

# Days<sup>of</sup> Hope

*Passionately communicating the love of God to hurting kids in a gentle way*

## *The Commandments Are Not the Point*

By Skyler Martin

"All these commandments I have kept since my youth."

Perhaps this is the silent motto of some of us who have grown up in religion. Sure, we've had our ups and downs. Just as this rich Jewish ruler had done the "Jewish" thing and kept Torah, we have done the "Christian" thing, making it to church on Sundays and refraining from the appearance of evil. We, like this young rich man, have become well acquainted with the letter of our law and have learned to keep it as a constant measurement of our personal spiritual growth. We've compiled the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, the exhortations throughout the epistles, and the wisdom of Proverbs into a long mental checklist by which we measure what we should or shouldn't do.

Like this man, we come to the Father, eager for eternal life. We carry with us the commandments we've kept and maybe even our financial successes as tokens of our maturity and worthiness. One would think that at this point in the story, Jesus might say something like, 'Wonderful! You've kept the law, you will certainly have eternal life.' At least He might affirm the man's piety and holiness. Instead, Jesus pokes a hole in the holiness and success that comprises this young man's ego:

"You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

Didn't Jesus just say that for this man to have eternal life he must keep the law?! Yet now that he has done it, it's not enough! Jesus now calls the man beyond simple commands and asks him to give up all of himself for the sake of others. This is just too much. The rich young ruler walks away. Keeping rules is one thing, but giving yourself up entirely, that seems impossible.

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# *I am Not Who I Was*

By Jon Wells



Our boy's service last Friday started out like any other service. I had the sound system and computer set up, the PowerPoint image was up on the screen. For this particular service we had a group of the younger boys show up, kids ranging from eight to twelve years of age. When I share a message with any residential population, I don't get into complicated three-point sermons with deep theological twists and turns. I have learned that it is best to make a single point and stick with it. If the child can walk away with a simple understanding from just one verse, that is a win. Last Friday we were unpacking a familiar verse from II Corinthians chapter five.

<sup>17</sup> *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!* <sup>18</sup> *All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ . . .*

The concept is simple and profound at the same time. Thanks to the work of Christ in my life, *I am not who I was*. This ability to leave the old behind and embrace the new is a core part of the gospel message. The kids we minister to carry the baggage of abuse and neglect everywhere they go. In addition to the multitude of wounds they carry, they also engage in behavior so damaging that they are unable to move past it. They often attach their identity to these broken choices. The dead weight of abuse compounded with their own mistakes makes it almost impossible for them to steer a healthy course in life. So often the young men in the chapel live their lives like a broken record, reverting back to the same patterns over and over again.

As I moved through our service on Friday, I shared our core concept in multiple ways. *I'm not who I was*. This discover that the broken choices of my past are not permanently fastened to me. I may have many mistakes in my journey, but *I am not who I was*... As I unpacked the idea, I shared a Brandon Heath song with the boys, and invited them to discuss ways in which God is inviting change in their lives. We watched some videos from popular 'makeover' shows on television. We discussed the difference between surface changes and deeper kinds of transformation. We talked about specific applications of this concept.

In the end I invited the boys to join me in an honest conversation with God about my desire to see God bring the 'New Creation' to my own life. When I gave the boys an opportunity to respond, 100% of them responded. We closed our time together in prayer. As I cleaned up the chapel that night, I couldn't help but ponder the implications of the time I had spent with these little guys.

You see, many (if not most) of the little boys who land in residential treatment have suffered some form of sexual abuse. These kids often re-enact their own abuse, engaging in sexual behaviors with other children. In so doing they earn for themselves a new label- 'perpetrator.' You can imagine the burden they must be carrying; the weight of the molestation combined with the self-hatred and shame of their own subsequent choices.

It is common for a young boy in this scenario to have difficulty with urination and defecation. Some clinicians identify these struggles as 'control issues.' Others have discussed a natural bodily connection between being sodomized and defecation. I won't attempt to unpack reasons why; suffice it to say that little boys who have been molested have a lot of 'bathroom issues.' They wet the bed. They collect and hide their own excrement.

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*Commandments continued . . .*

The hang-up seems to be that the man sees God's law as a checklist, rather than a catapult to the Father's very heart. The great commandments, teachings, and exhortations in scripture aren't meant for our mastering! They aren't a giant checklist that we have to complete in order to enter God's dwelling place. They are instead meant to point us to something much deeper; our neediness and our failure as those who are entirely dependent on God's intervention to save us, to keep us, and to transform us.



Though this rich young ruler had checked through the list of God's laws, he had refused to go where the laws were trying to carry him; instead making these requirements the focus of his religious devotion. Not only this, but he had banked on his financial success to demonstrate his responsible and devout nature. So instead of recognizing his inability to perfectly keep the law and his true inward poverty, the man clings to his own success at keeping the commandments and his financial situation as a kind of culmination of his religious life. He can't accept that the end of God's commandments is the realization that we could never keep them perfectly. Only by our participation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus can we be who God meant for us to be. Righteousness and fellowship with God are not levels of Christian maturity that we attain, but are the gifts of God to us, because of His work on our behalf.

In residential, I meet kids who have been raised in religious homes. It's interesting to see what little peace their spirituality has provided them in the most difficult circumstances of their lives. More often than not, the Christianity they've been trained in is a matter of mastering the long list. Some of them will even let me know that they don't celebrate Halloween or watch certain movies. As God's people, we've ignored the spirit of the law in order to adhere to the letter of the law. More than that, we've also communicated to the most vulnerable among us that this is somehow the work of Christian spirituality. It's shocking to some of those same young people to discover that I am not very concerned about what they don't do or how 'good' they are. From my own failures as a Christian, I've come to see that these are not necessarily the signs of maturity, but can strangely even be the signs of a religious, constructed false self; a false self that wants to prove its worthiness rather than simply receive the grace given by God in Christ.

Perhaps the most pressing thing to acknowledge is that we, along with the rest of the human race, have fallen short of the glory of God. Our vices have not kept us from God and our virtues have not brought us closer to Him. Paradoxically, our sinful, broken condition makes us perfect candidates for the free and healing work of Christ the Physician who did not come for the healthy but for the sick (Luke 5:31). Indeed, Christ is not calling the righteous who are perfectly (under the illusion of) keeping the law, but sinners who see how impossible their situation is.

Whether ministering to a local congregation, small group, or in a cottage, somehow we must remember that we are not calling people to keep rules but to participate in the redeeming work of Christ, who by grace brings us into the eternal fellowship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All of us; pastors, residential kids, businessmen, addicts, rich, poor - were once dead in our trespasses but have been made alive, together with Christ.

It is by grace, that we have been saved (Ephesians 2).



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*I'm not Who Was Continued . . .*

I remember one little guy in particular who had a habit of throwing and sticking his own feces to the ceiling. The staff in that cottage has zero appreciation for that unusual habit. It's not much fun to climb up on a ladder with cleaning supplies, trying to disinfect the ceiling for the eighth time. Sometimes those little stalactites fall without warning!

Over the years I have learned that these boys have very little insight into their struggles. Many of them fail to even connect their secret 'bathroom problem' with the original abuse at all! Nonetheless, there are scores of these little guys fighting a vicious battle with some strange and intractable habits.

You will have to forgive me; I wonder if such things are better off left unwritten. I hesitate to share much of this. I wonder if it needs to be shared at all, but this of one of those bizarre realities that play out every day in residential programs all across the country. And it is exactly the peculiar nature of this kind of struggle that has me scratching my head on Friday night. You see, I had a room full of little guys praying with me. If their prayers could only be heard, I am sure they would have included a few of these:

*"Dear God, I am not who I was. Help me to stop wetting the bed every night."*

*"Help me to stop peeing in the dresser drawers . . ."*

*"I don't want to be known as the kid who hides my poo in the closet . . ."*

I can only imagine the specific applications that these boys were wrestling through. I found myself wondering, *is this the gospel?* What must God think of such things? It did not take long for me to come to a humbling conclusion. I don't think there is much daylight between the struggles I experience and these little boys. No, I don't stick my poo to the ceiling. But I am fooling myself if I think I am somehow better than they are because my struggles are more sophisticated. Am I tempted to look down on them because my sin is less bizarre?

No, friends, the heart of the Gospel is rescue; rescue from the ravages of sin, whatever the form. However it plays out in a life, it is a beautiful thing to see someone embrace the reality of that verse that Paul penned centuries ago. *Old things have passed away, all things have become new.*