

THE NINE Commandments (*for Healthy Church*)

Brad Julihn

At a recent church Board meeting Kevin Heibner said to me; “*Before you leave I hope you will give us “Brad’s 10 Commandments for doing Church”*”. By that I believe he meant a summary of the keys things I have taught and tried to model about leading a church toward health. Well, I thought that that might a good way to wrap things up here and also a way to thank God for how far He has brought us together the last 2 ¼ years. Except, 10 Commandments is probably too many. Only God gets 10! So, (*trumpet fanfare please*) here are *The Nine Commandments*. Nothing I plan to say today is new. But you never know; you might hear something for the first time.

Commandment #1: “I Need God to Save the Church From Me”:

This could also be the “*I am Frequently Wrong Commandment*”, or the “*I Don’t Know Everything Commandment*”, or the “*Is It the Holy Spirit or Your Pride Directing You Commandment*”. Yes, this is about the need for all of us to walk humbly with one another. But it is more than that too. It is the conviction that human wisdom, opinions, and effort are not enough to build God’s church, or to create a genuinely loving community. If we want proof of that, all we have to do is look at the complete inability of the Jews to keep the Law. The Law was good and perfect but the people were not. They couldn’t keep it and neither can we. Knowing what we should do and actually doing it are two different things.

Jesus gave us “*a new commandment to love one another even as I have loved you.*” But my pride and fears and self-centeredness will find a way to sabotage such love. And the Evil One will do his best to coach us, prod us, and goad us to make the church about “*me and my desires*”. We need an ongoing miracle in this church. We do not just need God to save us from the penalty of sin and from Satan. We need God to save us from ourselves and our best efforts to serve Him and build the church. God’s solution for our sinfulness was not just to forgive us. It was also to save us from our fleshly nature. He didn’t do this by reforming the flesh or telling our flesh to try harder. He did it by crucifying it with Christ and giving us new life through the Spirit. This new life in the Spirit is experienced by trusting the Spirit daily to rule and reign in us.

We need God to save us from deceiving ourselves about how wonderful we are. From thinking that we have figured it out and we know how to do this “church thing”. We are normal people who get hurt and defensive and hard-hearted and

bitter just like everybody else. But the king mercifully intervened here. He has saved us from ourselves, and our opinions and our self-righteousness. And we need to keep trusting Him daily to saving us.

This is Thanksgiving. One of the things we can thank God for today is that although He let this church glimpse the discord, anger, and dissension that the flesh produces. And He has been faithful to save us from ourselves! And the fruit of the Spirit which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control has been the result. Thank God!

Commandment #2: Emotional Maturity and Spiritual Maturity Cannot be Separated:

This could also be called the "*Head Knowledge is Not Enough Commandment*". The worldview under which most of us grew up has come to be called Modernism. It's underlying assumption is that logic and knowledge would lead us ever forward. This rationalistic assumption led to a spirituality that was mostly knowledge based. Theological positions on every detail were supposed to be nailed down so that we were sure of our beliefs. To a large extent, we naively acted as though we could explain the infinite God and His ways. But in attempting to explain God, we reduced "*the One who is past finding out*" to the size of a box we could understand. And spiritual maturity was mostly equated with academic knowledge and degrees. The foolishness and pride of such thinking is astonishing to me now.

Hand in hand with that emphasis on rationalism was a de-emphasis on our emotions. So, a person could be considered a spiritual leader because they graduated from Bible College or Seminary even though they frequently lose their temper with people in the church. You could be a Pastor if you could teach the Bible well, but still be defensive and insecure. There is something incredibly imbalanced about that view of spiritual maturity. Yet most of Christians have no idea about how emotionally maturity is developed and most churches aren't even asking the questions much less providing answers.

I thank God today that many of you have seen the need to understand more fully the needs, fears, hurts and family patterns that have influenced your behavior. You have recognized that Emotional Maturity and Spiritual Maturity cannot be separated.

Commandment #3: Emotional Maturity Begins with Self-Awareness

No one even talked about this when I went to Bible College. Have you ever found

yourself in certain situations thinking “*Why, do I act like that?*” Or “*Why do I re-act like that?*” When we don’t understand our actions or reactions, it is usually because they are being driven at an emotional level often by needs or fears, or pride. My emotional reactions are the clues to what’s going on inside me. Many people are so accustomed to shutting down their emotions that they are hardly even aware they have them.

Start by paying attention to your body. Is your stomach knotted up? Are your hands clenching? A tension headache, teeth grinding, palms becoming sweaty, neck tightening, foot tapping, or insomnia are telling you something. They are telling you how you perceive things in your life. Emotions are just my gut reaction to how I see things in my life. Ask yourself, “*What is my body telling me about my feelings right now?*” Am I anxious, fearful, happy, frustrated, panicked, furious?

Second, if you find yourself having an emotional reaction to something or someone ask yourself;

- 1) What just happened? Or what was it about what just happened that bothers me?
- 2) What am I feeling? Name the feeling! - Fear, rage, frustration, attraction?
- 3) And then the BIG ONE. . . Why am I feeling this way?

The answer to the “WHY” question is not so much about some external objective reason the event affects you. It is more about why does this particular event make me feel threatened? Or Why does this particular action anger me? What button is it pushing in me? Is there a need or fear that is driving my response? Often strong emotional reactions are connected to childhood experiences, or traumatic experiences, or family patterns and expectations for dealing with things.

I have described in detail how my family pattern of high achieving men contributed to a drivenness in my life to succeed. I was trained to succeed. But it became coupled with some traumatic guilt experiences in my life that made me a highly successful potential time bomb as a pastor. It took a divine encounter to make me aware of the guilt that was driving my need to succeed and fear of failure. Please hear the words I am using. We all want to succeed. I still do. But I didn’t just “want” to succeed. I “needed” to succeed. People who threatened my success or approval would have become the enemy. Without that emotional awareness of what was driving my behaviour I would have been a disaster in this church. And for me it took God

healing those memories of guilt to set me free from my driven behaviour.

I thank God today, because I have seen a number of you grow in your awareness of some of the root needs, fears, hurts and family patterns that have driven your behavior. That awareness and in some cases the healing of emotional woundedness is a big step forward in genuine spiritual maturity.

Commandment #4: Don't Try to Shut Down Your Anger

Why? Because anger always comes out! Anger is like steam. If you try to put a lid on it, it will just build up pressure. When we try to control or shut down anger, it just comes out in other ways we can't control. It comes out as depression, or gossip, or passive-aggressiveness, or you transfer your anger to a less threatening object. Or you hold it in, hold it in, hold it in, until you can't hold it anymore, and then you EXPLODE! And usually you explode over a small thing. And your explosion is way out of proportion with the offense. And then you feel guilty for getting so angry, so you shut down and start holding things in again until the next explosion. People who are emotionally healthy learn to pay attention to things that bother them and stay current with their emotions.

Anger always has a "should" in it! "*You should have been on time!*" "*You shouldn't talk to me like that!*" "*You should have told me!*" The reason there is always a "should" in anger is that anger has to do our expectations. We get angry when things aren't the way we think things SHOULD be! But I have a sneaky tendency toward converting my preferences into expectations. I start thinking that the way I want things to be is the way things SHOULD be! The first step in dealing with anger in a healthy way is to check how realistic my expectations are; or whether they are mostly just my preferences. And the next commandment is what you do if you believe your frustration is justified.

Commandment # 5: Learn to Be Gracious and Direct

There is nothing more important, effective, or practical in community building than this. Learn to be gracious and direct with people. Christians do not have a corner on gossip, but our emphasis on loving one another gets easily translated into "*being nice to one another.*" In one sense, we should be nice to one another. But nice is way overrated in the church! I mean that in the sense of smiling and pretending everything is okay when it is not. That is the definition of Pseudo-community. Many of the nicest people in church are depressed people. They are depressed because

they do not feel they can tell people they are frustrated with what they really think. They NEED people to like them, so they are afraid to be gracious and direct.

For most of us, it is hard to say difficult things to other people; especially people we will see again regularly. We instinctively want to avoid it. But anger only dissipates when you direct it at the source; meaning when you speak to the person you are frustrated with. When you don't do that, the steam comes out in ways you can't control! You end up talking to other people who are sympathetic with you about it. And of course, they agree with you. In fact, the more you think about, the madder you get! The anger and frustrations just builds. And it resolves nothing. Gossip is the direct opposite of being gracious and direct. It is ungracious and indirect!

Genuine Community is conflict resolving. Pseudo-community is conflict avoiding.

There are times when it may not be safe to speak to directly to someone about your frustrations with them; and all of us need to learn to listen when people come to us with frustration and concerns. But healthy churches are safe places because you know where you really stand with people. If they have a concern or a problem with you they don't wait until they have 15 things to dump on you all at once. They are people who stay current with their emotions by being gracious and direct with one another.

I thank God today for how this church has grown in its ability to talk to one another and listen to one another and find a path forward together.

Commandment # 6: Use Wisdom Language Not Moral Language Most of The Time.

As Christians, we are more susceptible than most people to look at things through a moral lens. By that I mean to see things as Right or Wrong. And this viewpoint comes out in our language. We talk about making "the right decision" or the "the wrong decision." The problem with such moral language is that it creates very Black and White, Either-Or categories. There is no room for discussion, adjustment, or compromise.

But most decisions in life aren't right or wrong. They range on a spectrum from terrible, to poor, to okay, to fair, to good, to really good. When we speak in this way we are using the language of wisdom. And there is room for conversation together about what might be best. We can even disagree about what is best and still be friends, because you're not wrong or evil because disagree with me. You just see it

from a different perspective.

I thank God today because I see people here being careful in the use of moral language in our conversations. We talk about options and preferences and modifications. We have opened up space to talk about stuff together, instead of judging one another.

Commandment # 7: Thou Shalt Not Call a Vote Unless You have Talked Things Through

Okay, maybe this is a minor commandment, but it is more than a suggestion! I don't know if it comes from American influence, but somehow democracy has been baptized by the Christian Church. Robert's Rules of Order may not have been written by the Apostle Paul; but he would have, if he had thought of them!

I just want you to stop and think about this for a moment. Taking a vote is almost the perfect way to divide people or to divide a church. It has been done many, many times. It is a way to force a decision on people. It frequently creates winners and losers. There may be no better example of this than the vote in the US Senate on confirming Brett Kavanaugh for the Supreme Court. It was rushed through. People made up their minds before they even heard the evidence or the results of the investigation. It was not a conversation to find the best way forward together. It was about powerful people manipulating the system to get their way! There will almost certainly be a backlash in the next few years and the pendulum will swing the other way. At its foundation, democracy and its basic principle of "Majority Rules" is an adversarial system. But it doesn't have to be like that.

Some of the best advice I ever received about leading a church was this: *"Don't have a vote unless you already know the results."* That doesn't mean that you only vote when the results are fixed. It means you don't vote on something until you have talked about it enough to build some consensus about it. If there is no general consensus about something; it is often best to slow down. Look at alternatives and come back to it later. When an issue is really important or controversial, this takes time. But it is rare that our deadlines can't be adjusted. I'm not saying that a few naysayers should control the majority. But if you haven't really listened to their concerns, you may be ahead of Jesus on your agenda. It's okay to take a vote in the church. But it should almost always be a ratification of the conversation we have had together; not just a way to get what we want.

I thank God this Thanksgiving that He has helped us to listen to each other more. In my mind, the ratification vote of Pastor Rob was a great example of this. Every decision has upsides and downsides to it. There was freedom to talk directly with one another about what this decision would mean for them and for us. By the time Doug ask if we were ready to vote; there was not only a readiness to vote, there was also a strong sense what the decision would be.

Commandment # 8: Don't Try to Fake Grace

Christians talk a lot about grace. They sing about grace. They proclaim that it is amazing. But astonishingly few have truly experienced it. I say this based not on what they say in words, but what I see in their actions. Knowing grace is a whole different thing from knowing about grace. And the evidence that you know grace in your life is always Graciousness! To put it another way, Graciousness Is the Exclusive Fruit of Knowing Grace. Paul's prayer for the Ephesians says it this way:

I pray that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to KNOW this love that surpasses knowledge (knowing) that you may be filled to the measure of the fullness of God. Eph. 3: 17-19

The Greek word for "know" here means an experiential knowing. Those who "KNOW" the darkness and hardness and self-centeredness of their hearts and have experienced God's unreserved acceptance of them find themselves looking at people and their world differently. Rather than looking down at people who do not measure up to our high standards, we see others as fellow travelers on the road in need of mercy just like us. Their sin may be more obvious than ours, but none of us have anything to boast in. We are often tempted to think that God grades on a curve. We subtly think that there must be something in us that deserved God's mercy just a little more. We act as though while everyone is a sinner, God chose us because we were the best of the worst! That is a load of cow hooey! It is legalism trying to wear the clothes of grace. And the proof that we are trying to fake grace, that we think there we are just a little better than others, is criticalness, judgmentalism, and the absence of graciousness.

I thank God today, that I see a deeper understanding and appreciation for God's mercy in our lives. I see it not only in the greater humility I see in people's lives; but also in the graciousness with which we seek to treat one another. This is evidence of God at work here and I thank Him for it.

Commandment #9: God Works Through Your Weakness, not Your Strength.

2 Corinthians 12 is a pivotal passage in my life and my understanding of how God works in and through people and churches. In it, Paul describes some of the reasons he had to boast in his spiritual prowess. It even included the experience of being caught up to heaven and hearing God talk about things that he was not permitted to repeat to others. If anybody had reason to think he was special in God's eyes, it was Paul.

But then something strange happens. He is given a thorn in the flesh, a messenger from Satan, to keep him from becoming too big for his britches because of that experience of revelation. So Paul decided to pray. Actually he says to plead with God to take it away. If anyone had pull with God to pray for healing it was Paul. And God answers him. But the answer is a paradox! It is something that on the surface makes no sense; but in reality is a key to understanding how God operates. God says; *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*

Evidently God is not looking for my power and abilities the way everyone else seems to be. We are constantly trying to show our strengths and abilities to others. And if we are Christians, we pray for God to strengthen us; which usually means give us a boost so our strengths are even more evident. But all that tends to do is glorify us, not reveal God and His greatness to others. No, what God wants to do is show His all-surpassing powers in clay jars, so that people will see it is Him and not us. That is why His power is made perfect in weakness. So Paul says, *"I'm gonna boast in my weakness so that the power of Christ will rest on me, because when I am weak, that is when I am actually strong."*

This paradox is a core operating principle for me. The secret to success and blessing in God's kingdom is not how wonderful we are, but how wonderful He is. My challenge is not to try harder so that I can deserve His blessing and empowerment in life and ministry – that is legalism in spiritual clothes all over again. No, as Paul says, I boast in my weakness so that the power of Christ might rest on me. My prayer life is substantially a boasting session with God. I tell him how unloving, hard-hearted, selfish and superficial I am. I boast in my inability to pastor this church, or be the loving husband I should be. I brag about the fact that I haven't got any deep insight to His Word, so unless He opens my eyes, speaks into my brain; there will be nothing of substance to feed His sheep. *"And oh by the way God, have you noticed how impatient I am with all the other drivers on the highway!"*

The part of the miracle here that you probably don't fully understand is that God didn't send you a good transitional pastor who knew exactly what was needed and when; and who pulled it off in his usually insightful fashion. No, He took a rookie transitional pastor, with modest gifts, who lives almost an hour away. He took a man with minimal insight, limited strength, and a propensity for seeking the praise of men rather than the praise of God. And God said, *"Now, do you want to see a miracle. Watch what I can do even with this guy!"*

I thank God this Thanksgiving Sunday, that God still delights to use the weak to shame the strong, the foolish to shame the wise, the things that are not to shame the things that are; so that no one may boast before Him. 1 Cor. 1:29 And that is why I boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ might rest on me.