

Duty Bound?

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John 14:15-21
“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

Movement 1 – Jesus is Leaving

“Parting is such sweet sorrow,” (from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* Act 2, scene 2). Parting is a difficult and moving experience. Saying good-bye, moving on, losing something, letting go of something can be wrenching. We have so many scenes, so many stories, and so many examples of the sweet partings that remain in our collective mind. From the classic, “here’s looking at you kid” goodbye in *Casablanca* to the moving goodbye behind a waterfall between Daniel Day Lewis’s character and Madeleine’s Stowe’s character in *Last of the Mohicans* to the poetic good-bye of *Romeo and Juliet* and the tragic lament of Maria over Tony in *Westside Story*, we find a myriad of examples of people saying goodbye. These are scenes that, unless you are a robot, will draw tears to your eyes, will bring a lump to your throat and will be difficult, and yet beautiful to watch. These scenes capture moments in our own life. They speak to the moment when you have to leave your loved one for a week a month or a prolonged amount of time. They capture the difficult experience that many have when life separates you from the person who makes you feel whole. It sweet because you realize the profundity of your relationship, and it is sorrowful because you have to say goodbye.

When we read the later part of John, we need to approach much of the text with similar feelings. Jesus is saying goodbye. Jesus is with his disciples and preparing them for his own departure. In this chapter, along with the previous and following ones we find what is referred to as the “farewell discourse.” Jesus is preparing his disciples for life after he leaves; life without him. He is preparing his disciples for the expectations and the changes that would occur after he is no longer walking with them. You can imagine the emotions swelling amongst the disciples. The Lebanese poet Kahlil Gibran once wrote, “Ever has it been that love knows not its own depth until the hour of separation.” The German author Jean Paul Richter once wrote, “Man’s feelings are always purest and most glowing in the hour of meeting and of farewell.” So maybe, as the news of Jesus’ departure, as the reality of the possibility of Jesus’ death was beginning to set in a swelling of emotions, a swelling of love began to overtake the disciples and they tasted the bittersweet tears of parting, of saying goodbye.

Yet this parting is further complicated because not only was Jesus their friend, but he was also their teacher and leader. Not only are they losing a companion, but the disciples are losing the focus and the emphasis and the leadership of this nascent movement. Their leader is saying goodbye. It is always interesting when a leader of a movement begins to say goodbye. The dynamics change from simply the “sweet sorrow,” to a sense of shock and panic. Like a deer in the headlights, those who were following Jesus were beginning to feel the anxiety and the shock at the thought of Jesus’ absence. What would they do? How would they live? What would happen to their lives? They were preparing for the change.

Remember when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated? Remember when Gandhi was assassinated? These are examples of two great leaders of profound and

powerful movements in the world. These were movements that were not only focused on principles and ideas but on the personality of the leader. The independence movement of India and the Civil Rights movement of America were encapsulated by their leaders. When Gandhi and King were assassinated, when they were murdered the movement was left in disarray and anxiety. Many wondered what they would do next. Many wondered if there was any hope for further progress in their respective movements. People were not only saying goodbye to these great men, but were also saying goodbye, to a degree, to the movements themselves.

When a pastor announces he or she is leaving a church, panic and anxiety rises as people find they have to say goodbye. When the president of a company announces that he or she is going to resign anxiety rises. Not only is the goodbye to the individual, the character, but also to the leadership, the movement and perhaps the way of life itself. The disciples were saying goodbye to Christ, and as they were, maybe their love for Christ was rising as he was speaking of his departure. Maybe their devotion grew, and at the same time I am sure a sense of panic, a sense of malaise was also fomenting. The sweetness and the sorrow mixed in the welling and wash of emotions. How can we say goodbye?

Movement 2 – What do we do now? – The Commandment

What are we going to do? How are we going to live? Who are we going to be without Jesus? The anxiety of the disciples rises as the truth of Jesus' departure sinks in and slowly overwhelms them. The disciples were barely able to follow Jesus as it was, they could not stay focused, they could not understand the points of Jesus' preaching very well without Jesus and now he was going to leave? What would they do?

Jesus knows about their anxiety and speaks to the anxiety of the disciples. Jesus knows they are nervous, he knows they are anxious and uncertain about what to do next and offers some wisdom and some guidance for them to embrace. Jesus offers a very simple, very direct plan for the disciples. Nothing too complicated, nothing too involved but a simple guideline, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." This is all the disciples have to do is to love Christ by keeping his commandments. This seems simple enough. This seems fairly self-explanatory. If you want to continue the path that I have set for you, if you want to continue to walk with the Lord, then "Keep my commandments."

Is this really as simple as it sounds? Is this as easy as I am suggesting it to be? Perhaps not. After all, Christ's commandments may be numerous, may be complicated and may be involved. Christ's commandments may be hard enough to learn let alone follow. He had the parable of the mustard seed, the parable of the lost coin, the parable of the Good Samaritan, the parable of the Prodigal Son, the parable of the lost sheep and on and on. He had the Sermon on the Mount, the sermon on the plain, the woes and the blessings, the teachings in the synagogues and the random teachings to the disciples. Christ cured a paralyzed man lowered down on a mat, he cured the man who could not get to the reflecting pool, he cured the man with the withered hand, he cured the woman who touched his cloak, he cured the man with many demons, he cured Simon Peter's mother-in-law, and many others. Christ turned water into wine, calmed the wind and the waves, walked on water, fed multitudes many times, brought Lazarus back from the dead and did many other wonderful and amazing things. We have so many parables, teachings,

healings and miracles that we may not know where to start when we try to discern Christ's commandments. So what seems to be a simple command to continue in Christ's path can very quickly become overwhelming.

What are Christ's commandments? How do we know if we are following the right ones? After reflecting, it feels like an overwhelming request, one that we may never be able to live into. Yet if we were to listen a little more, if we were to sit with Christ for just a little bit longer and listen to what he had to say we would hear in the 15th chapter, 12th verse of John, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." This is the commandment that we are called to embrace, to follow and to live. This is a simplified, streamlined summation of Christ's ministry and teaching. Love others just as Christ has loved you.

A skeptical young man once approached Rabbi Hillel and challenged him, "Teach me the whole Torah while standing on one leg." Rabbi Hillel looked at him, stood on one leg and said, "Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, mind and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself. All the rest is commentary," (adapted by the author). Hillel offered a simple commandment, a profound summation of the Torah for the skeptical young man to follow. Christ is offering a simple commandment to follow. Love one another just as Christ has loved you. This is something we can remember, we can embrace and we can follow. It is like following a short, pity yearbook quote, following the advice on a fortune cookie or from a *Dr. Seuss* book or even Jerry Springer's words at the end of his show, "take care of yourself, and each other." Love one another just as Christ has loved you.

This is what we are to do, this is where we are to place our focus as Christ leaves us and we find ourselves wandering on our own. After your baptism, after your acceptance of Christ as Lord, what do we do next but stay focused on this commandment, love others just as Christ has loved us. We are walking with our eyes fixed on just that task. Like walking the Freedom Trail in Boston, MA you keep focused on that red line going throughout the city; never straying from the red line. Walk as if the commandment is that red line. Walk as if it is the path upon which we are to always focus. We are on our own, let us follow the instructions, the commandment of Christ and love others just as Christ has loved us.

Movement 3 – How can we do it?

Yet how? How do we stay focused on this one, seemingly simple commandment? How can we keep to this call that we receive from Christ? It may seem simple, it may seem self-explanatory, but look a little more closely, think about it a little more and you may begin to realize the problems inherent in this command. This is not as easy as we might like. This is not just a simple command that we can do automatically, without thinking. Christ is calling us to love others just as he loves us. This short and easy to remember command is difficult and challenging.

You can imagine the disciples shuffling in their seats as they hear their Lord make such a request. Are they really to love others just as Christ loves them? Christ reached out to them, believed in some of them when no one else would. Matthew the tax collector, Nathaniel the skeptic, Thomas the twin and doubter, others in the group would not be many number one candidates for Christ's close circle of followers, yet Christ reached out to them, believed in them and loved them. Christ was patient with them and was kind to

them. Christ would teach them, heal them and care for them. If Jesus was asking that this love be exclusive, be just among those who have followed Jesus, just among those who are already in the group, the disciples and others, then this may not seem to be such a difficult command. Yet Jesus is asking the disciples to love others, all inclusive, open doors. Jesus is asking the disciples to reach out to all others with the same love that they have received. The disciples remember how Jesus called the children, touched the leper, reached out to the man inflicted with demons, defended the adulterer who was about to be stoned and spoke with the woman at the well – the foreign, sinful woman. The disciples remember these actions of Jesus and maybe found themselves asking, “me to, Lord?” They find themselves wondering if that is the expanse of the love Jesus is asking them to share.

Think of the implications on our end. Think of the difficulties on our end. Jesus is asking all of his followers in Israel to reach out and love Palestinians, and all of his followers in Palestine to reach out and love Israelis. Jesus is asking all the Catholics in Ireland to reach out and love the Protestant and all the Protestants to love all the Catholics. Jesus is asking all of his followers here in the United States to reach out and love those with whom we disagree, with whom we distrust and with whom we despise. They are the ones we have to love, just as we love those who are close to us, those who walk with us. Love them just as Jesus has loved us. Remember, Christ looks past your faults and failings. Remember, Christ looks beyond your faults and failings. Remember, Christ looks past your betrayals and sins. Remember that Christ went to the cross, died on the cross to show the depth and the power of his love for you. How much does Christ love you? Enough to spread his arms and offer hope. Enough to spread his arms and offer forgiveness. Enough to spread his arms and offer life. This is a love that goes beyond the love of a parent. This is the love that goes beyond the love of siblings. This is the love of the Lord, picking us up, embracing us and giving us life.

How many Christians do you know say they love the Lord, but do not show any effort towards keeping Christ’s commandments? How many Christians do you know say yes to Christ, claim to follow Christ but do not show it? Their life has not changed, their values have not changed, and all they have now is “fire insurance.” When Christ is saying goodbye, these Christians simply shrug their shoulders, say fine and wish the best for Christ on his trip and it may be because to continue to love Christ, to continue to follow Christ is hard and challenging to do. It is easier to let Christ go, to say goodbye and go separate ways.

No, let us love the Lord, continue to love the Lord and embrace this short and profound commandment. Let us love others just as Christ has loved us. Let us express our love, share our love, and show our love just as Christ has loved us.

Movement 4 – We’ll get by with a little help...

It is a daunting lifestyle, a sometimes difficult command, yet remember that we are not on our own. We do not have to try to follow such a simple and profound commandment without any help. Christ is leaving, Christ is going to be with God, but we will not be left as orphans. Christ offers the assurance, the hope, and the support of the Holy Spirit. Christ reminds us and encourages us that we will not be left alone.

This is where we look for hope, to the Holy Spirit. In this passage, the Holy Spirit is referred to as the Paraklete, the advocate, the comforter and helper. The Spirit, the

comforter, advocate, helper will come and be with us. The Spirit will dwell amongst us. The Spirit will lift us up, guide us and support us. We are not on our own.

It reminds me of the end of the Steinbeck's great work, *The Grapes of Wrath*. In the end of this American classic, one of the main characters, Tom Joad, says to his mother, "Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. If Casy knowed, why, I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an' – I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry n'they know supper's ready. An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build – why, I'll be there.

This is not just about one individual, but about an idea, a movement that would be where hopelessness was greatest. In those places where the working folk needed a voice, that would be where Tom Joad could be found.

Think of the Holy Spirit in a similar why. The Spirit is always with us, but it seems that we notice the divine presence in those times of hurt and hopelessness. You can almost hear the Spirit say, where there is injustice, I'll be there. Where love is shared and experienced, I'll be there. Where there is poverty, I'll be there. Where there is a sense of despair, of desperation and of hopelessness, I'll be there. Where the Gospel needs to be shared, I'll be there, for these are all moments when we need to love others as Christ has loved us the most. These are the places where it matters the most that we follow Christ's command. The Spirit will be there, guiding us, comforting us, challenging us and leading us as we continue to follow the path of Jesus. The times we have to clench our teeth and reach out to someone is the time when the Spirit is giving us strength. That time when we have to make a sacrifice for the sake of someone else, the Spirit is with us. The time we find ourselves praying for someone that we in no way want to pray for, the Spirit is with us. The Spirit stays with us, supports us and guides us in all that we do when we are loving the Lord and following his commandment.

"Because I live, you also will live," says our Lord. There will be that day when we will again see Christ, and we will realize that Christ is in God and that Christ is in us, and we will see that all this time, through the leading of the Spirit, we have been walking with Christ. Through the support of the Holy Spirit we will be able to continue to walk in the footsteps of Christ and see Christ. In doing the acts of love, in sharing and showing the love that Christ offers us, we will again see Christ.

It is an awesome task, a profound thing to follow Christ's commandment. Remember that when you do so, you are not alone, and this will give us hope. This will give us assurance and guidance as we strive to follow Christ's one simple rule – love others just as Christ has loved us. Christ leaves us the Holy Spirit, the imminent, ever-present aspect of the Trinitarian God. We are not alone as we work to follow this rule, as we walk with our Lord.

Movement 5 – Separate Paths

What we have is two paths before us. What we have are two options to choose. We can continue to walk with Christ, to love others as Christ has loved us, and rely on the Spirit for the support and strength, or we can let Christ go, return to our lives and live in the world. Two paths to walk, which will you choose?

When we talk about the Holy Spirit, when we talk about living with Christ the world will not understand. When we talk about loving others as we have been loved, when we make this the central focus of our lives the world will not understand.

We need to remember that we have rejected a path of materialism for the path of faith. We need to remember why people will not understand why we give a percentage of our hard earned money to the church for the sake of doing God's work. It will not make sense to the world.

We need to remember when we reach out to the very ones who we are taught to hate and despise by the world and show them love that the world will not understand. We need to remember this when we reach out and show patience, kindness and generosity to those who are labeled enemies. We are showing and sharing Christ's love. The world will not understand.

We need to remember this when we keep our Sundays open for the Lord, when we dedicate more than just a time of worship to the Lord but the whole day, the next day, the next day, and on and on. We are following Christ and living with Christ. The world cannot see him. The world will not understand.

I want to stress this, because it is in the text, it is an explicit warning that Christ gives to us all. Yet it seems that so often Christians are living a faith that the world can understand. It seems that Christians are giving in to what seems "normal." It seems that Christians are finding ways to continue to claim to follow Christ, but is still accepted by the world. The young Christian activist, Shane Claiborne claims that Christianity should seem peculiar to the world, and yet it seems that Christians have found a way to make church as convenient as possible so that individuals would not have to change their life in order to make room for the church. It is so easy to fall to the ways of the world. It is so easy to submit to the seductive siren call of materialism, commercialism and the narcissism that is prevalent in our society. Remember, we are called to take a different path.

As Robert Frost's poem states:

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood
And sorry I could not travel both.
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth*

*The took the other, as just as fair
And having perhaps the better claim
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that, the passing there
Had worn them really about the same.*

*And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no feet had trodden back.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*
- Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken*

As Christians we are faced with two choices, with two roads. Take the road less traveled; take the road, take the path of our Lord.

Movement 6 – The Command of Love – Seeing the Face of God

Remember, we do this because we love the Lord. We are not bound by duty, we are not bound by obligation, but bound by love. We want to keep Christ's commandments, because we want to continue to walk with Christ, to be with Christ and live with Christ. We are not legalistic in our piety but romantic. We show our devotion out of a deep sentimentality, not an obligation. We are not duty bound but bound by love to follow the commandments of the Lord.

Love the Lord. Love the Lord with your heart. Love the Lord with your mind. Love the Lord with your soul, and then share that love with others. Love others just as Christ loves you, and you will see the divine. Share the grace, the mercy and the glory just as Christ has offered and you will see the divine. Live life sharing and showing that love and you will be transformed – you will see God.

Like putting on rose-colored glasses, everything will look different. Put on the glasses of love and everything will look different. Like walking with you head high, not staring at the ground and everything will look different. Open your eyes and love. Open your heart and love, and you will see the Lord.

Love the Lord and you'll want to love others as Christ loves you. Love the Lord and you'll want to walk the path of Christ. Love the Lord and you will look for the Holy Spirit amongst the poor, the suffering, the hurting, the least of our world.

We are sending some of our youth to Colorado for a national Baptist youth gathering, and we are excited and supporting such a trip because they will be surrounded by so many people who love and want to love the Lord, and they will see the divine. We are trying to invite people from the surrounding neighborhoods to our Vacation Bible School so that children can come into a safe and nurturing environment and see and experience the divine love of the Lord. We are going on a mission trip to Kensington because when we are working for others, when we are offering hope to others we are sharing our love and we will see the Lord. C.K. Barrett says that in our relationship with Jesus we find a mutual love that goes from God to Christ to the Holy Spirit, to us and into the world. Claim that love, live that love share that love and you will see the divine.

Christ is leaving but we will not be alone. We will not be on our own without a guide and a focus. We will not be on our own without help and the hand of the divine. Share the love of Christ, show the love of Christ just as Christ has loved you, and you will stay true to the one whom you call Lord.

AMEN