

LOVE HAS ITS REASONS

By SCOTT GRANT

Obedience has a bad reputation. For many, to be obedient is to be stifled. It is to stay inside the lines and inside the box. If God demands obedience, then he is written off as a demanding taskmaster and cosmic killjoy. Even many followers of Jesus feel conflicted. They've mostly obeyed God, at least outwardly, but they're left with feelings that they haven't obeyed him enough or that they've sacrificed too much. The rewards, they think, have been few. Obedience feels like a burden.

I know. I have entertained such feelings. Even before I came to Christ as a teenager, I was a dutiful older son. After coming to Christ, I endeavored to transfer my obedience to him, but I often struggled with guilt feelings and I secretly coveted the more carefree lifestyles of those around me.

How do the biblical authors explain the obedience they command? The most famous commandments, the Ten Commandments, are preceded by these words from God himself: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exodus 20:2). Because God loves us, he rescues us; therefore, we respond in gratefulness by obeying him, trusting that he knows what's best for us. That's the simplest way of understanding the Bible's commands.

But it's not the only way. The Apostle Paul invokes the Ten Commandments in Romans 13:8-14 and says that all the biblical commands that concern relating to others can be fit into one commandment: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But he doesn't leave us without reasons for obedience. He doesn't just command; he also inspires. He places obedience in the largest possible context. Obedience both realizes God's ancient purposes and anticipates our glorious future. Paul commands us to love because love fulfills the law and because the new age is coming. Obedience to God, then, connects us with both the past and the future. It is, in a sense, transcendent. When we're obedient to God, we're tasting eternity.

In Romans 13:8-14, Paul issues his final general instructions, which have concerned both internal and external relations (Romans 12:3-13, 12:14-13:7, respectively). In this passage, he draws together both concerns.

Romans 13-8-14:

⁸*Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law.* ⁹*For this, "YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, YOU SHALL NOT MURDER, YOU SHALL NOT STEAL, YOU SHALL NOT COVET," and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."* ¹⁰*Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.*

¹¹*Do this, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed.* ¹²*The night is almost gone, and the day is near. Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.* ¹³*Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in*

sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. ¹⁴But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.

Realizing God's ancient purposes

In Romans 13:7, Paul told his readers to render officials what is due them by paying their taxes. The word translated “owe” in verse 8 is related to the word translated “what is due” in verse 7. Just because you’ve paid your taxes to Rome doesn’t mean you’ve discharged your debt to it. The believers in the church owe it to Rome to love one another.

The rationale for this approach is that the one who loves, literally, “the other” has fulfilled the law. The commandment in verse 8 concerns love for each other in the family of God, although as the passage progresses it broadens to concern love for the outside world as well. Nevertheless, love within the family of God in verse 8 is for the benefit of the outside world. The Mosaic Law was given to Israel some 1,400 years before Christ as a witness to the world. If Israel was obedient to God, the Gentiles would be drawn to him (Deuteronomy 4:5-7). If we love each other in the family of God, we are fulfilling this aspect of the law. We are fulfilling the call of God’s people to be a light to the world (Isaiah 42:6, Romans 2:19). We are realizing God’s ancient purposes. Jesus told his disciples, “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). The Holy Spirit helps us love one another in fulfillment of the law (Romans 7:6).

But how can it be said that love for each other is something that we “owe” the world? No doubt the answer concerns our debt to God, who forgives our “debts” (Matthew 6:12). God is concerned for the world, which he loves. We owe it to God to share his concerns. We owe it to God to love each other for the sake of the world. We owe it to God to be a light to the world by loving each other. Our debt to the world, then, is linked to our debt to God, which we can never repay.

In verse 9, Paul explains how it can be said that love fulfills the law. The first half of the Ten Commandments focuses on humans in relationship with God. The second half focuses on humans in relationship with each other. Paul, concerned in this case with human relationships, lists four commandments from the second half. In Paul’s view, the prohibitions gather to form a singular active command in Leviticus 19:18: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Paul reflects the view of Jesus (Matthew 22:39). This is not, of course, a command to love yourself. It’s a command to love your neighbor as you do, in fact, love yourself. When the commandment to love focuses on a neighbor, it includes those in the family of God but it also embraces anyone we encounter in daily life.

The Mosaic Law, which featured the Ten Commandments, was supposed to restrain evil. Instead, it provoked evil. Paradoxically, the law provoked evil to the extent that God could defeat it through the death and resurrection of Christ (Romans 5:20-21, 7:8, 8:3-4). Now, in the footsteps of Christ and by the power of the Spirit, God’s people implement his victory over evil. Paul has been concerned with the presence of evil throughout Romans 12-13 (Romans 12:9, 17, 21; 13:3, 4). Now he says in verse 10, literally, “Love does no evil to a neighbor.” In yet another way, then, love fulfills the law. It does what the law wanted to do but couldn’t do: It defeats evil, the essential problem of

the world. Christ himself defeated evil with love. Paul said in Romans 12:21, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

When we in the family of God love each other and love the world, we fulfill the law: We are drawing the world to God, and we are overcoming evil.

I’ve conducted an informal but worldwide survey of people who were not reared in the church but came to Christ. I’ve asked them what drew them to Christ. Their answers invariably have something to do with love. They either say that they saw followers of Jesus loving each other or that followers of Jesus loved them. People are attracted by a community that loves its members and extends love to others. I could even include myself in my survey, for I wasn’t reared in the church. My experience mirrors that of others that I’ve surveyed. When I was introduced to a church youth group as a junior in high school, I saw love there that I didn’t see in my other circles.

Last year I met regularly with a man who felt the time had come for him to investigate the claims of Jesus. He had moved to the Silicon Valley 8½ years earlier and was still trying to find his way vocationally. He prepared for our Bible studies by thoroughly examining the passages. I enjoyed his keen mind and open heart. We bonded over an appreciation for literature. But I was not able to lead him to Christ. One day, I received a letter from him. He thanked me for meeting with him but told me he was leaving the next day to return to the East Coast. In the letter, he shared with me some reflections on the place we live:

What has become of the people in the Bay Area? They seem shallow to the degree that they are affluent. This land, “The Valley of Heart’s Delight,” is bountiful and beautiful. On my first day (Feb. 20, 1998) out here, I was stunned to see orange trees, their branches bending heavy with fruit. In the depths of winter, trees bore fruit. That same day I noticed something else: sports cars—Porsche Boxsters, Miatas—everywhere. Two seats only, little room for groceries. Of what use were these cars? Now, leaving, I keep remembering Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. Some 70 years ago, he wrote it in Monte Sereno, not far from here. The story is timeless. People migrate to California seeking to better their lives by working the abundance here. Pick fruit, write computer code. If you’ve got energy and enthusiasm, you can make it here. Or so you believed as an article of faith. And the land is bountiful, even more than expected, but what becomes of that bounty? What does it do to the people who possess it? And to the people who don’t possess it? I’ve been a stranger in a strange land for these 8 ½ years, living not in my own home or apartment but in a rented room. ... I was too busy working to exercise stock options or to buy a sports car. I worked like the “Okies” in Steinbeck’s novel worked. I’m proud of that, but I also have come to understand: I don’t belong here.

My friend saw many people here, but do you know who he didn’t see? He didn’t see my church, even though we met in my study. I didn’t introduce him to my spiritual community. I didn’t even introduce him to my family. He didn’t see the people of Jesus loving each other and extending love to him. Upon reading his letter, I recognized my failure. The best witness for Jesus that I could have given him was the community of Jesus, and I didn’t give it to him.

I immediately remembered similar meetings I had with another man a few years earlier. We met weekly for two years at coffee houses in downtown Palo Alto to investigate the claims of Jesus, study the scriptures and talk about life. At first, we met with two other men from this church. I also took him golfing with others from the fellowship. He often commented on the difference between the men from this church and those from his other circles. When he played golf with the PBC men, he felt encouraged by the way they related to each other and related to him. One morning he showed up for our weekly meeting and told me he was ready to commit his life to Christ and to be baptized. When I baptized him in Half Moon Bay a few weeks later, I knew that the church was baptizing him with me.

Recently, Andy and Brigitte Burnham purchased their first house, a fixer-upper, after renting for many years. A host of PBC folks, as many as 40 at a time, has descended on the house to help the Bunhams prepare it for occupancy. Their neighbors have looked on in awe. They somehow know that people are supposed to help each other in this way, but they rarely, if ever, see it.

The church of Jesus Christ—loving each other, extending love to others—is the most powerful witness to his reality. We owe it to God and we owe it to the world to be a community where love is shared and extended. What people want to see is love. And when they see it in us, they're seeing Jesus.

Anticipating our glorious future

Verses 11-14 expand on Romans 12:2, where Paul urged us not to be conformed to, literally, “this age,” which is characterized by opposition to God. In Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, the age to come has broken into this age. In verses 11-14, night symbolizes this age, and day symbolizes the age to come.

Before Paul commands certain behavior, he answers the question, “What time is it?” It’s no longer night. The new day is upon us. Everything has changed. The new age has dawned and will overtake the old age. Therefore, the hour has come for us, literally, “to be raised” from sleep. Already, we have been raised with Christ from the sleep of the old age to live the life of the new age by the power of the Spirit (Romans 6:4, 7:6). Having been raised from sleep, we anticipate the day of final salvation, when we will be raised from the dead. Knowing what time it is, we meet the new day like soldiers who take off their night clothes and put on their armor.

The night clothing represents the “deeds of darkness,” further defined by three pairs of vices in verse 13. The first four vices tend to be deeds of the night in a literal sense. Darkness provides a cover for those who engage in carousing, drunkenness, sexual promiscuity and sensuality (literally, “licentiousness”). To carouse was to involve oneself in excessive feasting that usually included drunkenness. Licentiousness was a term for all sorts of misbehavior, but it was particularly applied to sexual promiscuity, which was sex outside of marriage. Both drunkenness and sexual promiscuity are characteristic of the old age. Especially in light of the new age, which brings with it a world of hope, we do not need to seek artificial highs, illicit liaisons or pornography to satisfy our cravings or anesthetize our pain. We have Christ; we have the Spirit; we look forward to the new creation. God, quite literally, is giving us the world. Obedience to him is transcendent, connecting us both to the past and to the future. It’s what we were made for; it’s what we want.

The last two vices, strife and jealousy, are just as likely to be practiced in the light of day. Of the six vices, Paul in this letter is most concerned with the final two. Thus, by mentioning strife and jealousy last, he sets the stage for Romans 14:1-15:13, where he addresses the tension between Jews and Gentiles in the church. Ethnic rivalries are part of the old age. They are the night clothes that believers must take off.

On the other hand, we must put on the “armor of light” in order to do battle with evil. The old age, and the evil that characterizes it, has not yet passed away. In this passage, the Lord Jesus Christ constitutes the armor. The title “Lord” conveys sovereignty. All forces of evil must submit to the risen Lord Jesus. It behooves us then, as those who wage war against evil, to get as close to Jesus as possible, even to put him on like a suit of armor. We must be intentional about this, though the spiritual disciplines and other approaches, while being sensitive to interruptions that signal the presence of Jesus. Intimacy with Jesus addresses our core desires. If we address our core desires by moving toward Jesus, we’ll be protecting ourselves against addressing them by self-destructive means. If we must, literally, “walk properly, as in the day,” we do so, by the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of Christ (Romans 6:4, 7:6, 8:2-4).

From the perspective of Romans, the principal expressions of evil we must fight are strife and jealousy. We cannot say that God condemns drunkenness and sexual promiscuity while at the same time giving strife and jealousy a free ride. The lordship of Jesus Christ unites us. All rivalries, be they ethnic or otherwise, must be sacrificed for the sake of our Lord. The unity of believers, especially across ethnic lines, signals the presence of the new age. The flesh, humanity in rebellion against God, produces rivalries, not to mention carousing, drunkenness, sexual promiscuity and licentiousness. In making no provision for it, we determine to give it no opportunity.

The commands in Romans 12-13 not only include prohibitions but exhortations, beginning with Romans 12:2: “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Paul doesn’t take something away without giving something else. As a new parent, I’ve learned that the best way to get children to stop doing what you don’t want them to do is to tell them to do something else. If I take something away that could harm them, it’s advisable to give them something else that will benefit them. Paul shows us a better way.

As the multiple negative commands of verse 9 are summed up by the singular positive command to love your neighbor, the multiple negative commands of verse 13 lead into the singular positive command to put on the Lord Jesus Christ. We’re left to assume, then, that putting on the Lord Jesus Christ precludes making provision for the flesh. If we put on Christ, we won’t have to worry about the flesh. We’re also left to assume that if we put on the Lord Jesus Christ, we’ll love our neighbor, particularly our brother or sister in the family of God.

The Apostle John in his gospel evokes creation language when writing of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If you read John 20 with Genesis 1-3 in mind, you understand that John is saying that the resurrection is the beginning of God’s new creation. He depicts Mary Magdalene as coming to the tomb on the first day of the week, while it is still dark. It’s not only the first day of a new week; it’s the first day of a new age. Mary, however, is mourning the death of her Lord.¹ The old age was dominated by death—and by sin, which causes death. The world dwelt in darkness. When Mary comes to the tomb, she is still living in the darkness of the old age. The tomb is empty, she sees Jesus and even speaks with him, but she doesn’t know it’s him. Finally, her eyes are

opened to recognize Jesus, and to see that a new day has burst upon humanity. Jesus commissions her to proclaim his resurrection, which means that God has triumphed over sin and death.

The long night of humanity is over. God has triumphed over our ancient foes, sin and death. The sun has risen on a new age. Because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we can never look on our world in the same way again. Yet, it is still dawn. The full day has not yet arrived. When morning breaks, it's still mostly dark. Although a new day has dawned, it may seem that we're still living in darkness. It may seem that sin and death are still dominating our world. Sometimes, like Mary Magdalene, we can't see that a new day has dawned. John in his symbolism and Paul in his straightforwardness would give us eyes of faith. They would open our eyes, just as Jesus opened Mary's eyes. The future has invaded the present. The Son of God has risen from the dead. God has sent his Spirit to renew his world.

The new day has dawned, and we must live in its light and in anticipation of its full arrival. Feel the warmth of the sun on your face. See the light. Live in hope. The new day brings with it new life and a new world of possibilities. It inspires us to "lay aside the deeds of darkness" and "put on the Lord Jesus Christ," to live in a manner keeping with the new age, "not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy." It's dark out there, but we are the people of the light.

Between the time I graduated from college and got married, I lived as a single man for more than 20 years. During that time, I usually lived with other single men. All told, I had more than 30 housemates. I had so many housemates that I even lived with two men who had the same name. One of the reasons I had so many housemates is that single men often become married men and move out. I watched this happen repeatedly. I also watched men change after they became engaged. They began to think, talk and act differently. Some, for example, began reading the business section of the newspaper first instead of the sports section, knowing that they needed to get serious about finances. They knew that a new day was coming and they began living in light of that day. In some ways, they lived as if that day had already arrived. When you become engaged to be married, you know that everything has changed.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ changes everything. It tells us that we're engaged, so to speak, and that the wedding day is coming. That day, when God makes all things new, will feature what John calls "the marriage supper of the Lamb," who is Christ (Revelation 19:9). Let us therefore live as those who are betrothed.

The greatest adventure

Obedience to God, more than anything else, means love. When we are obedient to God by loving each other and loving the world, we are caught up in his eternal purposes for humanity. It's not about getting your act together; it's about what your act is a part of. Your act is part of God's eternal drama of redemption.

Life is an adventure, then, isn't it? It's also a challenge. The challenge sometimes seems too immense, so we settle for fantasies to spice things up or deaden the pain. In the *Star Trek* television series, the characters could program a fantasy for themselves. One of the visiting characters, Tosk, is offered such an experience in a "holosuite." To Tosk, the offer makes no sense. "I have no use for fantasy adventure," he says. "I am Tosk. I live the greatest adventure one could ever desire."²

With apologies to Tosk, followers of Jesus live the greatest adventure. We have Christ. We have the Spirit. We're taking down the forces of evil with love. We're on our way to the new creation. Let us arise and greet the new day.

*Arise, shine, for your light has come,
And the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For behold, darkness will cover the earth
And deep darkness the peoples;
But the Lord will rise upon you
And his glory will appear upon you.
Nations will come to your light,*

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¹ Just as God finished his work in creating the world on the sixth day, Jesus said from the cross, on the sixth day of the week, "It is finished." God rested on the seventh day; Jesus rested in the tomb on the seventh day. God placed the first man in the garden in Eden; Jesus was the first man to be laid in a new tomb in a garden. When the first woman sinned, her eyes were opened so that she lost her innocence. Mary saw Jesus but didn't recognize him. A new age has dawned, but she's still living in the darkness of the old age. Finally, Jesus speaks her name and opens her eyes, and she sees that God has made all things new. Unlike the first woman, who was banished from Eden, Mary leaves the garden to proclaim God's victory over death.

² *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine, Captive Pursuit*, © 1993 by Paramount Pictures.