

The Obedience of Love (John 15:9-17)

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Among the categories of people with whom we interact, there are two kinds that often don't overlap: people we love and people we obey. Think about it. Who are some of the people you love, people for whom you have a deep and abiding affection? Maybe your spouse. Your friends. Your siblings. Your boyfriend or girlfriend. Your children or grandchildren. Who comes to mind when you think of people you obey, relationships where you have some sort of obligation to submit to someone's authority? Teachers. Referees. The police. TSA agents at the airport.

We usually don't think of obeying people in the first category. We love them. And we usually don't feel a lot of love for people in the second category. We obey them. We enjoy loving people. It's a feeling that arises spontaneously within us. We often tolerate or disdain obeying people. It's suspect at best because it requires submission to someone else's authority. Given the choice, most of us would rather spend a day with someone we love than someone we must obey.

And that contrast, that wall of separation between love and obedience, relationships of affection and relationships of authority, creates all sorts of trouble when it comes to knowing and relating with God. Why? Because he deserves and requires both. In the passage we just read, two words show up again and again: love and command, affection and authority. The world says they can't go together. Jesus says, when it comes to our relationship with God, they're inseparable. Love is expressed through obedience and obedience consists of love.

But we'll never be able to understand love or obedience by starting with what we think they ought to be. Why not? Because love and obedience don't find their origin in us. They find their origin in God. As the Jackson and Cowpasture rivers give rise to the James, so God's love and God's obedience give rise to our own. Look at v. 9. "As the Father has loved me," Jesus says, "so have I loved you."

From eternity past, before time existed or the world was ever created, God the Father has delighted in the person of God the Son as the radiance of his glory and the exact imprint of his nature (Heb 1:3). No one in the universe is lovelier than God. And because God is righteously and supremely devoted to his own glory, no love is stronger, fiercer, more perfect, or unreserved than God's love for himself.



If God delighted in anyone more than himself, it would be an act of idolatry. But he doesn't. The Father's love is centered on the Son in whom his own loveliness is most fully revealed. He could not love him more and will never love him less.

Now here's the scandalous thing. The character, nature, and fullness of the Father's love for the Son is the character, nature, and fullness of the Son's love for his chosen bride, the people of God. How is that possible? We're not lovely as God is lovely. We bear his image, yes. But that does not mean we deserve his love. We're sinners who need a Savior. So why are we included within the circle of God's holy love? There is only one explanation. Ex 34:6, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious..."

He loves us because he is merciful and delights to withhold the death we deserve. He loves us because he is gracious and delights to lavish the favor we do not deserve. His love for us isn't rooted in who we are. It's rooted in who he is, in the merciful and gracious character of his own nature. His love for us, in other words, isn't a sign of our loveliness but rather the overflow of his own, to the praise of his glory.

And how exactly has Jesus loved us? In the same way the Father loved him. Jn 5:20, "For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing." Jesus loved his disciples by revealing the character and ways of God to them during the years of his public ministry. And that revelation, his display of the satisfying splendor of God's glory, culminated in his death on the cross, where God exalted the justice of his character and the mercy of his ways for all the world to see.

The cross stands for all time as the ultimate expression of Jesus's love for you, Christian. V. 13, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." No force is stronger. No power is greater. No affection is more influential or decisive in your life than the everlasting, cruciform love of God for you in Christ Jesus our Lord. And whenever you're tempted to doubt Jesus' love, remember this. His love for you can no more falter than the Father's love for him. "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you."

We must not "move on" from Jesus' love for us. It's not a box we check, a perk we obtain, or something we stash in the spiritual supply wagon. Look back at v. 9. "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love." To "abide" in Jesus' love is to trust, depend, and persevere in leaning the entire weight of your life on

his affection and care for you. So how do we do that? What does that look like to abide in Jesus' love? The Lord gives us at least 3 answers in the next 8 verses.

1) WE OBEY HIS COMMANDS FOR THE SAKE OF OUR JOY (vv. 10-11)

V. 10, "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love." Jesus didn't obey the Father's commandments because something outside of himself forced him to. He always did the things that are pleasing to the Father (Jn 8:29) because he wanted to. Why? Because he trusted the Father's love. He believed the Father's priorities and purposes for his life were good, fueled by holy love, even when they led him through the valley of the shadow of death and obeyed his commands accordingly.

The same principle holds true for us, friends. Abiding in Jesus' love means obeying his commands because obedience is how we express genuine faith in the Lord's love for us. If Jesus tells me to do something or not do something and I say no, I'm not just failing to obey him. I'm denying that he loves me. I'm refusing to believe he has my best interest at heart. I'm saying that when push comes to shove, I'm not confident that all he says is for my good, fueled by holy love.

Obedience to God's Word in all he commands us to do and not do is the most important expression and the ultimate test of faith in God and in particular, his love for us. To say, "I won't obey you," is to functionally say, "You don't love me." And when we're denying God's love by refusing to obey his commands, is it any wonder that we struggle to enjoy it or experience it?

D.A. Carson is right. "However much God's love for us is gracious and undeserved, continued enjoyment of that love turns, at least in part, on our response to it." Those who experience the greatest assurance of God's love are those who are most faithful to obey his commands, not because our obedience earns his love, but because faith-filled obedience is how we abide in his love.

Ok, fine. I know you love me, Jesus. I guess the least I can do in response to all you've done for me is tow the line by doing the whole obedience thing. I don't want to. I don't think it's going to make me feel any better. In fact, I think I would feel a whole lot better if I did what I want instead of always having to do what you want. But you did die for me, so fine. I'll obey you. Just remember to thank me, later, ok? I can't believe I have to put up with all these dumb rules.

If you're tempted to go there, look at v. 11. It's no understatement to say that if you can grasp what Jesus is saying here, it will completely change your view of the Christian life. "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." The "these things" in v. 11 refers back to the commandments Jesus mentions in v. 10. He wants you to be crystal clear on what's motivating him when he commands you to do something or not do something. He's marking out the path of life so you can experience fullness of joy. Wait, I get that obedience is the "right" thing to do. But how does it produce joy? Sometimes it feels more like a path of death. It works like this.

No one in the universe is more beautiful or glorious than God. Therefore, the greatest possible satisfaction, the deepest joy in the universe, is the joy of knowing God and experiencing God for who he really is. No other creature has the capacity to do that the way we do because no other creature bears his image like we do. He made us to know him. He made us to experience him. He made us for the joy of intimate relationship where we depend on God, abide in God, and trust God by obeying his Word.

But our sinful nature gets in the way of all that. There's a corruption deep within our souls that wants nothing to do with God or his glory. I would rather depend, trust, and glorify myself than abide in him. It's why Jesus came to earth in the first place. He came to rescue us from ourselves, to deliver us from our sinful desire to be God so we could experience the joy of trusting the One True God.

If you're willing to cry out to him for salvation from sin and the death we deserve as a result, he will freely forgive you and grant you a new heart, a new Spirit, that's eager and able to trust and obey God. You'll begin to experience the joy of abiding in Jesus' love for you. Yet even then our sinful desires remain. So a conflict begins, a war between the Spirit and the flesh.

And that's why the path of obedience to Jesus' commands, even as a Christian, is often painful. It's a joy that requires death, death to our pride, death to our lust, death to our selfishness and self-centeredness that continues to resist abiding in God's love by obeying his commands. Even in the struggle, however, joy abounds. Not the joy of an easy life or a suffering-free existence, but the joy of day by day, year by year, learning to abide in God's love by faithfully obeying his commands through the power of the Spirit.

It's the joy Jesus himself experienced through his own obedience. Ps 16:8-11 tells his story. "I have set the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption. You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore." Fullness of joy, the joy God enjoys, is reserved for those who abide in his love by obeying his commands.

2) WE LOVE ONE ANOTHER AS HE LOVED US (vv. 12-13)

The "commandments" to which Jesus refers in v. 10, on one level, include all the instructions he has given us in his Word. But there is one command that functions as a headwater for the rest. V. 12, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." This world, the church included, is filled with people that are not easy to love. But here's what happens when we begin to abide in Jesus' love for us. We discover a source, a wellspring of love for others that has nothing to do with them and everything to do with him. We love because he first loved us.

How has Jesus loved us? Look at v. 13. He laid down his life for us, right? His love is unmerited, faithful, lavish, sacrificial, persistent, unselfish, a love that covers sin and gives us the opposite of what we deserve. Do you love everyone around you like that? Or do you decide to only be as nice to them as they are to you? Or love them to the degree you think they deserve it? Praise God, he doesn't start with what we deserve.

Allow me to flag two expressions of Jesus' love for us that I think are especially important for us as a body. **First, it's a love that takes relational initiative.** Jesus didn't wait for us to seek him out or become a little bit easier to love before he moved toward us. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. When we were still lost in darkness, he sought us out.

Whether it's with acquaintances in your neighborhood, coworkers at the office, or people at church on Sunday whose names and stories you don't know, don't wait for them to come to you. Take initiative to build relationship. Introduce yourself. Ask good questions. Offer to pray for people. Guard time and money to practice hospitality and bring others into your home.

Second, Jesus' love is sacrificial. I fear that much of what passes as “self-care” in our culture today is simply selfishness in disguise. Is it wrong to take a night off from any sort of engagement with other people after a long day at the office? Not necessarily. Is it wrong to spend a weekend at home after riding an emotional rollercoaster? Not necessarily. But remember this. Biblical love is by definition sacrificial. It was not easy for our Lord to lay down his life for us. He did it for the joy set before him. But it cost him dearly. If you only relate or engage with other people in times and ways that feel easy or convenient for you, you're not abiding in Jesus' love because you're not loving the way Jesus loves.

In God's kingdom, we find life by laying down our life. So take care that your approach to relationships doesn't become avoiding doing, or saying, or participating in anything that feels hard. Ask the Lord to give you opportunities to consider the interest of others more important than your own, even when it costs you dearly, knowing that in the end you're not sacrificing your joy. You're maximizing your joy. For the joy set before him Jesus endured the cross. By the power of the Spirit dwelling within you, Christian, follow his example.

The single-best indicator of whether we're abiding in God's love is whether we love one another the way he has loved us. In many ways, you excel in this area, KingsWay. It's one of many reasons it's a joy to be your pastor. Let's see to it that we do so more and more. How do we abide in Jesus' love? We obey his commands for the sake of our joy. We love others as he loved us. Finally...

3) WE PRAY WITH CONFIDENCE AS HIS CHOSEN FRIENDS (vv. 14-17)

After urging us to love one another and pointing to his imminent death as the ultimate example, Jesus makes a stunning statement in v. 14. “You are my friends if you do what I command you.” In the Old Testament, only two people were called friends of God – Abraham and Moses. For Jesus to bestow the same honor on all his obedient followers is an amazing glimpse of the greater blessings available to us under the New Covenant, the new way of relating to God Jesus' life and death make possible.

V. 15, “No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends...” There's a critical sense in which every Christian is a slave of Christ, obligated to serve him as our rightful Lord. The



Apostle Paul repeatedly identifies himself as such. We are not our own. He bought us for himself at the cost of his own blood. But we are not slaves in the sense of being relegated to the status of do-your-duty expendables whose only job is to do their duty. We have received the incredible honor of being welcomed and loved as Jesus' friends.

It's not wrong to want friendship with other people, to be included among their friends. But that desire will destroy your soul in a swamp of man-pleasing apart from savoring and resting in the inestimable privilege of being numbered among the friends of God. That doesn't mean Jesus is our spiritual buddy. He's not a peer. He's our king. And yet he loves to spend time with you, Christian! He enjoys being with you and sharing his heart with you. How do we know that? V. 15, "For all that I have heard from the Father I have made known to you."

Jesus tells us who God is. He's a Righteous Judge who will by no means clear the guilty. And he's a Faithful Savior who lavishes mercy on those who fear him. And Jesus tells us what God is doing. He's building his church through the power of the gospel, bringing lost men and women under God's redemptive rule. The gospel is the summit, the climax of all the Father's works and the fullest revelation of his character.

Who God is and what he's doing is not a mystery because Jesus has made him known. As the Son of God, no one is more qualified to do so. His words and deeds are worthy of your trust, friend, because they are God's revelation of himself. If you believe that and are trusting and obeying Jesus accordingly, remember this. The privilege of being God's friend is not something you selected or merited for yourself in the greatness of your wisdom. It's not your own doing; it's the gift of God. V. 16, "You did not choose me, but I chose you..."

If you are a Christian, the ultimate explanation doesn't lie in something you did. It has everything to do with the intervening, heart-transforming, life-altering grace of God. And notice it's not just your decision to come to place your faith in Jesus that he has ordained. It's also your ongoing spiritual fruitfulness from that point forward! "I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide..."

What a comfort that is, in both our ongoing personal fight for godliness, and in the discipleship work we do to help others pursue the same. The phrase "and

appointed you that you should go” has a strong missional emphasis. We’re not just talking about personal fruitfulness. We’re talking about the work God does through us in the lives of others. Yes, Jesus sovereignly intervenes to bring us to himself initially. But he doesn’t abandon us afterward to our own devices. The same sovereign power continues to work in our life, enabling us and the people around us to grow in relationship with God.

When spiritual fruit in your life is slow in coming, don’t lose heart. A sovereign God is in control and will complete the good work he began. When spiritual fruit is slow in coming in another believer’s life, don’t lose heart. A sovereign God is in control and will complete the good work he began. And when you’re tempted to throw your hands up and say, “I quit,” in the fight for godliness, remember the means our sovereign God has ordained to bring his fruit-bearing work to completion in your life and theirs.

V. 16, “I...appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, *so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.*” In Jn 14:13, Jesus says, “Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.” In Jn 15:7, Jesus says, “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” And by the time he says again in v. 16, “Whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you,” we realize we’re not dealing with an isolated promise. God is confronting us with foundational, spiritual principles.

The way we bear abiding fruit in the Christian life, the way we escape the cycle of fitful starts and stops, is to bring our every need and request to him in prayer with confidence and persistence. Is there an area of life where you need to grow in godliness? Is there an area of life where someone you dearly love is struggling to honor the Lord with their life? Here’s what you do. You pray. You ask. You seek. You knock. Why? Because your Heavenly Father Sovereign and you’re his Son’s intimate friend.

When we call on the name of the Lord, we’re doing the most important thing we ever do. We’re doing what Jesus created and redeemed us to do. We’re abiding in his love, depending on him, expressing our trust in him, looking to him as the giver of every good gift. It’s why corporate prayer meetings like the one next Sunday evening focused on asking the Lord to help us bear spiritual fruit in a particular area are so important!

CONCLUSION

How do we abide in Jesus' love? We don't chase spiritual highs by asking the latest Christian song, book, or conference to make us feel emotionally closer to God. The recipe is far more ordinary and far more supernatural. We obey his commands for the sake of our joy. We love one another as he loved us. And we pray with confidence as his chosen friends.

The overflow of the Father's love for the Son, and the Son's love for us, is our love for one another. That's been God's plan all along, to incorporate us into the love he has enjoyed within himself from eternity past. Our abiding in Jesus' love has a bigger goal than making us feel better about ourselves. He's transforming us, equipping us, and empowering us to love as we have been loved. V. 17, "These things I command you, so that you will love one another."

The idea that you can either be a morose, legalistic Christian who's into obeying God thing or a joyful, grace-giving Christian who's into loving God is a false choice on multiple levels. Here's what God longs for you to experience, friend: the life-giving joy of loving God by running in the path of obedience to his commands, starting with his command to love other people the way Jesus has loved us. In the world, love and obedience are opposites. In the kingdom of God, they're inseparable.