

“kNOw Fear—Fear of Commitment”

Last week we started this series on fear called, “kNOw Fear; Facing Life’s Phobias.” We talked about how fear is a part of life--there are times when we will have fear. We talked about how God’s desire is that we would not be paralyzed by fear, but mobilized by it. God’s desire is not that we would be enslaved by fear, but that we would harness it in appropriate ways to help us avoid potholes and traps in life.

The truth is, we’d rather bail out than blast through. We’d rather leave than last. We’d rather throw in the towel than stay in the game. It is so easy to waver and waffle and take the path of least resistance, isn’t it? Why? Why? Because we fear this ten-letter word that reeks of accountability, integrity, and discipline. Commitment. Our culture is so characterized by a lack of, or a fear of commitment. From month to month apartment leases, to pre-nuptial agreements in marriage. From playing career hopscotch to escape clauses in contracts. “I don’t want to be hemmed in.” “I don’t want to be stifled or handcuffed.” “I want to keep my options open.” Commitment.

Commitment means to say what you’re going to do, sticking to it, and following through to the end. And I want to tell you something—if you invest in commitment, the returns will be awesome. They will be unbelievable.

Speaking of commitment, I truly respect my in-laws. They have been Chiefs football fans since day one. They have seen the Chiefs at their best and at their worst, which may have been that playoff game, and they have never wavered in their commitment as fans. They’ve sat in the rain and snow at games. They’ve watched winning seasons and terrible, ugly losing seasons. And through it all, while some people booed and gave up, they’ve hung in there. They haven’t always been happy about the team, or a coach, or some of the players. But they have hung in there. That’s commitment, to a football team. They’ve said they were going to be fans, they’ve stuck to it, and they’re following through in the good times and the bad. They would probably tell you that they’ve seen fair-weather, fickle fans come and go. People who lack commitment--but they’ve stayed.

So why do we struggle with commitment? Why do we fear it? One reason we fear commitment is because so many of us have been rejected. We have put our heart and soul into something, and we have had it trashed. We are afraid to put it out there again. Others of us have had an authority figure, maybe a parent or a teacher or a coach, commit to us, to say that they were going to show up— maybe take us to the game or fishing or shopping or whatever—but they don’t keep what they said they were going to do. And we fear it.

Others of us fear commitment because we have broken so many commitments ourselves. We think, “Why even think about it, why even talk about it, why even go through with it.” All those things lead to a fear of commitment.

Well, the Bible comes along and says this in Psalm 37, **“Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun” (Psalm 37:5-6, NIV)**. There’s an awesome promise in here, when we make a commitment to God, it brings righteousness. What is righteousness? **To be righteous means to have a right relationship with God and with others.** Commitment is so valuable because it leads to a right relationship with God and with others. And when you have that, you really have everything! The flip side is also true. Without commitment you can’t have a right relationship with God and with others.

So today I want us to have a crash course on commitment; to face this fear that so many of us have. I want to talk to you about some ways we can face our fear of commitment with God’s help, with God’s power and reap some pretty amazing results, some incredible returns on this investment.

Now the first area I want to talk about concerning commitment has to do with the marriage and family dynamic. And here is what we need to do if we are really going to be committed in this realm. We have got to be willing to shift into four-wheel drive. We have got to be willing, if we are going to be truly committed in a marriage or in a family situation or a blended family, we have got to be willing to shift into four-wheel drive.

I drive a small SUV that has four-wheel drive. I don't use it very often but I have now and then and it has really been awesome, like when it snowed last month. I like it because I know if I get into a sticky or slippery situation, snow, mud, gravel, I can shift it into four-wheel drive.

Marriage is wonderful. I'd even go so far as to say that marriage is the most important earthly relationship we will ever have. For Christ-followers marriage is the norm, and singleness is a very high calling, a special calling, that the church affirms. But marriage is the norm and the most important earthly relationship we will ever have. But even the best marriages have their bad moments. If you get married, you will have those off-road moments, those losing control, getting stuck, off-road moments.

I am talking about when you hit a point and you have got a problem and suddenly you veer off the smooth freeway and you find yourself in some unstable territory. In a relationship, a marriage, when that happens you kick it into four-wheel drive. Mud is slinging, you are burning up fuel. And this is a good thing because, if you are committed, totally committed, you've said what you're going to do, you're sticking to it and following through to the end, you will go through this off-road situation, this barrier. You will bust through it and when you bust through it, it will build deeper levels of commitment, of love, of compassion and intimacy and discipline and vision like you have never known before.

But here is the problem: Today, most husbands and wives when they hit some off-road, four-wheel drive stuff, when it gets to be a little bit dicey, when the tail of the vehicle kind of starts spinning and you begin to freak a little bit, most people just bail out. They ditch the car. They say, "You know what? I'm going to go into another relationship, get into another marriage." But little do they realize that just down the road they are going to hit some more off-road stuff in that marriage. Then they will go into another marriage and another marriage. They play the game called relational hopscotch.

What separates great marriages from mediocre marriages, and failing marriages are when a husband and wife are willing to kick it into four-wheel drive burn up some fuel and to crash through the tough stuff. You expend the extra effort and energy because it is worth it when you do it God's way. And sometimes you got to call in for help. Somebody else, Christian counselor, a trusted friend, who will help pull you out of the mess.

Commitment in marriage means you bail out when you hit the off-road stuff, it means you expend the extra effort, time, money. You kick it into four wheel drive and get back on track. And the payoff is huge!

The family relationship is also a four-wheel drive thing. Moms and Dads these days say, "We want kids who are committed, kids who say what they're going to do, who stick to it and follow through to the end. That's what we want." And they say that, yet they don't model it. They say that, yet they let a couple of raindrops or sunshine outside keep them from church. And they expect their children to be committed! Children scoop up commitment cues from you and from me. They are taking it all in and they are watching you and watching me. We are always on stage. Always.

Commitment to family means being committed, parents or single parents, to spending quantity and quality time with your children. You see quality time emerges from quantity time. Make sure that you are committed to quality conversation. Listen to them. Make eye contact with them. If you listen to them when they are five, it increases the likelihood that they'll talk to you when they are fifteen and twenty-five.

Make sure, Moms and Dads, you're committed to introducing your kids to an intimate and vibrant relationship with the Lord, Jesus Christ. Teach them how to pray. Teach them how to read the Bible. And if you don't know how yet, learn with them. And make sure you have them in church. Make sure when we offer age-appropriate teaching for the preschoolers, and the children, and the students that you have them here.

"But, Aaron, you don't know what they say to me." Oh, yes I do. They say this. "I don't want to go. None of my friends will be up there." That's probably a good thing! "It is not really my style." Parents, you're hitting a four-wheel drive stretch. I am going to ask you a basic question. Who is driving anyway? Are you driving or have you given them the keys? Too many parents have given away the keys.

Parents, I don't know how I can say this any better or clearer. If you are not taking advantage of what this church has to offer, good luck with all that! Good luck. If our church had some kind of mediocre preschool and children's and student ministry, I could say, don't worry about it. I'd give you some slack. Whatever. But we have got one of the best around. And for you not to take advantage of this....good luck. So whether you are here or not, make sure they are here because they are the future.

The advice from scripture is, **“Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it” (Proverbs 22:6, NIV)**. That takes commitment, and the payoff is huge!

Let’s go to another relationship, friendships. Let’s talk about commitment in friendships. It’s a tragedy today that we’re more connected than ever, but not really close. We have email, voice mail, text messaging, chat rooms, web casts, cell phones, video phones, blogs, yet our friendships are weaker and fewer than ever. A few years ago (March 3, 2000), the *Wall Street Journal* printed an article called, “Whatever Happened to Friendship?” In it, Nancy Ann Jeffrey states that we’re living in the midst of what could be called “the marginalization of friendship.” “People are saying—‘It’s the one thing I can give up,’ says sociologist Jan Yager. “They’re diminishing the value of friendship.”

Research is showing that friendships are being marginalized on a large scale in our culture. It’s finding that the busier we get the more we say, “Friendship is one thing I can give up in my busy life.” Even though the TV comedy *Friends* was a hit, the reality is that friendships are becoming less common. When friendships are formed, they are more short-lived and more superficial.

But listen, a friendless life is not God’s plan for human life! When we make a choice to live with marginalized friendships—or no friendships—we are choosing to be less than what we have the potential to be. The Bible says, **“A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity” (Proverbs 17:17)**. That’s commitment. Friendship is necessary for spiritual growth. In the book of Proverbs it says: **“As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another” (Proverbs 27:17)**.

Our fear of committing to friendship has some serious implications: We have a weaker support system. We have fewer new ideas. We have fewer conversations that refresh us and challenge us. We have less of a network of knowledge, support, accountability.

Here’s a quick primer on how to make friends and commit to them. **First** make the decision that building friendships is important. If you don’t make that decision first, you won’t make any progress. **Second**, get out of your comfort zone and go to those places where you will have the potential to make friends. Start with some common interest or a hobby. There’s all kinds of ways. Play paintball, take a Karate class, try something new. Do some research to see what’s going on read the paper, and get out and do something that has the potential of making friends. Of course, I believe that the best way to do this is to get in a small group, a class, a home group here through the church. This is where you’ll find people who are striving on their spiritual journey like you are and that’s real important to have in common with potential friends.

Third, be interested and interesting. Nothing builds friendship faster than asking people about themselves. Be interested in their lives, their families, their hobbies. And be interesting. Share parts of your life. Be ready to talk about what makes you tick, what ticks you off, all that sort of thing.

Fourth, be ready to do life together, the good, the bad and the ugly of life. Here’s a great piece of advice for building friendship from the Bible, **“Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn” (Romans 12:15, NIV)**. You know, sometimes it’s easier to mourn with those who mourn, than it is to rejoice with those who are rejoicing. But you know you have a true friend when not only does your heart break when they face sadness. But when you’re actually happy when something great happens to them rather than being jealous or envious. When you can mourn with them, and celebrate with them, then you know you’ve got a real friendship.

Then committing to that friendship means investing time in it. You can’t expect to enjoy the benefits of a friendship, the support, the fun, the accountability, the challenge, if you don’t nurture that friendship with conversation, time together, and doing things together. In fact, another sign of a true friendship, it’s when you are with people and all of the sudden you look at your watch and say, “It’s midnight already?” That’s a sign of a real friendship, a replenishing relationship.

This church is built on relational opportunities. Don’t sit there, do something. Don’t be afraid to commit to a friendship. You may have gotten burned by a friend in the past, I have, it happens, but if that’s happened, you put it into four-wheel drive, and expend the energy to get back at it. The benefits of commitment always outweigh the costs and the risks.

The next commitment I want to talk about is, of course, our commitment to God through Jesus Christ. Our goal is to see people become deeply committed Christians. Not stopping at nominal faith, being a Christian in name only, but moving on to deeply committed faith.

How do you do that? What does it mean to be a deeply committed Christian and how's that different from just believing? The Bible says that even the demons believe in God. Just believing isn't enough.

Well, Jesus was asked on several occasions what were the most important teachings and this is what he said. He boiled down the great truths of God and condensed them into things so simple that even I can understand them! He said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength." Now that is serious religion. This is loving God with everything we're made of! Our hearts, souls, minds, strength, that's everything. Then he said the next thing is also key, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." This means we love God with our head, our hands and our heart. Let me explain that.

To love God with your head means to love God with your mind, your intellect, it means to grow in your knowledge of God. When we don't love God with our heads we're gullible. All it takes is somebody with charisma and enthusiasm saying they're teaching the truth and we buy it! Whether it's the truth or not! Some people say. "Well, Aaron, if you say it's true it must be true. If you understand the faith, I don't have to!" But that shouldn't be good enough for you! God wants you to understand your faith; to apply your mind, to think and process and cogitate.

That's why we offer Bible Studies, classes, courses, small groups of all kinds. That's why I take the time to print these study guides every week. Did you know that? I do it so that you have an opportunity to grow in the knowledge of God. So that you can take them home and read and reflect on them because you're thinking people. We've got to use our brains to grow in our knowledge of God, don't check your brain at the door when you come to church or when you leave. Use it.

The second way we grow in our commitment to God is to love God with our hands. That means that we serve the Lord...we actually do something about what we believe. Are you doing something about what you believe? Here's a good question: **Is the dirt of doing God's work underneath your fingernails because you're actually out living your faith?** That's God's expectation! We're not just Christians with intellectual belief but with our hands too!

The third way we love God and move from mere belief is to love God with the heart, with your soul, with everything that's in you. That moves you to a whole new level of faith. That's a personal connection with God. A personal relationship with Jesus Christ. You see, Christianity here at Saint Paul's is not a system of beliefs, or a bunch of rules and regulations, or a religion. Christianity is first and foremost a relationship with a living God. And that relationship flies, it soars when you commit.

To have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ means to know him personally, to talk to him, to become friends with him, to develop a sense of his presence in your daily life. That only happens when we seek after it very intentionally. When we commit. And when our faith life hits some off-road conditions and we wonder where God is when you need him, or what he's up to, we don't bail out. We kick it into four-wheel drive.

You might be saying, "Well, Aaron, this is interesting, you know, four-wheel driving, learning commitment. But, Aaron, you don't know me. Man, I have messed up on so many commitments. I look back on my life and I have committed. I have messed up. I have committed. I have messed up. Man, is there a chance for me in my marriage, in my family, in my friendships, with God?"

The answer is yes. Think about Simon Peter in the Bible, one of Jesus' closest friends. Just before Jesus was crucified Peter said to him, "I will lay down my life for you." Jesus looked at him and said, "I tell you the truth, within 24 hours you will disown me three times." And he did. Peter swore that he didn't know Jesus. Committed one minute. Trashed it the next. Later, after Jesus was crucified. After he came back from the dead he went after Peter, to get some serious revenge! NO! No. No! He went after Peter to restore him. Jesus reinstated him, and forgave him, and empowered, and enabled him. Simon Peter emerged as one of the most committed men to ever live. So I don't care what you have done, how many times you have blown a

commitment. I don't care because there is no way we will ever blow it like Simon Peter did and look what happened to him!

There is another chance for you, another day for you. You can become a man or woman of great commitment. You do not need to be afraid. The ultimate act of commitment was when Jesus was hanging on a cross

God is committed to us. He has shown his hand. He has put his cards on the table. The question is, will we live as people of commitment to family, to friends, to our word, to God? If we will, the payoff is huge. Do not be afraid...to commit. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I thank Rev. Ed Young, Senior Pastor of Fellowship Church, and Rev. Adam Hamilton, Senior Pastor of the Church of the Resurrection, for some of their resources for this message.