

Jesus on Obedience

By Daryl Wingerd

Did you know that your motive for obeying someone is just as important as the obedience itself? For example, if a child obeys a parent *just* to avoid punishment, or *just* to get a reward, it is not as meaningful as if the child were to obey out of love and respect for the parent. Those other motivations can produce genuine obedience, at least outwardly, but motivations matter.



The same is true of obedience to Christ. There are plenty of people who call themselves Christians and who live generally moral lives, at least outwardly appearing to obey God, but not all of them obey for the best reasons, and not all of them are true Christians. You see, a true Christian may be simply defined as one who knows and loves Jesus from the heart. And Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15).

Based upon what Jesus said, consider the following thoughts about love and obedience:

- To love something is to value it highly.
- To love Jesus is to value him highly.
- To love Jesus rightly (i.e., according to his actual value) is to place higher value on him than on anything else. The one who truly loves him esteems him to be more valuable than all else because he *is* more valuable than all else.
- Where Jesus truly is esteemed above everything else, his will is esteemed above every other course of action.
- Where Jesus’ will is esteemed above every other course of action, his will is followed (i.e., he is obeyed).
- Where Jesus’ will is known and understood, but not followed, in preference to some other course of action, it is disobedience (i.e., sin).

- Disobedience to Jesus (i.e., sin) is a devaluing of his will in comparison with whatever other course of action was chosen.
- Where Jesus’ will is devalued, *he* is devalued, so to sin is to devalue Jesus—that is, to sin is to *not* love Jesus.

Now, it should be noted that there are other motivations to obey Jesus and avoid sinning. Sin brings painful consequences, like the need for repentance, and sometimes restitution. Sin hurts other people. Sin can disqualify you for certain tasks in the church. Sin can be embarrassing once exposed. Apart from Jesus’ forgiveness, sin ultimately leads to condemnation in hell. These are all what I would call secondary motivations for obedience, and they are all useful as motivations for righteousness. But secondary motivations *alone* do not make a person a Christian, because all true Christians love Jesus. As Paul wrote, “If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed” (1 Cor. 16:21).

Just because a person associates with other Christians and generally conducts himself rightly, it does not make him a true follower of Christ. He might be what is sometimes called a “moralist,” a person who behaves decently, often in association with other Christians, but who has no heart affection for the Lord himself.

You should ask yourself these questions: Is my outward righteousness commonly motivated by an inner affection for the person of the Lord Jesus Christ? Do I *want* to do the right thing because I love him and want to please him? Do I *actually* do the right thing because of my love for Jesus?

Be honest with yourself. If love for Jesus is commonly or usually absent as your motivation for your outwardly righteous living, then you may be a true Christian, but you are thinking and living more like a moralist than a Christian. If love for Jesus is *altogether* absent as your motivation for your outwardly righteous living, then you *are* a moralist and not a Christian. If you call yourself a Christian, and even feel an emotional love for Jesus, but you are continuing unrepentantly in patterns of sinning, then you don’t truly love him and should not be considered a Christian.

These may seem like bold statements from someone who does not know you personally, but I can say all of these things with authority based on Jesus’ simple statement: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

There is no greater authority on the subject of Christian obedience than Jesus himself, so you would be wise to ponder his simple yet profound statement.