

# IF YOU LOVE ME

## John 14:15

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“If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (Jn. 14:15).

**I**t is surprising that in a chapter filled with promises intended by Jesus to comfort his disciples, we also encounter so many uses of the word “if”. All through John 14, Jesus does not merely tell us of his provision for the disciples during his absence from earth, but he also tells the conditions by which we may be certain of these promises. In verse 3, Jesus said, “If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself.” Here, Christ’s return to gather us into glory is conditioned on his first departing from earth in his ascension. In verse 9, Jesus answered Thomas, “If you had known me, you would have known my Father also.” Knowing Jesus is the required condition for knowledge of God the Father: we can experience the latter only if we possess the former. Likewise, in verse 14, Jesus conditions his actions on our behalf with the “if” of prayer: “If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.”

The if’s of John 14 do not make our salvation less certain but more certain, provided the conditions are met. Christians must comprehend Christ, and then we will understand God. Christians must pray, and then Christ will answer. These are cause and effect relationships in God’s economy on which we may be absolutely certain and from which we may derive great comfort. Particularly important among this list of “if” conditions is one that pertains to our love for Christ. In this case, the result of our love for Jesus is as certain as it is important: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15).

## LOVE AND THE LAW

Many people, including some Christians, have difficulty thinking of love and obedience together: we may act either in love or in law, but not both. Among liberals, who are willing to dismiss the Bible's teaching, it is often said that what matters is not law but only love. On this basis, recent generations have been taught a "new morality" in which the only guideline is love. Anything is permissible so long as it does not seem to hurt anyone. This has been the driving idea behind the "situational ethics" approach that now dominates contemporary society. Its originator, Joseph Fletcher, said, "Only love is a constant; everything else is a variable."<sup>1</sup> Under this thinking marriages may be casually broken, adultery may be celebrated, contracts may be broken, parents may be disregarded, and worldly things may be coveted, and all may be justified on the grounds that no one was hurt and that love was the motive.

There are two major problems with this view, however. The first is that we must ask how to define love. In the new morality, love is generally defined according to the 1960's philosophy of Jerry Rubin: "If it feels good, do it." But, as the drug culture of the '60's proved, there are things that feel good that are not loving, but that destroy the person who does them and others. The Bible says that the heart is "deceitful above all things" (Jer. 17:9), so in reality we can not trust our own feelings as a guide to love. Thus a young man who seduces a woman into sexual sin is not loving her, however good it may feel at the time. Likewise, a young woman who tempts men into lust by her immodest way of dressing is not loving her neighbor, however good the attention may feel to her at the time.

This raises a question: has God provided us with an objective guide to love? The answer is Yes, God has done this very thing in his law. Jesus summarized God's law in terms of love. The first great commandment, he said, is to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." The second great commandment is to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt. 22:37-39). This division corresponds to the two halves of the Ten

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<sup>1</sup> Cited by Peter Barnes, in The Presbyterian Church of Victoria, *Love Rules: The Ten Commandments for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2004), 9.

Commandments, the first half of which pertains to love for God and the second half to love for our neighbor. The way to love one another, then, is to observe the commandments, not only in their prohibitions but also in terms of their positive agenda. We not only do not murder but we protect; we not only do not steal, but we provide. Compared to God's law of love, the "new morality" is revealed as justifying a self-love that does indeed hurt other people.

This leads to a second problem with the "new morality" of love, namely, that it utterly excludes the value of love for God. According to Jesus, this is the very first priority, so we must not have a view of love that conflicts with God's definition and standards of love. Our society asks, for instance, what is wrong with a few harmless lies? The first answer is that it shows no love for God, who is a God of truth and hates lying lips (Prov. 6:16-17). The second answer is that we are not loving our neighbor when we speak falsely and deceive. For these reasons, the antinomianism of liberal theology (antinomianism combines the words "against" and "law" – "against law") is not in fact an ethics of love, and its prevalence in our society in recent decades has brought misery and ruin to millions of people.

There is, however, an antinomianism of another kind among Bible-believing Christians, namely, those who conceive a radical contrast between law and grace in such a way that Christians are no longer to obey God's law. This can be seen among some Dispensationalists, who tend to see the Old and New Testaments as teaching different approaches to God and salvation, and by Lutherans, who tend to react against law-keeping out of concern for legalism. Noting that the Ten Commandments are part of the Old Testament, and also noting that we are justified through faith alone in Christ, who kept the law for us, these Christians will assert that we are therefore saved in such a way as to be free from obedience to God's law. All we need for salvation is to trust and love the Lord Jesus Christ.

The first problem with this Christian antinomianism is that the New Testament strongly emphasizes the Christian's duty to obey God's law. Paul writes that while we are saved from our failure to keep God's law, we are justified through faith in Christ "in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us," as we walk in the power of God's Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:4).

The second problem with the view that we need only love, but not obey, is Jesus' own teaching on love for him: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). According to Jesus, the Christian's bond of love with Jesus does not free us *from* keeping God's law, but frees us *to* keeping his commandments. If we love Jesus, that love will draw us to thoughts and actions that conform with Jesus' thoughts and actions, and please him. William Barclay comments, "It was by His obedience that Jesus showed his love to God; and it is by our obedience that we must show our love to Jesus."<sup>2</sup>

## LOVING AND OBEYING JESUS

John 14:15 makes a number of important points about Christian obedience. The first is that our obedience to Christ's commands is *personal* obedience. That is, we do not obey a cold legal code but we offer obedience to Jesus himself. He calls us to obey "my commands." This shows the divine lordship of Jesus Christ. Moses never called Israel to obey "my commands," but Jesus unreservedly calls us to personal obedience out of love for him. Charles Spurgeon wrote: "There are some men for whom you would do anything: you will to yield to their will. If such a person were to say to you, "Do this," you would do it without question. Perhaps he stands to you in the relation of a master, and you are his willing servant. Perhaps he is a venerated friend, and because you esteem and love him, his word is law to you. The Saviour may much more safely than any other be installed in such a position."<sup>3</sup> Both in his person as the perfect Son of God and in his work, having shown us the highest love by dying for our sins, Jesus has earned the right to call us to personal obedience: "If you love me, you will obey my commands."

Second, we note in Jesus' words the intimate connection between love for and obedience to him. The only kind of true obedience to the Lord is *loving* obedience. That is, we must obey Christ's commands willingly, gladly, and freely, as an intentional expression of our thanks and love to him. Spurgeon comments, "The essence of

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<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 2:193.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 63 vols. (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim, 1974), 32:653.

obedience lies in the hearty love which prompts the deed rather than in the deed itself... Love is the chief jewel in the bracelet of obedience.”<sup>4</sup> How dead and useless is obedience to the letter of God’s law without love to Christ! As Paul said, “If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing” (1 Cor. 13:3). We see this in those who obey the letter of Sabbath observance but never rest their hearts in Jesus on the Lord’s Day. We see it again in those who are careful to tithe but take no delight in giving to the gospel work of Christ’s church. We could say the same about sexual purity, obedience to marital duties and church membership vows, and many other matters. Obedience to the Bible is only obedience to Christ when given out of love for him.

Third, Jesus teaches the *certainty* of obedience where there is love for him. It is important to note that John 14:15 does not express a command, as rendered by the King James Version: “If you love me, keep my commands.” Jesus uses the future tense, rather than the imperative, pointing out that “if you love you, you *will* keep my commands.” A desire to walk in his way and embrace his teaching is the inevitable result of loving Christ. Indeed, it is *only* love that will motivate us to keep Christ’s commands, since to do so we must, like him, take up the cross, crucifying our love of self so as to love the Lord and love one another as he has loved us. This means that the key to obeying Christ is to cultivate a love for him, which comes from reflecting on his love for us. John wrote in his first epistle: “We love because he first loved us” (1 Jn. 4:19). This love for Christ will necessarily and inevitably result in a desire to obey his commands.

## HOW WE KNOW WE LOVE JESUS

Jesus’ teaching plainly shows how essential it is that believers should love him. Spurgeon writes, “He that believes in the Lord Jesus Christ for his salvation produces as the first fruit of his faith love to Christ; this must be in us and abound, or nothing is right.”<sup>5</sup> This priority is confirmed in the New Testament. What was it that Jesus asked Peter when he restored him to discipleship? Since Peter

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 32:652-653.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 32:653.

fell away before the cross, did Jesus ask, “Peter, do you now understand the doctrine of the atonement?” Understanding doctrine is essential, especially when it comes to the meaning of Christ’s death, but that is not what Jesus asked Peter. Nor did Jesus ask of his plans for spiritual improvement: “Peter, have you taken steps to make sure this problem doesn’t arise again?” What did Jesus ask Peter? He asked, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” (Jn. 21:16).

This raises the important question, “How do we know that we love Jesus?” The answer is found in our verse, which we may reverse to say, “We know that we love Jesus if we keep his commands.” This is how Jesus puts it in verse 21, “Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me.”

To what, then, is Jesus specifically referring when he speaks of his commands? To answer, we should note how Jesus touches on this same matter throughout this chapter. In verse 21, Jesus speaks again of his “commandments,” but in verse 23 and 24 he expands his meaning to include his whole teaching: “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word... Whoever does not love me does not keep my words.” Thus we must understand Jesus’ commands to embrace all his teaching, whether it is doctrinal or ethical. Indeed, when we realize that the New Testament apostles spoke for Jesus and that the Old Testaments prophets were servants of Christ’s covenant, we rightly expand Jesus’ commands to embrace the whole of the Bible. A. W. Pink explains: “The whole revelation of the Divine will, respecting what I am to believe and feel and do and suffer, contained in the Holy Scriptures is the law of Christ... The commandments of Christ include whatever is good and whatever God hath required of us.”<sup>6</sup> There is no division between the will of Christ and the will of God, so the Word of God is the Word of Christ. This does not mean that we do not love Jesus unless we are obeying perfectly every line in the Bible. Rather, a love for Christ will instill in us a loving, obedient, and willing attitude towards all that is taught in God’s Word. The Bible will become God’s Word for us and we will love it as that which both leads us to Christ and teaches us how to obey the commands of our dearly beloved Lord.

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<sup>6</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 776.

Does this mean, therefore, that if we find ourselves struggling with sin, or if we find it difficult to obey God's Word, that we therefore must have no love for Jesus? The answer is No: a struggle to obey does rule out love for Christ. We all struggle with sin, as John emphasized in his first epistle (1 John 1:8), because we all are still sinners and must contend with our sinful nature. But if we love Jesus, we *will* struggle and not give ourselves over to sin. This means that if you are a teenager, you may sometimes think your parents are hopelessly ignorant, but because you love Jesus you will nonetheless seek to obey and respect your father and mother. If you are a husband, your sinful flesh may desire to neglect your wife at the expense of your hobbies or career ambitions. But, loving Jesus, you will turn your heart to your wife and children so as to be faithful servant of the Lord. Similarly, Christian wives may sometimes resent the Bible's teaching to submit to their husbands and will grow weary of expending themselves in ceaseless service to their families. They may look out the window at other women who are living for themselves, to the detriment of their husbands and children, and feel a twinge of envy. But, because they love Jesus, Christian women will turn back to their husbands with respect and to their families with devotion, doing it all "as to the Lord" (Eph. 5:22).

Struggling with sin does not mean that we do not love Jesus; if we love Jesus, we will struggle and we will seek Christ's power in prayer that we might obey his commands. The good news is that those who love Jesus will be helped by the mighty Holy Spirit whom Jesus will send. As Jesus continues in John 14:16: "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever." Loving Jesus, we are not left to obey him in our own small strength, but he gives us his strength from heaven through the ministry of the Spirit, so that our love for him is enabled to express itself in obedience to his commands.

Having noted that Jesus' commands must be seen as encompassing the whole Bible, we should still note his special emphasis on our love for one another. Jesus earlier taught, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another" (Jn. 13:34). Later, Jesus repeats this special command: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I

have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (Jn. 15:12-13).

With this in mind, love for Jesus is certain to yield obedience to him in the form of *service to others*. We remember how Jesus began his teaching at this last gathering of his disciples prior to the cross by taking up the servant’s towel and washing the disciples’ feet. Jesus said, “You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet” (Jn. 13:13-14). James Boice comments: “This is the picture Jesus gave of true Christianity. It is the attitude that divests itself of its own prerogatives in order to serve others.”<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, our love for Jesus will produce an obedience that involves *sacrifice*. “This means that we are not called to serve only when we can do so conveniently and at no cost to ourselves. It means that we are called to serve at our cost when we would much rather do something else.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, our love for one another in Christ’s name is modeled on his sacrificial love for us. “Love one another as I have loved you,” he said (Jn. 15:12), and Jesus loved us by offering his life for our sake on the cross.

Finally, the love for others that reflects Christ’s love will involve *sharing*. We are to share ourselves with others, freely giving of our time, talents, and spiritual gifts. We are to share the provision God has given to us, that others might have their needs provided for. Most importantly, the love of Jesus calls us to share the good news of salvation through faith in him, so that others may know and love Jesus Christ and find eternal life in him. Here, the command to love merges with the last of Jesus’ commandments, given just before he ascended into heaven: “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation” (Mk. 16:15). How can we claim to love Christ if we neglect this great command to share his love with others?

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<sup>7</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 4:1109.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

## LOVE, OBEDIENCE, AND ASSURANCE

**W**e should conclude our study of this important verse by considering the relationship between love, obedience and our assurance of salvation. This is important because love for Christ is integral to our faith in Christ, and it is only through faith in Christ that we are saved. Because this is so important, in his first epistle, John made explicit the link between our love for Jesus, our obedience to Jesus' commands, and our assurance of salvation: "by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments... Whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may be sure that we are in him" (1 Jn. 2:3, 5). John does not say that we are saved by obeying Christ's commands, since salvation is by faith alone, but rather that *we know we are saved* only through a love for Christ that obeys his word.

This teaching makes two vital statements concerning our assurance of salvation. First, if we have no motivation to obey Jesus Christ and thus are not living a life of increasing obedience to his Word, we should have serious concerns about our salvation. To trust Christ is always to love Christ, and he adds, "If you love me, you will obey my commands."

Merely professing faith in Jesus, without bearing the fruit of that faith in obedience, provides no grounds for the assurance of salvation. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke to those who practiced religion but did not obey him in love: "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness" (Mt. 7:23). He explained, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my father who is in heaven" (Mt. 7:21). This was not to establish a works basis for salvation, but rather to point out that a saving love for Jesus will always yield the fruit of a life of obedience to his commands. Therefore, if you have professed faith in Christ, but have neither made progress in biblical obedience nor gained a desire to do so, you should reconsider what you mean by faith in Christ. Biblical faith is never a bare assent to beliefs, but always includes a trust in Christ that yields a personal commitment and surrender to his holy will. If you have not offered yourself wholeheartedly to Christ, then you are not saved, and he calls you to a true faith, trusting in his love, that will yield salvation.

Second, if you love Christ and sincerely desire to honor him through obedience to his Word, this can only be because you are born again to a new and eternal life in Jesus. This is the point of John's teaching in his first epistle: not to cause true believers to doubt their salvation but to encourage weak and faltering believers to have assurance through the evidence of their faith. Even if your obedience is flawed and incomplete, do you find yourself desiring to change in a Christlike direction? How can this be if you are not a true believer? Do you not realize that it is mankind's nature, apart from Christ, to rebel against God and resent his commands? Paul writes, "The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot" (Rom. 8:7). How is it, then, that you are not hostile to God's law, but that you desire to show your love to Christ by obeying him, that you are frustrated by your failure to obey God's law, and that you are in fact increasingly finding that you do keep God's law and find great joy in doing so? The only reasonable answer is that you must be a Christian. James Boice explains, "When a man or woman begins to obey God, first in responding to his offer of salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ and then in a growing desire to live a Christlike life, this is evidence of a divine and supernatural working in his or her life. It is proof that God is present and that he has already began a regenerative work within the individual."<sup>9</sup>

Be greatly encouraged, then, if you desire to show your love to Jesus by obeying his commands. Take heart, and be assured of God's saving work in your life. Now press on in new obedience, and enter into the joy of yielding yourself more and more fully in loving embrace of Christ's commands, knowing that in this way you not only prove your love of Christ to yourself but you show your love to him who has loved you and laid down his life for your sins.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 4:1108.