THE OBEDIENCE IN A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

John 14:15–24

Key Verse: 14:21

“Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them.”

We’ve been studying this summer about having a real relationship with God. Isaiah 1 depicts how this relationship starts, when we accept God’s grace of forgiveness. Romans 8 explains that as we live by the Spirit this relationship becomes as intimate and dear as a father and child. John 15 shows how this relationship grows as we do our part to remain in Jesus. And Proverbs 3 teaches us to trust in the Lord with all our hearts and lean not on our own understanding. In today’s passage we learn another important aspect of a real relationship with God: obedience.

The setting is the Last Supper. Jesus just told his disciples that he’d be with them only a little while longer, and that they wouldn’t be able to follow him anymore (13:33). As a man he could no longer be with them in this world. When they heard this, the disciples became really sad (16:6,22). But Jesus started teaching them from now on how to stay in a real love relationship with him.

Read verse 15. Jesus says, “If you love me…” It seems that the disciples loved Jesus so much. They’d left everything to follow him for the past three years. But did they love him, really? John’s Gospel mentions the word “love” 56 times. We’ve seen Jesus’ amazing love for his disciples. He loved those men first, he loved them faithfully, and he loved them to the end (13:1b). He also challenged them to love one another in the same way he loved them (13:34,35). But for the first time Jesus mentions that we need to love *him*. Yes, we all need to receive Jesus’ love. But we can’t just keep taking and taking and taking from Jesus and call that a relationship. We need to learn to love Jesus back. It’s part of a real relationship with him. But how much do we really love Jesus?

Read verse 15 again. In today’s passage Jesus repeats this same teaching several times. In verse 21 he says, “Whoever has my commands and obeys them is the one who loves me…” In verse 23 he says, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching…” In verse 24 he says, “Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching…” There are many ways to show love. Sometimes we love with our emotions; because of our love we can even cry. We can love by saying, “I love you,” or by giving a really special gift. But here Jesus says the way to truly love him is to keep his commands. At first, it doesn’t seem emotionally satisfying to love Jesus through obeying some commands. It may seem weird or even alien. But it’s what he’s looking for from us. Obedience is his love language. Once he said, “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” (Lk6:46) Through our study of 1 John earlier this summer we heard the words, “Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth” (1Jn3:18). And in 1 John it says, “In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands” (1Jn5:3). Throughout the Bible we’re taught that obedience is how we live in a love relationship with God. In Genesis we see Noah, who was different from the people of his time because he walked with God. His fellowship with God was real and close, and he expressed his love for God by doing everything just as God commanded him. We also see Abraham, who obeyed God’s calling, even though he didn’t know where he was going. And whenever God appeared to him and asked him to believe something really hard or to do something really hard, he obeyed. He obeyed God even when he asked him to sacrifice his one and only son Isaac. Through learning how to obey God, Abraham’s love for God grew until he could truly love God most.

Today we live in a culture where obedience is almost taboo. Children are raised not to obey but to be creative. Some would consider obedience a form of abuse. And this spills over into the way people conceive of God. We want God only to be our friend, our equal; sometimes, people try to ride God like a camel, telling him how to do whatever they want. But our relationship with God needs to be based on our obedience. God doesn’t obey us; we obey God. We obey not because we’re terrorized into submission, or in some sort of weird manipulation of God; rather, our obedience comes from love. Because we love God, we obey.

Obedience to God can sound so big and vast and kind of vague. But Jesus makes it very simple and practical. Look at verse 21a. “Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me.” To obey, we first have to “have” Jesus’ commands. And after having them, we have to “keep” them. We want to think about what these things mean.

What does it mean to “have” Jesus’ commands? To “have” them, we have to have been listening to them. We have to have been retaining them, holding them in our hearts, maybe even memorizing them. And he says here “my commands” or “my teaching.” We’d like to say it’s just one big thing, like “love.” But Jesus didn’t go around just saying, “Love.” He wasn’t legalistic, but he taught many things. What are his commands? Jesus gave some of the most profound commands human beings have ever heard. In Luke 6:27,28 he said, “But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” And in Luke 6:37,38 he said, “Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you.” As we live among other people, things often can get really hard. We get upset and think and say many things. But we should have Jesus’ commands and keep them. When we love, forgive and give to people, they may not change at all. But that’s not the point. The point in keeping these commands is that it’s the way we express our love for Jesus. In real life, we all face financial challenges also. We can get so burdened and start to really worry what we’re going to eat, drink or wear. Jesus taught his disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear…Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?...But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well” (Lk12:22,25,31). So when we face a real life situation where we’re short of money and having a hard time, do we focus on getting money, or do we seek his kingdom? Do we even remember what Jesus said? It’s sad but true, that often Jesus’ commands are the furthest thing from our minds. We can scarcely ever hear anyone actually talking about them. Actually by one’s self it may not be possible to “have” Jesus’ commands. Look at verse 26. “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.” We need the Holy Spirit’s help to “have” Jesus’ commands in our day-to-day lives. But we can’t just sit back and wait to be zapped by the Holy Spirit. We also have to take responsibility. We have to do our part to remind ourselves of what Jesus taught. Making time for personal devotions, where we read the Bible personally and spend some time in prayer, helps us to “have” Jesus’ commands as we face the troubles of each day. If we really love Jesus, we make it our priority to “have” his commands.

We also want to think about what it means to “keep” his commands. It was another way of his saying to obey them. But to “keep” them may mean more than just some mindless obedience. When we’re cleaning or organizing, we’re taught to create a “toss” pile and a “keep” pile. We all accumulate a lot of stuff in life, and from an outsider’s point of view, a lot of it is junk. But when we do our purge of our stuff, there are just some things we feel we’ve got to keep. They have sentimental value, or they remind us of something or someone really important. What things have we kept from our childhood? Some people haven’t kept anything; others may have a pretty significant pile of stuff in their attic. From my childhood I’ve kept only a few things. My best friend and I had a hobby of collecting rare coins. I still have the paperback KJV Bible my Sunday school teacher gave me. And I actually have a pair of my baby shoes. Through all the moves and changes in life it’s kind of remarkable I’ve kept these things. To keep something means to treasure it. And this seems to be what Jesus means when he says, “Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me.” What Jesus said should be like our treasure. We should take what he said seriously and really treasure it in our hearts as some of the most important things in life. We all may remember that certain relative who said some pretty memorable things. My grandmother used to listen to all kinds of family members' problems and just say, “Well…” I can never forget it. Kathy’s great-grandmother used to say, “For lands’ sake!” If there’s someone we loved in our lives who said something important, we probably really treasure their words. Well, Jesus said quite a few important things! But do we treasure them like something really dear to us? Are they unforgettable to us? To keep his words, he once said we have to make room for them (8:37b). Why do we keep Jesus’ commands? It’s because they're the very words of God to us, and how we respond to them is going to have eternal significance (12:47–50).

Ultimately, to obey Jesus’ teaching means to imitate his example. Back in chapter 13 he told his disciples, “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” (13:13–17). To keep his teaching means to imitate Jesus, who humbly served his disciples, even when they didn’t love him back and were clueless about a real relationship with him. 1 John 2:3–6 reads, “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 are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.” Here, to keep his commands basically means to learn to live the way Jesus did. It's a sure sign that we love him. Imitating him is a form of personal obedience that shows we really love him.

And in this passage Jesus promises that if we love him and keep his commands, something amazing happens to us. Read verses 16,17. As we keep his commands, we receive the Spirit of truth. The Spirit gives us discernment. He helps us know God and know ourselves rightly and understand other people. What else does the Spirit do for us? Read verse 20. He helps us experience a real relationship with God! Our relationship with him is just as real and intimate as Jesus’ own relationship with the Father. He says it in a different way in verse 21b: “The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them.” The Spirit helps us experience the love of God, and the love of Jesus, as real (Ro5:5). Through the Spirit’s presence we get to know Jesus more and more. In verse 23b Jesus puts it yet another way: “My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.” Through the Spirit we have this abiding relationship with God. Home is a powerful image. It’s a place we feel we belong, a safe place, a place of rest, a place where we’re accepted and loved dearly and unconditionally, a place where all our needs are met. We all have a human home of some kind, but we find our true home in God’s love. Without his love, we feel like orphans (18). But with his love, we feel wanted, safe and secure. We have access to this spiritual home through the key of obedience.

As we learn to love and obey him, Jesus wants us to grow into the same relationship he has with the Father. And what kind of relationship is that? In John 3:35 Jesus says that the Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. In John 5:20 he says that the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. He says in John 8:29, “The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him.” And he says in 14:31 that he loves the Father and does exactly what the Father has commanded him. The Father’s relationship with the Son is reciprocal: the Father loves the Son, gives him everything, shows him everything, and in turn, the Son loves the Father so much, always seeking to do what pleases him, seeking to do exactly what his Father commands. But we may feel so far away from Jesus’ example here. It’s hard for us to confidently say, “I always do what pleases him” or “I do exactly what the Father has commanded me.” But Jesus taught it’s not unattainable—we can do it. In John 15:9,10 he says, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love.” Again, keeping Jesus’ commands is the key. Keeping his commands is the way to remain in a personal love relationship with God, and the way we can grow more and more in the kind of beautiful obedience Jesus showed the Father.

But how can we grow in such an obedient relationship? It requires training. We can’t do it all at once; it takes daily practice, step by step, like learning to ride a bike on training wheels, or learning how to swim or play the oboe. The more we practice obedience to Jesus’ teaching, the stronger we get spiritually. Christians never graduate from learning this kind of obedience to Jesus’ teaching—it’s a life-long process. Hebrews 5:8 says that even Jesus the Son learned obedience from what he suffered; how much more should we. At the end of the day, obedience to God requires trust. It requires letting go of control. Obeying God with our lives is an adventure, like launching out into the ocean. We won’t know where it will take us. So to really obey God with our lives, we can’t calculate; we’ve got to trust him.

Let’s read verse 21 again. May God help us make a new decision to have Jesus’ commands and keep them, and launch into the very real and amazing world of experiencing the great love of God in Jesus.