

5 May 2024

On Love and Obedience
John 15:9-17; 1 John 5:1-5

Today we read first from the Gospel of John, chapter 15, verses 9-17.

⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

¹²'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

And now, for our second reading, we switch to the first letter of John. 1 John 5, verses 1-5.

⁵Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. ²By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. ³For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, ⁴for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. ⁵Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

A few years back my agnostic son and I went to visit my parents in Oklahoma. Now one rule of their home is that if we're there on a Sunday, we go to church with them, and my son, knowing that, went without complaint. (The preacher that day gave a rant about young people these days and how they needed to be in church. Yeah, it was great. So helpful.) Anyway, after worship, when we were alone, Ethan said, "Dad, that hymn we sang today! That was perfect! That's why I left church!"

"What hymn?" I asked.

"'Trust and Obey'! That's what I can't stand. 'Just trust us and do what we say, and don't think about it too much!'"

Well, you see where he's coming from, don't you? There's this whole "religion is the opiate of the masses" idea, suggesting that religion is just something that powerful men use to control others. And, to be fair, that *has* happened sometimes. And then we read these passages from John and first John and come to John 15:10: *If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love.* Then 15:14: *You are my friends if you do what I command you.* Or 1 John 5:3: *For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments.* Ouch. We talk about God's "unconditional love," but that doesn't sound like it, does it? It sounds like what we would call

today “emotional abuse.” *I’ll love you if you do what I tell you to.* Where’s all this “grace” that Paul is always banging on about?

So let’s talk today about love and obedience, and we should probably start by recognizing that we contemporary Americans are probably more suspicious of this obedience talk than anyone else on earth or throughout history. It is in our American DNA to hate being told what to do, going back to the Puritans who came here because they didn’t want to do what the Church of England told them, to the colonists who declared war because they didn’t want to do what the King and Parliament told them, to the anti-maskers and anti-vaxxers and university protesters of our own time, we are a stubborn, independent, Don’t-Tread-on-Me, group of thoroughly annoying individualists. And proud of it. It’s who we are and who we’ve always been. For us, “obedient” feels like an insult, implying weakness of mind and will. Those who comply with what they are told are called, in internet parlance, not people but “sheeple”: as in “Rise up, you Sheeple! Think for yourselves! Do what *I* tell you to do!”

Hmm. That does seem to be how it works. We individualists talk about “throwing off the yoke of oppression” and refusing to obey tyrants, but then we tend to just subject ourselves to someone else. Take the Puritans I mentioned earlier. Yes, they came to the New World seeking religious liberty, freedom from the tyranny of England’s bishops, but it’s not as if they established a free society here. Ask the Baptists and Quakers that got branded or whipped or executed for not obeying the Puritans. Or, to use a modern example, students on university campuses all over America are standing up against the oppressive colonialist policies of the white patriarchal racists of Western society, refusing to obey the oppressive rules of the complicit school administrators. Totally normal American behavior, actually. But in the process of declaring their freedom they seem to have bowed before a new master, a quasi-religious political sect that demands full obedience to its own orthodoxy, complete with creeds, loyalty tests, and banishment for heretics (defined as anyone who questions any part of their doctrine).

It’s as if the leaders calling for people to shake off the rules of the oppressor aren’t really opposed to rules; they just want to be the ones making them. And it appears as if the opposite of obedience isn’t really freedom, but just obedience to someone or something else. As Bob Dylan sings in one of his songs, “You’re gonna have to serve somebody.”

So with that introduction, let’s go back to our readings from John and 1 John, the ones that tell us that love means obeying God’s commandment. First, what is that commandment? John 15:12, *This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.* So we are told to do the one thing that is most likely to lead to our own happiness and fulfilment – to love others. No wonder 1 John 5:3 adds, *His commandments are not burdensome.* Second, we are reminded here that we are only being told to do what Jesus has already done for us. Our obedience is not a precondition for God’s love; it’s a response to it. Next, we should note that there are different kinds of obedience. The obedience that you give to your boss at work, because you need the job, is not the same as the obedience you give to a beloved parent, is it? Jesus explicitly says he is not inviting his followers into a master-servant relationship, but into one of love. John 15:15: *I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.* Our obedience to God is to be like the obedience to a beloved parent, or to a close friend: a willing agreement to do what he asks. But even more than that, servants are expected to obey, whether they understand their commandment or not (*the servant does not know what the master is doing*) but our obedience is not to be blind. We are invited into

the process. We are to love others as Christ loves us, and we are to use our own creativity in finding ways to do it.

To summarize, yes, we are commanded to obey God. And yes, that might rub our American sensibilities the wrong way. But the choice we have is not obedience to God or freedom; our choice is obedience to the God who loves us and calls us friend or obedience to any of a thousand harsher, less forgiving masters: wealth, status, beauty, popularity, liberal political orthodoxy, Conservative political orthodoxy, and so on. I do not recommend any of those as masters. If Dylan is right and we're gonna have to serve somebody, why not choose to serve the one who loves us – and whose commandment to us, the commandment that is to become the pole star of our lives, is to love each other?

Back to that song, "Trust and Obey." Please don't think – as my son apparently did – that it's saying we have to obey everything *the church* says. If a church leader tells you, "Just trust me and do what I tell you," run. Do not trust, do not obey, do not pass go, do not collect \$200. But that's not what we're talking about. We're talking about obedience to the one who loved us first and wants us to love others. Every other command is a subset of that one. Truly, his yoke is easy, and his burden is light. Amen.