

## God's Love and Ours

Some things just go together, and we all know they go together. Peanut butter and jelly. Bacon and eggs. Cup and saucer. Salt and pepper. Bill and Hillary. Abercrombie and Fitch.

The point is that there are some things we naturally think of together. But some things we find in the Bible are things we might not naturally think of keeping together but that we need to think of together. One of those is a description of Jesus found in the book of Revelation: He is a lion, and He is a lamb. Part of the beauty and glory of Christ is that He combines in Himself qualities not often found together in one person. He is the lion, fierce and passionate and powerful. He is holy and just. But He is at the same time the lamb, who is gentle and sacrificial.

Tomorrow morning I fly to Minneapolis, where I'm to speak at the Global Church Advancement, National Church Planting seminar. It is part of our growing involvement in church planting, and I'm to present messages and workshops on Christ-centered preaching. The theme for each workshop is that as we teach and preach the Scriptures and call people to follow Christ, we have to keep two things together. These two things tend to drift apart but need to be kept together. And what are those two things? First, a life of obedience to God. Second, a heart trusting in the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

The analogy that I want to build in the workshops is one that I have shared with you many times. It's the analogy of the music and the dance. The Christian life is like a dance in that it is clearly choreographed by God. There is a particular way in which we are called to live. But we cannot live life well unless we are listening to the music. In this case, the music is the grace-based truth of the love of God revealed in Christ and in the Christian gospel. The God who choreographed the dance has also composed the music that is the inspiration and empowerment for the life. So we must listen to the music and dance the dance. In other words we need to be continually filling our hearts with the truth of God's love in Christ so that we will be empowered to live the life of obedience to which we are called.

Now, both of these themes are found in the John 15 passage. Both appear in verses 9-10. Verse **10** is the dance. Jesus **says**, "If you obey

my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love." And verse 9 is the music. Jesus says, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love." God's love and our obedience go together. His love is what inspires and empowers our obedience. And obedience is the only adequate response to God's love. These two things go together.

### **We Need the Obedience That Is Empowered by Love**

Now let us look at verses 10 and 11. "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." Sometimes we fail to keep love and obedience together. Sometimes we think that, if God loves us no matter what, then it doesn't matter if we obey Him or not.

There's a lot of misunderstanding about this, so let's be clear.

First of all, it is true that God's love is gracious and unconditional. That means you do not earn or deserve it. You receive it as a gift of grace. His love is sovereign and eternal. He does not stop loving you when you disobey Him.

But, second, that does not mean obedience doesn't matter. Jesus says that if you obey His commands, then you will remain in His love.

The key to understanding this is to know what Jesus means by remaining in Him. He uses the analogy of a branch in a vine. He says He, the "vine," has to be the source of our life as a vine is the source of a branch's life. So he is talking about something that is conscious and experienced. When he says, "Remain in me," He doesn't just mean become a Christian and stay a Christian. He doesn't just mean become a Christian and then keep your membership up to date. He is talking about keeping your relationship with Him alive and vital so that, like a branch in its vine, you are continually drawing life and strength from Him.

So to remain in Christ's love is not just to be loved but also to be continually believing in and drawing strength and life from His love for you. In effect He says, "God will go on loving you if you do not obey Him, but you will not be able to draw life and strength and joy from His love if you do not obey." It just doesn't work like that. He is loving you,

but if you are not obeying, then you are not remaining in the atmosphere, the light, the force field of His love for you.

In verse 14 Jesus says. "You are my friends if you do what I command." In both verses 10 and 14 the little word "if" is important. It tells us that while God's love is unconditional, our relationship with Him and our experiencing His love is conditional. His love is priceless and powerful. When we live in His love, it makes us fruitful. But it is unrealistic to claim that we are depending on His love if we are disobeying His commands. Don't be confused or misled or forget that our dependence on God's love and our willingness to do what He says go hand in hand. That is just the way it is.

When we disobey Him, it is because at that moment we are loving something more than Him. We are relying on something other than Him for life. We are letting go of Him to take hold of something else. To remain in His love, we must let go of that which tempts us and take hold of Him again.

If we believe in Christ's love and are remaining in His love, why wouldn't we want to obey? "The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes" (Psalm 19: 8). The Bible says that without the radiant light of God's commands, we are stumbling around in the dark. We shall never find our way until we turn on the light. "The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes."

Later in Psalm 19, verse 12 says, "Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults. Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me." People often say, "I want the freedom to follow my own heart and be my own person." But the Bible says that is a very unenlightened way of looking at the issue of freedom. The heart is subject to all kinds of pressures and powers that tend to dominate us unless we have a higher power and perspective that can set us free.

British author G.K. Chesterton said, "If men will not be governed by the Ten Commandments they will be governed by the ten thousand commandments." I think what he meant is that if people will not obey God's laws of life, they do not end up with incredible freedom. Instead they end up with their lives ruled by thousands of little unspoken laws that come from the selfish demands of a sinful heart, their own misguided ideas, unbalanced desires, unhealthy reactions, peer pressure, parental and societal expectations, and the multitudes of

laws devised by government to keep a society like that from falling apart. God says that it is submission to His truth revealed in Scripture that actually sets us free.

He does not say, "I'm the Lord, and there must be rules. Let me just make up some." No, God is saying, "I built the human heart. I made the world of human relationships. If you do not obey Me, you are violating not only My laws of life but the very nature of your own spiritual psychology. Trust Me." He says, "My commands are perfect, trustworthy, right, radiant, pure, sure, and righteous." And Jesus adds here in John 15: 11, "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."

If you believe in Christ, keep His commands. Don't think that is being "legalistic." Being careful to keep the commands of Christ is not being legalistic. What makes some striving to keep the commandments of Christ legalistic is not the fact that there is a careful commitment to obeying Him, but something else.

Historically there has indeed been a problem in the church called legalism, but what is legalism?

When we think God's love depends on how well we keep His rules, that's a kind of legalism that loses sight of His grace.

When we elevate manmade rules, rules established by church or culture, to the same level as Christ's commands and then judge ourselves and others by those standards, that's a kind of legalism.

When we focus on rigid conformity to the details of religious and moral rules while neglecting the larger spiritual issues of inward transformation, that's a kind of legalism.

When our moral, spiritual, and religious life is motivated by fear, self-righteousness, and pride instead of by God's gracious love for us and our joyful love for Him, that too is a kind of legalism.

To know God's love and, because of His love, to love Him in return, trust Him, and so want to obey Him that we are committed to doing what He says in every area of life--that isn't legalism. That is loving obedience! That's how Christ lived. That's how He calls us to live.

John Piper has written a great book titled *What Jesus Demands from the World*. (The entire 400-page book is available free online. You can get it at [desiringgod.org](http://desiringgod.org), or just Google for *What Jesus Demands from the World*.) The title comes from what is commonly called the Great Commission.

First, let me remind you of what the Great Commission says: "Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20). Jesus here claims all authority and lays claim to all the nations. He tells us not only to teach His commands but also to teach obedience to everything He has commanded.

What John Piper does in this book is to scour the Gospels and identify 50 commands clearly given by Jesus. Do you know how many he actually discovered? He started with about 500 commands of Jesus and then for the purpose of this book narrowed the list to fifty.

Here are just a few of the commands of Jesus:

- Repent, come to Me, believe in Me, listen to Me, remain in Me
- Follow me, deny yourself, take up your cross daily and follow Me
- Always pray and do not lose heart
- Do not be anxious about the necessities of daily life
- Do not commit adultery and do not look at others with lust in your heart
- What God has joined together in marriage, let no one separate
- Love your enemies—pray for those who hurt you, turn the other cheek, go the extra mile
- Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness
- Don't lay up treasure on earth but lay up treasure in heaven by giving generously and sacrificially
- Deal ruthlessly with sin in your life
- Don't just straighten up the outside of your life, clean the inside of the cup

In John 14:21 Jesus says, "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him." □

The obedience that comes from love for Christ results in a deeper relationship with Him and a deeper reliance on His love. There's nothing greater than that if you love Him.

We need the obedience that is empowered by love but also . . .

### **We Need the Love That Empowers Obedience**

The obedience of verses 10 and 11 is important, but we have to keep it rooted in the love that Jesus reveals in verse 9. In that verse Jesus says, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love."

### **The Measure of Christ's Love for Us Is the Measure of God the Father's Love for Jesus Christ**

Jesus does two things in verse 9. First, He declares His love. He says, "I have loved you." It's often a very important moment in a relationship when someone says, "I love you." I've seen grown men tear up as they said, "My father never told me that he loved me." Jesus says, "I have loved you."

Second, not only does He declare His love, but He also compares His love to another loving. He says, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you." The way this is written in the Bible, the Greek original stresses the perfection, the completeness of this love. As God the Father has loved God the son with a perfect and complete love from all eternity, so also Christ has loved us with a perfect and complete love from all eternity and for all eternity. Here Jesus says, "Take the reality of My perfect, eternal love for you, believe in it, and remain in it."

However, the measure of Christ's love for us is not only the Father's love for Him.

### **The Measure of Christ's Love for Us Is the Measure of His Cross**

When Jesus said, "I have loved you," He was literally on the path to the garden where He would be betrayed with a kiss and carried off to die.

Some think of God primarily as being very demanding and that the way one has a relationship with Him is by trying very hard to obey His laws and do the right thing. Such people may at times feel fear and frustration, but they are never overwhelmed with the sweet goodness of the greatness of God. Why? Because they believe His love depends on their obedience. If you ask them if they believe in God they may say, “Yes, and I try hard to stay on His good side.”

But God's love doesn't flood their hearts with the light and warmth that gives life and creates change. It doesn't empower them from within to love an enemy. If you think that you can earn a right relationship with God, if you think your sin can be remedied through religion, and that you can earn God's favor, then there is no explosion of amazement over the love of Christ for you.

Other people downplay or simply disregard the demands of God, thinking of Him as some sort of soft love muffin in the sky who indiscriminately accepts everyone, excludes no one, and tolerates everything. If you ask this kind of person if he believes in God he may say, “Sure, and I believe He thinks I'm special, because loving me is His job. Of course, God loves me. It's no big deal.” But that view of God doesn't move your heart or heal your deepest wounds either.

The fact that this love is the love of Christ reminds us that although it is the love that began before the creation of the world, it required the story that we call the gospel. It required the incarnation—God's entering our world and becoming one of us. It required the shedding of His blood and the agony of the cross. Only then did it triumph in the resurrection from the dead and the calling of people like us to faith and redemption.

When we understand that Christ had to die our redemption and forgiveness and that He was willing to die because of His love for us, we realize that we are by nature more flawed, more sinful, more lost than we ever dared to admit. At the same time we see that we are more loved, more lavished with grace, more lifted up with love than we ever dared hope. That unique combination of seeing at the same time both the darkness and danger *from* which we have been delivered and the gracious love of Christ *by* which we were delivered is what floods the heart with light and warmth. That is what transforms the heart from within.

A former Catholic priest had struggled with alcoholism but had

come to faith in Christ and discovered the power of His love. In an interview he said this:

I believe that the real difference in the American church . . . is between the aware and the unaware. When somebody is aware of that love—the same love that the Father has for Jesus—that person is just spontaneously grateful. Cries of thankfulness become the dominant characteristic of the interior life, and the byproduct of gratitude is joy. We're not joyful and then become grateful—we're grateful, and that makes us joyful. (Brennan Manning, "The Dick Staub Interview: Brennan Manning on Ruthless Trust," *ChristianityToday.com*, 12-10-02)

Author Donald Miller shares a story of how he helped a friend whose alcoholism was destroying his life:

Last year, I pulled a friend out of his closet . . . . His marriage was falling apart because of his inability to stop drinking. This man is a kind and human being, touched with many gifts from God, but addicted to alcohol . . . . He was suicidal, we thought . . . . We sat together on his back deck and talked for hours, deep into the night. I didn't think he was going to make it.

Two months later . . . as he told me the story of the beginnings of his painful recovery process, he said a single incident was giving him the strength to continue. His father had flown in to attend a recovery meeting with him, and in the meeting my friend had to confess all his issues and weaknesses. When he finished, his father stood up to address the group of addicts. He looked at his son and said, "I have never loved my son as much as I do at this moment. I love him. I want all of you to know I love him." (Donald Miller, *"Searching for God Knows What"* (Thomas Nelson, 2004), pp. 130-31)

It was the assurance of love that gave him strength to fight his addiction. Love is powerful. Fathers need to tell their children that they love them. But even if you don't have a father or you don't have a loving father, don't miss the incredible power of what Jesus is telling you about the ultimate father, God the Father in heaven. He has revealed His perfect and eternal love in Christ. He declares His love for you. That doesn't excuse you from the fight, but it empowers you *for* the fight.

Think about what this means for you personally. Is the love of God and Christ your source of strength? The same love with which the Good Shepherd laid down His life for your redemption is the same love with which He laid down His commands for your life. So depend on His love and do what He says.

When tempted, say, “Lord what am I failing to believe about Your love for me? Do I doubt that Your love is expressed in this command? Do I doubt that Your love can sustain and fulfill me if I obey? Do I think that this thing that tempts me can better satisfy and complete me than You can? Lord, forgive my foolish unbelief and sinful pride. I open my heart to Your love and submit my will to Your ways.”