

Todd's Original Version: December 6, 2020

SLIDE 1

Good morning. (A few introductory words.)

I wish I could have shared these words right after David's lesson two weeks ago. His teaching regarding obedience was a perfect lead-in to my lesson, which I feel centers on our church family maturing in Christ together. Many of David's scripture references were from Deuteronomy. He shared many examples of Moses encouraging the Israelites to remember God's words and obey when they enter the promised land. God introduced his chosen people to MANY commands to obey as they wandered in the desert. As I was thinking through all those commands to remember, Galatians 5:14 came to mind. "For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: **'Love your neighbor as yourself.'**" How simple (or maybe difficult) is that command? This morning we will consider our worship together in light of this command.

SLIDE 2

Over the past year, the elders of this church family have spent a lot of time together. Matt's illness quickly followed by the pandemic have brought us together to make the necessary plans to triage the current situation. A wonderful byproduct has been many hours learning about one another and sharing our experiences and observations as members of this church family-*our* church family. Collectively your elders represent about 150 years of walking with God here. It quickly became apparent that, like many of you, our lives and those of our family members have been impacted in so many positive ways it is impossible to remember them all. On the other hand, it is not difficult to recall a number of frustrations and challenges. We have struggled with the possibility that we are only a shadow of the powerful light God desires for us.

SLIDE 3

What brings out the God-honoring best in our church family? What prompts our glimpses of the power God intends to provide a church pursuing obedience, holiness, love for God and others? We discussed these questions for hours and prayed for God to provide answers. Over time, God has put a few things on our collective hearts. You heard from Dale regarding our individual pursuit of holiness-offering ourselves as slaves to righteousness. And David's message on obedience. By the first of the year you will hear from Sam and Marcus on selected topics as well.

SLIDE 4

Let's take a moment now to consider **Jesus' Great Commission**. Matthew 28: 18-20 reads "Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." These are among Jesus' parting words to the eleven apostles he was leaving behind with the charge of spreading all the things they had seen and heard over the previous three years; thus establishing the church. The book of Acts then shares how the gospel quickly spread with many of the disciples traveling and evangelizing the whole region. I believe this initial plan to spread the Good News has strongly shaped our view of the role we play in bringing others to Christ. I know it has for me. Evangelism has dominated my thoughts of leading folks to Christ, and I have been mostly paralyzed by my inadequacy as an evangelist. Maybe a lack of giftedness. I have been for years conflicted, and paralyzed and troubled by my shortcomings in bringing people to Christ.

SLIDE 5

It is only recently that God has brought my attention to the importance of the phrase **“and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”** Over the years, we have placed more emphasis on baptism than obedience. The result is too many Christians of weak faith and testimony resulting in immature believers which then leads to fewer and fewer expressing their faith in baptism. Now David has already shared with you that obedience leads to righteousness and disobedience leads to death. We also need to see the critical role of obedience as a Christian’s matures in the faith. This maturing faith has a powerful impact on our non-believing friends, family, neighbors, co-workers and community. **Brothers and sisters our personal growth in Christian maturity is the light which exposes non-believers to the power of the gospel of Christ!** Our individual maturing process AND the unity of this body of believers that results from us allowing The Spirit to bind us together through our collective maturing processes. Our growth through obedience, and the strong Christian testimony that results is our vehicle to begin the conversation! **SLIDE 6**

Brothers and sisters, more than a year ago on the 24th of November, we shared with our church family a desire for more fruit resulting from our collective walk with Christ. There is no doubt Northeast and Holland Park have produced fruit for the kingdom of Christ over the years, but your elders feel God sharing that he has gifted us for so much more. In John 15:8 Jesus says “This is to my father’s glory, that you bear *much fruit* showing yourselves to be my disciples.” Why have so many of us felt ineffective and unproductive in our faith? I am sure there are several reasons. We probably have not had our eyes opened to all of them, but we are sharing with you the things God has drawn our attention to at this time. **SLIDE 7** 2 Peter 1:5-8 reads ⁵For this very

reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; ⁶and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; ⁷and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. ⁸**For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

SLIDE 8

Let me share with you our elder experience of leading this church through a once-in-many-lifetimes pandemic. COVID came on us quickly in the spring of this year. Our governing authorities, who Romans 13:1 says we should respect as established by God, asked our community to stay home except in essential situations. Everything except essential businesses was shut down and we stopped meeting in person for what ended up being ten weeks. We quickly established a way to worship together online and did so for the entire ten weeks. The whole time your elders were meeting to pray for our church and discern how to best return to worshipping together. This was our priority. We had many uncomfortable discussions as we reconciled our differing perspectives. At the end of May we returned to worship together. We made every effort to provide a safe place to worship; reduced capacity, spreading out chairs, extra cleaning, modifying how we take communion together, installing technology with an ability to disable viruses, and many other steps. Multiple services were needed to keep occupancy low. We decided to take that opportunity to offer a face covering required service and a face covering optional service. **We did this because we know our church family well.** We have maintained that arrangement for approaching seven months. Thankfully, we are not aware of one case of the virus being spread during worship or our occasional outdoor gatherings together. We feel extraordinarily blessed that our priority of

worshipping together has been honored by God. This is not to say that we are to be careless, to test God – In fact Christ points out when he was tempted in the desert that we are not to do that. We want our congregation and our visitors, especially those most vulnerable, to be safe. And we want to show our neighbors that we care about them as well.

So, what have we seen during this time? We have certainly observed many of our church family faithfully worshipping, loving others and serving in any way possible. That has encouraged your elders. We have also seen differing perspectives driving us apart from one another. Like the poem Matt read to us recently, it seems that some of us think fences make my church family tolerable. We have been asked since day one “When are we going to stop being afraid and get rid of the masks so we can worship together again?” and “When are you going to require everybody to wear a mask so we can safely worship together?” Folks are pushing for the elders to make a **ruling** that supports their view. Now keep in mind, the mask issue isn’t one of community law or Biblical principle, simply personal views backed by whatever evidence makes sense to that individual. In our view, Christian maturity should be taking over. What does that look like? Maybe thoughts should occur to us like What is best for my brother? Am I willing to give up what I want for the sake of the body? In 1 Corinthians 10:24 Paul says “No one should seek their own good but the good of others.” We offered sermons and a class on **peacemaking** earlier this year. **We have tried to equip Biblical peacemakers.** The training taught the following:

- **SLIDE 9** We all have tension
- **SLIDE 10** Tension can be healthy
- Tension can be unhealthy

- **SLIDE 11** Discover your **STORY** and stretch your perspective -LISTEN FIRST
- Go back to your Biblical core values-**ASCEND**
- Take personal responsibility-**REFLECT**
- Make & carry out your plan-**CONNECT**

We saw this teaching as foundational for Christians in these controversial and difficult times.

SLIDE 12

Did anything change as a result of this teaching? Not much. Why? **This church family does not exhibit widespread spiritual maturity.** This isn't a recent development. The Creator has blessed this church family with the incredible gift of diversity. **But instead of a gift that reveals us as children of light, it's a never-ending challenge.** Facebook lays bare all our opinions for the world to see. And instead of raising concerns as a brother or sister in Christ, we assume the worst and judge the person we worship with week in and week out. **SLIDE 13** James 1:22-25 says "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.²³ Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror²⁴ and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.²⁵ But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom and continues in it—**not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.**" We have many knowers of the Bible who realize deep inside I am supposed to go talk to that person with the peacemaking process as a guide. But we don't have many **doers** who obey.

SLIDE 14

James 5: 9 Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged.

Colossians 3:13 Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

1 Corinthians 13:4-5 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

Ephesians 4:3 Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Too often we read, study and profess scriptures such as these only to walk away and not do what it says. We **have** experienced a few notable exceptions. Several deacons and other members gather early Sunday mornings to discuss race issues. They wanted to understand the issue more thoroughly and did something about it. Also, as I mentioned earlier, your shepherds have spent hours with one another wanting to **understand**, more so than wanting to be **understood**. And we sought an outside resource in Buddy Jones to do our very best to **understand**. In these examples, obedience is leading to spiritual maturity...and fruit.

SLIDE 15

Today I am here to share your shepherds' belief that our church family harbors an unhealthy focus on rules-especially rules governing our worship together. **We have grown too comfortable coexisting on opposite sides of issues.** The issues we struggle

with are always man-made rules; not the truth of the Gospel. Our belief is this renders our church family ineffective and unproductive in our faith. Specifically, we have traditions that have evolved into rules restricting the use of musical instruments and women's participation in our worship time together. We see these rules as unhealthy as they separate us from one another leading to criticism, judgement and faultfinding. **It is our decision to end these rules.** And, do our very best not to add new ones.

SLIDE 16

Let me begin by saying we believe these traditions had well-intended origins which we still value. Previous elderships have expressed support for acapella singing as “a beautiful form of music as it **encourages all Christians to participate** in praising God and encouraging each other. The words are clearly heard, and expression of the heart easily demonstrated.” We still believe this to be true. Also, the elders of Holland Park believe that God has placed upon men the responsibility for leading the local churches. If anything, as the world changes around us, we feel an increasing fondness and connection with these traditions. However, the conversion of well-intended practices to binding rules can build a reputation for what we are against as opposed to our message of hope in Jesus Christ. **We have freedom in Christ and it needs to show in our lives and in our worship.**

SLIDE 17

Let's go to Mark chapter 7 and take a look at an example of religious folks' attention being drawn away from important things. “The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus ²and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. ³(The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding

to the tradition of the elders. ⁴When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.) ⁵So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?” ⁶He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:

**“These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.**

**⁷They worship me in vain;
their teachings are merely human rules.’**

⁸You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.”

The Pharisees’ were renowned for their knowledge of the scriptures. They became “knowers of the word, but not doers of the word.” In fact, Jesus quoted Isaiah’s words “their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain. Their teachings are merely human rules.” Why does this happen? How do human traditions morph into rules? How do rules cause us to “let go of the commands of God and hold on to human traditions?” **SLIDE 18** **Rules place the focus on ME.** Our position and how we are being wronged. We then become focused on righting that wrong by taking matters into our own hands. Protesting. Circumventing. Agitating. Or even leaving and finding a place where the rules are more to our liking. Where then is the fruit of the Spirit? Suppressed until it shrivels. Where are our brothers and sisters? Forgotten as our mind fills with more and more conviction for or against the rules.

Acts 15 is an instance where early Christian leaders avoided the temptation of rulemaking. Beginning with verse 1... "Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: Unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." The believers sent messengers to Jerusalem to ask the apostles and elders for a ruling on circumcision. The answer they received was "You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You would do good to avoid these things." I have two observations about the apostles and elders reply.

1. You'll note there was no reply to the request for a rule about circumcision.
2. You will also note Paul later says in 1 Corinthians 10 it is okay to eat the meat sacrificed to an idol that is sold in the marketplace.

Where is the absolute from the elders? Jesus' brother James said "we should not make it difficult for Gentiles who are turning to God."

Please pause right now and listen closely to me church family. We as elders **do not** see our church family as modern day pharisees. We have, however, seen glimpses of how the evolution of human traditions to rules can derail our obedience of the commands of God and reduce our focus on **his** priorities. We can easily be so distracted by a perceived breach of rules that we miss the opportunity to worship and praise our creator and draw close to our fellow believers.

SLIDE 19

A year ago the elders addressed this family on a Sunday night and I shared this picture with you. We shared with you-and we are convinced-this minimal fruit does not result

from our collective lack of giftedness or lack of knowledge of the scriptures. Our minds are too often drawn toward an unhealthy administration of the rights and wrongs of following Christ. **And generally, those observations are directed at others.** Jesus said the religious leaders often strained a gnat but swallowed a camel. Brothers and sisters, we have swallowed our share of camels. I believe reading Ephesians 5 is an example. Let's read selections from this chapter together.

SLIDE 20

5 ¹ Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children ² and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

³ But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. ⁴ Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. ⁵ For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

Continuing in verse 8... ⁸ For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light ⁹ (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) ¹⁰ and find out what pleases the Lord.

Moving to verse 15... ¹⁵ Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, ¹⁶ making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. ¹⁸ Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ speaking to one another with

psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. **Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord,**²⁰ always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

There's a lot of challenging, great stuff there about living as children of light. Brothers and sisters, when we can read this scripture and take away from it an absolute rule that musical instruments are forbidden, it is our judgement that **for this church family** we are straining a gnat only to swallow the camel that leads to disunity.

Now I would like to speak for a moment about the role of women and their giftedness in our church family. Over the years we have felt an urging to enjoy the gifts of our daughters, moms, wives and sisters as we worship together. Many churches struggle with this issue, and we have too. In my conversations on this topic with various members here, 1 Timothy 2: 11-12 often surfaces as a restriction-or rule. Paul sent this letter to Timothy as he was ministering to the church in Ephesus. This passage reads “¹¹A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. ¹²I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.” Sounds pretty clear.

SLIDE 21

I want to give you three things to think about and study on your own.

1. The city of Ephesus was famous for its goddess Artemis. The city was filled with images and idols of Artemis and the Temple of Artemis was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The temple of Artemis was massive, and her cult-run entirely by female officials-was the religious center of the whole area. Many in the city made their livings off this idol. This is the setting where Paul sent

Timothy to re-establish the gospel message the Ephesians had originally heard from Paul himself.

2. Consider 1 Cor 11: 4- 6 ⁴Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. ⁵**But every woman who prays or prophesies** with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is the same as having her head shaved. ⁶For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off; but if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should cover her head.” This clearly shows that women would need to speak to be able to prophesy. David Lunsford shared a lesson on this topic with you a couple of years ago.
3. Let’s look at another clear statement from Paul. A selection of verses in Galatians 5 read “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. ²Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. ⁶For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. ¹²As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!” Seems pretty clear that Paul sees circumcision as unnecessary for the gentile believers. Until, that is, you read from Acts chapter 16. “Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek. ²The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. ³Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, **so he circumcised him** because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.” Paul circumcised Timothy even though he railed against those who **wanted a ruling** that gentile Christians be circumcised! Paul clearly

said circumcision is unnecessary and then did it anyway. What gives? How do you think Timothy felt? What did Timothy do? **He obeyed Paul's wish despite what could have been viewed as contradiction.**

SLIDE 22

There is a *greater truth* at work in everything Paul did. 1 Corinthians 9: 19-23 reads ¹⁹Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. ²⁰To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. ²¹To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. ²²To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. **I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.** ²³I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.”
Paul prioritized creating a setting where the Gospel wasn't drowned out by issues.

SLIDE 23

Let me again be clear brothers and sisters. This eldership believes the Bible emphasizes the need for male leadership. We believe you will see this in the way we lead and the decisions we make. But we don't believe male leadership is established by suppressing the giftedness of women. We don't practice it in the homes we lead so why should we do it in the Church we lead? We believe for male leadership to flourish, everyone—men, women and children alike must experience the **freedom in Christ** to stretch to the full potential of their God given gifts. Men are leading effectively when **everyone** is fully maturing in Christ.

SLIDES 24, 25 & 26 WALK THROUGH THEM AT MY DIRECTION.

So church, what are our expectations going forward?

SLIDE 27

We know God has provided everything needed for Holland Park Church to produce MUCH fruit! But we must alter practices in our current context that cause us to be ineffective and unproductive in our belief. **God has put on our hearts where our obedience as a church family begins. We must embrace each other as fellow believers first and foremost.** Not simply embrace but allow the Holy Spirit to supernaturally bond us with a unity that is confounding to the world around us. We must make every effort to be peacemakers-share meals, ask questions, listen, learn about one another's roots, and for those who are daring, exhibit some transparency about the hurts and failures we've experienced in our lives. Trust one another enough to offer the benefit of the doubt. Your elders are confident as we grow in obedience, we will produce much fruit-making disciples and baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. And all of us will then teach them to obey.

Church family, what I am sharing with you today doesn't mean that we will have a band on stage next Sunday or that we will have an all-woman sermon next week. What it does mean is that you may occasionally see something different than you are used to seeing. And even if it makes you a little uncomfortable for a short time, can you offer the grace and maturity to see that maybe this is helping someone else have a more meaningful worship experience? Can we use these times as an opportunity to grow?

Now-if your takeaway is concerning instruments in worship or that a sister may occasionally pray or give a communion thought, I would encourage you to reassess what

you have heard this morning. Maybe go back and listen to the recording. My transcript here is available if you want it. Our decisions are about the growth in Christian maturity of this church family. This is about you. Me. Us. And our behaviors. As Bob Goff says, this is about “becoming love in a world full of setbacks and difficult people.” This is about setting an example for our children and friends and neighbors. This is about walking the path God has laid out for this group right here. After Jesus revealed to Peter his fate as a believer, Peter asked “What about him (John)? Jesus said “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is it to you? You must FOLLOW ME.” God has gifted Holland Park Church prominence in location and a make-up that reflects the diversity of our community. These are significant gifts and to those he has given much-**he expects much**. We are to be a light. And that light must shine brightly.

We ask that you hold us accountable to our belief that rulings are a last resort. Rules draw lines. Too often we end up on opposite sides of these lines and they become dividing lines. **Removing these rules of worship is a step we do not take lightly**. This change will be difficult for many of us-including the elders. Collectively, your elders have over 250 years worshipping with these traditions. Making this change is hard for us too. We have expressed to the staff these changes must be done with **authenticity and excellence**. Brothers and sisters, our history with you gives us great confidence that you will embrace our imperfect decisions to the glory of God the Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Also, we want you to know we do believe in absolute truths, but too often we want our own preferences and traditions to be absolute truth, and that cannot be the case. We will not alter the gospel. We will not waiver on forgiveness that comes from the resurrection of Jesus.

I will leave you with this. Jeff Payne asked me to read a book by Todd Wagner titled Come and See. Todd writes “God’s Word is not full of God’s rules; it is full of His love and plan to rescue, redeem, and reengage with us. History is His story of pursuing us and making us His prize-a prize that is both beautiful and admired by the watching world.”

To quote my sister Francie Koenig; “Let us make it so church family.” Thank you.