

**“Gospel 101”**  
**John 14:15-31**

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them." Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, "Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?" Jesus answered him, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe. I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me; but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us be on our way.

During the wedding rehearsal, the groom approached the pastor with an unusual offer. "Look, I'll give you \$100 if you'll change the wedding vows. When you get to the part where I'm promise to 'love, honor and obey', I'd appreciate it if you'd just leave that part out." He passed the minister a \$100 bill and walked away quite confident.

On the day of the wedding, when it came time for the groom's vows, the pastor looked at the young man in the eye and said: "Will you promise to prostrate yourself before her, obey her every command and wish, serve her breakfast in bed every morning of your life and swear eternally before God and your lovely wife that you will not ever even look at another woman, as long as you both shall live?"

The groom gulped and looked around, and said in a tiny voice, "Yes." The groom leaned toward the pastor and hissed, "I thought we had a deal." The pastor put the \$100 bill into his hand and whispered back, "She made me a much better offer."

The word *obey* was long ago jettisoned from the marriage vows and for good reasons. It's language that just doesn't fit if you regard a man and a woman as equal partners in a marriage, and how can you know Jesus Christ and not regard them as equals. **"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus,"** says the scripture.<sup>1</sup>

It's more than a matter of ill-fitting language, however. Contrary to what the little story suggests, *obedience* was not expected from the man. Originally, the man vowed, "to love and to cherish, till death us do part," while the woman was expected to promise, "to love, cherish, *and to obey*, till death us do part."<sup>2</sup> A study by the Church of England concluded that such language could encourage husbands to abuse their wives. Could?!

I see no rationale for a husband and a wife, as equal partners in a marriage, to *obey* one another. I believe a good case can be made for children to obey their parents. Children and parents are not equal partners in a relationship. These days a lot of parents try to be their children's friends! The original design, however, is for parents to be their children's parents. **"Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right,"** says the scripture. **"Honor your father and mother" – this is the first commandment with a promise: 'so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.'**<sup>3</sup> Gratefully, St. Paul, or whoever wrote Ephesians, goes on to say, **"And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord."**<sup>4</sup> Such language is a welcome change from the ancient law prescribed by misguided and over-zealous extremists that said a rebellious son should be taken by his parents to the elders of the town who would then stone him to death.<sup>5</sup>

Such a possibility as that would have kept me sober as a young man. But obedience motivated by fear is parenting gone askew. Such obedience is not the rich, full and abundant life that Jesus wants to give us. The best obedience a child has for a parent is motivated by love and respect for the parent. Here's an important and obvious caveat that best not be left unsaid: there is a time when obedience to a parent is not appropriate for a child – that is, when the child becomes an adult. Maybe adulthood does not make us equal partners with our parents as husbands and wives are equal partners, but the word *obey* becomes just as inappropriate in describing the relationship. So if you are an adult and have parents who are still alive, don't carry too much guilt if you don't obey every little demand they may make upon you.

I hope I don't have to make a case for obeying God. Obviously we are not equal partners in such a relationship, though our relationship with God is meant to be very personal. The Thursday evening Book Club is currently reading, *Simply Christian*, by N. T. Wright. This past week we read a sentence which is out of context for you but I believe it can be helpful at this point: "Christian spirituality combines a sense of the awe and majesty of God with a sense of his intimate presence."<sup>6</sup>

Unlike parents who are called not to be friends to their children, we are called to be friends of Jesus. **“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer ... but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.”**<sup>7</sup> Friends of Jesus though we are called to be, Jesus never becomes our pal; he never ceases to be the Lord of life! I believe that's what N. T. Wright means by the combination of awe and majesty with that of intimacy.

It is *always* appropriate for us to obey God. After all, **“It is God that hath made us, and not we ourselves.”**<sup>8</sup> Our motivation to obey, however, should never be one of fear that God will get us if we don't; nor should it ever be one of trying to earn points, as if we could ever do enough to gain God's favor; nor should it be to work off whatever guilt we might carry. The only motivation we need in order to obey God is God's love for us. That's “Gospel 101.” Yet, instead of obeying God because we know God loves us, we do things in reverse. We try to obey, we jump through all the religious hoops as it were, either to keep God off our backs or in the hope that God will deem us worthy to love.

That's why church becomes such a drag for many. That's why religion becomes so burdensome. We do the right things, but we do them for the wrong reason. So Jesus addresses us this way: **“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.”**<sup>9</sup>

For whatever reason, we don't get it. In the passage that is before you, I took the liberty of underlining five sentences that say essentially the same thing: we obey God because we love God and, it follows, if we don't love God we won't even try to obey God. But it all begins with our love for God. Without it, our attempts at obedience are set ups for failure. In this passage, Jesus says it over and over again – five times! I can hear my mother saying to me, “how many times do I have to tell you?!”

J. B. Phillips paraphrases Hebrews 6 this way: **“Let us leave behind the elementary teaching about Christ and go forward to adult understanding. Let us not lay over and over again the foundation truths – No, if God allows, let us go on.”**<sup>10</sup>

An adult understanding of Christ recognizes that love precedes obedience; grace precedes law. The Ten Commandments were not given as hoops for the children of Israel to jump through in order for God to love them. God had already made his love clear by delivering them from slavery in Egypt. Just before the Commandments are given, we hear God speak with great tenderness: **“You have seen ... how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant ... you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.”**<sup>11</sup>

There's an old liturgical tradition in the church in which the Ten Commandments were read every week *after* the assurance of pardon to remind God's people that obeying the law is not something we do to gain God's love but is an expression of our love for God. **"In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us..."**<sup>12</sup> How can we know that and not love God in return!? The order is critically important. Don't get it backwards. God's love and grace come first. Our love for God will not make God love us anymore than God already does. Our loving response, however, leads us into the rich, full and abundant life that God intends for us. "There's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey."

1. Galatians 3:28
2. Daniel Blake Christian Today, October 3, 2006
3. Ephesians 6:1-3
4. Ephesians 6:4
5. Deuteronomy 21:18-21
6. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2006), p. 137
7. John 15:13-15
8. Psalm 100, *King James Version*
9. Matthew 11:28-30 (*The Message*)
10. Hebrews 6:1-4
11. Exodus 19:4-6
12. 1 John 4:10