

¹⁵“If you love me, hold on to my commands. ¹⁶I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever. ¹⁷He is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive because it does not see him or know him. You know him because he stays with you and will be in you.

¹⁸“I will not leave you as orphans; I am coming to you. ¹⁹In a little while the world will see me no longer, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. ²⁰In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹The one who has my commands and holds on to them is the one who loves me. And the one who loves me will be loved by my Father. I too will love him and show myself to him.”

“If you love me, hold on to my commands.” That is the standard Jesus sets before his disciples of every age. And he sets that standard on the night of his betrayal, mere hours before his death. Our love for Jesus should be evident in the way we obey his commandments. So, is it? Do you guard your tongue from slander or gossip? Can you honestly say that you refrain from disgracing God’s gift of marriage in and out of your bedroom? Are the needs of other people a priority above your own needs?

I think it happens in almost every Bible Information Class I teach. We read 1 Peter 1:15: “Rather, just as the one who called you is holy, so also be holy in everything you do.” And then I ask the question: What does God demand from us? The response I get almost every time is the same: “Well, God wants us to try our best.” But the word “try” is never found in that passage. Instead, we see the word “be.” God’s command is not to try our best to be perfect, or holy. It is to achieve it. It is to live in perfection. And there is no wiggle room for that.

So, why does everybody give the “try” answer? They give it because they know they have not been holy. They give it because they know no human born in sin has been able to be holy. So, they lower the bar. But God doesn’t. And as we hear Jesus’ words here, “If you love me, hold on to my commands,” we feel a similar instinct to lower the bar. Because what is it Jesus is saying? He’s not saying that our love for him will lead us to keep most of his commands or that it will lead us to do a pretty good job. How do we know that we truly love Jesus? We keep all of his word all the time.

Do you like these words? Or do they make you feel uncomfortable? In truth, these words are a terror if we are being honest about our lives. We don’t live holy lives. We don’t keep Jesus’ commands. In a few weeks, we are going to start a series on the 10 Commandments, and one-by-one we are going to see how we constantly break them all. We know his commands. They are written on our hearts. We feel the pin prick of our consciences when we break them. But in

moments of weakness or of willful rebellion, we disregard them to chase sin. Do you really love Jesus? Do you really appreciate him and all he's done? Or is it just lip service?

Don't worry about hiding it. God knows what you do behind closed doors. He knows what evils hide within your heart. He knows what master you really serve. And you can make all the excuses in the world. You can surround yourself with people who only ever tell you that you're right in all you do. But Jesus pops the bubble of delusion you've tried to insulate yourself with in these words: "If you love me, hold on to my commands." All of them. Every single one.

Jesus certainly knew that these words would fall like a ton of bricks on the men in the room with him on Holy Thursday. The teacher had chastised them plenty of times over the last three years. They knew they were sinners, even if they needed to be reminded from time to time. The next few days would fare the same way. Soon after this, in the Garden of Gethsemane, they'd fall asleep when Jesus instructed them to "watch and pray." When the Jewish authorities would show up to arrest him, the disciples would not stand with Jesus. They would run. And what would they do after Jesus had said to them multiple times that he would rise? They locked themselves away in fear and doubt. "If you love me, hold on to my commands."

They had failed. We have failed. So, what does Jesus say next? "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever." A counselor or advocate is someone who works for the good of another person. A weaker person. A helpless person. If we were to keep Jesus' commands and demonstrate perfect love for him, we'd have no need for a counselor. But Jesus know we aren't, so he promises to come to us with exactly what we need. He explains further, "He is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive because it does not see him or know him. You know him because he stays with you and will be in you." Jesus is promising the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit who comes to strengthen your faith and instills in you a desire to serve God.

Understand that true service to God does not come out of fear, but out of joy. A person who says, "I can't give into drunkenness or God might harm me," is in the wrong just as much as the person who lives with a bottle always in hand. A student who does not cheat because she's afraid of God's wrath is just as guilty as the one that uses all the tricks to avoid detection from the teacher. The law of God inflicting terror and keeping people from evil is a good thing, but it does not create service to God born out of love and thankfulness. It's just obedience that stems from fear.

True service to God comes out of joy. It comes from a heart that – yes, recognizes sin – but also recognizes that God frees us from sin in his Son. This is what the Holy Spirit is sent to convince us of and remind us of. This is what he leads our hearts to trust even when that Old Adam in us wants to lie and cover up our sins or live in fearful despair over them. That Counselor comes to advocate for us and convince us that our rightness before God does not

come from our ability to keep the commands, but rather the one who kept the commands for us in our place.

Yes, these words are nothing but terror if we want to be honest about our lives. But when we face the harsh truth, these words become nothing but joy knowing who speaks them. Sure, we deserve God's wrath. We deserve death. We deserve to spend eternity separated from God and all his good gifts. But the beauty is that God doesn't give us what we deserve. He gives us the opposite. "I will not leave you as orphans; I am coming to you," Jesus says. He does not leave us to wander through life alone, dragging along a black garbage bag from temporary home to temporary home. He does not allow us to wonder where our next meal will come from, or if we'll have a place to sleep tonight. He makes us his children. He wraps us in the priceless robes of his righteousness. He guarantees us a mansion in the glory of heaven.

And so, we read the words in front of us in a different light. Not in fear, but in joy. Not to figure out what to do to please God and avoid punishment, but to learn how we can serve the one who has already freed us from the crushing weight of our sins. Look at those first words again: "If you love me, hold on to my commands." And we do love him. We love him because he bent the timeline of history and worked all things so that we could be his. And that now means his commands don't restrict us or convict us, but help us.

Since we got married, Christa and I have made sure to budget. It's served as a brake pedal to prevent overspending. But over time, we've also discovered that it doesn't just limit us when we don't have money to buy this or that. It also frees and encourages us to spend when we have money in this or that budget category. Our budget sets healthy limits to keep us from getting stressed or arguing over when to spend our money.

In a sense, God's law operates the same way. It defines the healthy boundaries between forbidding something God gives us to use and pushing gifts beyond their giver's intended use.

God's law sets a budget. It shows us what is healthy and what is unhealthy. It tells us that there is nothing wrong with alcohol. God's word even speaks of the joy that comes from alcohol at times. But it also warns against drunkenness. Likewise, God's word shows us the joy that comes through sexual relations. It goes on quite a bit about how this is one of the greatest bonding agents between wives and husbands, a joy we should not pretend is wrong or gross. But it also warns us against using this gift in a disordered way, outside the union of marriage. Think about the potential costs of sex outside of marriage instead of within the confines God set for it.

God sets this budget of his law so we can walk in love for him between the extremes of forbidding what God has not forbidden on one side, and not pushing his gifts beyond their intended use on the other side. God's commands help us walk that tightrope as we live for our Savior who lived for us.

But Jesus also uses his commands of you so that you can help others. It is impossible to love Jesus and not love other people. The Counselor that has been sent into our hearts moves us to love God totally and only. And that makes us yearn to do what God has created us to do. And what has he created us to do? I'll give you a hint: There's a reason God does not place us on individual islands, but puts us in homes and communities and church families. He created us to love and serve our neighbors. And how do his commands help us do that? Well, none of his commands instruct us to hurt and harm the people around us. Quite the opposite. They tell us to care for and serve and protect our neighbors. They urge us to take a hands-on approach in loving them. Because – as Jesus says – the world cannot see him. Only believers can, through the eyes of faith.

So, how does the unbelieving world come to see Jesus? They see him through you. You can talk about Jesus' self-sacrificing love until you are blue in the face, but people don't understand God's great love until they see it in your little acts of love, in you putting their needs ahead of your own. Then, Jesus starts to shine through, because as you serve them, it's really Jesus serving them through you.

“If you love me, hold on to my commands,” Jesus says. Is our church filled with the Spirit? Are our homes filled with the Spirit. Are our hearts filled with the Spirit? And if so, how will people know? They'll see it in the way you worship. They'll see it in the way you live. And they'll see it in the way you treat them. Amen.