

Obedience

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Obedience to the Law of Christ is the proof of our repentance, the proof of our faith in Christ, and the clearest and deepest expression of our love for Christ. As to importance, after Christ's work on the cross and the gospel of the kingdom of God – Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah, is Lord – obedience, enabled by the Spirit, is the focus of the Scriptures, and teaching it is part of the essential core of the church's commission. Obedience, most importantly, glorifies the Father and secondarily, for us who order our lives according to Jesus' Law, obedience is freedom — freedom to be what the Father always intended us to be and, thus, live a truly human life.

To most this sounds surprising, for today we begin with God's love and acceptance, emphasizing a relationship with Jesus. Some don't even do this but emphasize all that God wants to do for them. This so-called Christianity is merely a form of postmodern narcissism.

In contrast to the prevailing view on obedience, consider Jesus' imperative in the Great Commission.

And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, *teaching them to observe all that I commanded you*; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Matthew 28:18–20 [emphasis added]

In His Great Commission, Jesus commands that we make disciples of all nations. For the Christian there are no national boundaries; disciples are found in every nation. These disciples are to be baptized in the Name of the Holy Trinity — the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And what are we to teach them? We are to teach them to observe, that is obey, all things Jesus has commanded. Obedience to the Law of Christ is at the heart of our commission and, thus, at the heart of Christianity.

Consider further what Paul says in Romans:

Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh, who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom *we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for His*

name's sake, among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ.

Romans 1:1–6 [emphasis added]

For Paul, obedience is at the heart of his task to bring the gospel.

Consider now Peter.

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, *to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood*: May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure.

1 Peter 1:1,2 [emphasis added]

Here, Peter, in the opening address of his first epistle, greets those who have been chosen to obey Jesus. Christians are chosen to obey Jesus.

1 The Christianity of Christ and His Apostles

The Christianity of Christ and His Apostles is a Christianity of action, specifically, obedience to the Law of Christ. Of course, what makes reconciliation with God possible and restores man's ability to obey God and live an authentic Christian life is Christ's atoning work on the cross. The Father, through the Son alone, provides the means of forgiveness and redemption.

We participate in this redemption by confessing Jesus as Lord, believing that God has raised Him from the dead, and then walking in obedience — obedience enabled by the Spirit of God.

That men and women are called to action in the form of obedience to the Law of Christ is evident when we observe that the gospel is introduced with the call to repentance. John the Baptist, Jesus, Peter, and Paul all begin their message with repentance.¹ This call to action is further reinforced when we realize that repentance is first an agreement with God's assessment of our condition; we are lawless rebels against God who are under God's judgment facing an eternity in the Lake of Fire. Second, it is the knowledge and then belief that the Son's atoning work on the cross is our only hope of reconciliation to God. Third, it is the belief that God has raised the Son from the dead and lastly, it is the active and deliberate reordering of our lives according to the Law of Christ, that is, our lives are characterized by obedience to the Law of Christ, and this obedience becomes more and more perfect the longer we walk by the Spirit.

¹Matthew 3:2; 4:12; Mark 1:15; 6:12; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 17:30; 26:20

The call to obedience is always part of Jesus' message in a variety of contexts.

Someone said to Him, "Behold, Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside seeking to speak to You." But Jesus answered the one who was telling Him and said, "Who is My mother and who are My brothers?" And stretching out His hand toward His disciples, He said, "Behold My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother."

Matthew 12:47-50

While Jesus was saying these things, one of the women in the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, "Blessed is the womb that bore You and the breasts at which You nursed." But He said, "On the contrary, blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it."

Luke 11:27,28

On what is our family relationship with Christ based? It is based on obedience. In several other passages Jesus teaches that obedience to Him takes precedence over family relationships when He says that obedience to Him will bring conflict within our homes, and that our love for all others must look like hate when compared to our love for Him.²

To His apostles at the Last Supper, Jesus affirms that obedience to His Law is the proof of their love for Him and the condition for His self-disclosure to them.

"He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him." Judas (not Iscariot) said to Him, "Lord, what then has happened that You are going to disclose Yourself to us and not to the world?" Jesus answered and said 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 abode with him. He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father's who sent Me."

John 14:21-24

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus teaches:

Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS."

²Luke 14:26-35; Matthew 10:37-40

Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell – and great was its fall.

Matthew 7:21–27

The wise man obeys the Law of Christ and flourishes while the fool disobeys the Law of Christ and perishes.

To the churches in Revelation Jesus says:

Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place – unless you repent.

Revelation 2:5

Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth.

Revelation 2:16

So remember what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. Therefore if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you.

Revelation 3:3

Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent.

Revelation 3:19

In Romans Paul is quite clear that we are no longer slaves to sin and live in newness of life and are slaves to righteousness.

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it? Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in

newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace.

...

But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.

Romans 6:1–14,17,18

Later in his epistle to the Ephesians Paul teaches that we are created for good works.

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

Ephesians 2:8–10

James is equally concerned about doing, that is, obedience. As he puts it, true religion is about doing.

Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does. If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is worthless. Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

James 1:21–27

In chapter two of his epistle James tells us that faith without works (obedience) is dead.

What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. But someone may well say, "You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works." You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS," and he was called the friend of God. You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.

James 2:14-26

The apostle John in his first letter has a lot to say about obedience.

If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.

1 John 1:6,7

By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.

1 John 2:3-6

By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome.

1 John 5:2,3

We will have occasion to turn to John's first and second epistles later to learn a few more things about obedience.

It is absolutely certain from Scripture that Christianity is a religion of action, and that obedience is at the center of our Christian life. However, in this "I'm OK, you're OK" postmodern world, all this talk of obedience frightens people and the accusation goes up that "You are just fixated on perfection," or that all of us are equally disobedient for we all sin and only one sin makes us guilty. Similarly, we hear the charge that we can't be that obedient since we are just saved sinners. In a moment I will address these heresies, however, we must first establish what the Law of Christ consists of.

2 To What are We Obedient?

Before proceeding we need to establish what is the Law of Christ in order to determine what it is we obey. To do this consider the following commands — commands that are a blessing and freedom and, most importantly, glorify God.

Let us not forget, however, that the Law of Christ can only be obeyed by those who have confessed Jesus as Lord and believe that God has raised Him from the dead, that is, those who can walk by the Spirit.

The following is not a comprehensive list but contains most of the essentials.

2.1 Walk by the Spirit

The Christian is held to a high moral standard. In fact, we are commanded to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.³ When we understand the standard of performance that God commands it seems overwhelming, and indeed it is if we should attempt to walk in our own strength. But thanks be to God, for He has sent the Holy Spirit Who now dwells in us to empower us to be careful to obey His commands and observe His statutes,⁴ for we may now put to death the deeds of the flesh.⁵

However, we must remember that we are not machines that the Spirit animates, but our walk in the Spirit is cooperative; as we choose to obey, the Spirit enables our obedience, and this obedience is freedom and life itself.

Consider what Paul has to say about life lived in the flesh compared to life in the Spirit:

³Matthew 5:48

⁴Ezekiel 11:19,20; 36:22-32

⁵Romans 8:1-14

Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. *Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.* If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another.

Galatians 5:19–26 [emphasis added]

Having died with Christ we have died to sin and are no longer slaves to sin; having been raised with Christ we live unto God,⁶ and walking by the Spirit we are able to put to death the deeds of the flesh along with its passions and desires and can finally live in obedience to God's commands and thus glorify our Father Who is in heaven.

2.2 Moral Purity

As to moral purity Christians must be above reproach.⁷ Adultery, lust, fornication, and divorce and remarriage must not be named among us. Not only this, our thought life is pure since we take every thought captive to our Lord and King.⁸ In our speech we are truthful and we are not vulgar. Our way of life is characterized by honesty, and we rather work so we may care for our own and others instead of taking what is not ours from others.⁹

2.3 Forgiveness

As Christ commanded us and showed us by His life and death, we must always forgive anyone for anything. As we forgive, we glorify God and powerfully witness to the world that God forgives should they repent and turn to Him.

To harbor hatred, ill-will, vengeful thoughts, that is, to not forgive, cuts off God's forgiveness to us and causes a cancer to grow within us that eventually destroys us.¹⁰

⁶Romans 6:1ff.

⁷Philippians 2:15; 1 Timothy 5:7

⁸2 Corinthians 10:5

⁹Ephesians 4:28

¹⁰Matthew 6:7–15; Matthew 18:21–35

2.4 Love

The love that characterizes the Christian's life is agapé love, the love the Holy Spirit enables in God's children. Agapé is unconditional and self-sacrificing and self-giving. Agapé believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things, and does not take into account a wrong suffered. Hence, there is no occasion for revenge or violence. It is the love that enables us to love even enemies; it is the love with which God loves us.

Love of the Brethren

After our love for God (obedience to His commands), love for the brethren follows. Just as love for God is revealed in action, so is our love for the brethren revealed in action, for we sacrificially care for one another.

Our love for one another is also vital for our witness to the world since Christ taught us that the world would know that we are Christians by our love. The truth of this is born out in Acts chapter four where we read that the witness of the apostles was powerful for there were no needy among them.

Nonresistance and Love of Enemies

Perhaps the most extraordinary command that Jesus gives us is that we resist not the evil man and love our enemies, doing good to those who hate us, blessing those who curse us and praying for those who persecute us.¹¹ To teach us what this looks like Jesus lives it out before our eyes, resisting not as He is abused and beaten by Herod's, Pilate's, and the Jewish leaders' soldiers; as He hangs on the cross He lets them have His coat and shirt; He prays, "Father, forgiven them for they know not what they do"; and He does the greatest good that could be done for His enemies – He makes of Himself a propitiation for sins for our reconciliation to God and our redemption from slavery to sin. In this self-giving act, this greatest of all love for enemies, Peter tells us that we too have been called for this same purpose, that is, to patiently endure unjust treatment at the hands of our enemies, entrusting ourselves to Him who judges righteously.¹²

Resistance is forbidden to the follower of Christ for when struck, we turn the other cheek, when sued, we do not counter-sue and we actively love our enemies. If we follow Jesus' way of love we will find that there is no occasion for anger or violence, for those who love with God's agapé love do not take into account a wrong suffered.¹³

Lastly, as a result of these commands we find that we may not participate in or support

¹¹Matthew 5:38–48; Luke 6:27–36

¹²1 Peter 2:18–25

¹³Romans 12:9–21; 1 Corinthians 13:1–13

any group or institution that refuses Jesus' way of peace; in particular, we are forbidden to participate in the state, employing its means to achieve its ends.

2.5 Servanthood

Jesus is again our example in servanthood. In the Old Testament Jesus is the Suffering Servant of Isaiah¹⁴ and in the New Testament Jesus describes Himself as the servant king.¹⁵

Following Jesus we find that those in the Body of Christ live in mutual submission and sacrificially care for one another. Consider what Paul has to say in Philippians chapter two.

Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:1–11

Servanthood, truly self-sacrificing servanthood, is the way to greatness. Jesus teaches this clearly in Mark chapter ten when He says that he who will be great among us will be a servant, and he who would be the greatest will make himself a slave to all.¹⁶ The first shall be last, and the last shall be first, and God gives grace to the humble, but abases the proud.

Lastly, our sacrificial care for one another is the demonstration of our love for one another and hence the proof to the world that we are Christians. In this obedient witness we find our most powerful expression of the gospel.

¹⁴Isaiah 42:1–4; 49:5–7; 53:1–12

¹⁵Matthew 20:20–28; Mark 10:42–45; John 13:1–17

¹⁶Mark 10:35–45; Matthew 25:31–46

And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them. *And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all. For there was not a needy person among them,* for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need.

Acts 4:32–35 [emphasis added]

2.6 Trust God

Trust in God, and faith in God, are absolutely necessary to please God, for without faith it is impossible to please God.¹⁷ To not trust God is also a profound insult to God, the very One “who spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not also with Him, freely give us all things.”¹⁸

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus commands that we not worry about what we shall eat or with what we shall clothe ourselves for our Father knows we need these things and will provide.¹⁹ To live in worry is to disobey our Lord’s command and thus live in sin. To not trust God is to call Him a liar.

2.7 Our Relationship to Wealth

Jesus commands that we keep a safe distance away from riches, for riches are problematic to say the least. Jesus teaches that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.²⁰ This warning should be enough for us to distance ourselves from riches.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus gives us specific instructions not to store up wealth on earth, but in heaven.²¹ He also tells us how to store up wealth in heaven; we store up wealth in heaven by giving away what we have been given.²² We gain true riches as we give away our earthly riches. It is an example of the principle of finding and losing: He who will save his life will lose it and he who will lose his life for Jesus’ sake will find it.

In this same sermon Jesus also commands that we not worry about what we shall eat or with

¹⁷Hebrews 11:6

¹⁸Romans 8:32

¹⁹Matthew 6:19–34; Luke 12:22–34

²⁰Matthew 19:23,24; Mark 10:25; Luke 18:25

²¹Matthew 6:19–34

²²Matthew 19:16–26; Luke 12:13–21,33

what we shall clothe ourselves for our Father knows we need these things and will provide.²³ Thus, the pursuit of wealth and its accumulation is unnecessary.

Understanding that Jesus cares for all our needs we find it much easier to give our wealth away. This is particularly true when we are part of a healthy Christian community where we sacrificially care for one another. Under that condition Jesus' command isn't so hard to obey.

Lastly, let us consider how we keep a safe distance away from riches. For most, this is not hard, for most do not have the ability to earn large sums. However, even then we must be careful to not order our lives so that we may seek riches. On the other hand, there are some whom God has given the ability to earn large sums of money. For these people it is difficult not to acquire wealth. On these people God has placed a tremendous responsibility. These must willingly part with their wealth and use their wealth to generously care for those in need within the Body of Christ. They do not need to make sure they do not earn the large sums of money, but they must make sure they part with large sums of money.

2.8 Christ Above all Others

In no uncertain terms Jesus commands that He hold first place among all our affections and loyalties. He does so with the most severe and uncompromising language.

He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it. He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.

Matthew 10:37–40

If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him, saying, "This man began to build and was not able to finish." Or what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and consider whether he is strong enough with ten thousand men to encounter the one coming against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his

²³Matthew 6:19–34; Luke 12:22–34

own possessions. Therefore, salt is good; but if even salt has become tasteless, with what will it be seasoned? It is useless either for the soil or for the manure pile; it is thrown out. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

Luke 14:26–35

Our love for Christ so eclipses all other loves to such an extent that these other loves, even love for family, look like hate compared to our love for Christ. And how may this work out in our lives? Our true love will reveal itself when, in obedience to Jesus, we offend or anger our loved ones. When this happens we must choose whom to please, whom to obey. Will we obey Jesus or make peace with our loved ones? For the obedient son or daughter of God there is only one choice: obedience to the Law of Christ. We do not seek the approval of man and neither do we fear man. Instead, we fear Him who after He has destroyed the body is able to destroy the soul as well.

2.9 Pray at all Times

Prayer is how we communicate with God the Father. In prayer we praise the Father, make our requests of Him, confess our sins and find forgiveness, pray for strength, and intercede on behalf of others.

As to the form of our prayers, Jesus taught us how to pray.

When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. Pray, then, in this way: “Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.” For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.

Matthew 6:5–15

As to the frequency of our prayers Jesus teaches:

Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart, saying, “In a certain city there was a judge who did not fear God

and did not respect man. There was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, ‘Give me legal protection from my opponent.’ For a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, ‘Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.’ ”

And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge said; now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?”

Luke 18:1–8

Paul puts it this way:

Rejoice always;
pray without ceasing;
in everything give thanks;
for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 5:16–18

The above list is not an exhaustive description of the Law of Christ, but it does capture most of the core imperatives.

Obedience to the Law of Christ is not legalism, but freedom. Those who insist otherwise must ask themselves why it is that Jesus’ Law is burdensome, and then they must realize that they are not of the household of faith, but are of Satan’s domain, being lawless and unknown to King Jesus.

3 The Expectation: Obedient Lives

The passages above should be enough to show that Christian lives must be characterized by obedience, that obedience is expected. They thus, imply that lives characterized by obedience are possible. In fact, such lives are made possible by Jesus’ work on the cross, which resulted in the gift of the Holy Spirit Who empowers us to obey.

To those who believe that I am insisting on perfection or that we really can’t obey that well since we are just saved sinners, consider what John has to say in his first epistle.

We have already seen that John (as well as Jesus and Paul and James) does not believe that we can know Jesus and not obey His commandments. It is simply impossible.

Thankfully, John fully addresses the issue of perfection and the notion of lives characterized by obedience. His writing is clear and unequivocal.

In 1 John 1:8 he says “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us,” cutting off the assertion that we may attain perfection in this life. However, he insists that we can live lives characterized by obedience, something he calls “practicing righteousness.” Consider this from John’s pen.

See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. *And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure. Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness.* You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin. *No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him. Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning.* The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. *No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.* By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: *anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God,* nor the one who does not love his brother.

1 John 3:1–10 [emphasis added]

First, John affirms that those who have their hope fixed in Jesus purify themselves just as Jesus is pure. This can be understood to mean that we strive to remove from our lives all disobedience, for disobedience – that is, sin – makes us impure. He then goes on to emphasize that there are some who practice righteousness and some who practice unrighteousness (lawlessness). Notice how carefully he chooses his words; he has already denied that we can be sinless but he insists that we must practice righteousness (have lives characterized by obedience). To practice righteousness is to abide in and know God, but to practice unrighteousness is to live in sin. It is simply impossible that the child of God practices unrighteousness.

That John would teach this should not be surprising since Jesus Himself taught this in the Sermons on the Mount and the Plain when He said that you shall know them by their fruits. A thorn bush cannot produce figs nor can a fig tree produce thorns. Likewise, the child of God cannot produce unrighteousness. The Christian is not a thorn bush, but a tree that produces righteousness. That is not to say that the tree is always as fruitful as it ought to be, or that it never produces inferior or spoiled fruit, but that as a good tree it characteristically produces good fruit.

From our consideration of John’s text we know that there are levels of obedience all the

way from practicing righteousness to practicing unrighteousness. As to obedience, not all Christians are equal.

Furthermore, from this passage here and the others above we know that we are not all just saved sinners living equally poor lives. On the contrary, the expectation is that we live in obedience, for we are indeed saints.

Walking in obedience is not only possible, but the only possible response for one who has truly confessed Jesus as Lord and believes that God has raised Him from the dead.

In the following section we will take a quick survey of how frequently the writers of the New Testament letters address what it looks like to walk in obedience. In this survey we will find that many of the letters are devoted to what it looks like to obey Jesus.

4 A Survey of the New Testament

A quick survey of the apostolic epistles gives us a good idea of how much of their writings addressed Christian conduct, that is, what obedience looks like. As you can see below, most epistles devote large sections, if not nearly entire epistles, to Christian conduct, that is, how the Law of Christ is applied.

Book Chapters Teaching on Christian Conduct

Book	Chapters Teaching on Conduct	%
Romans	6–8, 12–15 (7 of 16 chapters)	44%
1 Cor	1, 3–14 (13 of 16 chapters)	81%
2 Cor	8, 9, 13 (3 of 13 chapters)	23%
Galatians	5, 6 (2 of 6 chapters)	33%
Ephesians	4, 5, 6 (3 of 6 chapters)	50%
Philippians	2, 3, 4 (3 of 4 chapters)	75%
Colossians	1–4 (4 of 4 chapters)	100%
1 Thess	4, 5 (2 of 5 chapters)	40%
2 Thess	3 (1 of 3 chapters)	33%
1 Timothy	2–6 (5 of 6 chapters)	83%
2 Timothy	2–4 (3 of 4 chapters)	75%
Titus	1–3 (3 of 3 chapters)	100%
Philemon	1 (1 of 1 chapter)	100%
Hebrews	6, 10–12 (4 of 13 chapters)	31%
James	1–5 (5 of 5 chapters)	100%
1 Peter	1–5 (5 of 5 chapters)	100%
2 Peter	1–3 (3 of 3 chapters)	100%

1 John	1–5 (5 of 5 chapters)	100%
2 John	1 (1 of 1 chapter)	100%
3 John	1 (1 of 1 chapter)	100%
Jude	1 (1 of 1 chapter)	100%

As you can see, vast portions of the epistles are given over to teaching on Christian conduct. Obviously, obedience to the Law of Christ is not a passing interest.

4.1 Romans 6, 7 and 8

Below are some passages listed in the table, but before reading these, consider Paul’s teaching in Romans chapters six, seven and eight.

Romans chapters six, seven and eight comprise another passage that powerfully teaches that Christians live in obedience. In chapter six Paul begins his argument.

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?

Romans 6:1

It is inconceivable that a Christian live in sin, that is, live a life that is characterized by sin (disobedience), for to “live in” some status is to be characterized by that status. For example, someone who lives in poverty lives in a condition where poverty characterizes his financial status. Or, to live in water is to be surrounded by water; water, thereby, characterizes your physical environment.

In this chapter Paul uses a very clear and specific argument to prove that we must not continue in sin if we are Christ’s: an argument centered on Christ and His work. As always, Christ is at the center of Paul’s theology.

The argument is presented as follows. Having been baptized into Christ we have been baptized into His death. “Therefore, we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (4).

Thus, we participate in Jesus’ death. Hence, “our old self was crucified with Him in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin” (6,7). We also participate in Jesus’ resurrection for “we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection” (5). Therefore, just as Jesus lives to God so we to live unto God.

With these truths we may confidently consider ourselves “dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (11).

But, what does it mean to be dead to sin, but alive to God? Paul answers with an imperative, an imperative that is a perfectly logical consequence of our new condition in Christ.

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace.

Romans 6:12–14

Above, and in the rest of the chapter, Paul uses the analogy of slavery to make his point, teaching that we are no longer slaves to sin resulting in death, but slaves to God resulting in life. Slavery is an excellent metaphor to describe the two conditions. A slave to sin is mastered by sin, his life is characterized by sin, and his destiny is the Lake of Fire. A slave to God is a slave to righteousness, his life is characterized by obedience, and his blessed destiny is with the Father, Son, and Spirit. Could Paul be clearer? Indeed, how is it possible for those in Christ to continue in sin given what Jesus has accomplished by His death and resurrection?

Pushing the slavery metaphor a bit harder Paul says:

What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be! Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification.

For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death. But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 6:15–23

Whatever you obey, to that you are a slave. If you are a slave to disobedience (impu-

rity/lawlessness), then you die apart from Christ. If you are a slave to righteousness, then you will live. After making a confession that Jesus is Lord there still remains the choice to become a slave to righteousness or unrighteousness. The choice determines if your confession was true.

In chapter seven Paul might appear to change the topic but he remains right on track.²⁴ The main topic of the chapter is the current status and purpose of the Law of Moses and its relationship to sin. He begins by saying that having died with Christ we died “to the Law through the body of Christ, so that we might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit [good works] for God.”²⁵ He explains, further, that while in the flesh “the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death. But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.”²⁶

Some may wonder at this. How, and why is it that the Law of Moses aroused sinful passions? Paul explains quite clearly.

What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, “You shall not covet.” But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead. I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died; and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me; for sin, taking an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. *Therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me? May it never be! Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, so that through the commandment sin would become utterly sinful.*

Romans 7:7–13 [emphasis added]

The reason we had to die to the Law (come out from under the Law) is that the Law,

²⁴In addition to discussing the main point in Romans chapter seven, I want to mention a misunderstanding of Romans 7:14–25. Many use this passage to argue that we Christians are just saved sinners and that we struggle mightily to live obediently. This comes about from Paul’s use of the first person in this passage. However, this passage cannot be describing a Christian for the one speaking is “of the flesh and sold into bondage to sin” (14) and is a “prisoner of the law of sin” (23). Paul has gone to great lengths to show that those in Christ are no longer slaves to sin, having been freed from the law of sin and death. What then can this passage mean? It is a continuation of the first part of Romans seven where Paul also uses the first person in a general way to discuss the effect of the Law of Moses to increase sin. Thus, verses 14-25 describe what it was like to live under the Law. The use of the first person, as it is used here, was a common rhetorical technique in the ancient world. See Ben Witherington III, *New Testament Rhetoric*, pgs. 139-142.

²⁵Romans 7:1–4

²⁶Romans 7:5,6

through the weakness of our flesh, multiplied sin “so that through the commandment sin would become utterly sinful.” Thus, we begin to understand how, and why the Law of Moses multiplied sin. That the Law multiplied sin in order to show sin utterly sinful was not a mistake on God’s part, but part of His eternal plan, for the Law was a tutor to teach man the sinfulness of sin, and hence the hopelessness of his condition. Once this lesson was learned, the Messiah came.

In Galatians Paul helps us to better understand the purpose of the Law of Moses.

Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made. Now a mediator is not for one party only; whereas God is only one. Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law. But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.

Galatians 3:19–25

The Law was a temporary tutor to lead us to Christ, and enable obedience as we will see in Romans chapter eight.

To show the internal tension of living under the Law of Moses Paul recounts the internal struggle the faithful Jew endured while living under the Law of Moses.²⁷ The one who speaks in this passage (Rom 7:14-25) says that he is of the flesh, sold into bondage to sin.²⁸ Later he repeats this, saying that he is prisoner of the law of sin.²⁹ Being thus enslaved, he is unable to do what he truly desires, that is, keep the Law of Moses. Instead he keeps on sinning. This is exactly what Paul has just said in Romans 7:4–13. It is this lesson of hopelessness while under the Law that had to be learned, resulting in the realization that only God could enable true obedience by freeing from sin. This He does through Jesus Christ our Lord.³⁰

After describing the deplorable condition of a person under the Law of Moses, Paul declares our triumphant deliverance in Christ,³¹ for God has indeed acted and “there is now no

²⁷Romans 7:14–25

²⁸Romans 7:14

²⁹Romans 7:23

³⁰It must be noted that the person speaking cannot be a Christian for Paul has just gone to great lengths to show that a Christian is not a slave to sin, but a slave to righteousness. This passage is a continuation of Paul’s explanation of what it was like to live under the Law of Moses. That this is so is also clear from the “for” at the beginning of the passage which functions as the word “because” making the passage part of the argument he is developing regarding the nature of the Law of Moses and why we had to be set free from it.

³¹Romans 7:24,25

condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the Law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” Through Christ’s work we live in obedience.

Here Paul introduces a new phrase, “to walk according to the Spirit,” to characterize a life of obedience, and the phrase, “to walk according to the flesh,” to characterize a life of disobedience.

Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, *who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.* For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

Romans 8:1–8 [emphasis added]

In these verses Paul makes several important connections: First the Law of Moses was unable to set us free from the law of sin, that is, we were slaves to sin. But now through Christ we walk according to the Spirit, that is, in obedience. We are able to subject ourselves to the law of God, having been freed from the law of sin and death. Second, those who live according to the flesh, who set their minds on the flesh, do not and cannot subject themselves to the law of God. Neither can those in the flesh please God. In verse nine Paul emphasizes that you are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if the Spirit dwells in you. In other words, if you are indeed in Christ (and therefore are in the Spirit) you do not live in sin (live in the flesh). Paul thus comes full circle: one who has died and risen with Christ cannot live in sin, for to do so ends in separation from God and death. The one living in sin does not belong to Christ.

The power of the Spirit to live in obedience is expanded further here.

So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh – for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; *but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body*, you will live. For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.

Romans 8:12–14 [emphasis added]

The distinction here is to live according to the flesh, or according to the Spirit. Paul is comparing ways of life, not just different beliefs. This is made more clear when we read that we put to death the deeds of the body, that is sin, by the power of the Spirit. The Spirit enables obedience as God promised in Ezekiel.

Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. *I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.*

Ezekiel 36:26,27 [emphasis added]

Paul ends his argument with a powerful imperative – “So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh – for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.”³²

There are many other passages to which we could go and find clear support that obedience is the normative response to the Law of Christ for a Christian. For example, we could read Galatians 5:16-26; Ephesians 2:1-10; 4:1-5:21; Philippians 1:10-27; 2:1-16; 1 Peter 1:14-16; 4:1-3; and 2 Peter 1:2-11. We could also turn to Jesus Who asked, “Why do you call Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?”³³ and said “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter.”³⁴ However, before leaving this section consider a bit further Paul’s imperative to put to death the deeds of the body.

Jesus and Paul both use the imagery of self-inflicted death or mortification. Jesus teaches that it is not possible to follow Him if we do not take up our cross (Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23). Paul says in Galatians 5:24: “Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires”; in Colossians 3:5: “Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry”; in Ephesians 4:22-24: “put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth”; in Romans 6:6,7: “knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin”; and, finally, in Romans 6:11: “Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

Thus, in our struggle against sin we must take our own life as it were. Dealing with sin in our lives is deadly serious. Even the “instrument” of this self-mortification is horrific, for it is crucifixion, a most horrible means of killing. For those of us today the force of this

³²Romans 8:12,13

³³Luke 6:46

³⁴Matthew 7:21

imagery is lost, but to one living in the first century it was overwhelmingly powerful, for they had seen the brutal, agonizing, and horrible death the crucified endured. Crucifixion was reserved for the worst of the worst: those that posed a serious threat to the Roman Empire. Thus, when Jesus and Paul talked about crucifying ourselves, their audience understood the seriousness of the command. The emphasis implied by the image is perfectly reasonable when we consider the evil of sin. Sin is a violation of God's law, a refusal to obey God's commands: it is outright rebellion of the creature against the Creator. Sin also destroys God's creation and specifically mars the image of God in man. Sin and our flesh are our enemies, and the only fit end for them is death by crucifixion. By the power of the Spirit of God now dwelling in us we can and must crucify the flesh along with its passions and desires.

However, we do not stop at mortifying the flesh, for while we put to death the deeds of the body we are busy obeying our Lord and King, learning what is pleasing to Him, and walking in the good works that have been ordained for us.

Romans chapters six, seven, and eight present the most complete proof that, for the Christian, obedience is normative and enabled by the redemptive work of God through the agency of the obedience of the Son of God, Who by His propitiation for sins allows the gift of the Spirit of God Who enables us to obey.

4.2 An Assortment of New Testament Passages

Below are presented other New Testament passages making clear the expectation for obedience. These are given without comment.

Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all. . . .

But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, "WHEN HE ASCENDED ON HIGH, HE LED CAPTIVE A HOST OF CAPTIVES, AND HE GAVE GIFTS TO MEN." (Now this expression, "He ascended," what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things.) And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result,

we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love. So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness. But you did not learn Christ in this way, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus, that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth. Therefore, laying aside falsehood, **SPEAK TRUTH EACH ONE of you WITH HIS NEIGHBOR**, for we are members of one another. **BE ANGRY, AND yet DO NOT SIN**; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity. He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need. Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear. . . .

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. . . .

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma. But immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints; and there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them; for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light (for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them; for it is disgraceful even to speak of the things which are done by them in secret. But all things become visible when they are exposed by the light, for everything that becomes visible is light. For this reason it says, "Awake, sleeper, And arise from the dead, And Christ will shine on you." Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil. So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get

drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.

Ephesians 4:1–5:21

But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.

Romans 13:14

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him.

Ephesians 1:3,4

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

Ephesians 2:10

Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called.

Ephesians 4:1

Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil. So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.

Ephesians 5:15–18

And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure. Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness. You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin. No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him. Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the

devil. No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother.

1 John 3:3–10

And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. . . .

Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel;

Philippians 1:9–11,27

Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world.

Philippians 2:14,15

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness . . . Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless.

2 Peter 3:10–11,14

For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light.

Colossians 1:10–12

And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach – if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the

gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister.

Colossians 1:21–23

Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry. For it is because of these things that the wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience, and in them you also once walked, when you were living in them. But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him – a renewal in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all.

Colossians 3:5–11

So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.

Colossians 3:12–17

Therefore, prepare your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, “YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY.” . . .

If you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each one’s work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay on earth; knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ.

1 Peter 1:13–19

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through

Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

Jude 1:24,25

Prescribe these things as well, so that they may be above reproach.

1 Timothy 1:7

I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who testified the good confession before Pontius Pilate, that you keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which He will bring about at the proper time – He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen.

1 Timothy 6:13–16

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:16,17

For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children, so that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory.

1 Thessalonians 2:9–12

Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory. . . .

Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry. For it is because of these things that the wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience, and in them you also once walked, when you were living in them. But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him – a renewal in which there is no distinction between Greek

and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all. . .

So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.

Colossians 3:1–17

5 Obedience Enabled by the Holy Spirit

The giving of the Spirit of God to the people of God is mentioned many times when the prophets talk about the new covenant.

But now listen, O Jacob, My servant,
And Israel, whom I have chosen:
Thus says the LORD who made you
And formed you from the womb, who will help you,
Do not fear, O Jacob My servant;
And you Jeshurun whom I have chosen.
For I will pour out water on the thirsty land
And streams on the dry ground;
I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring
And My blessing on your descendants;
And they will spring up among the grass
Like poplars by streams of water.
This one will say, "I am the LORD'S";
And that one will call on the name of Jacob;
And another will write on his hand, "Belonging to the LORD,"
And will name Israel's name with honor.

Isaiah 44:1–5

This is a beautiful description of the blessing that will come when God pours out His Spirit. Like the righteous man in Psalm 1, they will be planted by streams and become firmly planted trees and they will know they are God's – that they belong to the Lord. This is a description of an obedient people, for those who know God, obey God.

Like the passage above, when we read the Old Testament passages that deal with the New Covenant we always find that the giving of the Spirit figures prominently. In fact, the enabling of obedience by the gift of the Spirit is a persistent theme.

“Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD, “*I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it*; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the LORD, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

Jeremiah 31:31–34 [emphasis added]

And I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances and do them. Then they will be My people, and I shall be their God.

Ezekiel 11:19,20

Therefore say to the house of Israel, “Thus says the Lord GOD, ‘It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for My holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you went. I will vindicate the holiness of My great name which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD,’ declares the Lord GOD, ‘when I prove Myself holy among you in their sight. For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. *I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.* You will live in the land that I gave to your forefathers; so you will be My people, and I will be your God. Moreover, I will save you from all your uncleanness; and I will call for the grain and multiply it, and I will not bring a famine on you. I will multiply the fruit of the tree and the produce of the field, so that you will not receive again the disgrace of famine among the nations. Then you will remember your evil ways and your deeds that were not good, and you will loathe yourselves in your own sight for your iniquities and your abominations. I am not doing this for your sake,’ declares the Lord GOD, ‘let it be known to you. Be

ashamed and confounded for your ways, O house of Israel!

Ezekiel 36:22–32 [emphasis added]

I will put My Spirit within you and you will come to life, and I will place you on your own land. Then you will know that I, the LORD, have spoken and done it,” declares the LORD.

Ezekiel 37:14

My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd; and they will walk in My ordinances and keep My statutes and observe them.

Ezekiel 37:24–28

5.1 The Gift of the Spirit Conditioned on Repentance and Obedience

Before proceeding it must be made clear on what conditions God gives His Spirit, for the gift is not given for a prayer or belief or affirmation. No, the Spirit is given only to those who repent and obey.

At the very first sermon delivered on the day of Pentecost Peter affirms that the gift of the Spirit is conditioned on repentance.

Peter said to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

Acts 2:38

The apostles before the Jewish ruling council affirm that the Spirit is given to those who obey God.

And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him.

Acts 5:32

No repentance and obedience, no Spirit. Clearly, most calling themselves Christian today know nothing of the Spirit of God.

5.2 The Spirit's Activities

Many activities are attributed to the Spirit of God by Christians today, however, the Scriptures are careful to explicitly state the Spirit's activities. We don't have to guess at what the Spirit is doing.

- Helper: The Spirit is called our helper. John 14:16–31; 15:26
- The Spirit was to lead the apostles into truth. This is why we can trust the apostle's teachings as Christ's teachings. John 14:25,26; 16:12–15
- The Spirit testifies of Jesus and glorifies Jesus. John 16:12–15,26
- The Spirit convicts of sin. John 16:8
- The Spirit gives power to witness for Christ. Acts 1:5–8
- The Spirit testifies that we are the children of God. Romans 8:16
- The Spirit helps our weaknesses, interceding for us. Romans 8:26–27
- We bear fruit by the power of the Spirit. Galatians 5:16–25
- The Spirit is at work in us to conform us to the image of Christ. Philippians 1:3–6; 2:12,13
- By the Spirit, we may put to death the deeds of the flesh. Romans 8:12–14

The last three items deal directly with obedience. The fruit we bear is both a good character and our works of obedience. The Spirit is also working in us to conform us to the image of Christ, and hence to more complete obedience. Finally, by the Spirit, we put to death the deeds of the flesh, that is, we live more holy lives.

5.3 Walk in the Spirit

The Spirit's enabling of obedience is frequently misunderstood. The confusion arises regarding how the Spirit enables obedience.

Some have the notion that the Spirit animates us. In this we are a bit like a robot controlled by some external entity. For others, we are similarly animated or taken over if we would only let the Spirit so control us.

In reality, neither of these two concepts captures the truth. The Spirit is given to us upon a genuine confession of faith. This is a most precious and amazing gift when seen in light of the Old Testament and the imagery in the New Testament.

In the Old Testament God's Divine Presence, is present when the divine fire of God appears. The fire of God is present when God made His covenant with Abraham, when He called Moses to lead the people of Israel out of exile, when He led the people of Israel through the wilderness, and when He entered the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle and, later, the Temple.

In the New Testament we find that when Jesus cried out “It is finished,” the curtain in the temple that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom, signifying that there was no longer a barrier between God and man and that no high priest was needed to mediate between God and man. In some sense, man could approach the Divine Presence.

In Acts we find out exactly what that torn curtain meant. In the upper room on that day of Pentecost the Divine Presence of God, the fire of God, appeared before those assembled and divided itself and entered each person. The imagery was shattering; God now dwelt in man as He dwelt in the Holy of Holies! It staggers the mind to think of it. In the truest sense God’s people became temples, and corporately the greatest temple ever built.

However, this great gift should not have come as a surprise since God had told us this would happen by His prophets, and Jesus Himself foretold it at the Last Supper.

Now that the Spirit is given, God expects obedience as we cooperate with the Spirit. Thus, the indwelling Spirit of God enables us to obey as we cooperate. We may thereby walk by the Spirit. That is, we obey by the agency of the Spirit.

Now cooperation explicitly entails a choice. It is our choice whether to obey or not obey. If we choose to obey we are empowered by the Spirit to obey. If we choose to disobey we deny the Spirit and live in the flesh.

The fact that we may choose to walk, or be led by, the Spirit, indicates that cooperation with the Spirit is by choice. Paul starts off his great passage on the Spirit in Galatians with “if you are led by the Spirit, . . .” the ‘if’ indicating a choice. His use of the word ‘led’ is also instructive, for one must choose to be led.

5.4 Enables Obedience – New Testament

The Old Testament is quite clear that when the New Covenant is established God will place His Spirit in His people and they will be careful to walk in His ordinances and keep his statutes. It is God’s promise to enable obedience by the gift of the Spirit.

Let us turn now the epistles and find the resonances with God’s promise to enable obedience by the gift of the Spirit.

In Romans chapter eight we have a lengthy discourse on the Spirit in relation to obedience. First, the law of the Spirit of life in Christ has set us free from the law of sin and death (vs. 2). Romans 6 shows that the consequence of this fact is that we are no longer slaves to sin but slaves to righteousness, that in Christ’s death we died to sin, and in His resurrection we have been raised in newness of life that we might serve God. Sin no longer has dominion over us – we may live in obedience.

In this chapter Paul uses the phrase “walk according to the Spirit” to describe a life of obedience in contrast to a life of disobedience, which is described as a “walk according to the flesh.” To walk according to the Spirit is life, whereas to walk according to the flesh is death. Life and death hinge on obedience.

Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, *who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.*

Romans 8:1–4 [emphasis added]

In verse nine he introduces another phrase, a shorthand for the phrases introduced above. Consider this passage.

However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.

Romans 8:9–11

Here we find “in the flesh” to indicate a walk according to the flesh, that is, a life of disobedience. Now the one in whom Christ dwells is “in the Spirit” (walks in obedience) and not “in the flesh.” Notice that to walk in the Spirit brings spiritual life, that is, obedience and a future hope when God will give life to our mortal bodies through the Spirit who dwells in us.

Given this great work of Christ’s, Paul says that we are under obligation to not live according to the flesh, that is in disobedience. Paul puts it this way:

So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh – for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.

Romans 8:12–14

To emphasize our obligation to God Paul says that we are to put to death the deeds of the body. Our enmity to sin is so great and our effort so energetic that the Christian kills the sin

found in his life by the power of the Spirit of God, and he again emphasizes that only those who are led by the Spirit (live in obedience) are the children of God. This is essentially the same thing that James says in James 2:14-26 and what John teaches in 1 John 2:1-6 and 5:1-3. There is no disagreement between the apostles that faith without works is dead.

In this life of obedience Paul once again emphasizes that we are not alone, but that the Spirit helps our weaknesses, for the Spirit intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.³⁵ Finally, he affirms that

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. *For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.*

Rom 8:28-30

Paul continues this theme in Galatians.

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another.

Galatians 5:16-26

Here Paul uses the phrase “walk by the Spirit” that is parallel in meaning to “walk in the Spirit” to make the same point he made in Romans chapter eight – if we walk by the Spirit we will not carry out the desire of the flesh, that is, live in disobedience, but rather produce the fruit of the Spirit.³⁶

³⁵Romans 8:26,27

³⁶Some say that Gal 5:15-26 teaches that you “may not do the things that you please.” In other words, we cannot live lives characterized by obedience. We are just saved sinners. This is the same argument that many make with Romans 7. This passage, however, teaches the opposite, for if we walk by the Spirit we will not carry out the desires of the flesh. In fact, we have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. This is a description of victory over sin – a life characterized by obedience. The statement that “you may not do the things that you please” is for those walking in the flesh.

We find a similar theme in Ephesians 5:15–21 where Paul commands us to be filled with the Spirit. A command is not given if it cannot be fulfilled. A life of obedience is mandatory for those who would actually follow Christ, for God is at work in us to perfect that work until the day of Christ Jesus.³⁷

6 Obedience and Our Relationship to God

Many well-meaning pastors not only emphasize the need for a relationship with Jesus, but make it their primary message. This is true as far as it goes; however, much more needs to be said. If all we say is that we need a relationship with Jesus, we leave out many things that must be said, specifically how that relationship is established and how it is sustained, in addition to the nature of the relationship. This is especially needful in our age since *relationship* is frequently understood in subjective and emotional terms (an emotional state of mind) rather than in concrete terms (action). Additionally, in the Protestant world, the notion of a relationship with Jesus carries with it an emphasis of the fulfillment of deep emotional needs, especially when things are difficult, and, in its more perverse embodiments, includes erotic dimensions.

It is important to note that it is not wrong to say that Jesus meets deep emotional needs and carries us through difficult times. However, if this is the emphasis of our relationship with Jesus, then it is entirely un-Scriptural. In reality, the emphasis found in Scripture is not on the relationship as such but on how the relationship is established and how it is maintained. The Scriptural emphasis makes the concept of a relationship very concrete; subjectivity is removed.

6.1 Establishing the Relationship

John the Baptist’s message, Jesus’ message, Peter’s message, and Paul’s message began with “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.” With respect to our responsibility, repentance is the first step in the establishment of a proper relationship to God. The Father, through the Son’s work of atonement, makes the relationship possible, but we must repent.

Repentance is first an agreement with God’s assessment of our condition; we are lawless rebels against God who are under God’s judgment facing an eternity in the Lake of Fire. Second, it is the knowledge and then belief that the Son’s atoning work on the cross is our only hope of reconciliation to God. Third, it is the belief that God has raised the Son from the dead. Lastly, it is the reordering of our lives according to the Law of Christ, that is, our lives are characterized by obedience to the Law of Christ, and this obedience becomes more and more perfect the longer we walk by the Spirit.

³⁷Philippians 1:6

6.2 The Nature of the Relationship

The nature of our relationship with God consists of a hierarchical dimension as well as love. First, consider the hierarchical dimension.

Hierarchy and our Relationship to God

The nature of our relationship with the Father, the Son, and the Spirit can be understood in Who They are and who we are. God is our Creator, Master, Judge; the Son, in addition to these, is our King, Savior, Priest, Advocate, and on a more personal level our Brother and Friend; the Spirit is our Helper and Comforter. Those who confess Jesus as Lord find ourselves to be His children, servants, slaves, friends, and brothers and sisters. Notice how varied is this relationship. Although at one level it is very intimate – friend, brother – on another level it is entirely hierarchical; Master/slave, Creator/creature, King/subject, Savior/lost, Judge/accused, Father/child. Although our relationship consists of familial dimensions, we must never allow ourselves to relate to the Father and Son in the common familiar way we relate to other humans, for they remain our Creator, Master, King, Savior, Judge, and Advocate. For us, there is always a profound reverence, awe, humility, abasement, and fear when we approach God. We see this very attitude when God's Shekinah glory appears in the Old Testament, when the glorified Jesus appears on the Mount of Transfiguration, when He appears to Paul on the road to Damascus, and when He appears to John in the Revelation of Christ. For His subjects, to be found in the presence of the risen Lord is to experience fear, awe, joy, and love all at the same time.

Love and our Relationship to God

The deepest and most meaningful relationships are grounded in mutual love. In Christianity this love is the most profound love, agapé love, the divine self-giving, self-sacrificing love with which God loves us and the love that the Spirit empowers in us. At its core, this love does not consist of emotion, but acts of the will. This is not to say that it does not entail emotion, but that emotion is secondary to our actions, specifically our obedience to the Law of Christ. The distinction between emotion and action is an important one made necessary by the modern emphasis on emotion when speaking about love. For the modern and especially for the postmodern, love is more an emotional state of mind than action.

To understand that the Scriptures teach that action, that is our obedience to the Law of Christ, is the deepest expression of our love for God, all we need to do is consult Jesus and the Apostles, for they most certainly teach it.

Consider Jesus first. In John 14 Jesus clearly equates love for Him with obedience to His commands.

He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him. . . . Jesus answered and said 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 abode with him. He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father's who sent Me.

John 14:21,23,24

You are My friends if you do what I command you.

John 15:14

My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.

John 15:8

Notice that fruit is another term for works of faith that consist of obedience to Jesus' Law.

Jesus knows of no love for Him or relationship with Him apart from obedience to His commands. Obedience is how we express our love for Christ. And how does Jesus, the Son of God, express His love for the Father?

I will not speak much more with you, for the ruler of the world is coming, and he has nothing in Me; *but so that the world may know that I love the Father, I do exactly as the Father commanded Me.* Get up, let us go from here.

John 14:30,31 [emphasis added]

In John's first epistle we find the same teaching affirmed.

If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.

1 John 1:6,7

One who walks in the light keeps God's commandments.

In John's second epistle we find an explicit equivalence between love and obedience.

And this is love, that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, that you should walk in it.

2 John 1:6

We also find that obedience to the Law of Christ is the proof that we know Him and that we abide in Him and He in us, for Jesus says:

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.

John 15:10

Once again John affirms the same.

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world. By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.

1 John 2:1-6

The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.

1 John 3:24

By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit.

1 John 4:14

Watch yourselves, that you do not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward. Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son.

2 John 1:8,9

Obedience is also the proof that we love the children of God.

By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome.

1 John 5:2,3

The proof that obedience is foundational to our relationship with God is simply overwhelming. Those who do not teach this are failing their spiritual charges, and those who teach the opposite stand condemned and face an eternity in the Lake of Fire if they do not repent.

7 Sustaining and Deepening our Relationship to God

From the passages in the section above we can see that our relationship with God is sustained by our obedience – no obedience, no relationship.

In addition to the passages above, perhaps the most frightening is spoken by Jesus Himself.

I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned.

John 15:5,6

Since abiding in Christ is conditioned on our obedience, we find from the above that if we do not abide in Christ, that is, are not obedient, we are thrown away and cast into the fire. For any serious Christian this should strike fear into our hearts and cause us to do exactly as Jesus commands.

But note, our obedience is not founded primarily on our fear of judgment but on our love for Christ (we love Him for He first loved us), and His commandments are not burdensome.³⁸

Many people talk about deepening their relationship with Christ, insisting that reading the Bible, praying, and spending time with Him is the way we accomplish this and learn more about Jesus. It is true that Bible reading and prayer deepen our relationship, but they are not of first importance, even though they are needful. This comes as a surprise to many, but Jesus makes it quite clear.

He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him.

Jn 14:21

Jesus' self-disclosure is conditioned on obedience. Do you want to know more of Jesus? Then obey Him.

³⁸1 John 5:2,3

In our postmodern fog most assert that we get to know Jesus by spending time with Him. However, the concept is without meaning. If you were to ask ten people what it means to spend time with Jesus you would get ten different answers. This confusion arises since the Scriptures do not talk about spending time with Jesus, and neither does the notion appear. What it does say about knowing Jesus is as solid as granite and as clear as crystal: If you would know Jesus, you must obey Him.

8 The Intensity and Seriousness of Christian Life

Seeing how important obedience is, we find that the Scriptures describe the Christian life as a life of deliberate intensity, of labor and striving, working out our salvation in fear and trembling for God's glory is at stake and our salvation hangs in the balance.

The Christian does not try to find out how far he may wander from Jesus' Law and still be in the Body of Christ. Instead he mercilessly examines himself, buffets his body, puts to death the deeds of the flesh, and runs with endurance. Is it any wonder then how Christ and the apostles describe the Christian life?

- Be alert: Mat 24:42, 43; Mat 25:13, Mar 13:33-35, 37; Luk 12:37; 21:36; Acts 20:31; 1Co 16:13; Eph 6:18; Col 4:2; 1Th 5:6; 1 Pet 5:8
- Strive, striving, labor: Rom. 15:30 (KJV); 1 Cor. 4:12 (KJV); Col. 1:29; 1 Thess. 1:3; 2:9; 3:5; 5:12; 1 Tim. 4:10
- Endure: Matt 24:13, Mk. 13:13; 2 Thess. 1:4; 2 Tim. 2:3, 10; 4:5; James 5:11; 1 Pet. 2:19
- Fight: 1 Cor. 9:26; 1 Tim. 6:12; 2 Tim. 4:7; Heb. 10:32
- Take pains: 1 Tim. 4:15
- Be careful to . . . : Titus 3:8; Eph. 5:15-18
- Steadfast: 1 Cor. 15:58
- Persevere: 1 Tim. 4:16, Jas 1:12
- Press on: Phil. 3:12, 14; Heb. 6:1
- Zealous: Titus 2:14; 1 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 3:19
- Be sober: 1 Cor. 15:34; 1 Thess. 5:6,8; 2 Tim. 4:5; 1 Pet. 1:13; 4:7; 5:8
- Diligent, diligence: 2 Pet. 1:5-11; Eph. 4:3; 2 Tim. 2:15; Heb. 4:11; 2 Pet. 3:14; 2 Cor. 8:7; Heb. 6:11
- Devote: Col. 4:2
- Suffer: Rom. 8:17; 1 Cor. 4:12; 2 Cor. 1:6; Phil. 1:29; 1 Thess. 3:4; 2 Thess. 1:5; 1 Tim. 4:10; 2 Tim. 1:12; 2:3,9,12; 3:12; Heb. 11:25; 1 Pet. 2:20; 3:14,17; 4:16,19; Rev. 2:10

9 The Early Church on Obedience

To some, this chapter appears to contain new and foreign ideas. However, it contains nothing of the sort. In fact it is in agreement with the ancient church. The exegesis and interpretation of the Scriptures found here are consistent with a plain reading of Scripture and agree with the earliest writings of the Church of the first three centuries, the church that knew the apostles and the men they trained. Being closest in time to the apostles, we may use them to verify our understanding of Christ and the apostles.

Some may object to this, however, we can do no better than these men to check our understanding of the Scriptures given their proximity to the apostles and the uniformity of their writings on many subjects. Their consensus on most biblical issues is extraordinary and spans both time and location, being essentially the same over the three centuries after the apostles and throughout the entire Roman Empire.

Below I have gathered a number of quotations from the early church (pre-325 A.D.) where they express their views on the necessity of obedience.³⁹ As you read them you will find many resonances with what has already been written above.

... that he [God] may both hear you, and perceive by your works that you are indeed the members of his Son.

Ignatius, ANF 1.51

Faith cannot do the works of unbelief, nor unbelief the works of faith.

Ignatius, ANF 1.53

The tree is made manifest by its fruit. So those who profess themselves to be Christians will be recognized by their conduct.

Ignatius, ANF 1.55

But He who raised Him up from the dead will raise up us also, if we do His will, and walk in His commandments, and love what He loved, keeping ourselves from all unrighteousness, covetousness, love of money, evil speaking, false witness; “not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing,” or blow for blow, or cursing for cursing.

Polycarp, ANF 1.33

The way of light, then, is as follows. If anyone desires to travel to the appointed place, he must be zealous in his works.

Epistle of Barnabas, ANF 1.148

³⁹The references for the quotes are read in the following way. ANF stands for the ten volume work of the Ante-Nicene Fathers. The first number is the volume and the second the page number in that volume.

We take earnest heed in these last days; for the whole [past] time of your faith will profit you nothing, unless now in this wicked time we also withstand coming sources of danger, as becometh the sons of God. . . . Take heed, lest resting at our ease, as those who are the called [of God], we should fall asleep in our sins, and the wicked prince, acquiring power over us, should thrust us away from the kingdom of the Lord. And all the more attend to this, my brethren, when ye reflect and behold, that after so great signs and wonders were wrought in Israel, they were thus [at length] abandoned. Let us beware lest we be found [fulfilling that saying], as it is written, “Many are called, but few are chosen.”

Epistle of Barnabas, ANF 1.139

We are justified by our works, and not our words.

Clement of Rome, ANF 1.13

This, then, is our reward if we will confess him by whom we have been saved. But in what way will we confess him? We confess him by doing what he says, not transgressing his commandments, and honoring him not only with our lips, but with all our heart and all our mind. . . . Let us, then, not only call him Lord, for that will not save us. For he says, “Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will be saved, but he that works righteousness.” For that reason, brethren, let us confess him by our works, by loving one another.

II Clement, ANF 7.518

Therefore, brethren, by doing the will of the Father, and keeping the flesh holy, and observing the commandments of the Lord, we will obtain eternal life.

II Clement, ANF 7.519

Let us then practice righteousness so that we will be saved unto the end.

II Clement, ANF 7.523

It is neither the faith, nor the love, nor the hope, nor the endurance of one day; rather, “he that endures to the end will be saved.”

Clement of Alexandria, ANF 2.600

And he does not believe God, who does not do what God has commanded.

Clement of Alexandria, ANF 2.416

To obey the Word, whom we call the Instructor, is to believe in him, going against him in nothing.

Clement of Alexandria, ANF 2.350

No one, then, can be a believer and at the same time be licentious.

Clement of Alexandria, ANF 2.505

It is the will of God that he who repents of his sins and is obedient to the commandments should be saved.

Clement of Alexandria, ANF 2.263

So that when we hear, “Thy faith hath saved thee,” we do not understand Him to say absolutely that those who have believed in any way whatever shall be saved, unless also works follow. But it was to the Jews alone that He spoke this utterance, who kept the law and lived blamelessly, who wanted only faith in the Lord. No one, then, can be a believer and at the same time be licentious; but though he quit the flesh, he must put off the passions, so as to be capable of reaching his own mansion.

Clement of Alexandria, ANF 2.505

“For by grace we are saved:” not, indeed, without good works; but we must, by being formed for what is good, acquire an inclination for it.

Clement of Alexandria, ANF 2.445

Whoever obtains this and distinguishes himself in good works will gain the prize of everlasting life... Others, attaching slight importance to the works that tend to salvation, do not make the necessary preparation for attaining to the objects of their hope.

Clement of Alexandria, ANF 2.591

Some of the [heretics] . . . simply deny the Law and the Prophets for the sake of their lawless and impious doctrine. And under the pretense of grace, they have sunk down to the lowest abyss of perdition.

Caius, ANF 5.602

If thou seekest to live, being a believing man, as do the Gentiles, the joys of the world remove thee from the grace of Christ.

Commodianus, ANF 4.214

He follows Christ who stands in his commandments, who walks in the way of his teaching, who follows in his footsteps and his ways, who imitates that which Christ both did and taught. . . . To put on the name of Christ, and yet not go in the way of Christ – what else is this but a mockery of the divine name! It is a desertion of the way of salvation. For he himself teaches and says that the person who keeps his commandments will come into life.

Cyprian, ANF 5.494

We are still in the world; we are still placed in the battle-field; we fight daily for our lives. Care must be taken, that after such beginnings as these there should also come an increase, and that what you have begun to be with such a blessed commencement should be consummated in you. It is a slight thing to have been able to attain anything; it is more to be able to keep what you have attained; even as faith itself and saving birth makes alive, not by being received, but by being preserved. Nor is it actually the attainment, but the perfecting, that keeps a man for God. The Lord taught this in His instruction when He said, "Behold, thou art made whole; sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee." . . . Solomon also, and Saul, and many others, so long as they walked in the Lord's ways, were able to keep the grace given to them. When the discipline of the Lord was forsaken by them, grace also forsook them.

Cyprian, ANF 5.284

By enduring suffering and by going forward to Christ by the narrow way that Christ trod, we may receive the reward of his life.

Cyprian, ANF 5.472

Only those who fear the Lord and keep his commandments have life with God; but as for those who do not keep his commandments, there is no life in them.

Hermas, ANF 2.25

Life is the possession of all who keep the commandments of the Lord.

Hermas, ANF 2.42

For the Lord has sworn by His glory, in regard to His elect, that if any one of them sin after a certain day which has been fixed, he shall not be saved. For the repentance of the righteous has limits. Filled up are the days of repentance to all the saints; but to the heathen, repentance will be possible even to the last day. . . . For the Lord hath sworn by His Son, that those who denied their Lord have abandoned their life in despair.

Hermas, ANF 2.11

He will bestow on them the blessing which he has promised them, with much glory and great joy, if only they will keep the commandments of God, which they have received in great faith.

Hermas, ANF 2.10

Hoodwinking therefore multitudes, he led on (into enormities) many (dupes) of this description who had become his disciples, by teaching them that they were prone, no doubt, to sin, but beyond the reach of danger, from the fact of their belonging

to the perfect power, and of their being participators in the inconceivable potency. And subsequent to the (first) baptism, to these they promise another, which they call Redemption.

Hippolytus, ANF 5.92

Those who do not obey him, being disinherited by him, have ceased to be his sons.

Irenaeus, ANF 1.525

We ought not, therefore, as that presbyter remarks, to be puffed up, nor be severe upon those of old time, but ought ourselves to fear, lest perchance, after [we have come to] the knowledge of Christ, if we do things displeasing to God, we obtain no further forgiveness of sins, but be shut out from His kingdom. And therefore it was that Paul said, "For if [God] spared not the natural branches, [take heed] lest He also spare not thee, who, when thou wert a wild olive tree, wert grafted into the fatness of the olive tree, and wert made a partaker of its fatness."

Irenaeus, ANF 1.499

Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, not effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And as it was not to those who are without that he said these things, but to us, lest we should be cast forth from the kingdom of God, by doing any such thing.

Irenaeus, ANF 1.500

The elders pointed out that those men are devoid of sense, who, [arguing] from what happened to those who formerly did not obey God, do endeavour to bring in another Father, setting over against [these punishments] what great things the Lord had done at His coming to save those who received Him, taking compassion upon them; while they keep silence with regard to His judgment; and all those things which shall come upon such as have heard His words, but done them not, and that it were better for them if they had not been born, and that it shall be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the judgment than for that city which did not receive the word of His disciples.

Irenaeus, ANF 1.501

We cannot attain to immortality by a delicate and easy course of life. Rather, he can arrive at the unspeakable reward of eternal life with only the utmost difficulty and great labors.

Lactantius, ANF 7.200

The spirit must earn immortality by works of righteousness.

Lactantius, ANF 7.127

He has set before you all of these things, and shows you that, if you follow after evil, you will be condemned for your evil deeds. But, if you follow goodness, you will receive from him abundant good, together with immortal life forever.

Melito, ANF 8.754

Therefore, let each one lose his own sinning life, that having lost that which is sinful, he may receive that which is saved by right actions.

Origen, ANF 9.465

To those who by patient continuance in well doing seek immortality, he will give life everlasting.

Theophilus, ANF 2.93

So, by obeying the will of God, he who wants to can procure for himself life everlasting. For God has given us a law and holy commandments. And everyone who keeps them can be saved. And, obtaining the resurrection, he can inherit incorruption.

Theophilus, ANF 2.105

For what I say is this, that the repentance which, being shown us and commanded us through God's grace, recalls us to grace with the Lord, when once learned and undertaken by us ought never afterward to be cancelled by repetition of sin.

Tertullian, ANF 3.660

The world returned to sin . . . and so it is destined to fire. So is the man who after baptism renews his sins.

Tertullian, ANF 3.673

God had foreseen also other weaknesses incident to the condition of man, — the stratagems of the enemy, the deceptive aspects of the creatures, the snares of the world; that faith, even after baptism, would be endangered; that the most, after attaining unto salvation, would be lost again, through soiling the wedding-dress, through failing to provide oil for their torchlets.

Tertullian, ANF 3.639

We ought indeed to walk so holily, and with so entire substantiality of faith, as to be confident and secure in regard of our own conscience, desiring that that (gift) may

abide in us to the end, yet not presuming (that it will). For he who presumes feels less apprehension; he who feels less apprehension takes less precaution; he who takes less precaution runs more risk. Fear is the foundation of salvation; presumption is an impediment to fear. More useful, then, is it to apprehend that we may possibly fail, than to presume that we cannot; for apprehending will lead us to fear, fearing to caution, and caution to salvation. On the other hand, if we presume, there will be neither fear nor caution to save us.

Tertullian, ANF 4.19

It is for this reason that [the Gnostics] neither regard works as necessary for themselves, nor do they observe any of the calls of duty, eluding even the necessity of martyrdom on any pretense that may suit their pleasure.

Tertullian, ANF 3.517

So that if they repent, all who wish for it can obtain mercy from God: and the Scripture foretells that they shall be blessed, saying, "Blessed is the man to whom the Lord imputeth not sin;" that is, having repented of his sins, that he may receive remission of them from God; and not as you deceive yourselves, and some others who resemble you in this, who say, that even though they be sinners, but know God, the Lord will not impute sin to them.

Justin Martyr, ANF 1.270

Let those who are not found living as he taught, be understood not to be Christians, even though they profess with the lips the teaching of Christ. For it is not those who make profession, but those who do the works, who will be saved.

Justin Martyr, ANF 1.168

But there is no other [way] than this, — to become acquainted with this Christ, to be washed in the fountain spoken of by Isaiah for the remission of sins; and for the rest, to live sinless lives.

Justin Martyr, ANF 1.217

Each man goes to everlasting punishment or salvation according to the value of his actions.

Justin Martyr, ANF 1.166

From the quotes above it is clear that the early church believed that it was impossible to be a Christian and live in disobedience.

10 Conclusion

The Scriptures teach that obedience is the way of the Christian; God's Word knows of no Christians whose lives are not characterized by obedience. However, the Scriptural emphasis on obedience is not legalism. On the contrary, it is freedom to be what God always wanted us to be, it enables the creation of caring Christian communities and, most importantly, obedience pleases and glorifies God.

As I reflect on my life I see that obedience has indeed brought into my life what the Scriptures have promised. I have not sought peace, fulfillment, joy, meaning, purpose, or even a relationship with Christ. What I have done, is in whatever condition I have found myself, I have sought, by prayer and the study of God's Word, what it is that God would have me do. Most of what He wants is perfectly clear and, as I have walked in the power of the Spirit, my obedience to the Law of Christ has increased. However, there have been crushing difficulties that nearly brought me down. In these times I have not focused on the truths that Jesus will get me through or that He loves me. I internalized these truths long ago. The question was what I was going to do. Thus, I sought to know and live out what I was supposed to do (obey), learn from the difficulty, and gracefully submit to God's will in permitting the difficulty. In other words, I focused on obedience, for more than anything else I desperately desire to glorify my God, for He is worthy beyond words. As I have done so I have found the strength to endure, I have found peace and meaning, and I have found my relationship to Jesus deepen as He has become more dear and more beautiful to me than I could ever have imagined.

What I have found is what Jesus meant when He said: "He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it."⁴⁰ As I have thought less of myself and sought to be pleasing to my King I have found, without seeking, the very things we all desire. Obedience is the blessed Way of the Christian.

⁴⁰Matthew 10:39