

Series: Walking in the Way of Love

“Knowing that Leads to (Really) Living”

Introduction: Our reading today from John’s first letter has us consider the relationship between knowing and living. We might sum it up with the word “obedience,” but what is obedience, really? Let’s consider two extremes. On the one end of the spectrum there is the term “cheap grace.” This was coined by German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his classic book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. By this term Bonhoeffer was referring to receiving the undeserved favor and love of God without bothering to love God in return. Cheap grace means living as though God doesn’t really care about sin; he’s just happy to forgive us and we’re just happy to receive it. On the other end of the spectrum is the thinking that our life with God is made up of a large list of do’s and don’ts. It’s as if God puts in front of us a kind of obstacle course that we’re to try and get over without falling down and hurting ourselves before we make it, hopefully, to the finish line.

Neither of these are life-giving ways to live. What Jesus gives us, as we’ll see this morning, is a way we can walk a healthy path between these two minefields of cheap grace and an obstacle course. It’s a path which reveals that our life of faith, that really living, is really an intimate relationship with a person—a friendship, even—in which what Jesus calls us to is a way of life, a shape of life, that receives his love and seeks to extend it to others as we love and serve God.

Let’s hear from John’s gospel, and then his first letter, and then unpack this a bit together. [READ]

I. Genuine Christianity

A. What is genuine Christianity? John, as we have pointed out, is spending his retirement years being a pastor to pastors, in particular pastors who had been experiencing people leaving their churches, promoting alternative versions of Christianity, and trying to draw others away with them. They were saying that it really didn’t matter how you lived, and that one could know God without the need for Jesus, either for his life or his death. From having spent three years with Jesus, that is definitely not what John had seen and heard from him! So, John is writing, both to encourage these pastors and to encourage their people to consider carefully what knowing and loving God is all about.

B. Essentially, what John declares in the paragraph that we just heard read, is that our knowledge of God, if it is really knowledge, cannot stop in our heads. Let’s hear John again:

We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands. Whoever says, “I know him,” but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did. [vv. 3-6]

True knowledge of God, in other words, works itself out in the living, as we keep God’s commands, as we do what he commands, as we obey his word. John says this not once, not twice, but three times, in three slightly different but complementary ways, in three short verses. And then he sums it all up in the fourth verse as to what it all really looks like –

Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did. [1 Jn. 2:6]

True knowledge looks like living our lives as Jesus lived his.

John is really just reflecting what he heard from Jesus, that keeping the commands of God is the way we experience the life and joy of the triune God as we enter into an ongoing friendship with him.

C. So this is definitely not cheap grace, grace in which we can receive God's forgiveness and merrily continue on our sinful way. But neither is it a kind of grit your teeth obedience, keeping a list of rules and hoping we can keep more of them more of the time so that God will keep loving us. So, what might be a more helpful way to think about obedience, about knowing that leads to really living?

II. Genuine Obedience

A. Let's think about that by reflecting on Jesus' command that we be willing to lay down our lives for one another: "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." What Jesus reveals is that such sacrificial love can only be offered out of the kind of love Jesus has first given to us. "Love each other," Jesus says, "as I have loved you." [John 15:12-13] Jesus, it seems, doesn't expect us to follow a list, but to follow him.

Just before he said these words Jesus got up from the table where he had been sharing a meal with his followers, took off his outer clothing, wrapped a towel around his waist, and began to wash his disciples' feet. On the surface, this was not all that unusual of an act. People walked a lot to get from one place to another. The roads were dusty. People wore sandals. One's feet often needed washing. But the washing of feet was a service to be done by the most menial of servants. Or, it was at least done for you by one who was of a lower social status. So, a student could wash a teacher's feet, a child his or her parent's feet, or a wife her husband's feet. Each of those acts would have been considered an extreme act of devotion. But never, ever, would one with a "higher" social status wash the feet of one who was beneath them. Not, that is, until Jesus. When he was all done, he said to them (Jn. 13:14-17):

Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is the messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

B. Jesus would go on to explain that if his followers loved one another in this way, the fellowship that this love created would reveal to the world the kind of love that he had come to bring (Jn. 13:34f). This is how it could be an old command (1 Jn. 2:7) – the call to love one's neighbor was as old as the Old Testament – but also a new one (1 Jn. 2:8) – the nature of it, as lived out by Jesus, was more radical than one might ever have imagined. And, if his followers did a good job practicing this love in community, on one another, how much more prepared would they be to go out and love those in the world around them with the love of Jesus? Christian community is where such love is learned and practiced.

C. Further, as this community of Jesus followers continued to take in and practice this Jesus-like love, they would begin to sense that certain ways of acting and responding were not compatible with being his friend. As we begin to attune our hearts to his way of being human (and he is the perfect human), we want to become more and more like him. Do you see how, while we may call this obedience, it goes way beyond and way deeper than just following a list of rules?

Illustration: A Spiritual director and Jesuit priest named Bill Barry tells of a man he used to visit frequently in prison named Darrell. Darrell, he learned, had a conversion experience in prison and so on the next visit, Bill was expecting to hear about some powerful, prayer experience. But what Darrell said was this: "I began to care for a woman who was visiting me. Once I began to care for her, I realized that I couldn't keep on living as I had been living." Darrell's life had been transformed by love, by this woman's love for him and by his desire to reciprocate that love. [[Here's My Heart, Here's My Hand](#), p. 73]

In like manner, obedience, when rightly understood, is nothing more, or less, than falling deeper in love with Jesus. We're not falling for cheap grace, or stumbling over a set of rules, but simply want to please him in increasing ways, facing up to our failures (because God does have standards), and seeking to become more and more like him as we grow in friendship with him.