

# **The Paradoxical Commandments**

**Keynote Address presented to  
Church World Service: Staff Training and Celebration  
By Dr. Kent M. Keith  
Quorum Marriott, Dallas, Texas  
January 18, 2007**

Good evening!

Thank you for the opportunity to be with you at this important conference. I have enjoyed getting to know many of you, and I want to thank you for your hospitality and fellowship. Congratulations on your 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary! You have an extraordinary record of service to others.

I am here because I admire you. I admire your values, your spirit, your commitment, your faith. I admire what you are accomplishing in the world. You are doing the things that we *all* must do, if we are to have a future together on this planet.

## **Habakkuk**

In thinking about the work you do, I think about a prophet name Habakkuk, who lived in Judah in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C. His conversation with God is found in the book of Habakkuk, which is part of the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures.

Habakkuk looked out on his society, and he saw violence and injustice. He cried out to God. *Why* was there so much violence and injustice? And why wasn't God doing something about it? How long must he cry for help? He did not doubt God, but he was filled with anguish. He wanted to know what God was doing.

Two thousand six hundred years have passed since then, but we can understand the questions Habakkuk asked God. They are our questions, too. We, too, want to know: Why there is so much violence in the world? We remember the terrorist attacks in the United States and other nations. We have seen ongoing battles between ethnic groups, and the continuing war in the Middle East. We have witnessed genocide in Bosnia, Rwanda, and the Sudan. And there seems to be no end to the earthquakes, hurricanes,

tsunamis, floods, and fires around the world that leave hundreds of thousands dead and many more homeless.

And why is there so much injustice? Why are some people so wealthy, while millions do not have enough to eat? All over the world, children go to bed hungry every night. Why do some people have access to education and health care, while millions do not? Why do so many people live in poverty, and die of diseases? Why has the HIV virus killed millions all over the world? In Africa alone, HIV/AIDS has left millions of children without any parents. Why do things like this happen? Where is God in all of this?

Habakkuk complained to God, and God answered him. It was not the answer Habakkuk wanted. God said he was going to punish the wicked, yes—but he was going to do it by raising the Babylonians, who would conquer and destroy Judah. Later, the Babylonians themselves would be punished, but first, the Judeans would suffer destruction, and death, and exile. It was going to get much worse before it got better.

This was devastating news. What is so inspiring is that it didn't affect Habakkuk's faith in God. In fact, his faith remained so strong that the book he wrote ends with his *rejoicing* in the Lord. The last three verses of the book of Habakkuk are a poetic and stark affirmation of faith. He knew what the invading armies would do to Judah, but he said:

Though the fig tree does not bud  
and there are no grapes on the vines,  
though the olive crop fails  
and the fields produce no food,  
though there are no sheep in the pen  
and no cattle in the stalls,  
yet I will rejoice in the Lord,  
I will be joyful in God my Savior.  
The Sovereign Lord is my strength;  
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,  
he enables me to go on the heights.

Nothing could stop Habakkuk from rejoicing in the Lord. This evening I will talk about how each of *us* can still rejoice, even when times are very tough indeed. I will talk about how each of us can find personal

meaning and deep happiness, no matter what is happening in the world around us.

### **Being Deeply Happy**

You see, I believe that we are all God’s children, and God wants his children to be deeply happy. What do I mean by “deep happiness”? I mean the kind of happiness that touches your spirit and connects with your soul. It is hard to describe. Some people call it self-fulfillment, or self-actualization, or being centered. Others call it living their passion, or following their bliss. For people of faith, it is about finding God’s will for their lives, and then living that will. It is about following the teachings and living the faith.

Seeking deep happiness is not selfish. I am not suggesting that you try to be happy *instead* of others or *at the expense* of others. I am suggesting that you should be deeply happy so that you will be at your best, and will be able to help others to be deeply happy and at their best, as well.

We are all familiar with the safety instructions we receive when we board airplanes. We are told to put on our own oxygen masks, then help our children. I see deep happiness as the oxygen mask. When we put on that oxygen mask— when we experience deep happiness— we are ready to really help others. We become more loving, more giving, more patient, more enthusiastic. We become a gift to others. So we should be deeply happy for their sake as well as ours.

### **Personal Meaning is a Key**

Personal meaning is a key to being deeply happy. We know this from research and from personal experience.

There is no more dramatic example of the importance of meaning in our lives than the story of Viktor Frankl, a Jewish psychiatrist who survived the Nazi concentration camps in World War II. In his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl described his experiences as a prisoner. It is a painful story of immense suffering and sorrow. Prisoners had to work each day with little food, clothing, or sleep, in an environment of constant fear and death. Frankl observed that prisoners who had faith in the future, who still had a reason to live, were the ones who were most likely to survive. From this, he developed his theory of *logotherapy*, or meaning therapy, in

which a patient is “confronted with and reoriented toward the meaning of his life.” Frankl broke with Freud and disagreed with Jung. He didn’t believe that sex or power were the primary drives. Frankl believed that “striving to find a meaning in one’s life is the primary motivational force in man.”

### **Where to Find Meaning**

So God wants us to be deeply happy, because then we will have the energy and love and enthusiasm to help others to be deeply happy. A key to being deeply happy is finding personal meaning. So— where do you find it? What are the most important sources of personal meaning?

I have surveyed several thousand people over the past five years. I ask people to fill out a survey form that lists about 30 different potential sources of meaning, and I ask people to rate those sources of meaning on a scale of 1 to 10. I have surveyed university students, community and business leaders, Rotarians, YMCA staff members, and Army officers. Most of the surveys have been conducted in Hawaii, where I live.

I do not have any random samples, so I can’t extrapolate to larger populations. But the results of all the different groups have been remarkably similar, and the results are consistent with other research in this field.

Let me tell you about the survey results. All but one of the groups I have surveyed have given the highest average rating to the same source of meaning— “my family.” The rating is always a 9.0 or higher. Most have given the next-highest rating to “giving and receiving love.” Here are the six sources of meaning that always get high average ratings:

- My family
- Giving and receiving love
- Intimate relationships
- Doing my personal best
- Living my values
- A sense of accomplishment

These are all wonderful sources of personal meaning.

Equally important, I think, is that all the groups I have surveyed so far have given low average ratings to our culture’s symbols of success— power,

wealth, fame, and winning. They usually get a 3, 4, 5, or 6. People aren't necessarily against these symbols of success, it's just that they aren't important sources of meaning. They don't provide a lot of happiness.

### **Four Universal Sources of Meaning**

People have asked me— are there some really fundamental sources of meaning?

I would say yes. There are at least four fundamental, universal sources of meaning. These are sources of meaning that can be found in the world's great religions and spiritual teachings, as well as our own life experience. You won't be surprised. Here they are: Love people, help people, live ethically, and don't be too attached to material things.

I think there is a causal link between these four principles. If you love people, you will want to help them. And if you are loving and helping people, you will want to treat them ethically. And if you are busy loving and helping and treating people ethically, you are probably more focused on people and aren't too attached to material things.

Jesus taught these four principles. He taught us to love our neighbor as ourselves— to be good Samaritans. In the parable of the sheep and the goats, he made it very clear that he wants us to help people— to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, provide hospitality to strangers, provide clothing for the naked, look after the sick and visit those in prison. He wanted us to live morally and ethically— he did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. And he made it clear that we should not store up treasure on earth, but in heaven. We should not be too attached to material things.

You are living these four principles. You are doing what Jesus taught all of us to do. I hope this is a source of immense personal meaning and deep happiness for you. And I hope that you will remember, when you ask others to donate and participate and support Church World Service, you are inviting them into this meaning. You are offering them the opportunity to find more meaning and happiness in their lives by loving and helping others. You're not just asking, you are offering.

## **The Universal Importance of Service**

Every day, you are serving others. The importance of service is emphasized in the teachings of the world's great religions, as well as statements by many respected thinkers and leaders.

I would like to highlight quotes from two German Alberts— Albert Einstein and Albert Schweitzer. Albert Einstein said: “The high destiny of the individual is to serve rather than to rule.” Albert Schweitzer, the famous philosopher, theologian, musician, and medical doctor, said: “I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know: the ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve.”

One of my favorite quotes about service comes from Tagore, the Nobel-Prize winning Indian poet. He said:

I awoke and saw that life was service.  
I acted and behold, service was joy.

### **Servant leadership**

Focusing on service is the best way to lead. I call it the service model of leadership. People who live this model are often called servant leaders. A servant leader is simply a leader who loves people, and wants to help them.

Jesus was clear about this. He gathered his disciples together and said:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for the many.

Servant leaders find meaning in their work, and that meaning sustains them. The meaning is enough to keep them going, whether they get applause or indifference or even opposition.

I was fortunate to learn this pretty early in life. One of my most important experiences occurred as I walked to the stadium for the student awards ceremony at Roosevelt High School. You'll never believe it, but I was a fairly cocky young man. As I walked into the stadium, I wasn't wondering *if* I would get an award, I was just wondering *how many*. But then it occurred to me that I was so happy about what I had done that year, and felt so good about what I had learned, and who I had helped, that I didn't need any awards. *I had already been rewarded*. I had already been rewarded with the sense of meaning and satisfaction that came from doing a good job. That realization was a major breakthrough for me. I felt liberated. I felt an immense inner peace.

### **The Paradoxical Commandments**

A couple of years later I was in college. It was the sixties. As some of you know, the sixties were a time of conflict and confrontation on many American college campuses. It was also a time of hope and high ideals. What disturbed me the most was watching idealistic young people go out into the world to do what they thought was right, and good, and true, only to come back a short time later, discouraged, or even embittered, because they didn't achieve the change they sought to achieve, or nobody seemed to appreciate what they were trying to do.

I was working with student leaders, back then, and I had two basic messages for them. First, I told them that you really have to love people. You have to really care, because change usually takes time, and love is one of the only motivations that is strong enough to keep you with the people and with the process until change is achieved. The second message was this: If you go out into the world and do what you believe is right and good and true, then you will get a lot of meaning and satisfaction. If people appreciate you, that's fine, but if they don't, that's okay. If you have the meaning, you don't have to have the glory.

In 1968, when I was 19, a sophomore in college, I wrote a booklet for student leaders. It was called *The Silent Revolution: Dynamic Leadership in the Student Council*. It was a leadership manual, about how to work together to get things done. In that booklet, on just one page, I wrote 149 words that I called the Paradoxical Commandments. Here is what I wrote:

1. People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered. Love them anyway.
2. If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives. Do good anyway.
3. If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies. Succeed anyway.
4. The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway.
5. Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. Be honest and frank anyway.
6. The biggest men and women with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest men and women with the smallest minds. Think big anyway.
7. People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs. Fight for a few underdogs anyway.
8. What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway.
9. People really need help but may attack you if you do help them. Help people anyway.

And finally:

10. Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth. Give the world the best you have anyway.

Ten Paradoxical Commandments. The Paradoxical Commandments are guidelines for finding personal meaning in the face of adversity. That's why the first phrase in each commandment is about adversity, or difficulty, or disappointment. People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered. The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. People really need help, but may attack you if you do help them. Those things are difficult.

But each statement about adversity is followed by a positive commandment: Love people anyway. Do good anyway. Help people anyway.

The paradox is this: Even when things are tough—even when the world is crazy—we can still find personal meaning and deep happiness. We do that by facing the worst in the world with the best in ourselves.

The fact is that, as individuals, we can't control the external world. We can't control the world economy, and the rate of population growth. We can't control the weather, or natural disasters like fires and floods. We can't control when terrorists may strike or wars may break out. We can't control what political leaders will decide to do, or which government regulations will be issues. We can't control which companies will acquire which companies, and which jobs will be downsized and which jobs will open up. We work hard, and prepare, and seize opportunities—we have to do that. We join with others, and try to influence the external world—we ought to do that. But there are lots of things in our external world we just can't control.

What we can control is our inner lives. You and I get to decide who we are going to be and how we are going to live. And we can live our faith, and we can live our values, and we can stay close to our families and friends, and we can do what we know is right and good and true—no matter what. *No matter what.* And the good news is that is where people have been finding a lot of personal meaning for a long, long time.

Some people see the Paradoxical Commandments as a personal declaration of independence. It's a declaration of independence from all the external factors that we don't control. Whatever the world does to us, we can still find meaning and be deeply happy.

Some people look at the Paradoxical Commandments as a “no excuses” policy. Sure, some people may be illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered. So what? That's no excuse. You have to love them anyway. You don't want to limit your life by limiting your love. And maybe the good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. So what? That's no excuse. You don't rush out and do bad. You have to do good anyway. That's your character. That's your spirit. That's where you find the meaning.

Several times after giving a talk I've been approached by somebody who looks at me sympathetically and says something like this: "Gee, Kent, you must have been having a really bad year when you wrote these Paradoxical Commandments." They just see the statements of adversity at the beginning of each commandment. Actually, I was very optimistic then, and I am very optimistic now. I think that if you do what is right, and good, and true, things will usually work out for you, and you will often receive recognition and praise.

But what if you *don't*? What if you put your heart and mind into a project or program, and it fails? What if you do a wonderful, caring, sensitive job serving others, and nobody notices? The answer is: So what? *So what?* You still have to be who you have to be. You still have to do what you have to do. You still have to live your faith, and live your most cherished values, and stay close to your family and friends, and do what you know is right and good and true, because— that's you're going to find the most meaning. That's where you're going to find the deep happiness. And you don't want to give that up— don't ever give that up, especially not when times are tough, certainly not then.

### **The Paradoxical Commandments Spread**

Well, that little student council booklet with the Paradoxical Commandments was published in 1968, and about 25-30,000 copies were sold between 1968 and 1972.

I went on with my life, and for 25 years, I didn't know what was happening to the Paradoxical Commandments. What I know now is that people were taking the Paradoxical Commandments out of that little booklet and putting them up on their walls and their refrigerator doors, and putting them into speeches and articles. They spread around the country and then around the world. Today, 39 years later, it is estimated that they have been used by millions of people all over the world—people of all faiths, and no faith, people of all backgrounds and ages.

I know from searching the web that they were used by business leaders, government officials, military commanders, religious leaders, teachers, social workers, coaches, and students. They were used by Rotary Clubs in Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Alabama— I like that combination! They were used by Boy Scouts in Canada and the United States; by student

leaders in South Africa, and the Cambodian Free Speech Movement. They were on a website for Iranian news and culture. They were part of a leadership program at a university in Belgium. They were used by a homeless shelter in Philadelphia, a welfare agency in Texas, a Family Council in Ohio, a Methodist church in Kansas. They were used by Karl Menninger in a speech at the United Nations in 1981. They were used by the President of Zimbabwe-Rhodesia. They have been translated into Japanese and used in homilies by a Japanese Catholic priest in Tokyo. They are being used with an Eskimo group in Canada. They were published in John C. Maxwell's book, *Becoming a Person of Influence*, and Rev. Robert Schuller's book, *Turning Hurts into Halos*, and Wayne Dyer's book, *There's a Spiritual Solution to Every Problem*. They are in Stephen Covey's new book, *The 8<sup>th</sup> Habit*.

### **The Mother Teresa connection**

The discovery that changed my life occurred in September 1997. That was when I learned that Mother Teresa had put the Paradoxical Commandments up on the wall of her children's home in Calcutta. When I learned that, I wanted to laugh, and cry, and shout—and I was getting chills up and down my spine. The idea that Mother Teresa had put the Paradoxical Commandments up on the wall to look at from time to time as she and her colleagues ministered to their children—that touched me deeply. It touched me because of my immense respect for Mother Teresa, but also because my wife and I adopted all three of our children from children's homes in Japan and Romania, and we know that children's homes can be heart-wrenching places. So it really meant a lot to me. That was when I decided to write and speak about the Paradoxical Commandments again after 30 years. I have now published three books about the Paradoxical Commandments.

*The New York Times* called me the Rip Van Winkle of inspirational gurus. I wrote something when I was 19, thirty years went by, and then I “woke up” and discovered where it had traveled all those years. It has been truly amazing. Every month, eight or nine thousand people from 50 or 60 countries visit my website, and many of them send me messages. They tell me how they have used the Paradoxical Commandments to raise their children, or get through a tough time at work, or establish their goals. I set out to inspire people, and now they are inspiring me. I have become part of a growing network of kindred spirits, and I am deeply grateful. I have been very blessed.

## Concluding remarks

You are doing very challenging work. I can imagine that it is easy to get worn down from time to time. But you *have* to keep going. You have to do it *anyway*. People need you. They need you desperately. You are making a huge difference in their lives. And while there are many things worth doing, there is nothing more meaningful than the work you are doing now—loving and helping others, saving lives, improving lives, and empowering lives. Every job has its frustrations, but some jobs are worth the frustrations. Your jobs are worth it. You're among the lucky ones.

I think about Habakkuk, and how he had faith, and rejoiced in the Lord, even in the face of devastation and death. We, too, can look out at all the violence and injustice— all the world's difficulties and tragedies— and still have faith. We can still have faith in the Lord, faith in the abilities God has given us, and faith in the difference we are making. We, too, can receive strength from the Lord, and use God's gifts to walk on the heights. Whatever happens, we can find personal meaning and deep happiness— the kind of happiness that God wants for each of us.

Habakkuk did not see God's larger plan— and he was shocked when God revealed it to him. I do not claim to know what God's larger plan is for us today, but here is what I believe. I believe that God has allowed us to reach the point that we face problems that are so big that no one country, or economy, or culture can solve them. War, starvation, disease, and environmental degradation will not stop until we come together— all of us— as the children of God. We don't have to have the same faith, we don't have to agree with each other, we don't even have to approve of each other. We just have to love each other. We just have care enough to see each other as people. We have to look beyond categories like race, color, creed, religion, nationality, age, and gender to see each other as people. When we see each other as people, we can understand each other, help each other, partner with each other, and make the world a better place for each other.

You know this. *This is what you do*— locally and globally. You are in the vanguard, leading the way for others to follow. You are helping us move toward the kind of world that God has always intended for us. Each of us may have our own vision of what that world will look like. Mine includes a vision of all our men and women in uniform, deployed throughout the world,

with planes and ships and trucks full of food, clothing, medicine, equipment and supplies, helping wherever the need is greatest. That, for me, will truly be a day the Lord hath made.

In the meantime, the stakes are very high. There are enough nuclear warheads to kill every person on the planet. There are diseases that can strike down millions of people. There are climatic changes that have affected millions and may some day affect billions of people. Because the stakes are high, your role is even more important, and your work is even more meaningful.

Just as God told Habakkuk, Judah was overrun by the Babylonians, and thousands of Judeans were sent into exile. Three generations later, they were freed, and allowed to return to Jerusalem. There is a passage from Isaiah 55 that scholars believe was written to encourage the Judeans in their journey home. As you go forth, each day, to do your work, I hope that you will carry these words with you. I hope that these words will remind you of the great meaning and deep happiness that will always be yours, as you continue to build the new world that the Lord wants all of us to build, together.

*Then you will go out in joy  
and be led forth in peace;  
The mountains and hills  
will burst into song before you,  
and all the trees of the field  
will clap their hands.  
Instead of the thornbush will grow the pine tree,  
and instead of briars the myrtle will grow.  
This will be for the Lord's renown,  
for an everlasting sign,  
which will not be destroyed.*

God bless you! Thank you.