



YOU FIRST*

Jesus said that the Law and the Prophets could be summarized in two commandments, which are to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and might, and to love your neighbor as yourself. (See Matthew 22:37-39; Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18.) Jesus fulfilled the Old Covenant and the Law of God in perfect righteousness and obedience. Therefore, we no longer have to strive to measure up to God's standard in order to receive His love and be blessed by Him.

This said, Jesus gave a new command to us who follow Him, "Love one another as I have loved you." (See John 13:34, 15:12-17.) With this, He entirely changed the configuration and flow of love and blessing. Under the old system, adherents exhaust themselves attempting to love God with all their heart and then, as if there is anything left after using all of their heart, to love others as themselves. But, in the new way of Christ, we as believers receive love unconditionally, freely, and bountifully from God and then are full and able to freely give out what we have received from Him.

This is part of what I call God's **you first** policy. We cannot give out what we have not received for ourselves. God spoke from Heaven in an audible voice in order for His Son (and everyone else around) to unquestionably know of His love and approval. (See Matthew 3:17, 17:5; Mark 11:1; Luke 3:22, 9:35.) In the same way, because of what Jesus did for us, we can be assured of God's love for us before we have done anything to deserve it. (See Ephesians 2:8-9.) But, in order for us to love others as Jesus loves us, we have to let Him love us first.

In fact, Jesus tells His followers to abide in His love. (See John 15:1-9.) This means leaving the old behind being led by the Holy Spirit within us. It means *waiting* for God's guidance and *trusting* that He is working all things out for our good. (See Romans 8:1, 14, 28.) It means *being held and kept* in His presence so that we can receive the fullness of all that He has for us.

Abiding can be hard work because we have to resist the temptations and ways of this world and our flesh in order to remain in Christ. This said, it is the only work that God requires of us.

John 6:29 NLT: Jesus told them, "This is the only work God wants from you: Believe in the one he has sent."

For this reason, we need to do whatever is necessary to rearrange our lives and our priorities in order to abide. This may mean spending time in God's presence and keeping Him first in our lives even if this causes other priorities to receive less of our attention and energy. It may mean reading and meditating on His Word rather than watching television or reading other books. It means doing anything that helps us to know God's love and hear His voice, even at the expense of everything else in our lives.

As we abide, every hindrance is removed, wounds are healed, wrong thinking is replaced with truth, all fear is expelled, and we stop striving for acceptance from anyone other than the One who already accepts us and who is the only One that really matters. This makes us free to love and frees us up to obey God's voice and truly fulfill His purposes.

SIMPLE OBEDIENCE

Before we can tell other people to obey God, He says to us, **you first**. Sometimes, our approach to obedience can become overly passive in the name of "God's sovereignty" thinking that God has predetermined His will and it is both totally inescapable and unaffected by the choices of man. Other

times, we can think that doing God's will lies entirely on our ability to obey Him perfectly or the rest of eternity could be altered by our decisions. Another method is to make our own plans and then ask God to bless what we do.

None of these reflect the relationship of Father and child cooperating to bring about God's will on the earth. To put it plainly, God does have His will, and He gives us free will to cooperate with Him or not. God's will was Eden. Adam's free will messed it up. (See Genesis 3) Jesus, on the other hand, surrendered His free will in order to do only what the Father wanted. On a daily basis and even a moment-by-moment basis, Jesus said and did only what He heard and saw His Father doing by living in obedience to the Holy Spirit. (See John 4:34, 5:19, 6:38, 12:49.)

God doesn't really need our help. He wants our cooperation as His children as He fulfills His eternal plans in all the earth. Sometimes, it seems that He tells us everything because we are His friends and other times, it seems that we are on a need-to-know basis because if He told us everything our minds would explode. This said, when we trust that He loves us and is working for our good and the good of others, we are free to obey even when we don't know exactly what He is doing. In fact, we stop trusting in ourselves and our own ways and truly begin to know to the depths of our being that God is real and He is good to us. Through this, our mind, will, and emotions are changed to be like Jesus as we keep our attention on Him and press into deeper levels of knowing and doing God's will for our lives.

*Romans 12:2: Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but **be transformed by the renewing of your mind**. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will. (See also James 3:15-17; Galatians 5:19-23)*

*Philippians 2:13: for it is **God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose**.*

*2 Corinthians 3:18: And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are **being transformed into his image** with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*

Obedience is simple. All we have to do is listen to God and do what He says. We obey God by submitting to God's will and ways of doing things even at the expense of our desires, pride, plans, timing, reputation, and way of doing things. (See Hebrews 5:8, 12:3-11; James 1:4; Romans 5:3-5) God knows the end from the beginning and often uses supernatural or miraculous methods of executing His plans because His ways are a lot higher than ours and have a holy and eternal objective. (See Isaiah 55:8-11) For this reason, He often leads us in ways that make absolutely no earthly sense whatsoever in order to demonstrate His love, mercy, and power and so that His name is exalted.

When we do what God asks of us, nothing more and nothing less, we can obey and walk away because we are not responsible for the results...God is. When we have followed the promptings of the Holy Spirit, we can have a clear conscience and be confident that we have done what God asked of us, even if we do not see tangible change right away. We do not have to look for recognition, approval, or anything in return from those whom we serve.

When situations and people tempt us into old behavior patterns and we want to confront them in their sin and selfishness, desiring secretly in our hearts to crucify them, God says to us, **you first**. God never leads us in hypocrisy. Before we can rebuke anyone for their faults, we must consider our own flesh, selfish ambitions, and preferences to be as good as a dead sacrifice on the altar of God. This way, we will not be offended by the flesh of others so that we can truly love them.

SIMPLE LOVE

All of us want the love of other people but again, God says to us, **you first**. First we have to learn to love others whether they love us back or not. God's kind of love is merciful. It is not unkind, rude, or jealous. It does not hold a grudge, keep track of how many times people say or do stupid things, or demand loyalty. He just loves.

As we set out to love, undoubtedly, unlovable people cross our paths and it seems that they have been placed there for the singular purpose of aggravating us and revealing to the world just how poorly skilled we are at being like Jesus. But, this is exactly the time for us to overlook their offenses and even to bless them. (See Matthew 5:39-48.) That aggravating person is dead in Christ's death (just like we are), and their sins have already been judged (just like ours have been). This means that we don't have a right to judge them because God already has. If they are a believer, then they are a new creation in Christ even though they may not be behaving like one. What they need is encouragement to know who they really are as a child of God. If they are not a believer, then they are still someone for whom Christ died, and what they need is to hear how much He loves them.

Love is simple, but it is not easy. It can be hard to know what love looks like sometimes. The right approach to loving one person could be a disservice to another depending on where they are in life and what God has purposed for them. (See 1 Thessalonians 5:14.) Sometimes love is allowing ourselves to be treated like a doormat while, at other times, love is rebuking a bully. Sometimes love rushes in to help, and other times love does not.

The only way for us to truly love the way that Jesus loves is to be led by the Holy Spirit the way that He was. As we do so, we discover that love is not catering to spoiled impulses and preferences, enabling or endorsing error, encouraging fleshly lusts or worldly desires, or serving needs towards false ambitions. Love is not turning people into our discipleship projects, conforming them to our image or the patterns of our culture, or creating false dependencies. Love is pointing people to the Father and extending mercy and grace to them as their imperfections are revealed. Love is helping others to stand firm in God's will, plan, and path for their life no matter how hard it gets and leaving them in God's hands when necessary so that their faith is firmly established in Him alone. (See Hebrews 3:13, 10:24; 1 Thessalonians 5:11.) Love is never giving up or losing hope that a person we love can be saved and set free from the pain and torments that afflict them so that they can be transformed into all that God has designed them to be.

In the world's kind of love, there is fear and hidden selfishness such as, "Will they love me back?", or "What if I get hurt by loving so much?" But God's kind of love can be selfless because our love does not depend on anything or anyone other than our relationship and our trust in God—our loving Heavenly Father.

SIMPLE TRUST

Each of us have to trust God for ourselves. This is another part of God's **you first** policy. We have no business telling anyone else to trust Him if we do not trust Him first for ourselves.

Sometimes trusting God is as unsophisticated as believing that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him even if we feel like we do not know what we are doing. (See Hebrews 11:6.) Other times, it means completely taking our hands off of a situation in order to get out of God's way and allow Him to work it out according to His will. (See John 6:29; Zechariah 4:6.) Then again, there are times that God asks us to wholeheartedly jump into doing something completely foreign to us so that we depend entirely on Him as we do it. (See 2 Corinthians 1:9.)

*Proverbs 3:5-6: **Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;**
in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.*

Truth be told, when we start truly relying upon God in deeper levels of trust and obedience, it seems that He leads us straight into situations which appear to be the exact opposite of what He promised us. I call this "a walk with the Lord through the valley of the shadow of death." (See Psalm 23:4.) The path of true greatness and glory includes being willing to be nothing so that God can truly be everything in our lives. He often leads us through obscurity, failure, humiliation, isolation, and various other trials so that we learn to rely upon Him and His faithfulness to bring about what He promised rather than relying on our own strength, abilities, intellect, or skills. When we have become like children and have learned not to trust in our own knowledge of good and evil, we can receive the Kingdom of God. (See Matthew 18:3.) When

we have endured through God's **you first** policy of preparation, we will fear no evil because we have learned to trust God in all things.

CUT TO THE HEART

Before any of us can do much of anything for God, we must submit ourselves to His **you first** policy. In fact, God's desire has always been for people to worship Him in Spirit and in truth, not through religious observance and outward circumcision but because of circumcision of their hearts. (See John 4:24.)

*Deuteronomy 10:16: **Circumcise your hearts**, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer. (Also Deuteronomy 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4, 9:25-26.)*

*Philippians 3:3: For it is **we who are the circumcision**, we who **serve God by his Spirit**, who **boast in Christ Jesus**, and who put **no confidence in the flesh**. (Also Romans 2:28-29.)*

Since the day of Pentecost, people near and far have been "cut to the heart" when they hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Some, like the 3,000 people who repented after hearing Peter's Pentecost day speech, were cut to the heart and became believers. Others, like the religious people listening to Stephen's speech, were cut to the heart in anger and indignation.

*Acts 2:37: When the people heard this, they were **cut to the heart** and said to Peter and the other apostles, "**Brothers, what shall we do?**"*

*Acts 7:51, 54 KJV: "You stiff-necked people! **Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised**. You are just like your ancestors: **You always resist the Holy Spirit!**... When they heard these things, they were **cut to the heart**, and they gnashed on him with [their] teeth.*

As God calls us to His **you first** process, we will either be humbled and willing to do whatever it takes to repent, change, and serve Him or we will be incensed, and resistant in our own self-righteousness. When we are cut to the heart for Christ, it is because we have received revelation from God that Jesus is who He says He is. It is exhilarating and humiliating at the same time because it is like realizing with full assurance that something that we have been in denial about for a long time is actually true. It is recognizing that we have been wrong all along about Jesus and that we do not deserve the grace that He has never stopped extending to us.

The prophet Ezekiel had a vision of a man dressed in white linen who placed the mark of God on the people who were cut to the heart in grief over the horrendous lack of regard for God in Jerusalem. God's prophet Jeremiah was so deeply cut to the heart for God's people that he is commonly called the weeping prophet. Jesus had so much compassion because of His circumcised heart that some people thought He might be Jeremiah reincarnated. (See Matthew 16:14; Luke 9:8, 19:41; John 11:33-35.) Now, God cuts us to the heart by filling us with His love for people and dismay over their separation from God. This motivates us to serve Him and draw them into His Kingdom.

Have you been cut to the heart yet? If you want to do great things for God and His Kingdom then, God is calling you and saying, "**you first**."

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