

## OBEYING LOVE

### Love for God #1

Sarah was the daughter of a colonel in the U.S. Army. A beautiful young lady of 18, it was understandable that her father was protective of her. But the inevitable happened. In the summer of 1832, Sarah became infatuated with a tall, handsome, 24 year old lieutenant named Jeff who served under her father's command.

Right from the beginning, Sarah's father disapproved of the relationship. In part, it was probably because he didn't want his daughter marrying into the army for he knew the hardships that military service put on a marriage. But it was also her boyfriend that bothered him. Jeff was a dashing, handsome man. But he was also very idealistic and given to outbursts of anger. Sarah's father just didn't feel that Sarah and Jeff were a good match.

Well, Jeff was irate at Sarah's father. So much so that he actually considered challenging him to a duel. Imagine that. Challenging the man who would become your father-in-law to a duel. Happily, Jeff's friends talked him out of that plan by promising to help him arrange secret meetings with Sarah. And in time, Jeff and Sarah planned to marry each other in spite of her father's objections.

It was in June of 1835 that Sarah supposedly went to visit her aunt in Beechland, Kentucky. Actually, she was eloping to marry Jeff instead. After the wedding ceremony, Jeff and Sarah planned a lengthy honeymoon in the deep south, down in Louisiana.

Just 2 months after their wedding, both Jeff and Sarah contracted malaria. Jeff did recover from it, but Sarah never did. She died on a plantation in Louisiana, hundreds of miles away from her father and mother. It would take Jeff 8 years of almost total seclusion to recover from her death- Sarah's father would never fully recover from it.

And one cannot help but wonder how the history of our country might have been changed if Sarah would have not so flagrantly disobeyed her father's wishes, if Sarah's father and Jeff could have in time worked out their differences. For Sarah Taylor was the daughter of Zachary Taylor, the man who eventually would become the 12th president of the U.S. And Sarah's young, impetuous husband was Jefferson Davis,

the man who would ultimately become the President of the Confederacy.

Why is it so difficult for parents to deal with the disobedience of their children? Why did Zachary Taylor grieve his entire life over the loss of his daughter, Sarah? Is it not because of the connection in our minds between obedience and love? A young child gains approval from a parent by obeying. So as he or she grows up, there is a connection that develops between loving and obeying. Now there is certainly a time when any child must become independent, must make decisions on his or her own. But so often, the transition is so difficult. The parent whose wishes are denied often feels that his child has betrayed him, has stopped loving him.

The Bible clearly teaches us that one of the ways in which we demonstrate our love for God is thru our obedience to him. And whereas human relationships do change with time, children grow up into adult independence, our relationship with God never does change. We remain a child of God throughout our entire lifetime. We certainly do move thru different stages of maturity.

We are initially born again as a babe in Christ. We desire the milk of the word. But then we begin to grow into maturity in our relationship with Christ. But all the time, we remain one of the God's children. Therefore, there remains a connection between love and obedience throughout our entire lifetime.

There are many commandments required of us by God that are stated in the Bible. But there is one commandment that has priority over all the others. It was during the final week of Christ's life upon this earth before his crucifixion and resurrection that an expert in the O.T. law approached Jesus asking him the question, *Teacher, what is the greatest commandment?* Without hesitation, Jesus answered, *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments. (Matt. 22:37-40; Mark 12:30-31).* Jesus said that the Greatest Commandment was to love God and our neighbors and that this summarized the entire Law and prophets of the O.T.

But what does it mean to Love God? What does it mean to love our neighbor? What does love for God look like? How can we be sure that we are loving God and our neighbors as God wants us to? The term love today is one of those terms that is so common, so popular, but so nebulous in its meaning. We use

the term love when speaking of our relationship to a new car, a pet, our spouse, a favorite food, and innumerable other things. We show love for our new car by washing it, we show love for our pet by feeding it, we show love for our spouse by kissing her, we show love for food by eating it- how do we show love for God? And how do we show love for our neighbors?

You see, language is distinctive in that the more popular a word becomes the broader its meaning becomes and the less it actually means. We would think that it would work the opposite. We would think that the more a word is used, the more refined its meaning would become. But the opposite actually occurs with regards to language. The more widely a word is used, the broader its meaning becomes until it actually ceases to mean much of anything at all.

Years ago, the term "born again" had a very specific meaning. It clearly meant a new birth into the family of God. But then, born again became quite popular in the English usage, and in time its meaning broadened and broadened to the point where it now means many things. I saw this past week this term "born again" referring to Tiger Woods' recovery from his knee surgery - a far cry from its original meaning.

Now we have to realize that this is what has happened to the term "love". Love has been used of so many things in so many ways that love pretty much means anything that anyone wants it to mean today. To some, love is an emotion. To others, love is an affection. To others, love is a preference. To others, love is a feeling. To others, love is a power. What really is love? And most importantly for our considerations, since loving God and our neighbors is the greatest commandment and the summary of the entire law of God, what does it mean to love God? And what does it mean to love our neighbors?

We plan to take the next 5 weeks looking specifically at how the Bible describes loving God. And then later, we plan to take another 3 weeks looking specifically at how the Bible describes loving our neighbors. Our goal is to have confidence that we are fulfilling the greatest commandment, that we are doing what is most pleasing to God.

In 1 John 5, we have one of those statements that gives a definition of love for God. It is not the complete definition, of course. But it certainly is part of the definition. And it helps us as we begin to find a definition for Biblical Love for God.

READ 1 John 5:1-3.

*Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. <sup>2</sup> This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. <sup>3</sup> This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome.*

**This is love for God: to obey his commands.**

Now when you think of it, looking from a human vantagepoint, God has gone to a great deal of trouble to reveal his word to us. This is certainly from a human standpoint, for an omnipotent God doesn't have trouble with anything. But just consider for a moment:

\*working thru the lives and experiences of over 40 different people who would be human authors of the Scriptures

\*transcending some 1,500 years of human history, with all of the different cultural barriers and changing political scenes.

\*God revealed his word:

- to Moses from a flaming mountaintop
- to David in an abandoned cave
- to Jeremiah in a dried up well in the ground
- to Paul in a Roman prison
- to John on an island in exile

\*And for over 2,000 years, God has carefully preserved his word against persecution, bonfires, ignorance, so that we today still have the completed revelation of God.

\*Don't you think that God's word is important to him? David the Psalmist said "for you have exalted above all things your name and your word." Ps. 138:2.

\*Now when we value God's word, when we study it and learn it, and when we do our best to obey it, God interprets our actions as love for him.

We have been at war in Iraq for over 5 years now. Many of our finest young people have been yanked out of their daily schedules and sent overseas to live in the desert. Shane VandeVrede, who served with us as a Seminary intern just a couple of years ago, is now over in Iraq as a military chaplain. I know from

emailing him that of all the inconveniences that he is suffering, comforts of home, recreation, heat of climate, etc., the greatest for him is being away from his wife, Janet. Mail call is the highlight of his day, for there is always the possibility that a letter from home might be in the bundle. Imagine with me Shane getting a perfumed letter from Janet and not even opening it, just throwing it in the garbage. What do you think his fellow soldiers would think? Would they think that he loved and missed his wife? Of course not. A man who loves and misses his wife would want to read a letter that she sends to him over and over again.

So it is with God's word to us. If we love God, we will be interested in what He has to say to us. And as we realize what style of life he desires from us, we will be eager to do our best to please Him. It is not that we will perfectly obey all of his commands all the time- for we are sinful people and the flesh is weak. But certainly, it should be our desire to be pleasing to him.

*If you love me, you will keep my commandments*, Jesus told his disciples. This principle remains true today as well. Obedience demonstrates our love for God.

2. But there is also a flip side of this truth that we must look at as well. For love for God is not blind obedience, but rather love for God is discerning obedience. Not that we discern what commands from God we will obey and which ones we will not obey. If a command is from God, if we love him, we will obey it. But we must discern whether or not a command is really from God or not. Especially in our day, when so many are claiming to represent God. Just as love for God is obeying his commandments, love for God is obeying God's commandments alone.

READ Deuteronomy 13:1-4.

*If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, <sup>2</sup> and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, "Let us follow other gods" (gods you have not known) "and let us worship them," <sup>3</sup> you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. The LORD your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul. <sup>4</sup> It is the LORD your God you must follow, and him you must revere. Keep his commands and obey him; serve him and hold fast to him.*

Now here we have a situation where a prophet appears who claims to be speaking on behalf of God.

But he is a false prophet. He is not speaking on behalf of God at all, but he rather has ulterior motives. The Bible speaks of some of these selfish motives - fame, greed, sinful desires, etc. The person who truly loves God is not gullible or naive. The person who truly loves God doesn't just follow any colorful figure that comes along. The person who truly loves God is rather discerning. And in his rejection of the one who is a false prophet, the follower of God is showing his love for God. *The Lord your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul.*

Now we might think at first that this statement given by Moses in Deuteronomy was very necessary in his day, but not so critical today. After all, they didn't have the entire Bible. They had to rely more upon prophets speaking on behalf of God. Today, we do have the completed revelation of Scriptures. Certainly we don't have the problem of following false prophets today, do we?

Oh, yes we do. For whereas it is true that God has given to us the completed canon of Scriptures, there have always been and are today those who are only too willing to twist and distort the Scriptures to their own ends. And the Bible warns us that this trend is going to become more pronounced as the last days come upon us.

Listen to some of the descriptions that Paul gave to Timothy of those false prophets in the last days:

\*they will follow deceiving spirits and demons- 1 Tim. 4:1. There will be an increase in the occult, in the supernatural and the power of it.

\*they will be hypocritical liars whose consciences have been seared - 4:2. Works will not follow words, lives will not follow lessons, and there will be no seeming remorse over sin, seared consciences.

\*they will forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods - 4:3. Some false prophets will be very legalistic in their approach, setting forth their own standards in contrast to God's.

\*they will love to foster controversies and quarrels, and be puffed up in pride - 6:4. Intellectual pride will be a trademark of false prophets in the end times.

\*they will teach that godliness is a means to financial gain. 6:5. If you follow God, you can get rich quick. This will be their message. And they will be followers of their own message in the greediness of their lifestyles.

False prophets. An abundance of them. In the last days. Teaching what people want to hear.

That you can have power without God, in yourself, in the demon world. That you can sin and not suffer the consequences of it. That you can please God by keeping these certain legalistic rules that they make up. That following God will make you rich, that God wants you to be rich in this world's wealth.

God says, if you love me, you will keep my commandments. And if you love me, you will not follow the false prophets. These are 2 very practical tests of your love for me. Now we have to have the right motivation for our obedience for there are several levels of obedience.

\*there is an obedience motivated by fear. We fear what will happen if we do not obey. This kind of obedience obeys because it has to. And many obey God motivated by fear. If I don't do what God tells me, He will get me for it. Now God is not out to get us. There are natural consequences to obeying God. If we persist in sin, we will suffer the natural consequences of our actions, so there are even temporal benefits in obeying God. But we have to always remember that God is for us; he is on our side; he wants for us to succeed as his children. And he doesn't desire for our obedience to be motivated solely by fear. We always should maintain a healthy respect for God- after all, He is God. But a loving father does not want his children cringing in fear around him all the time- this hinders relationship.

\*there is also obedience that is motivated by reward. If we obey, then we will get a reward. God has offered rewards to us for obedience, and we are going to conclude our study of loving God with a look at all of the rewards for loving God that are presented in the Bible- there are many. But this is not the highest motivation for love either. If we obey merely out of fear or for rewards, our obedience is selfish. We simply desire to avoid a negative consequence or reap a positive consequence.

\*No, the highest motivation for obedience is love. And that is the kind of obedience that God desires from his children. Obeying God and following Him alone because of our love for him. God says that our love for him can be demonstrated by our obedience to his commands.

Do we love God? This is the greatest commandment. This is priority number one on God's resolution list. One test of our love for God is found in our obedience to him. Is obedience to God important to us? Are we living our lives in a pattern of obedience to his commandments? Another test is our discernment. Are we following only the Lord? Do we find ourselves regularly rejecting those alluring voices that call us to follow another shepherd besides Christ alone?

