

Sunday 10th December 2023

Followers of the Way.

'Life giving principle 3: Obedience' Tom Yacomeni

John 14v12-21

¹² Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³ And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.

¹⁵ "If you love me, keep my commands. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— ¹⁷ the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be^[c] in you. ¹⁸ I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. ¹⁹ Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. ²¹ Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them."

Today is the final instalment of our series *Followers of the Way* and I hope you have enjoyed engaging with the set of waymarks and principles of discipleship inspired by Celtic Christianity and commended by the Community of Aidan and Hilda. It has been encouraging to hear how home groups and individuals have worked through the series together and grappled with some of the challenges.

So a little quiz for you just as a final reminder of what we have covered!

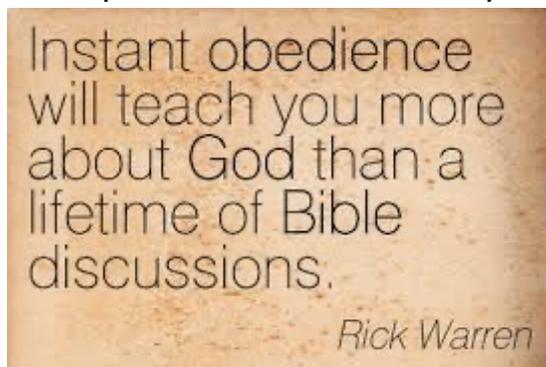
1. Be a lifelong learner
2. Journey with a soul friend
3. Keep a rhythm of prayer, work and recreation
4. Live as simply as possible
5. Celebrate and care for creation
6. Heal whatever is broken
7. Be open to the Holy Spirit and listen
8. Pray for good to overcome evil
9. Pursue unity
10. Share Jesus and justice

And the 3 life-giving principles: Simplicity, purity and obedience

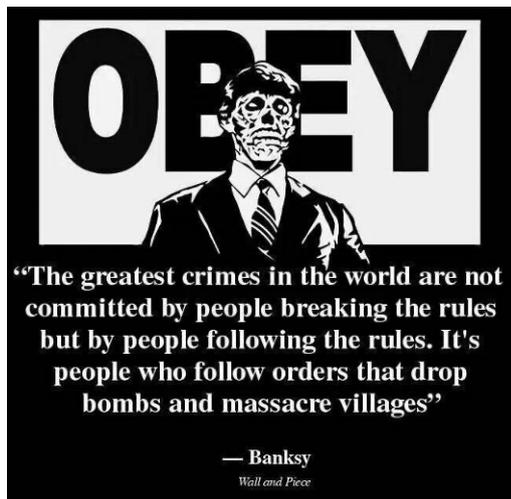
So today we are thinking about obedience and Jesus' challenge to not only obey his commandments but also to teach others to do the same.

By way of background, in Matthew 28 Jesus set out the Great Commission for us when he gave his final instruction to 'go and make disciples of all peoples, baptising them in the name of the Father, son and Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey *everything* I have commanded you, and surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age'.

So part of our continuing mandate is to teach obedience to Jesus' commands – not just some of them or our favourites, but everything Jesus commanded. Now actually that is actually a huge challenge for us, because he set incredibly high standards for the way we should live as his followers. If it was simply a set of religious practices it might be easier, but actually he was more interested in the transformation of our hearts and attitudes, such that we need his grace and power to live humble lives of worship every day of the week. In John 13 verse 34 Jesus summarises his teaching like this 'A new command I give you: Love one another as I have loved you...' If Jesus' supreme demonstration of his love for us was his sacrifice of himself on the cross, that is both our means of receiving salvation and freedom but also our example to follow. Life in the kingdom of God means worshipping him by living otherly lives. As Rick Warren says:



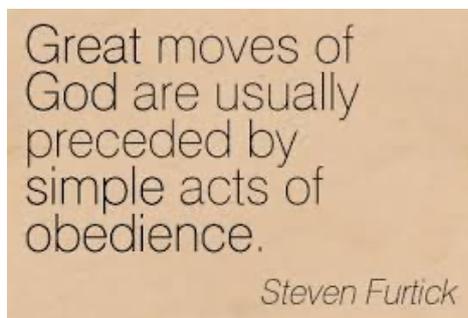
So it might be easy to point the finger and preach: 'what part of the word obey don't you understand!' But that could also do more harm than good because when it comes to a call to obedience we need to be mindful of the fact that this word comes with baggage. It can be seen as toxic. Just look at this piece by the artist Banksy.



I had a quick look at the vision and values statements of various schools and the word *obedience* doesn't feature in any of their Vision statement or values. The word obey has been dropped from Wedding vows too.

So why has the word obedience fallen from grace so-to-speak? Well I think it is because it can conjure up associations of fear and coercion, or mindless compliance like Banksy depicts. Also obedience has been required by authoritarian and insecure leaders in many organisations over the centuries, including, sadly, the church.

However, obedience is nevertheless a theme that runs throughout the Bible, and obedience to God is a very necessary part of discipleship – and for our growth as Christians. As Steven Furtick says:

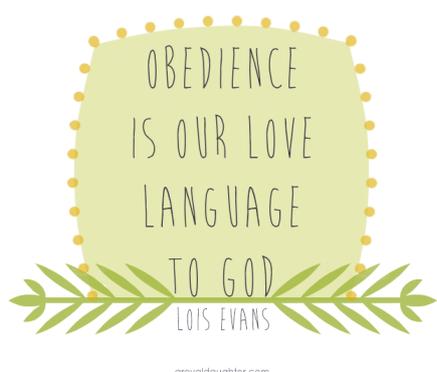


So clearly we need to redeem the word *obedience* this morning by replacing its association with coercion to a more positive form of obedience instead.

In his book 'The five signs of a loving family' by Gary Chapman, the last chapter is all about the need for both obedience and honour for healthy family relationships. Of course he is talking more about the dynamics between parents and children but if we can foster a healthy culture of honour and loving obedience to the Lord and his commands that would really set us apart from the world's corrosive values.

Jesus clearly said 'If you love me, you will obey my commands.' Obedience to Jesus is a positive and automatic response to love for Jesus. As we respond to what God is

telling us to do – perhaps from what we have read in scripture, or discern from the threads of different guidance confirming what the Holy Spirit is saying to us, we start to want to demonstrate our love for the Lord through obedience.



The difficulty comes when we have trouble discerning God's will on a matter or we find ourselves getting stuck in patterns of behaviour or life's getting out of control. The woman at the well described in John chapter 4 was one such person. Her personal life was a mess but Jesus demonstrated what good leadership looks like – establishing relationship, asking for her help, shining God's light onto her situation, yet maintaining her honour and dignity.

Obedience starts with knowing that God is the divine engineer, meshing things together for good for those who love him.

In our bible reading from John 14, Jesus suggests three lovely incentives for why obedience can and should be a joy.

Firstly for the believer, God has **greater things** for us to do for him.

'Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these'

Jesus lived the ultimate life. He carried the Father's heart and did what the Father wanted him to do – as it says in Hebrews 5, his life was perfected because of his obedience.

It is a wonderful thing to sense the pleasure of God flowing through you because you are in a state of obedience to his will. It is like Eric Liddell who said 'when I run, I feel God's pleasure' and he ran obediently for the glory of God.

Jesus said we would do even greater things – what did he mean by that?

Well remember the other times Jesus used the word greater. He talked about the greatest person being the one who serves. He said John the Baptist was the greatest person to have lived, yet the least in the kingdom is greater than him. He also said

greater love has no one than this that they lay down their life for their friends. I think Jesus was talking about the Holy Spirit working most powerfully through those who consider themselves least in the Kingdom and yet obey his commands.

The second lovely incentive is that obedience to God brings **greater prayer** because the Holy Spirit is our advocate.

¹⁵ “If you love me, keep my commands. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— ¹⁷ the Spirit of truth.

Loving obedience to God means we can be transparent before him, open handed and confident of his forgiveness and blessing.

The word advocate here is interesting. The Greek word is *paraklētos* which means ‘Summoned alongside’, and the Holy Spirit helps us to pray. Sometimes with groans that words cannot express.

The third and final incentive for obedience is that brings **greater revelation** The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them.”

I feel excited for 2024 and the opportunities ahead of us for greater things, greater prayer and greater revelation of the Father’s love. I am praying for new ways to engage with our community and I think the Lord is taking us into a season of sowing and planting.

During our prayer time yesterday morning as I was praying about what obedience looks like I was reminded of the story of Philip in Acts 8:

²⁶ Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” ²⁷ So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸ and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. ²⁹ The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.” ³⁰ Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked. ³¹ “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

If you notice, Philip was only given the instruction to start walking to Gaza. Then after he noticed the Ethiopian official he was simply told to stay near a chariot. If it had been me, I would have been tempted to say ‘why’ or ask for more details. But Philip was obedient to the prompting of the Lord and obeyed one step at a time. It is

worth noting that the place of this divine encounter with the Ethiopian was along the road to Gaza. I do pray that there would be divine encounters today in the same location!

So obedience starts with offering our day to the Lord and asking 'can I serve you today?'

Imagine living like Phillip did. How exciting to be led to a divine encounter like that, and then whisked away by the Lord to minister to someone else!

When we obey the commands of the Lord, we can expect to do greater things, we can expect greater prayer, and we can expect greater revelation.

So on that basis, who is up for being obedient to the Lord?

*Trust and obey,
trust and obey,
for there's no other way
to be happy in Jesus,
But to trust and obey.*