

“IF YOU LOVE ME”

John 14:15-21

We’ve all had the experience of wanting to get a project done but putting it off for later. Sometimes we wait because we just don’t care enough about the project, but other times we care a lot – and still end up doing something else. I, for one, end up cleaning my desk when I have a sermon to write and do not want to do it..

So why do we procrastinate? Are we built to operate this way at some times? Or is there something wrong with the way we’re approaching work?

It all starts with a simple choice between working now on a given project and doing anything else: working on a different project, doing something fun or doing nothing at all.

The decision to work on something is driven by how much we value accomplishing the project in that moment – what psychologists call its subjective value. And procrastination, in psychological terms, is what happens when the value of doing something else outweighs the value of working now.

This way of thinking suggests a simple trick to defeat procrastination: find a way to boost the subjective value of working now, relative to the value of other things. You could increase the value of the project, decrease the value of the distraction, or some combination of the two.

For example, instead of cleaning my desk, I might try to focus on why writing a sermon is personally important to me. Or I could think about how unpleasant cleaning can actually be – especially when I think of how much of a mess I can make..

It’s simple advice, but adhering to this strategy can be quite difficult, mainly because there are so many forces that diminish the value of working in the present.

The tendency for people to devalue money and other goods based on time is called “delay discounting.” For example, on average receiving \$100 three months from now is worth the same to people as receiving \$83 right now. People would rather lose \$17 than wait a few months to get a larger reward.

Other factors also influence subjective value, such as how much money someone has recently gained or lost. The key point is that there is not a perfect match between objective value and subjective value.

New research supports the idea that mental effort is intrinsically costly: for this reason, people generally choose to work on an easier task rather than a harder task. Furthermore, there are greater subjective costs of work that feel harder (though these costs can be offset by experience with the task at hand).

It's for this reason that procrastination seems to stem from a failure to "identify sufficiently with your future self" – in other words, the self for whom the goal is most relevant.

"If you love Me, you will keep My commandments." That may not seem like a solution to procrastination. Instead it is easy to focus on the "keeping My commandments" part as being perfect or at least without any major blame. When we hear the word "commandment" we think of the "Thou shalt nots" of the Bible. We aren't supposed to lie, cheat, commit adultery, curse, or hurt others. And it is easy to connect that with being good enough to say that we can hope to make the standard of loving God.

Jesus is speaking these words in John's Gospel. John, in the first letter is the one who talks about Jesus being the "atoning sacrifice" for our sins. But then he also says, "Whoever claims to live in Jesus must walk as He did." So what is it? Do we follow His commands to be good enough, or does He forgive us despite our failures?

Jesus is talking to His disciples on the night before He died. They would not understand what He said until after He rose from the dead on Easter. Though Jesus said many great things to the disciples and therefore to us, the key is to see that He was what He was about to do as He allowed Himself to be arrested, tortured, and killed for us on the cross.

In that context Jesus speaks also of the "Counselor," the Holy Spirit. Jesus would only physically be with the disciples for a while before He left to return to His Father. Why was He going to do that? Wouldn't it be easier for Him to stay there and lead them as He did the past three years?

That is where, "If you love Me, then keep My commandments," comes in. Jesus' commandments did not focus on "Don't do this," or even "Do this." He focused on "Love your enemies," and "Love, as I have loved you." The way we keep His commands is by reaching out in love to others. It is not about living a cautious life of never doing things wrong, but about risking by giving to others.

But do we do that? While psychologists speak about “subjective” and “objective” values, God’s Word shows us that the problem is sin. Even if we know in our hearts that God is right, we still act according to what “we” want. And all our attempts to decrease the “subjective” and increase the “objective” are described in that way by Isaiah: “All our righteousness is like filthy rags.”

“If you love Me.” This isn’t just anyone talking, it is Jesus. Jesus spoke those words as He was about to suffer His death on the cross. He died to forgive us of our sins. His love for us is so great, that in response, we can love Him. As John says in his first letter, “In this is love, not that we love God, but that He first loved us and sent His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. “But how do we love Him? Why couldn’t He have stayed to make it easier to love Him directly?

Jesus died, as John emphasizes, to save all people. If Jesus stayed on earth, the disciples would have clung to Him instead of spreading out in the world loving other people as Jesus loved them. Jesus would be there for the people in His general vicinity, but not for the world. By going Jesus was preparing His followers to keep His commandments by going out into the world with His love.

That is where the Counselor, the Holy Spirit comes in. The Holy Spirit is there to help us, but He isn’t physical like Jesus. The Holy Spirit then can guide us not to Himself, but to the physical—to other people. Where we encounter Jesus is in other people. Jesus said, “Whatever you do to one of the least of these, you do it to Me.” Martin Luther said we are led by the Holy Spirit to see other people as “little Christs.” For us to love, means that we need real, physical people to receive that love. Love is not some good feelings, but the whole act of reaching out to other people. That is where we can encounter Jesus’ love for us. We keep Jesus’ commandments not to qualify to receive His love, but to experience the love He already has for us.

That is what can move us to love. “If you love Me.” The relationship we have with Jesus is the key. When we love Jesus, then we want to love the people Jesus has put in our lives as he commanded us to do. And as we love those people, we learn to love Him more. It is a cycle that moves us from “feeling” love into “doing” love. “If you love Me,” we do because of how much He loves us.