

Sermon: Unshakable Faith

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, August 24, 2025)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. **Amen.**

A conversation I've had with a young pastor, to this day still gnawed at me. It took place in a mentoring group that I've been taking part ever since 2020. A few of us, mostly pastors, would gather every two months or so, here in Ottawa. We would share our joy and/or struggles in ministry, pray for one another, and study a particular section of the Scripture.

This mentoring group is led by Glenn Smith, a professor of practical theology at the Presbyterian College in Montreal. Glenn and I go way back when I first began serving on the Board of the College. When I realized that he travels to Ottawa regularly to lead this mentoring group, I happily joined.

Anyway, this conversation took place during a sharing session, where a young pastor and church planter, explained to us his latest project, that is to write out for the benefit of his parishioners, a set of what he calls 'The Rule' based on the Benedictine tradition. It would seem that his parishioners, mostly young families and recent Christians, are eager to be given a set of rules to live by in an increasingly secular and confusing world. A set a rules that clearly spells out what the Lord requires of us, not in the abstract summary of Micah 6:8, that is "to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God", nor in the specific but somewhat abbreviated form of the Ten Commandments, but a set of rules clearly spelled out of everyday details of acceptable Christian living—what to do the first thing in the morning when one wakes up, how to pray and for what, how much to tithe (before or after tax), the right way to shop, to enjoy a meal, to earn a living, to study, to work, etc, etc, (you get the gist).

In the context of sharing within a mentoring session, we weren't supposed to challenge one another, but to simply accept what was shared and pray for one another. But this business of writing out rules bothers me, You see, I've carried with me ever since when I was a rebellious teenager a certain attitude towards rules and laws—that is I've never met a set of rules that I did not tried my best to poke holes in, to find faults, or hypocrisy, or to formulate counter arguments. Don't get me wrong, I am not in a habit of breaking moral laws or societal laws, I just want to be sure if I am to be constrained by these rules and laws, they better be coherent, just, beneficial to many, and open to change in an clearly acceptable process.

Never in all my years as a minister, did I ever entertain the notion of writing out a set of rules for my parishioners. Whenever I was asked to give a clear interpretation or instruction on a specific religious practice, for example: how to observe the Sabbath. My response has always been tending towards the non-specific, citing the words of Jesus that “*The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath*” (Mark 2:27), or the words of the Apostle Paul that, “*All things are permissible, but not all things are beneficial*” (1 Corinthians 10:23).

So where did this young pastor in my mentoring group get the gall, not to mention life experience, wisdom, academic knowledge, or spiritual insight, to even attempt to write out ‘The Rule’ according to the Benedictine tradition for his parishioners? What exactly is the Benedictine tradition?

The Rule of Saint Benedict is a set of codes and precepts, written in Latin, by Benedict of Nursia in 530 AD, for monks living communally under the authority of an abbot. Benedict was not the only one writing codes, but comparing to others, ‘The Rule’ provided a moderate path for individuals living under institutions, with a focus (or should I say ‘foci’) on peace, pray and work.

The beauty of this set of rules is what I would call ‘open-endedness’, that it actually makes provision, encourages and invites later generations to, not add to the rules, but to write their own, in their own context. Due to such flexibility, The Rule of Saint Benedict has had a profound reforming influence on Western monasticism, through the medieval period, right on to contemporary Catholicism.

On the cover of this week’s bulletin you will find an illumination titled “The Benedictional of St. Aethelwold”, produced in the 10th century AD, in the Anglo-Saxon Winchester School of illumination, containing pictorial depictions of the said Rule, in its own context, when literacy amongst the population was not wide spread.

One can see the use and the usefulness of The Rule throughout the history of Christendom. But still, finding The Rule of Saint Benedict popping up in a 21st century non-denominational evangelical congregation, that surprises me. What’s even more surprising, at least according to that young pastor, is that his members of congregation were asking for it, eager to have ‘Christian living’ concretized for them, spelled out in details of what to do or what not to do—in another word, they wanted a ‘touchable faith’.

But as the author of the Book of Hebrews explains, some two thousands years ago, as read in our Scripture passage today, “**You have not come to something that can be touched**” To be more precise, “*You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them.*” (Hebrews 12:18-19)

What the author of Hebrews is referring to was Moses giving the Law, the Ten Commandment, on Mount Sinai, as recorded in Exodus 19-20. In that passage, the theophany of God was manifested in a fearsome combination fire, darkness, gloom and tempest. At the same time, the voice of God was manifested as thunder and loud trumpet, so awesome that the congregation of Israelites begged Moses that he be the only mediator to receive them, so the people would not have to endure another word from the Lord. The real irony of that story lies in the location of such a theophany, on a mountain top that can be touched but will certainly lead one to a brutal fate for doing so. Faith in the form of The Law thus becomes both touchable and untouchable.

However, there is another congregation that gathers, as described by the author of Hebrews. It is not on the earthly Sinai, but on Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. This gathering is strengthened by innumerable angels, by the firstborn enrolled in heaven, and by the spirits of the righteous made perfect. Leading such a festal gathering is none other than Christ Jesus, the Lamb of God whom through his sacrifice on the cross, through the blood shed on Calvary, redeemed us from the power of sin, and delivered us from the path of death.

Such sprinkled blood of Christ speaks a better word, a living Word, better than the word of Abel, the first human being murdered, crying out from the ground for justice and vengeance, better even than the word of Moses uttered from Sinai and carved on stone tablets. The words of Jesus, his teachings, his healings, his signs and wonders, his servitude, his obedience to the Father, even to death on the cross, his resurrection, his ascension, his church, and the hope of his return have now become the Living Word of God, incorruptible, untouchable, yet touching every aspects of our lives, of those who have faith. Hallelujah! Praise be to God!

Not too long ago there was an earthquake, a magnitude 8.8 quake, 80 miles off the coast of Russia. Right away the entire Pacific region went on high alert—tsunami advisories were issued in the wee hours of night for Japan, Hawaii, Alaska, Vancouver Island and much of the British Columbia. People were woken up in their sleep, attempts were made to evacuate coastal communities in the middle of the night. Luckily, for whatever reason that is still not clear to many, the dreaded waves never arrive—only a few ripples. False alarm, nothing to see, go back to sleep.

I understand much of the city of Richmond in BC is actually right at the sea level, relying on a series of dikes and pump stations to keep it dry in case of any sudden rise of the sea. I don't know how people in that city sleep at all, knowing that at anytime 'the big one' may come, will one day come. But people do live there, blissfully not unaware of the impending disaster.

The author of Hebrews reminds us that a shaking is coming, the likes of which no one has ever seen, and is surely coming. “Yet once more God will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.” The shaking the author is alluding to, to my understanding, is not of the physical nature but a spiritual one. It will shake the foundation of faith to its core, so what cannot be shaken may remain, may endure.

I have a strong suspicion that rules, in whatever form, Benedictine or otherwise, will not be such that would endure. I have an even stronger suspicion that faith in Jesus Christ, in the kingdom he is bring forth, has indeed already been brought forth, even just a glimpse, will remain, will endure. Since faith is truly a gift of God, we can only give thanks to God for the grace we have received.

However, if you still need me to tell you how to live out the Christian faith, I sympathize. I understand from a practical theology point of view, one which my college and friend Glenn Smith would surely agree: Faith and praxis (that is faithful practices) go hand and hand. So let me offer you not a set of rules but five verbs—pray, study, worship, fellowship and serve.

Pray when you get up, when you lie down, when you walk, when you sit, pray anywhere, any time. Praying is building a personal relationship with God, and God is indeed listening. **Study** the words of God in the Bible as food for the soul. Set out a regular schedule, be persistent, join a bible study group and share your questions or insights with others. **Worship** in a community of faith, worship the Lord God with reverence and awe, for it is your duty to do so, and a joy in doing so. **Fellowship** with believers and seekers alike. Through fellowship, we practice loving our neighbours as ourselves. Through fellowship, we share our faith with others as well. And finally **serve**, serve the Lord God through serving the church, the people of God. Even our Lord Jesus came to serve, not to be served, and disciples are not above their teacher.

So there you have it, five simple verbs, not rules, to live by—pray, study, worship, fellowship and serve. May the Lord God bless you and grant you an unshakable faith.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**