

Don't Downplay Obedience

Obedience (submitting to and keeping God's commandments) is one of those concepts that can get downplayed because of how it sounds. If we "have to" obey, then love and grace are diminished. If we "have to" obey, then our stress is on the wrong idea. Obedience just kind of sounds oppressive to us, especially in a time that would also see terms like *submission* and *authority* as outdated and tyrannical. Obedience is seen as opposite of mercy, and this perception has, I fear, hurt us.

Obedience is not at all contrary to love and grace. In fact, they are intricately tied together in Scripture. For example, read Titus 2:11-14 to see that grace teaches us to deny ungodliness and worldly passions so that we can live soberly, righteously, and godly while we await the coming of our Lord. If we refuse to obey God, we cannot think that we are living according to His grace.

Most who claim to be Christians would likely say that they want to follow Jesus and the example He set. Who could argue with that? What, then, does Jesus have to say about the matter of obedience, particularly as it is tied to love? Listen to Him, from the Gospel of John:

"I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no claim on me, but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father" (John 14:31).

Note how Jesus ties these ideas together. The way that the world would know that Jesus loves the Father is that "I do as the Father has commanded me." His ultimate demonstration of this was in going to the cross. The proof of love is found in obedience. If we wish to follow the example set by Jesus, then we need to have the same attitude: we obey what God commands so that we may demonstrate our love for Him. Love and obedience cannot be separated here. This combination is found in multiple places. Keeping the commandments demonstrates love.

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15).

"Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him ... If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words." (John 14:21, 23, 24).

"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. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. 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. You are my friends if you do what I command you.” (John 15:10-14)

John also shows the same combination in his epistles. Notice, too, how he argues that knowing God and keeping His commandments are necessary corollaries.

“And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says ‘I know him’ but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.” (1 John 2:3-6)

“By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.” (1 John 5:2-4)

Scripture, then, is quite clear on this point (and we’ve barely touched on what Paul wrote here). If we love God, we keep His commandments. If we love the people of God, we keep God’s commandments. If we know God, we keep His commandments.

We need, then, to stop downplaying the role of obedience. I get it. We don’t want to diminish grace and mercy. However, this is not one of those either/or situations, but a both/and, for it is by the grace and mercy of God that He has revealed His will and given us the opportunity to be reconciled to Him. Obedience in itself is not what saves us, as if it is to be divorced from grace and therefore qualify as earning salvation. No! Absolutely not! Grace is paramount because without it, no amount of “keeping” can save us. Keeping God’s commandments, are, however, one of the signal ways in which we show that we love God and love His people. If we remember that we love Him because He first loved us (1 John 4:19), we can keep grace and obedience together in proper perspective.

“And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments...” (2 John 6).

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