people will not invest very much time or life in such an uninspired cause. And in most churches with this agenda, those who do come are always squabbling. Nothing exciting is happening, so at least a good argument makes it seem more important.

The common denominator is that in many places, the church is trying to accomplish its purposes with its people's spare time. This is so incredibly stupid and inexcusable that you may think I am trying to be humorous, but I am dead serious. Most of the people I know think of the church's mission in terms of the extras and the leftovers. The church, as everybody knows, is its people. And the only way it will ever be effective in its mission is when the mission is carried in the vocations of its people. The true LIFE of the church is not where its people spend two or three hours a week; it is where they spend between a third and half of their entire lives. God is supposed to be in control of our work, not just our spare time. Give Satan only three hours a weekend and see how long *he* stays in business!

What if all the people in Christendom – across the world – truly believed that God also owned their lives and their efforts from nine to five? That would be a revolution to turn the world upside down. And I am *not* talking about interfering with work by trying to convert everybody on the job. I am talking about each of us doing our work as if deep in our hearts and minds we had made the commitment to do whatever work we do for our Lord, and not for success or money or other people.

It is never easy. Have you ever heard a preacher who preached to win the approval of the people? Who preached to be successful or popular, or to be well thought of? They are everywhere – a blight on the land. You would think all of us preachers would have only one purpose: to preach what will please Jesus – to preach what the Holy Spirit is asking us to say. I am merely trying to point out that no matter what your work is, the commitment to do it for Jesus is rare. It is also huge, difficult, scary, exciting, and full of joy.

Most churches act like they do not trust their people to really live for God except when the leaders of the church are watching. So the church is forever trying to haul its members to some special meeting or program where the church can watch them being faithful: march for this; dance for that; sign this statement; give to seventy-eleven causes (but never enough to do any of them any real good); honk if you love Jesus; walk

five miles on a Sunday afternoon and turn twenty dollars over to some good cause that has nothing to do with Jesus. We have to end the posturing and the play-acting. If you love Jesus, turn your will and your life over to Him – all of it – and commit the rest of your time and life to following His guidance to the best of your ability ... in all things.

* * *

Back to the third commitment – let's get oriented. From the dictionary: *Vocation* – from Latin *vocatio* – a calling, a summoning; from *vocare*, to call. You see, our language remembers, even if we have long since forgotten. *Voice*, *vocal cord*, and *vocation* come from the same root. A VOCATION IS A CALLING FROM GOD – a summons to accomplish. You are not an accident. You are here for a reason. You have a special identity, and with that comes a special cluster of gifts and abilities that nobody else quite matches. I know that some of you do not really believe this. I am not here to argue with what you do or do not believe. I am here to tell you that you do have an assignment from God. God is calling you. That is not the question. The question is: Are you listening? And are you willing to answer?

When we start praying – when we become willing to let God all the way into our lives – the danger of our being called to the purpose for which we were designed greatly increases. Of course, we really want this on the soul level. But there are two little wrinkles:

First, it is always disruptive to our present lives. Even if we have stumbled into work close to our real *vocatio*, which is often the case, nevertheless when the calling makes the assignment clear and we know it is for Jesus, there are always changes of focus and direction that seem quite disruptive. And naturally, if the *vocatio* beckons us toward a whole different field, that becomes a major upheaval in our life, even if we end up loving it.

The second wrinkle is that a real *vocatio* always scares us half to death. It scares us because it always feels like a compliment higher than we deserve, and higher than we can live up to. Even though we want it very much – which is always the case, since a true *vocatio* always matches our true identity – we are quite sure it will be impossible (we don't have enough money, enough authority, a high enough IQ, enough training, or whatever). We know we will never be able to be or do what is being asked of us. The problem is, God assumes we will do this task together,

and we always start out thinking we will have to do it alone. So it scares us. “*I am a man of unclean lips and dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips*” was Isaiah’s first response. “*I am slow of speech and tongue, send my brother Aaron*” was Moses’ first reaction. “*Depart from me for I am a sinful man, O Lord*” was Peter’s first reply.

These are not the exceptions – these are the classic responses to the call (the *vocatio*) of God. We constantly assume that God doesn’t understand the situation or know who we really are. “Who, me?” “Sorry, wrong number.” “You must mean my older sister.” “I’ve never even been sure You really exist, and now You want me to do *what?*” “Give me a sign so I can be sure this is really You ... How about another sign ...” (That last one is called the Gideon Complex, for those of you who read your Bibles. And Jesus did not have a lot of patience with it.)

There are thousands of people out there who have heard God’s call but turned away from it because it seemed too scary or too impossible. In many cases, they did not have the background to know what was happening, or they did not turn off the radio or television or drugs long enough to be able to track it. One of the saddest things in all of life is when people are mismatched to their work. Not only do they miss the connection between identity and task – one of the highest joys in life – but all the rest of us miss what they were sent here to accomplish. Every person who does not find and fulfill their *vocatio* is cheating all the rest of us out of the plans and purposes of God. Well, God has backup plans and systems, but that does not take away the sadness or minimize the waste. Many people are very concerned about waste these days, but what our world wastes the most is its people.

Some of you may be thinking: If finding our *vocatio* is such a huge and important piece of the Christian Life – if it is so important that we are going to name it as the third commitment of the Christian Life – how come it is not mentioned more often? How come it is not emphasized everywhere in Scripture? Why is it not one of the major, blaring themes? I’m glad you brought that up.

Have you ever heard the term “conversion”? All the biblical stories of conversion are stories of people receiving their *vocatio* – their calling. Only in recent times have we transformed conversion into trivia. Today, many people talk about conversion as if it were some kind of emotional high – a touchy-feely, goose-bumpy thrill from God. Sometimes God does give us a strong hint of presence and support; sometimes the Holy Spirit

does touch us in a way that says, “I like your intentions and honor your struggles – and should you be wondering, I REALLY AM HERE!” When that happens, claim it and keep it and never let me or anybody else talk you out of it. But that is not conversion. That’s encouragement.

We have a significant number of church members who are bored or half-hearted about the Faith, but I do not think it is always their fault. Many of them have simply never been told much about the New Life. They have been told about conversion but not about what comes after that. Conversion is for openers. Conversion does not complete the Christian Life, it begins it. If a person “gets converted” and then just sits around waiting for Heaven, they did not get converted, and they know nothing of the Christian Path or what the church is all about. Some of us came to Jesus weary, frightened, and discouraged and tried to jump up into His lap to rest, only to discover that Jesus doesn’t sit around a lot. Part of the healing is to find ourselves enthralled and involved in a very different LIFE.

Some people still ask, “Are you saved?” Meaning, “Have you encountered the Living Christ in such a way that you know for sure that you are loved and cherished, and that God will never desert or forsake you?” That is a really wonderful question, if asked in the right setting and in an appropriate way – which some of us think is very seldom. But even that is not conversion, though discovering the love of God very frequently *leads* to conversion. The question that goes with conversion is not “Are you saved?” The question that goes with conversion is “ARE YOU USED?” Have you turned your life over enough so that God can use you? Are you a citizen of the Kingdom enough that you work for it? Do you know who you are, and have you found your vocatio? Is God your true Boss? *That* is what conversion is about.

This is essential perspective, so it is essential for those of us who do not already know it to realize that this is the hard-core biblical perspective, even if much of our world has forgotten. So track it with me.

Abraham is the Father of Faith and the beginning of Judaism. He starts praying and gets his marching orders: Leave Ur, go to the land I will show you (Israel), and there find a new people – a new nation that shall be my chosen, my holy people. Not a religious high – though it is also that, as it often is, but that is not the primary point or purpose. It is an assignment, a vocatio. Naturally, when God breaks through to us, it is pretty startling – a memorable moment. But the assignment – the vocatio – is *the reason* for the breakthrough. If we forget the assignment and focus

on the feelings that surround its coming, it comes to nothing. Abraham's conversion changes the face of earth history forever. It is not because it makes him feel good; it is because he accepts his assignment. And using Abraham, God is able to back and support and carry on that assignment.

All biblical stories of conversion are the receiving of assignments. All biblical accounts of conversion are about vocation – *vocatio*. If you hear a story about a conversion experience and it contains no assignment – no calling to accomplish – it is a fraud, a dud. I do not mean that you should challenge the person to a duel. Maybe the calling – the assignment – will follow close on the heels of the awakening. Maybe the person has received their *vocatio* but is still too shy or too humble to claim it yet. I just want you to know that if there is no calling – no *vocatio* – there is no conversion.

Moses has an amazing experience on the mountain: A burning bush – a classic conversion encounter. And the assignment to go back to Egypt, free the people, and take them to the Holy Mountain to receive the Covenant. This is not something he concludes later or evolves into as a result of the amazing experience. The assignment *is* the conversion. The *assignment* is what changes his life.

You want to talk about Jacob, Joseph, Samuel, David, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah? How about Amos or Hosea or Gideon? The conversion is *always* a calling, *always* an assignment. They are not being entertained, they are being used. They are called to their work, to their *vocatio*.

Peter's conversion? I will make you a fisher of men. Paul's conversion? I will send you as an apostle to the Gentiles. Jesus' conversion? Oh yes. His conversion started with His baptism, which sent Him immediately into the wilderness for forty days. And He would not come out of that wilderness until He had His assignment clear.

There are no exceptions. Well, there is always an exception, but I cannot find one for this. Conversion means you receive your *vocatio*. It means you hear the call of God to accomplish what you were designed and sent here to accomplish. Over the years I have been in many conversations about prayer and spiritual experiences, and there are always some people who say that they have never had any dramatic religious conversion. They did not see any bright lights or hear any loud bells or whistles. They grew into it all gradually. (Actually, I appreciate the honesty, because if we don't stay honest, we get nowhere.) But my question to

them is: Have you found your vocatio? If you know your vocatio, you have been converted – I don't care how quietly, gradually, or humbly. And if you do not know your vocatio, you have not been converted – I don't care how many bands of angels danced or sang or did cartwheels all over Heaven.

The third commitment of the Christian Life is the commitment to find and follow your vocatio. It is important to note that the zeal of the commitment begins with the search. That is, all the energy and devotion that will later go into the work goes into the search for that work until you find it. The blessing of the commitment begins as soon as we make it. A few of you may be troubled by a logical inconsistency: If God does the calling, why are we searching? The experience through the ages is that God often does not call *until* we are searching. I suspect it is for the protection of free will, but the reason does not matter. God usually waits until, on some level, consciously or unconsciously, we want it and are willing. Much of the Christian Life feels stuck somewhere between boring and irrelevant until we make this third commitment.

One of the fastest theological overviews of what is going on here on earth is found in the Garden of Eden story. Because of the serpent (the tempter, Satan) connecting with human pride – our tendency to “go it alone,” to forget our Creator, to do things our own way – we both inherit and earn all the curses of alienation: aloneness, estrangement, being out of tune and out of relationship with God. The one-word summation of this condition is “sin.” The curses are not a trumped-up punishment. The curses are descriptions – the inevitable consequences of alienation. The curses are all definitions of apartness, of being out of tune, of being alienated from God: humans estranged from God; brother against brother; men lording it over women; humans at odds with nature. This is *not* the way God wants it! Some people keep forgetting that the curses are not God's will or desire. Jesus Christ came to reverse the curses: to reconcile us to God, to put brother back in love with brother, to fill up the ever-widening chasm between men and women, and more.

One of the curses is the curse of toil. Out from under the weight of alienation, we love our work. We love to accomplish. It is one of life's highest joys. Only under the curse is work reduced to toil – meaningless labor, the squandering of energy with little return and no satisfaction. If Jesus cannot give us meaningful labor, He is not the Christ. But we have to be willing to listen and obey. Jesus never coerces. The Kingdom Movement that Jesus brought to this earth is a volunteer revolution.

If you don't want to, it doesn't count. We have to *choose* the Kingdom or it leaves us pretty much alone (pun intended). But the truth is, you have a special identity and you have a special vocatio. The third commitment of the Christian Life is the commitment to find it, and to live it out.

I know many of you have known and followed your vocatio for years. But if you have not, this commitment, if you make it, is dynamite. And I said it before and I must also end with it: It does not matter if you are young or old or in-between – God has work for you.

MENTOR / SPONSOR / CONFESSOR / FRIEND

SCRIPTURE READING

We are about to read one of the most famous passages in Scripture. I want to take a few minutes to set it in the context most of you never hear about.

Saul, David, and Solomon were kings over a united Israel in its most prominent period in history. Abraham was the beginning of Judaism, about 2000 B.C. David reigned about 1000 B.C. Jesus came at the turn of the ages, as we count it – about halfway between Abraham and us. Start keeping the timeline in your head, and many things will start sticking in your memory instead of drifting on through.

At the death of Solomon, there was civil war, and Israel split into two kingdoms, north and south. (Knowing what happened to Israel as a result was part of why Abraham Lincoln was so determined to not let it happen to us.) Adding to the confusion, the Northern Kingdom was called “Israel” and the Southern Kingdom was called “Judah.”

Ahab was the seventh king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel (*Moby Dick* came later). He reigned for twenty-two years (873-851 B.C.). As a political and military leader, Ahab was an outstanding king of the Divided Monarchy. But the Bible *hates* him because he came within a whisper of destroying Israel’s religion (that whisper we are going to read about in a minute). Ahab did this by forming an alliance with Ethbaal, king of Tyre (the Sidonian kingdom north of Israel; what you think of as Lebanon), and sealing the alliance by marrying Ethbaal’s daughter. Her name was Jezebel, one of the most religious ladies who ever lived. She was a fierce proponent for the religion of her people. Not only did she introduce the worship of Baal (and the Ashtoreth), but she instituted severe persecution against Yahweh worship and began killing off all the prophets and priests who tried to maintain Israel’s religion. Her two sons, Ahaziah and Jehoram, became kings after Ahab, thus extending her influence. Her daughter, Athaliah, married into the Southern Kingdom of Judah and, upon the death of her husband, became the Queen of Judah. She then killed off (or thought she had) all the male heirs who might return Judah to Yahweh worship.

So you see, Jezebel very nearly succeeded in replacing Judaism with Baal worship in both Israel and Judah. Had she succeeded, we would not be here. Essentially, one man stood in her way. His name was Elijah. (Now you know whether Elijah came before or after David.) His name means “YAHWEH is God!” (*Not Baal!!!*)

Jezebel had all the armies and all the resources of the nation at her beck and call. Elijah had only his feet and his God. He could run like the wind, and all day long if he had to. Elijah appeared and disappeared like smoke. They simply could not catch him.

Finally, in one of the most startling and dramatic stories in the entire Bible, there was a contest on Mount Carmel. Elijah and God won that contest, and Elijah killed all the priests of Baal that were there (about four hundred of them; Jezebel had killed, many times over, that number of priests and prophets of Yahweh). Nevertheless, Elijah knew that Jezebel would be utterly furious, and that his life wasn't worth zip anywhere in the nation. Messengers were sent by horse to Samaria, the capital city about thirty miles south of Mount Carmel, to tell Jezebel what had happened. Elijah outran the horses and, as Jezebel's men swarmed out of Samaria looking for Elijah to the north, Elijah was already past Samaria, going south.

He kept going south: clear out of Israel, clear through Judah, into the vast wastelands of the Sinai Peninsula, to the Mountain of God ... to where Moses and the newly freed slaves out of Egypt first made covenant with God – the Ten Commandments, the Torah. Where else *could* Elijah have gone? He went, as you can imagine, to report utter disaster: Your plans, Yahweh, have come to nothing. The Promised Land, the Chosen People, the Holy Nation – it is all in utter ruin, and Baal worship has overrun the land. “*I, and I only, am left of the whole dream of what would come to be.*” And God said, “You ain't seen nothin' yet, kid.”

HEAR, THEN, THE SCRIPTURE READING (I Kings 19:9-21):

And there Elijah came to a cave, and lodged there; and behold, the word of the LORD came to him, and God said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He said, “I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the people of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thy altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.”

And God said, “Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD.” And behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him, and said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He said, “I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the people of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thy altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.” [Self-pity always tends to sound like a broken record.]

And the LORD said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; and when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria; and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel; and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abelmeholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place. [The bad news is, I have daring and difficult work for you that will make all your former tasks seem like child’s play. The good news is, you’re almost out of here. And Elijah says, “Thanks Lord, I can hang-in if it’s just for a little while longer.] And him who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu slay; and him who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha slay. [In fact, Tyre, Israel, and Judah were in strong alliance, united in political interest and in the worship of Baal. The alliance was working, and doubtless most people thought the prosperity and security were more important than the god, or were the result of changing to a better god. But then Jehu killed off the Baal contingent, the kings, and all their successors in both Israel and Judah, thus splintering the alliance forever.] Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.”

So Elijah departed from there, and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was plowing, with twelve yoke of oxen before him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and cast his mantle upon him. And Elisha left the oxen, and ran after Elijah, and said, “Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.” And Elijah said to him, “Go back again; for what have I done to you?” [“Get lost; I didn’t do anything to you.” And if I did, you better start acting like it.] And Elisha turned, and took the yoke of oxen and slew them, and boiled their flesh with the yokes of the oxen, and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he arose and went after Elijah, and ministered to him.

MENTOR / SPONSOR / CONFESSOR / FRIEND

We are in the middle of a series of sermons on the basic commitments of the Christian Life. Before we were called “Christians,” we were known simply as “Followers of the WAY,” which meant followers of the Path or Way that Jesus showed us. Today, many people do not think of the church as a community of people who walk a special Way. That is, they do not see the church talking about or practicing any special Way of Life. They see Christians going to church, but they do not know why. And lots of Christians go so erratically that it doesn’t seem to make much difference to anything. If going to church makes no difference, then what difference does it make?

Add to this the fact that many people go to church looking for a spiritual path and cannot find it. That is, it is possible to go to many of our churches for months, or even years, and never find any description of or instruction in what it means to live the Christian Life. Of course, if the Christian Life were set forth in any discernible way, many people would reject it. On the other hand, at least that would make some choices available, and perhaps many who rejected it at first would return to choose it at a later time.

Let me say just a word about commitments. No authentic commitment can ever be forced on you from outside. If it is forced from outside, it is coercion, not commitment. We choose to make commitments when something is important enough to us that we begin to really want it. Today, people are fond of saying things like: “I’m really very spiritual, but I don’t much like religion.” And that statement often sums up the attitude of our time. But *religion* is what you DO about your spirituality. Everybody is *spiritual* – God made us. Some of us have learned that we cannot escape our spirituality, no matter how hard we try. But you become *religious* when you decide to do something about it: When you take steps. When you make commitments. When you let it make real changes – let it begin to make a difference – in how you live.

It is my belief (not my faith – my belief) that we start wanting to make commitments to walk the Christian Way when we start to love Jesus (that is, when it hits the heart). I suspect that it is mere theory or curiosity until we get “caught” – hooked – drawn by His purposes, and also drawn to what He Himself is like. None of the Christian commitments are worth the time or energy or risk ... until we start to like Jesus; until we start to want Him

as our teacher and guide; until we begin to notice that He is more than we can fit into normal, rational patterns of explanation. I keep trying to use a variety of phrases because all the usual ones have turned into formulas that have lost their meaning for the vast majority of people.

I know that some people here this morning do not have any strong or special link or bond with Jesus. I want you to be comfortable coming here. I want you to be comfortable saying that Jesus is not very important to you. All of us remember the feeling. Nobody starts out already in love with Jesus. If we cannot be honest and keep our integrity, no authentic search or path is possible. How else can you explore, learn, or find out if any such connection might be possible, if you cannot participate in the life of the church for a while? It must nevertheless be true, and stay true, that this is a Christian church – a community or fellowship of people who *do* love Jesus; who do, for that reason, make every earnest effort to walk His Way; and who therefore have serious commitments that keep them growing and learning in the Christian Life.

So I am in the midst of lining out seven of the basic commitments of the Christian Life. There are others. These seven are time-tested and built deeply into our experience and traditions, and they *do* work if we work them. Now, we are all constantly being told about endless activities and disciplines that somebody thinks we “should” do or which would make a big improvement in our lives: Read this book. Eat that food. Go to such-and-such a lecture, or concert, or spa, or weekend event. Get an astrology reading. Become a Rotarian. Join Habitat for Humanity. Give to the World Hunger Fund. You get the picture. You have been getting it for as far back as you can remember.

I am *not* saying there is no good in these things. Somebody believes they have found value in them or they would not be suggested. But you can do none of them and still walk the Christian Path. Just like you can do all of them and never even come close to knowing or following Jesus.

The seven basic commitments of the Christian Life are not guaranteed to bring you to Jesus. But if you already have a bond with Jesus, these commitments shape and form the Path, and bring you progress and excitement and joy in the walking. And if you have no commitments, you have no Path, no Way. It is mere play-acting. The biblical word for it is “hypocrite.” *Hypocrite*, in Greek, means “play-actor.”

First commitment: PRAY EVERY DAY.

Second commitment: READ AND STUDY THE BIBLE.

Third commitment: FIND AND FOLLOW YOUR VOCATIO.

It is, of course, hard to get anywhere with the third if you have not made and kept the first and second. And we could interplay that thread between all seven commitments.

The fourth of the seven commitments is the hardest to sell to a modern American. When I talk about the first three, not everybody makes the commitments or keeps them, but nearly every Christian knows they should. After I get through talking about the fourth commitment, lots of people respond: “Say what?! I didn’t really get it. I heard what you said, but I’m sure it’s not as important as you seem to think.”

Well, I already told you that nobody gets into all the commitments all at once, and that nobody does them all well, all of the time. If so, we would have a perfect world, or at least a perfect church. Choose the commitments as they call to you. I just want you to know what they are. If you get to Heaven and you have not followed the Path, then you have a problem. If you get to Heaven and nobody ever told you there was a Path, then I have a problem.

The fourth commitment is to CHOOSE A MENTOR. I do not want to get lost in details here; there is obviously a great deal more to each of the commitments than I can put into one sermon. There are also many names for a Mentor, but Mentor will suffice. A Mentor is someone you choose, not someone who chooses you. Then you explain to them what you want from them, and ask if they are willing to be your Mentor. If they say yes, then every ten to fourteen days, you sit down with them for an hour or so and conscientiously review with them how you are doing on the Path. You share with them the issues you are facing, the decisions you are trying to make, the relationships you are struggling with, the mistakes you think you have made, and the delights and the progress.

A few items (no time to explain much, just putting it out there):

1.) I know many of you do not think you need a Mentor. Actually, some of you do not. But if you make even the first three commitments, you will! If you seriously intend to walk the Christian Way, you will need

a Mentor. Every serious spiritual path in the world knows this to be true, and teaches it as necessary. The Christian Life is dangerous. If you walk it alone, you do not understand the nature of the Path itself, and you have already flunked Humility, which is the first prerequisite – the first beatitude – the first step of the Way.

2.) Your spouse does not count for this fourth commitment. Some spouses are excellent Mentors, I know. And it is wonderful to be able to share such things with a spouse from time to time. However, it is not good for a marriage to switch from a marital relationship to a mentor relationship on a regular basis. It is not possible for you or your spouse to maintain the necessary objective perspective on some of the most important items. Your children, by the way, are an even worse choice for a Mentor (terrible for them, I mean), though a surprising number of people try it, in many cases without even realizing that they are doing it.

3.) It often works well at first, but it is a very poor idea in the long run to make a reciprocal arrangement: “I’ll be your Mentor if you’ll be my Mentor.” It is fine to have a Mentor and to be a Mentor, but do not let it be with the same person.

4.) Do not choose a Mentor of the opposite sex. (Unless, of course, you are gay. Then by all means do so.)

5.) The fact that you choose someone as your Mentor does not mean they are superior to you or more advanced than you are. There are no perfect Mentors. But almost any thoughtful, listening person can see us and our patterns more clearly, at least in some ways, than we can see them ourselves. A Mentor *does* have to be someone you can be honest with – someone you trust – and they have to be someone who will listen, and who will be honest with you after they listen. The fact that you choose a Mentor does *not* mean you will always agree with their suggestions or perspective. It does *not* mean you have promised to do what they say. It *does* mean that you will consider their input thoughtfully and prayerfully.

We are talking about the priesthood of all believers here, not anything fancy or perfect.

The fact is, if you choose and use a Mentor, at the end of six months or a year (or any other time frame) your Path will be far clearer, and you will be a lot farther along on it, than if you do not have a Mentor.

Initially, the Christian church tried to respond to this category of the fourth commitment by setting up a priesthood whereby every Christian would talk to a Mentor (a priest) at least once a week – confess sins, set penance, receive absolution, get cleaned up from the residue of life that clings to all of us – every week before worship and taking communion. As I said, every serious spiritual path on earth has always known the necessity of this fourth commitment.

The trouble with the institutional answer is that it always turns into rote and ritual for a lot of people. By the way, there are still excellent priests who listen creatively and help their parishioners stay on a vital Christian Path. They assign meaningful penance, and those who use the system well reap deep and meaningful rewards. Even a priest who, swamped by the number of confessions, resorts to rote penance is still often helpful to Catholics who know their faith. Saying fifteen or twenty “Our Fathers” sounds pretty dumb to most Protestants. But a Catholic who remembers that the Lord’s Prayer is a summation of the very Path itself does not just rattle it off as an empty form, but meditates on it until their own life is realigned to God.

The trouble with the noninstitutional answer is that, while it has the potential to be far more vibrant and creative and tailor-made to each person, in reality it often ends up neglected, or even forgotten entirely. Then pretty soon, the Path itself may be forgotten.

In any case, you should know that one of the basic commitments of the Christian Life is a commitment to find a Mentor. If for any reason you lose one or it stops working with somebody, find another one! Forgiveness and new starts are the very essence of the Path.

If, in the course of time, the bonds of Christian love do not seem to be very strong in a church ... if the people do not seem to feel the power of the Christian Life flowing in their midst ... if sometimes it seems like the church is just another social organization or maybe another service club – sometimes it is because the people no longer remember that they each need a Mentor for the Way, and that one of their top reasons for existence is to embody the priesthood of all believers.

Just in case you paid attention to the Scripture reading: Controlling twelve yoke of oxen is quite a feat. Not many men could manage it. Elisha must have been in the heavy-hauling business. And he almost missed

his calling by trying to act logical and normal when Elijah came by. “Give me time to get all my affairs in order and say goodbye to folks.” Elijah had no time or sympathy for that.

Elijah’s dismissal awakened Elisha to the nature of the call, and he sacrificed all his earthly wealth on the spot. He gave all he had to the people and followed Elijah. It is also true that Elijah was casting his mantle. Elisha had an awesome Mentor, and soon the incredible spirit that had been guiding and inspiring Elijah’s life was flowing and directing the life of Elisha. Just wanted to remind you that this is not my idea – it is not some newfangled theory. It has always been part of the Path.

Could this really be true? That the heroes and leaders we honor had Mentors? What about Moses? Jethro. What about King David? Samuel / Nathan. What about Jeremiah, who, not from choice but from necessity, was the most isolated, lone-wolf character in the entire Bible? Baruch. If you are serious about the Path, you *need* a Mentor!

Somebody or something is always trying to destroy the worship of Yahweh – trying to interfere with or minimize our relationship to the God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ. So it is not just a game or a pleasantry or a sideshow. It is a life of commitment – commitments made in dead earnest by those who mean to follow the Way. Take them on one at a time, as they call to you. All of them are meant for your benefit. Sooner or later you will want all of them to help shape and form your LIFE in Christ Jesus.

A DISCIPLE BAND

Jesus has been busy since He came out of the wilderness. His life has changed dramatically. Instead of the normal days of carpentry, neighbors, friends and family, work and worship, suddenly He is the focal point of a new movement. His days are full of confrontation, and conversation. He has a message, and some are enthralled by it, others are puzzled, and many are rather fiercely antagonistic. Along the way, He heals people – sometimes in one way, sometimes in another. And right in the middle of this busy, busy time – as was frequently true of Jesus – He goes off to pray. *“From time to time he would withdraw to remote places for prayer.”* (Luke 5:16 NEB)

This time, Jesus has gone off to some mountain in the vicinity. I suspect Mount Tabor, just because that would be dramatic, but there are plenty of other places nearer the Sea of Galilee (Mount Arbel, for instance). This time, Jesus prays all night. What is troubling Him? What is at stake? Some of us think forty days and nights should be enough prayer to last a lifetime. But He is at it again. What is going on?

We do not have to wait very long to find out. *“When day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles.”* Most of you know that a *disciple* is a learner, a pupil – someone under the discipline of the Master or Teacher. An *apostle* is a messenger – “he that is sent out.” In this case, an ambassador of the Basileia – the Kingdom and its Gospel.

Some of you are happy to rejoice at Pentecost and to call it the “birthday of the church.” I certainly do agree with that. But if Pentecost is the birthday, then this quiet, unsung moment is the inception of the Christian church. Jesus spends all night in prayer, talking things over with God. Moses had gone up the mountain and had come back with Ten Commandments; Jesus goes up the mountain and comes back with Twelve Apostles. In many ways, that symbolizes and defines the difference between these two great leaders and the movements – the two great world religions – they launched.

We have no idea how many disciples (followers) Jesus has at this point. Probably hundreds and growing every day. From these disciples, He chooses twelve apostles – twelve to be the inner core; twelve to be the

insiders who will train and learn from Him and carry on His mission. (So much for ridiculous comments that Jesus was not exclusive. All quality of life depends upon exclusivity. Has anyone here ever gotten married?!)

The twelve who are chosen do not understand yet what is happening. That is, they do not comprehend the magnitude of it. It is too soon. There are too many dimensions that have yet to unfold. Though Jesus sees the connections with all that has gone before and constantly highlights them, still there is so much that is new in what He sees and does that no one else is following it all. But that doesn't matter. They are trying to cooperate – to go along with whatever it is Jesus is seeing and shaping and doing. And they will keep seeing it more and more clearly as events unfold. For the moment, all they know is that they have been chosen. They live with Him, go about with Him, learn from Him. That is their full-time occupation now. His ministry spreads and keeps going deeper, and the twelve have become apprentice apostles.

These twelve are to be the foundation of the new twelve tribes of Israel – what will come to be called “the Christian church.” They will be shocked as the ministry goes on. They will be devastated and fear for their lives, and even lose one of their number, when Jesus is killed. Much of their awakening and transformation will come after the crucifixion. Sometimes we have to lose everything to gain what truly matters. That, along with many other things which Jesus taught them, does not really come clear until they remember it looking back through the lens of the crucifixion and resurrection. Of course, the Holy Spirit of the Resurrected Jesus will help them for the rest of their lives. Well, it's not always what we would call “help” – all but one of them dies a martyr's death. The world gets incredibly angry, and incredibly cruel, toward people who carry a message of love: a love that is not “people-pleasing” – a love that is willing and eager to trust and proclaim the LOVE of God.

It is interesting that yet again today, there are scholars trying to tell us that Jesus did not really intend to create “the church.” They say Jesus had no sense of special identity and never intended to start a movement of followers – never mind a new world religion. It is beyond belief, they say, that Jesus was genius enough to be thinking so big or so far ahead. On the other hand, I think it is more absurd to imagine that a group of His followers were the geniuses who dreamed it up, and so quickly and compellingly after His death. But each to his or her own surmises, I suppose.

In any case, I suspect that those of us who are serious followers today want to pay attention to what Jesus was doing and how He went about it. Jesus chose a disciple band. His purpose in this world could not be accomplished without that – it could not move forward apart from that. Choosing the twelve was the beginning of the church.

Thousands of people, for thousands of years, have talked about the crucifixion and about the resurrection, and they have found faith, hope, mercy, grace. Their lives have changed and they have discovered new life, new values, and new reasons for living – new dimensions to it all that they had not even known existed. And some of us are among that number. Absolutely none of them, nor any of us, would ever have heard about any of it if it had not been for the twelve. (In my scheme of things, the Holy Spirit chose Paul to replace Judas, though we don't have time to go into it here.) If Jesus saves by His death and resurrection, He also saves because He chose the twelve. The night He spent on that mountain was one of the great turning points in human history. God in Jesus Christ said to the world on that night: This is not just about us – it is not just about me and God. We are not doing this *to* you, and we are not doing this *at* you – like you can just sit around and passively watch. You have to be part of it, get into the story, carry it, be its messengers – *or it will be for you as if it never existed*. To not carry the message of God's love will be the same as never having known it.

The truth is, Jesus bet everything on the power of friendship. Other great leaders have depended on military might or economic power, founded schools, learned to appeal to the masses, or had political clout. Jesus depended on none of these things. Jesus bet it all on twelve friends. If you are a Christian and you do not live in and out of a small group of true friends who are followers of His WAY, what are you doing? Who do you think you are following?

Jesus had the Gospel (the good news – the message of God's love), and Jesus *was* the Gospel. He embodied the message He carried. It became more and more amazing as He went. But after He was murdered, who carried His message? News that is not carried is no news at all, no matter how incredible its content. And this news cannot be carried as sheer information. This news can only be carried by a band of believers who have taken it unto themselves, and into themselves. You can write about it or talk about it, to some degree. But it goes bad quickly, or turns toward other purposes, unless you take it into yourself. This message has to be carried on the inside, or the outside quickly atrophies.

Jesus not only died and rose again, He also chose the twelve – or we would never have known about any of it. One without the other is useless. Do one without the other and nothing will ever come of it. Do you think the Roman Empire was trying to carry the news of His death and resurrection? Choosing the twelve is one of the great, unsung miracles of human history.

Jesus chose the twelve and trained them – taught them, talked with them, loved them, scolded them, argued with them, forgave them, commissioned them, sent them out. He never got anywhere near finished with their training before His time on earth ran out. But it was enough, as one of His parables suggested – enough for the seed to take root and begin to grow. And it is growing still. But Jesus does not coerce. It will cease to grow, and will even wither away, if no one finds it worth their time and life to carry it.

Jesus saves by His death and resurrection. He also saves by calling the church into being. The fifth commitment is the commitment to BE the church. (Not just to GO to church; that's pathetic. To BE the church.) The missing piece for many modern Christians is that the church always has two parts, or dimensions. It is the larger body – all the followers in general. But that quickly goes generic unless there are also DISCIPLE BANDS within the larger group. True “church” is not possible except in the company of people who really know you and care about you. That means people you really know and care about too. If you love everybody, you love nobody. Even the Son of God had to narrow it to twelve to get it real. And the main reason so many drift away from the church is because generic love – love in general – is a contradiction in terms. Or if you want it really clear: Generic love – love in general – is a lie. Would you even walk across the street to get love from somebody who loves everybody? Neither would I! It means nothing.

Lots of you are way ahead of me on this and have fully comprehended such things for years. But people new to the Path, or who are still contemplating becoming followers, are sometimes surprised or even offended by anything “institutional.” Of course! When we are just getting excited about the spiritual life, we do not like it to be mixed up with – sullied by – physical, pragmatic realities. It is such a disappointment when people go from contemplating the burning bush to sitting around with their calendars trying to decide when to have the next committee meeting. Even Jesus is grouchy for a while when He comes off the Mount of Transfiguration and walks back into the humdrum problems of everyday miracles and ministry.

But the fact is, if we want to help Jesus with His mission, we have to be part of it – part of His church. Love is a concept, an idea, a vision – family is an institution. But love does not last for very long in any way that matters or makes a difference if it does not go to work in the real world – and that is institution.

Institute: to initiate, begin; to establish, organize,
set in operation.

Institution: a relationship or behavior **of importance**
in the life of a community or society.

“I don’t like institutional religion” means “I don’t want any religious principles to be set in operation; I don’t want it to make any difference in the real world – especially not in *my* life.” Of course. No mystery there. We have all felt that way from time to time. Being “spiritual” is easy; we were made that way – designed and created by God. But turning will and life over to God is a whole different matter. That is never easy for us humans. But that is also what makes a difference. You can be as spiritual as you like – all day long, every day – and it will never make any difference.

Christianity is a concept, an idea, a vision – church is an institution. But Christianity is mere fleeting sentiment if it does not get embodied in a faith family – a church. Cyprian wrote: “He cannot have God for his Father who has not the church for his mother.” Augustine, referring to Cyprian’s comment, added: “No salvation exists outside the church.” Augustine was not talking about a building with a steeple. He was talking about a people – the *ecclesia*. Nobody was more of a loner than Augustine, but he knew there was no salvation outside the faith family. We are desperately in need of Jesus, but Jesus knows we also need each other. So He formed the church. And the church depends on and is made up of disciple bands. Without the larger church, the disciple bands go self-centered and disintegrate. Without the disciple bands, the larger church goes empty and meaningless.

You would never know I was raised Quaker, since Quakers don’t have a high regard for talking. Like every community, though, the Quakers have stories to illustrate their truth. A Quaker farmer heard noises downstairs in the middle of the night. He quietly got up, picked up his shotgun (even Quakers hunted for food), went to the head of the stairs, and waited. When the shuffling noises got to the bottom of the stairs, he flicked on

the light and, sure enough, there was a burglar with sack in hand, creeping along. “Friend,” said the farmer, “I would not harm thee for the world, but thee are standing where I am about to shoot.” But this is not a sermon about preaching ...

Here is the story for today, and it is about an actual incident. It also concerns a Quaker farmer. This one lived in Pennsylvania. He was an elder in the church, and one of the pillars of the congregation. One day, the Meeting decided against things he really cared about, and the pastor (Hicksite Quakers have pastors) had also voted against him. The next Sunday, the farmer was not at Meeting – something that was unheard of. About mid-week, toward evening, the pastor showed up at the farmer’s house. The farmer opened the door, and the tension and animosity were thick in the air. But not a word was spoken. The farmer shrugged and stepped aside, and the pastor went in. They sat down in front of the fire and did not say a word.

After ten or fifteen minutes, the pastor got up, stepped to the fire, took a pair of tongs and, with them, drew a large, red-hot coal out of the fire and set it on the hearth. Then he sat down again. The two men sat in silence, watching the glowing coal, until it turned cold and black. Then the pastor got up again and, with the tongs, set the coal back into the fire. He sat down again. Soon the coal was glowing as red and hot as it had before. Then the pastor got up and left. Still no word had been spoken. The next Sunday, and ever after, the farmer was back in church.

Do you think this is a commercial? Do you imagine that Cyprian and Augustine were trying to offend other religions? If there were time, perhaps it would help to remind you of the rebelliousness and anguish of Augustine’s own path to Christ. At the moment, however, I will only say that Cyprian and Augustine were trying to tell it straight. Nobody can walk the Christian Life alone. The Gospel cannot be honored in isolation. The message of God’s love dies unless we carry it as a community of faith, not just as lone rangers. (Even the Lone Ranger had Tonto.)

Jesus calls us into His church – into the disciple band, into the fellowship of believers. And the church (the *ecclesia* – the people – the people of Jesus) is the visible representative of the truth and the movement that Jesus began. Of course it reeks of imperfections. Of course it needs constant renewal. Of course all of us who are part of it wish it could be a truer and better witness for our Lord, even as we wish we ourselves could be truer and better followers. But the fact is, as long as we are the

church and dedicate ourselves to its purpose, however imperfectly, the message and movement of Jesus Christ survive upon the earth.

Now, suppose that you yourself, as an individual, are totally converted, totally in love with God, totally immersed in the teachings of Jesus, but you do not like organizations and cannot stand the institutional church. So you will do your best to live an exemplary Christian Life, but you will never worship with others, study with others, work in concert with others on any purpose or project. By the end of your life, will you have helped or hindered Jesus' purposes?

In addition, suppose for a moment that all the other Christians in the world suddenly agreed with you and wanted nothing to do with being the church – none of them ever again worshipped with each other, studied together, cooperated in any projects or purposes. How long would any remnant of Christianity remain upon the earth? It would all be gone in two generations, except for the museums. Does anyone honestly suppose that it honors Jesus to live in such a way that Jesus' name and His message and His purpose would cease to exist – would no longer be known upon the earth? Had those before us thought this way, there would be no Bible. Who would have translated or printed it? Who would have suggested that any of the writings were worth preserving in the first place? There would be no church schools or places to gather and learn about any of it. In short, we would never have heard about any of it, if people before us had not *been* the church – had not carried the message in their own faith families.

Wherever two or three are gathered in His name, that *is* the church. Then the only question is: Will we try to be a helpful and effective church? It's like opening Pandora's Box. Next thing you know, several families are having fun talking together and praying together, the kids are getting to know each other, and pretty soon not everybody can fit into the living room, so we end up building Community Church, Congregational. Then what if the roof leaks? Or we want a new courtyard? Pretty soon we have committees because nobody has figured out a better way to take care of such things.

Now, I know at least as well as anybody here that if the committees run for very long without continual spiritual renewal, pretty soon we run programs and fix roofs and forget all about why we were doing it all in the first place. That is the Achilles' Heel of any institution, and Satan loves to play on it. So it is hard. But after all, what do you expect from

an orphanage? It is still true that if we love Jesus, we will *be* the church. We will do that the best way we can, and it will never be good enough. Yet it may still be the most important thing we ever do here. And I mean including and despite all the fights, disappointments, mistakes, and hurt feelings – and sometimes even because of them.

This next is my own private opinion, but you may find it useful. The early church tended to be small disciple bands, starting with Jesus and the twelve. Likewise, the churches we hear about in the New Testament were mostly house churches, small bands of disciples gathering together. As Christendom grew and became prominent and acceptable, the experience of being the church was often greatly diluted. Being an unknown individual in a sea of two or three thousand worshippers can have its moments, but psychologically, it is not very different from being alone.

I would suggest that as followers in our time, we should take the hint from Jesus and, as part of our commitment to be His church, we should get ourselves into a disciple band – a group of somewhere near twelve people who are our Christian “support group” – people with whom we study, pray, and share on a regular basis. To my mind and in my experience, that is the core of the church. Apart from such disciple bands, I do not believe the church stays the church for very long.

In any case, the fifth commitment is the commitment to be the church of Jesus Christ. I strongly urge you, within that commitment, to make yourself a promise that, one way or another, you will get yourself into a disciple band.

CHOOSING YOUR SIX

Seven commitments of the Christian Life. That has been the theme for several weeks now. Some of you think it has been for far too many weeks. I warned you not to try to take on all of the commitments at once. This is not something we do to get saved, to earn God's love. This is something we do in response to God's love because we want to grow and make progress on the Christian WAY. There is no great hurry about getting perfect, you know, or God would not have given us eternity. It's just that we get tired of old ways that do not fit right or feel right. So we do it because we want to, or at least most of that which is within us wants to. The five commitments so far: PRAY every day, read and study the BIBLE, find your VOCATIO, choose a MENTOR, get into a DISCIPLE BAND.

The sixth commitment is the commitment to be an EVANGELIST. Oops, I just used an "E" word, which bothers some of you even more than a "B" word. So much baggage hangs around the word "evangelism" that, for the most part, we choose not to mention it at all. The only problem is, by not mentioning it, we have also stopped doing it, and more and more the concept itself is lost to us. But the concept is not entirely dead yet. One of you *has* used the word once in the nine months that I have been here, though not in an entirely positive manner. My friends, when evangelism dies, the church dies. That is fact. There is no escaping it. Sometimes it takes a few years, but nevertheless, the fact is that a church which has no evangelists does not survive for very long. And we have scores of UCC churches all over the country proving it.

Our problem with "evangelism" and "evangelical" and being "evangelists" is not with the words themselves, I think, but with some of the people we have encountered with whom we associate these words. But we must stop letting others steal our best traditions and disciplines just because of the way *they* do things.

What is the difference between an angel and evangel? Or an evangelist? Well, in Greek, *angel* means messenger. An *evangelist* is one who announces or proclaims glad tidings – good news. In other words, if you want to be an *angel* – a messenger of God – you have to be an *evangelist*. Now, indeed, you do *not* have to use the Greek words for it. I just think you should stop being afraid of them, or of the concepts they stand for.

There is no escaping the sixth commitment if we care about the Christian Faith. We know this is true. If we do not carry the Message ourselves, we lose the Message. That's on the inside. If we do not spread the Word, we shrink and die. That's on the outside. Think of the justice and rightness of that. If we are not turned-on enough to bring others into the Faith – and into the community that tries to walk it and support those who want to live it – then why should we go on taking up space here as a Christian church? Why would God *want* to support or bless us if we are not interested in spreading the Message or honoring the Kingdom? And why would God want to send people here if he knows they will never find any spiritual support or life or growth here?

The sixth commitment is the commitment to be an evangelist – to carry the Message – to invite people into the faith family that shares and ponders and tries to walk according to what is revealed in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. There is a lot of mystery in Christianity, but there is no mystery here. The Fifth Tradition of Alcoholics Anonymous, for instance, states: “Each group has but one primary purpose – to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.” They know what they are about. Do we know what we are about?

It is impossible to be in recovery from alcoholism and not want other drunks to find sobriety. I don't care how crass, selfish, mixed up, or confused a recovering person might be, if they see another person still caught in that wretched whirlpool, that horrible bondage, they cannot help but feel a deep yearning to invite that person into the program – into a different way of life. It is a logical and practical impossibility to know something wonderful and not want to share it. We have to carry the message, or we don't really have the message.

If you see an absolutely marvelous movie, read a book that moves you greatly, or find an exceedingly pleasant restaurant, you tell your friends. It just comes out of your mouth. When any related subject comes up, all at once here it comes, flowing over the lips. Of course, you pick the people and the times when it seems appropriate. *You are supposed to!* When it comes to evangelism, some people in other traditions do not do this. They put it out there all the time, appropriate or inappropriate, and they seem to have no other interests, as if God had not made all the rest of the world, just their little eight-by-ten-foot cubicle. They reach a lot of people we will never reach, by the way. Let it be. It is none of our business.

But we *will* reach a lot of people they can never reach – people they only offend. Accept that. Know it to be true. Learn your own truth, and your own way to proclaim it. And I would like to suggest three precepts:

1.) The very first promise Jesus made to Peter as he became a disciple was that Peter would become a fisher of men (a catcher of people instead of fish). In some churches, they fish with nets, trying to haul everybody in. You do not do that. It is not your way. It is not *supposed* to be your way. You are fly-fishermen. Think about that: It is an art. You have to practice. It is always one at a time. It does not work the same way twice. Brochures and pamphlets and one-phrase formulas will not work with the fish you are after. And you must “be one” with what you are doing.

2.) You are never responsible for the results. If what you try *has* to work, you cannot do it well. God does not coerce. Your job is to get the offer and the invitation clear. What somebody does with it after that is up to them, and to the Holy Spirit. Sow the seed; do not keep digging it up to see if it is growing. The church in our time is full of the “business manager” mentality: goals, procedures, and control; make it happen; force productivity; if it doesn’t work in two months, trash it. Does that sound peaceful, comforting, loving? Does that match the Message? It leaves no room for the Spirit. All we get that way is a human institution, full of underlying fear and pressure. No, we just want to keep our commitments, and leave the results to the Holy Spirit.

3.) Evangelism is not head-hunting. Obviously it often can be, as evangelism has often been turned into a numbers game. But I am suggesting that it must *not* be for us. When it is, the method does not match the Message. If you fly-fish and the fish bite – and our analogy breaks down here, but nonetheless – they do not land in the skillet, they land in the fellowship of the faith family. At least that is what is *supposed* to happen. We are not out fishing for trophies or scalps (though some people go at it that way). We are not in charge of the results, remember. But when it works – when the Spirit brings the connection and it “takes” – what we get are brothers and sisters in the Faith, dear friends, fellow pilgrims with whom we share and walk the Way.

What this means is that if we do not want to love somebody, we ought to keep quiet about the Gospel, at least when we are talking with them. After all, the Gospel is the Word of LOVE. What that means, in turn, is that you cannot evangelize very many people. If somebody gets

excited about the Message you carry, then you have a whole new relationship. You need to spend a lot of time with them. There is a lot to talk about, much to share. You have a new friend in Christ. How many of those can you keep up with? We are not talking about theory, where you are supposed to love everybody, but so little that nobody will ever notice, least of all them. We are talking about real-life relationships that take time and energy, and make a real difference. Space and time are the two great limitations of life. You cannot be a significant friend to very many people at the same time.

Some of you can hardly believe your ears. I am telling you that your evangelism must be limited to only a few people. That's right! I am not saying that I am correct. I am saying that you heard me correctly. You do not have space and time enough to be a true evangelist to very many people.

I believe that Jesus asks a lot less from us than most people think. Most people talk as if we are each supposed to save the whole world, love everybody, feed everybody, heal everybody. Then they try to persuade us that if we would just band together and coordinate our efforts correctly, we could build organizations that would actually be able to do this. I think that is mistaken. "*My yoke is chrestos [easy]*" – it fits right. The whole world and everybody in it with any needs? That does not fit right. I cannot do that. Neither can you.

I also happen to believe that if we would stop being grandiose and do the simple yet profound things we are asked to do, it would have far greater impact on the world in the long run. Quality, not quantity, is the mark of our Path.

The sixth commitment is to be an evangelist. If you want to be a real evangelist, concentrate on six people. Members of your immediate family do not count. (Of course they count greatly, but not as part of your six.) So you watch and pray and speak to people about your Faith and the Way you try to walk, until six people have responded. Then you stay with those six, nurture the friendships, show them into the church (not to – INTO). And you go on building your friendships with them until they die or move away, or you do. If you get a vacancy, fill it. Keep choosing your six. That is your primary evangelical task.

Never ever feel guilty about not doing more. If you keep faithful to your six, you will eventually train them to choose their own six. And if you do that, you will transform the world. You will do it faster, more authentically, and more deeply than everything all the churches are

doing today – all put together. And you will not be nearly so stressed and busy. You will also have a lot more joy and fulfillment on the Christian Path than you could possibly have otherwise.

Jesus sent out the twelve to do what He had been doing. (Luke 9:1) It worked wonderfully. Then a little later (Luke 10:1), Jesus sent out seventy-two in the same manner, for the same purpose. Where did the seventy-two come from? Jesus chose twelve, and He was the all-time pro and was doing it full-time. I am suggesting that He instructed each of the twelve to choose six. Six times twelve is seventy-two. Seventy-two additional disciples, each one in real relationship, each one personally cared about, each one part of the movement and choosing their own six. What were the disciples doing with their time? Well, I think they were keeping up with Jesus on the one hand, and each dealing with their six on the other hand. Why do you think the movement was spreading so quickly and powerfully?

Nothing, of course, ever works with precision. But suppose it takes a year to get things rolling. After that, let's suppose it takes three years for each new person to come into the movement, learn something of what it is about, and then choose their own six. **In twenty-five years, there would be more than twenty million people in the movement!** And not because anybody was trying to play hero or save the whole world, but because each person was paying attention to his or her own SIX! And because each new six felt truly included and valuable, and knew they were also part of the Kingdom – and were one of its evANGELS.

Not with precision or perfection, we all know, but something like this is what must have happened with the early church, or they could never have engaged the Roman Empire – which had decided to exterminate them – and, without lifting a sword, win over the greatest Empire in the world in less than three hundred years. Twelve ... who chose six ... who chose six ... who chose six ... Keep it simple. Keep it real. And really mean it.

One Saturday night, a pastor threw up his hands and said to himself, "There's no way I can finish this sermon and face that congregation tomorrow morning. I'm going golfing." So he phoned the associate pastor, told him he was feeling really sick, and asked the associate pastor if he could please put together whatever sermon he was working on and take the services tomorrow.

The pastor got up bright and early Sunday morning, put his clubs in the car, and drove off to a distant golf course where he thought no parishioners would see him. The sun was shining brightly, the day was crystal clear. It was beautiful, and the pastor felt wonderful. But up in Heaven, Gabriel nudged God and said, “Hey Lord, do you see what your servant is doing down there? And how he lied about it and everything?” And God said, “Mm-hmm.”

Gabriel said, “Lord, I don’t think you should encourage this sort of thing with beautiful sunny days and wonderful feelings and such.” And God said, “Don’t worry about it, Gabe. I’ll fix it.”

Just then the pastor stepped up to the tee. He teed up his ball and suddenly felt an incredible flow of peace and harmony. His energy and his consciousness flowed together and he seemed almost to merge with the universe around him. When he was ready, his swing seemed effortless, yet he could feel the flow of power – and oh my, what a shot! The ball soared with the grace of an arrow, straight down the fairway – no wobble, a nice slow spin, like the sun hurtling through space. It was far and away the best drive the pastor had ever made. And as he watched in near disbelief, the ball landed on the green and rolled straight toward the flag. The pastor ran all the way to the green to see if the shot could be at all as good as it looked from afar. Sure enough, the ball had rolled straight and true and into the cup! He danced and whooped around the flag. His very first hole-in-one, and on a very difficult course, to boot.

Gabriel looked at God with a face not quite describable and muttered, “I thought you were going to take care of this guy.” God looked back at Gabriel with a steady, unhurried gaze and said, “Hey Gabe, who’s he going to tell?”

There are those who believe that the Good News of God’s LOVE, and his desire for relationship with us ... that news of the Kingdom, and the spiritual dimensions unseen, yet all around us ... that New Life in Christ Jesus – are far more exciting than any hole-in-one could ever be. The question is: Who are you going to tell?

The sixth commitment is the commitment to be an evangelist. Time to choose your six.

* * *

THE MATH

Do less – get more.

Or: How we can mind our own true business and still do more for the Kingdom than ever before ...

1st Year -	12
4th Year -	72
7th Year -	432
10th Year -	2,592
13th Year -	15,552
16th Year -	93,312
19th Year -	559,872
22nd Year -	3,359,232
25th Year -	20,155,392

28th Year -	120,000,000
31st Year -	720,000,000
34th Year -	4,320,000,000

THE SERMON ON THE AMOUNT

One more commitment to consider – the seventh. I hope you have enjoyed this series of sermons. I hope you will enjoy today's. But some of you will not, unless you relax. Some people see commitment only as pain – obligation laid on from outside – instead of as vision and opportunity for a better life. Nobody is trying to *make* you do something you do not want to do. Nobody is trying to *make* you pray every day if you would rather stay distant and estranged from God. It would do little good, if that were the basis. Can you imagine the content and quality of prayer time, if a person were resentful and angry about having to pray?

Just so, what spiritual advantage could there possibly be in tithes or offerings given grudgingly or from an unwilling heart? But let us be clear: The concepts of tithings and offerings to God go back as far as we can trace human history. What was the problem between Cain and Abel? Abel brought the choicest of the firstborn of his flock as a gift to God; Cain could not stand it, so he killed Abel. He thought Abel was too self-righteous. He thought that Abel was either trying to make him look bad or was doing it to get in good with God. It was all a figment of Cain's imagination, however. Abel loved God and merely wanted to show it. But it made Cain insanely jealous, and the problem has plagued us ever since. Cain decided that it was easier to kill Abel – to do away with the example that was making him look bad – than it was to check his own heart and motives ... and, God forbid, to repent. It is reminiscent of what would later happen to Jesus. And we have had that same problem ever since.

Some people are always trying to denigrate the principle of tithing or pretend it does not really matter, but it is a fool's errand. The stories of Abraham and Jacob cannot be ducked. The pattern of Israel's life was shaped around sacrifice, first fruits, firstborn, and tithes. One entire tribe among the twelve was set apart to take care of the Tent of Meeting and the feasts and sacrifices – to care for the holy things – so God would remain central to Jewish life. Why does it take ten families to form a synagogue? Because if they tithe, they can hire a rabbi. I think it was reduced from twelve to make it easier to

form synagogues. But tithes from twelve families would leave enough to start saving up for scrolls and the other needs of a synagogue community.

The Bible is replete with stories of falling away from commitment, and of returning to faithful patterns. Over and over, God gets neglected and things go from bad to worse. Often there is also renewal – great joy as the community returns, rededicates itself, decides to take God seriously once again.

The seventh commitment is the commitment to TITHE – to give ten percent of your income to your church. (More of that definition in a moment.) Now, why wouldn't you relax as we talk about such a beautiful concept?

If you tithe already, you rejoice in the principle. And maybe remember your own struggles with the concept, and smile as you recall what happened when you finally made the commitment. But if you do not already tithe, then every word I utter is potentially difficult. That is, you must ward it off. You must find some way to conclude that I am telling it wrong. In your mind, you must either discredit me or go into poverty. That is what some of you still think, consciously or subconsciously. And if I am at all persuasive – if I say anything that appeals to you in any way – then that is threatening. Even if you are able to make it through the sermon genuinely convinced that I am in error, it leaves a residue of resentment that I troubled you with the notion of tithing in the first place. You managed to escape my clutches, but if you were not so smart and fast in your wits, I would have left you with a whole new load of guilt. That is how some of you think – or will end up thinking, if you do not shake it off on purpose. Only, I am not poisoning your mind – the culture around you is doing that. You want to love God, and you want to show it. Tithing is a privilege and a joy. It is natural to want to bring gifts to our God, and to want our Lord's influence and reputation to prosper and spread upon the earth. The truth is, we have to warp things and go grim inside, to keep ourselves from responding to such a principle.

In any case, you can relax. You know very well that I cannot *make* you do anything you don't want to do. Maybe you don't realize it, but I do not *want* you to do anything you don't genuinely want to do. You think I want to be minister of a bunch of guilt-ridden, resentful, hostile people? That might sound like fun to you, but not to me. "Tried it once, didn't like it." Besides, our God is not like that. Our

God is dangerous, but he's not stupid. Our God calls us to incredible LIFE, but we are never supposed to respond until we would rather risk the consequences than miss the adventure. So relax. If you want, you can even assume I'm going to tell you a bunch of bunk. But it will be interesting. A lot more interesting than some other things you spend your time thinking about.

Here we go. First of all, let's be clear about tithing. This is "The Sermon on the Amount." The amount is ten percent of your spendable income. If you accept the seventh commitment, you figure out how much money you make, and then ten cents on every dollar of that goes to your church. This is really clear and simple to most of us, but genuinely confusing to some. Let's slow down. I cannot clear up details, but I can clear the principle. By the way, checking it out with your Mentor is an excellent idea. That way you know pretty clearly if you are rationalizing or if you are really trying to honor the principle.

Money that you make – that is available for you to spend for any purpose – that is what you tithe on. Every tither has to work through the wrinkles of their own situation. Every tither does it prayerfully. Classic situations: (1) You earn money that goes into a retirement fund or into Social Security. In many cases, your employer sends money you are earning straight to those places. You do not tithe on that money. You have not received it yet. If the day comes when you start getting checks from such sources, then you tithe on it. It has become income. (2) Suppose your employer pays your health insurance. You tithe on that amount. It is working for you in the present, buying protection. If you do not think the protection is important, do not buy it.

Let's not get snowed under with details here. We all have to work out the details until we think it is a tithe, and until we are pretty sure *God* knows it is a tithe. Just getting the concept clear. You may also have some favorite charities, but take such gifts out of your own money, not God's. A tither is someone who gives one-tenth of their spendable income to *their church*. You get to choose your church. That was not always true in the past.

What is "the church"? The church is the covenant community of believers in Jesus Christ that you participate in. Its function is to increase faith on earth, to strengthen awareness of God's Kingdom, and to invite people into a fellowship that tries to walk and live for that Kingdom. Perhaps you give a lot of money to a lot of various

charities; that makes you generous, but it does not make you a tither. I am just trying to be clear. A tithe is ten percent of your spendable income, given to the church to which you belong.

You see, there are many good causes upon the earth. That is part of our problem. Priorities constantly trouble us. One of the deepest meanings of the seventh commitment is that it names and sets the church of Jesus Christ as a top priority in our lives.

That is what truly is at issue. Do we or do we not truly believe that Jesus is the light of our lives? Do we or do we not want His mission and movement to increase upon the earth? If you do not pay tribute to your King, you do not *have* a King. Christians, like their Jewish forerunners, have always known that God is the true King. That is often muted upon the earth – often neglected or forgotten. But Christians have always known that what is most important here is usually not what is being called important here. The true and most important citizenship is citizenship in Christ's Kingdom. We tithe to the church because that is our true allegiance. And when we can no longer live in this world in allegiance to our true King, then we will no longer live in this world. No hard feelings.

The church in our time gives very mixed messages about allegiance. The church is very important, but not *as* important as soccer or Monday Night Football or a thousand other things. In former times, people sacrificed jobs, mates, homes, friends, health – life itself, when it became necessary – in order to keep their allegiance to Jesus Christ. What are we to make of it if the people of the church in our time believe that it is too much to ask if God inconveniences us? How much can God ask of you before you decide it is too much?

Money is an item of interest – and more than that, an *issue* – for almost every human being on earth. For many people, down through the ages, money has been of interest because it can be used for religious aims and purposes. But where is the line between greed and devotion? Between responsibility and pride? Between stewardship and stinginess? Humankind has stumbled, and sometimes broken, over such issues from the dawn of time. Socrates proclaimed: “If a rich man is proud of his wealth, he should not be praised until it is known how he employs it.”

This is “The Sermon on the Amount.” I get to cut through the confusion and tell you that a tithe is ten percent of your useable income. God does not want you poor. Ninety percent is for you to use faithfully in your own life. Ten percent is for the church, which represents the Kingdom here on earth. You get to hear this message once again and decide whether or not you will live by it. Isn’t that clear and simple? It should also be a delight! “We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.” Or so said Winston Churchill. Which reminds me of a story:

It is told of a British family that journeyed to Scotland for a vacation. The young son went wandering through the woods by himself and came upon a swimming hole. It was a hot day, so he stripped and dove in. But the water was far colder than he had expected, and soon he was doubled up with cramps. Unable to swim ashore, he yelled and flailed and was about to go under ... when suddenly he felt strong arms reach around him and haul him to the side of the quarry. It was a Scottish farm boy who, working in a field nearby, had heard the yells and dashed over to dive in and pull the English boy to safety.

Next day, the English boy’s father sought out the Scottish farmhand and, with deep emotion, thanked him for saving his son’s life. He asked the Scottish lad what plans he had for his own life. “I suppose I’ll be a farmer like my father,” the boy replied. “Is there anything else you would rather do?” asked the English father. “Well, secretly I’ve always wanted to be a doctor,” said the boy, “but we are common folk and my parents could never afford such schooling.” “It would please me to help with your dream,” said the Englishman. And he pledged to pay the boy’s way through medical school.

Years later, in 1943, Prime Minister Winston Churchill was in North Africa, dangerously ill with pneumonia. Sir Alexander Fleming was summoned to fly down with a new wonder drug he had developed called penicillin. Fleming administered the new drug, and Winston Churchill made a remarkable recovery. Thus the Scottish farm boy saved the English lad a second time.

Churchill’s father, in gratitude, had given Fleming the astounding gift of a medical school education – thinking it was a “thank you,” and perhaps a reward, for saving his son’s life. But in fact he was saving his own son’s life at a later time – in a future he could not yet

see. Of course, he was also saving many other lives in the process. Do we really imagine that if we tithe to God, we are rewarding *God*? Or do we recognize that we are saving our own lives, and the lives of those we love, a second time ... a third ... a fourth?

Jacob, fleeing from Esau and seeking a wife, headed north to Haran (Turkey). There, he had a strange, mystic encounter. And there, he made the seventh commitment – to tithe. This encounter changed his life. He had been a mama's boy, a cheat, a liar, a thief. Genuine changes are hard and take years, but they have to start somewhere. Like Jean Valjean in *Les Miserables*, Jacob stole a blessing and found out that the blessing was really stealing him. His life was being transformed.

Among other things, I am reminding you that tithing is not *my* concept. I preach it to stay faithful. Over and over, I have trembled when certain parishioners decided to tithe. I was afraid it would ruin them. I thought the discipline was too much for their circumstances. Yet over and over, some unseen things would connect and, instead of ruin, the blessing would flow and life would take off. And I have just stood there gaping. Life likes to be dedicated to the true King. Things straighten out that nobody even knows are out of alignment or not integrated. When all the particles of the magnet face in the same direction, the power is surprising. I guess it is not really a miracle; it just seems like one.

How much can God ask of you before you decide it is too much? What would the church be like, do you suppose, if all or most of its members tithed? Obviously the financial resources would greatly increase. We would have three or four times as much money to be faithful with. Do you think God would like that? Instead of squabbling over every line item or arguing over which of our most basic programs deserve to take the cut – instead of feeling stingy, acting poverty-stricken, or wondering if we can afford a projector or our staff or a refrigerator for the parsonage – we would be trying to figure out the next most joyful and faithful step to take. If you all suddenly tithed, we would be trying to figure out what to do, as a congregation of faithful stewards, with an \$800,000 overage – and I mean *after* already fully funding our requested budget – and we would be facing that problem every year. In time, that would change who we were,

what we were able to accomplish, and how we felt about the church. Do you think God would like that?

Be that as it may, this I can promise you: We will never be the church we want to be – and, more importantly, we will never be the church the Holy Spirit wants us to be – unless we become a tithing church ... and a church of tithers. Jesus and His church have to become that important to us, that high on our priority list. And no, it is not just the money. It would change how we felt about coming here, how excited we were about what we do here, how we felt about each other – everything. Do you think God would like that? How much can God ask of you before you decide it is too much? As usual, and of course, pleasing God benefits us far more than we can ever imagine.

That brings us to what tithing is really about. It is not a scheme to make money. It is not about raising a budget. It is a spiritual discipline. Its purpose is to bring us closer to God. While it does benefit the church if members become tithers, the benefit that matters most is the benefit to the tither. Tithing clarifies priorities, and it announces a clear and genuine allegiance deep within. Tithing changes the level of our relationship with God; it changes the nature of our participation in the church; it changes the experience of what it means to walk the Christian Path or Way. To be very clear: The true reason and purpose of tithing is for the spiritual growth it brings. Otherwise, it would have no place among the basic commitments of the Christian Life.

I do not believe that any person is ever able to make the commitment to tithe simply because they think the church needs money. There has to be more smoke than that to cause a fire. Motive has to match commitment. The discipline of tithing is much too great to be fueled by mere economics. The only people I have ever known who tithed were people who came to see it as part of the spiritual Path – part of the Christian Way. It is an allegiance thing: A way we pay tribute to our King. A way we keep saying, in all our labors each day of our lives, “Lord, whatever I do, whatever I’m about, one-tenth will always be for You, because I love You.” That is very close to what Jacob said, after his experience with what we call “Jacob’s ladder.”

Here are a few quick items, none of them fully explained:

1.) If you decide to tithe, then claim freedom from guilt. It does not matter how much you make. A tithe is a tithe. Isn't that beautiful? If God does not think it is enough, let him increase your income. You do your part, and God does his part. When you tithe, you have a right to be peaceful and content with what you have given – no matter who asks what or thinks otherwise. Many people are able, and choose, to give to various things beyond the tithe. Well and good. Free choice – no obligation. If you tithe and wish to do more for your church, it should be in the form of a special, designated gift of some kind. I realize this is not a great concern to most of you. But never give more than ten percent of your income as a regular pledge to the operating budget of the church. It will mess things up in the long run.

2.) I do not know why the following is true. It makes no earthly sense to me. I only mention it as an item of interest, and perhaps someone here will bring me information to the contrary. There seems to be an operative principle that kicks in when we give ten percent that does not work at six percent or eight percent or anywhere short of the ten percent. I only report that many people over the years have told me that it changes at ten percent – that the blessing, though perhaps it was *trying* to operate, was quite muted until they reached the ten percent. You can do with that whatever you like. I'm not trying to argue you into anything; I'm just telling you what I know.

3.) I am often amused that the church never preaches about “blessed are the poor” on Stewardship Sunday. If you are going to tithe, then the richer you are, the better I like it. I wonder if God feels that way. “The more you tithe, the more I can bless you, and the more we can accomplish together.” Have you pondered the parable of the pounds lately? (Luke 19:11-26) Those of you who are pragmatic realists would probably want to make clear to God that there is incentive for blessing you – that if you do well, his church is going to benefit. If you are competing for a promotion and the record of performance is just about equal but you tithe and the other person does not, whose side is God going to be on? God gets ten percent one way and nothing the other way? Well, everybody knows, or thinks they know, that God is no good at business affairs. I am sure there is no truth to such an implied favoritism. But are *you* sure?

4.) Okay, I was having fun. Now I am in dead earnest. Some of you might accuse me of trying to use reverse psychology. I do not think you are foolish enough to be moved by silly tricks; do not think I am stupid enough to try them. Please listen and hear this: It is important not to tithe before it is time. The one arena of life where we can never cheat or take shortcuts is in spiritual affairs. Faking faith does not work. When it comes to money, giving money on the Christian Path is an act of praise and devotion. Any other motive makes it counterfeit money. God is not a beggar. The issue here is not about God's needs. It is about our awareness of God's presence and God's Kingdom, and our desire for fullness of LIFE in Christ Jesus.

Some people think they can bring any old gift they want, whenever they want, and the poor old dotting Creator of the Universe will feel lucky and grateful to get it. All spiritual people have always known two things: First, that you never appear before God empty-handed. Sometimes we can only bring remorse or a broken heart. But we never come with nothing to lay before him. (Exodus 23:15) The second thing we have always known is that the gift must be pure or true or right in some way, or God will not accept it. (Remember Cain? Remember the lamb without blemish?)

Giving to God must be in praise and devotion. The gift must be "without blemish" – without ulterior motive, insincerity, or resentment. Christians must be very thoughtful and prayerful about what they bring to God's altar. Oh, I don't mean God will break out and smite you. The gift will simply be rejected. Nothing that matters will come of it. You will go home unblessed. And the church will wither and go dry. Does that ever happen? All across the land.

If you do not know what your gift should be, better to give nothing. If you resent the giving, far better to give nothing. God is patient. God will honor your honest intent to find clarity and authenticity. The Board of Trustees may be less enthusiastic – but then, who do you want to please, them or God?

I realize that if all of you, or even most of you, started to tithe, it would have a dramatic impact on our church's budget. We could do many things we are not now able to do. We could take on new projects, expand present programs, even take on new missions. It will cross your mind that I would like you to tithe so this could happen. Let me tell you something: I would *love* to see this happen! There

probably is nothing in this world that seems more exciting to me than the possibility of living in a church that really means to live its faith.

That is still not why I preach this sermon. First and foremost, I care about your spiritual health and growth. I know the interior difference – the difference in a person’s personal relationship to their Lord – when they do not carry their commitment and devotion to the level of tithing. *That* is what I care about.

If you do not pay tribute, you have not yet claimed Jesus as YOUR KING. If you have a King you believe in, it is joy to pay tribute. Friends, *that* is what tithing is really about. Life is like a game of chess. Every move you make reflects the position of your King. What is the position of Jesus Christ in your heart and life?