Obedience To God’s Commands – A Key To Victory

It is not just the Mosaic Covenant which emphasises obedience to God’s commands. The New Covenant also stresses it (see John 14:21, Romans 6:16, 2 Corinthians 10:5-6, Philippians 2:12, 2 Thessalonians 3:14 and Hebrews 11:8).

Jesus taught that obedience to God’s commands is a sign we love Him. In John 14:21, Jesus said: “He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me…” Note Jesus does not say here that it is he who keeps Jesus’ single commandment to love others, is he who loves Him. Instead Christ refers to obeying all of His commandments. Jesus gave commandments about murder, adultery, sex outside marriage, sexual uncleanness, marriage, divorce, loving enemies, worrying, theft, lying, deceit, greed, blasphemy and other matters (see Matthew 5:21-32, 15:19 and Mark 7:21-22).

False views about obedience

There are many false views among churchgoers about obedience to God’s commands. Here are two examples:

One view claims obedience to God’s commands is one condition of salvation and of being declared righteous before Him. This view is contrary to Romans 3:20, 3:27-28, 4:1-4, 11:6, Galatians 2:16, Ephesians 2:8-9, 2 Timothy 1:9 and Titus 3:4-7.

Another view claims that God does not care if we as believers disobey Him in our actions and that He is concerned only with the intentions of our hearts. They quote God’s Words to Samuel in 1 Samuel 16:7 as supposed proof: “…For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”

But this is a dreadful interpretation of God’s Words here. In 1 Samuel 16:7, God was comparing heart condition to outward physical appearance and surface impressions of one’s character. God was not saying He did not care if David committed murder and adultery as long as David’s heart intentions were supposedly good. In fact, James 2:14-26 reveals our actions are an outward sign of our real heart attitudes toward God.

In the time of the early church, some heretical Gnostic groups who claimed falsely to be Christians, taught it did not matter what our outward actions involved. For example, the Gnostic writing “The Gospel of Thomas” (14) falsely quotes Jesus’ Words in Matthew 15:17-18 as supposed proof that our outward behaviour is unimportant.

The New Testament stresses that God regards believers’ actions as very important. In 2 Corinthians 5:10, Paul said: “For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.”

In John 15:1-8 and Matthew 7:15-21, Jesus stressed that true godly character will express itself in fruit which others can see outwardly. Matthew 7:17-21 says: “Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and
thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them. Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord’, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.”

Christians are called to manifest both Christ and good works of obedience through Christ. Ephesians 2:10 refers to the latter: “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” 2 Corinthians 9:8, Colossians 1:10, 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17, 1 Timothy 5:10, 2 Timothy 2:21, Titus 3:1, 3:8 and James 2:14-26 are similar verses.

**Obeying only the love command and the Holy Spirit?**

Another view says that the only commands which New Covenant believers need to obey are the love commandments and what the Holy Spirit guides us internally. But this is a combination of the false views of situational ethics and of the Quakers.

The Quakers believed that the Holy Spirit can guide us to do things contrary to the specific commands of the New Testament. When commenting on situational ethics and its main teacher, Joseph Fletcher, the Evangelical Dictionary of Theology says: “Moreover Fletcher rejects all revealed norms but the command to love...Jesus had no rules or system of values; revered principles, even the Ten Commandments may be thrown aside if they conflict with love. To break the seventh commandment may be good, it depends on whether love is fully served. Sexual intercourse before marriage – if the decision is made ‘Christianly’ – could be right...morality rests on love relationship. But in situation ethics only one thing is intrinsically good – love, ‘a way of relating to persons and using things’. The end sought, love, is the only criterion, and alone justifies the means. There are no prescribed rules – only love.” 1

As stated earlier, Romans 13:8-10 shows that the general command to love others is expressed in obeying God’s specific commands to not murder, commit adultery, steal, be greedy and so on: “Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, you shall not covet,’ and if there is any other commandment, all are summed up in this saying, namely, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no harm to a neighbor, therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.”

Love summarises but does not replace God’s commands about murder, adultery and so on.

**Flexible guidelines or absolute rules**

Another false view claims that God’s commands are not absolute rules but are instead just flexible optional guidelines that can be amended according to the situation. This view is one “Christianised” variation of the humanistic situational ethics philosophy.

Some of the holders of the above view suggest that the idea of absolute unchanging commands is equated with legalism and/or the Mosaic Law. They say that the greater emphasis in the New Testament on the Holy Spirit and God’s grace means that the instructions of the New Testament about not murdering, not stealing, not lying, not having sex outside of a

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marriage between a male and a female, honouring our parents, avoiding all types of uncleanness in relation to sex, not being greedy and so on are not absolute commands but are only flexible guidelines which can change from situation to situation.

The above approach may appeal to Christians who have been brainwashed by relativism and situational ethics, but it is not that of the New Testament. For example, in 1 Corinthians 14:37, Paul told any person who thinks he is a Spirit-anointed prophet or spiritual that what Paul wrote are the “commands of the Lord”: “If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord.”

Paul was not pleased with so-called “prophets” or supposedly “spiritual” individuals who claimed the inspiration of the Holy Spirit but who ignored His God-inspired absolute commands.

It is true Romans 14:1-13 shows God does not have one absolute will about some matters. In such cases, He allows humans a range of choices. But to apply the Romans 14:1-13 principle to all of God’s New Testament commands is wrong. God’s absolute commands or rules must be obeyed in faith and love for God by the power of the Holy Spirit.

John the Baptist’s attitude to obedience to God’s commands

One popular modern view teaches that the devoted Jewish followers of Christ prior to His death, did not believe that obedience to all of God’s moral commandments was important. But this is wrong. For example, Matthew 14:3-5 records that John the Baptist continually said in public that it was wrong or unlawful in God’s eyes that King Herod had married a woman called Herodias who had previously been married to Herod’s brother Philip: “For Herod had laid hold of John and bound him, and put him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife. For John had said to him, ‘It is not lawful for you to have her.’ And although he wanted to put him to death, he feared the multitude, because they counted him as a prophet.”

John rebuked her for disobeying God’s command found in Leviticus 20:21: “If a man takes his brother’s wife, it is an unclean thing. He has uncovered his brother’s nakedness…”

To some modern Christians, it would seem John was criticising Herod for disobeying a minor law. But John did not think this. He was willing to risk being murdered for rebuking Herod about it. As Matthew 14:6-12 records, Herod did later murder John.

The relevant Greek words for “command” and “commandment”

An examination of the original Greek New Testament words for “command” and “commandment” shows how false is the modern humanistic philosophy that God’s commands are not absolute rules but are instead just flexible guidelines. Here are the Greek words:

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2 Acts 15:23-29 reveals that the Holy Spirit guided the Apostles and elders at the Church Council of Jerusalem to say that the commands of the Mosaic Law in relation to sexual immorality also applied to New Covenant non-Israelite believers. Such commands against sexual immorality include those in Leviticus Chapters 18 and 20 against incest.
The word “entello” means “command, order, give orders.” When someone gives another person an *order*, this is not a flexible guideline which the receiver can choose to amend to suit himself and the situation. Instead, it is a demand which must be obeyed precisely. The word “entello” is used in Matthew 15:4, 17:9, 28:20, Mark 10:3, John 14:31, 15:14 and Acts 1:2. In Matthew 28:20, Jesus said: “teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you…” In John 15:14, Christ stated: “You are My friends if you do whatever I command you.”

The word “diastello” means “order, give orders” or “state with force and/or authority what others *must do*” and is used in Matthew 16:20, Mark 5:43, 7:36 (twice), 8:15, 9:9, Acts 15:24 and Hebrews 12:20.

The word “keleuo” means “command, order” or “to state with force and/or authority what others *must do*.” “Keleuo” is used in Matthew 8:18, 14:19, 14:28 and Luke 18:40 about Jesus commanding others. In many verses in the New Testament, “keleuo” is used in relation to Roman leaders commanding their solders or ordinary people. See for example, Acts 22:30, 23:10, 25:6 and 25:17. Roman leaders expected their commands to be obeyed precisely and without question. They did not regard their commands as mere flexible guidelines.

The word “prostasso” which means “to give detailed instructions as to what must be done” or “command, order” is used in Matthew 1:24, 8:4, 21:6 and Acts 10:33. In Acts 10:33, Cornelius said to Peter: “…Now therefore, we are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God.”

The word “diatasso” which means “order, direct, command” or “to give detailed instructions as to what must be done” is used in Matthew 11:1, Luke 17:9, 17:10, Acts 7:44, 1 Corinthians 7:17, 9:14 and 16:1. In Luke 17:10, Jesus said: “So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.’” In Acts 23:31 and 24:23, the word “diatasso” is used for the commands of Roman leaders.

The word “paragello” means “give orders, command” or “announce what must be done” and is used in Matthew 10:5, Acts 10:42 and 16:18. In 1 Corinthians 11:17, Paul uses “paragello” in relation to his previous orders to the Corinthian believers. In 1 Thessalonians 4:11 and 2 Thessalonians 3:10, Paul used “paragello” to refer to God’s command to believers to work. In Acts 16:23 and 23:30, the word “paragello” is used in relation to the orders of Roman officials.

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3 Bauer, page 268.  
4 Ibid, page 188.  
5 Louw and Nida, page 425.  
6 Bauer, page 427.  
7 Louw and Nida, page 425.  
8 Ibid.  
9 Bauer, page 718.  
10 Bauer, page 189.  
11 Louw and Nida, page 425.  
12 Bauer, page 613.  
13 Louw and Nida, page 426.
The word “paraggelia” means “an announcement as to what must be done” \(^{14}\) and is used in 1 Thessalonians 4:2 of the many commands which the Apostles gave believers: “for you know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus.” Note the following verse – 1 Thessalonians 4:3 – is closely linked to verse 2 and relates to the specific commands of Jesus Christ about sexual immorality. “Paraggelia” is also used in Acts 16:24 and is translated as “charge” in the New King James Version. Note in Acts 16:23-24, “paraggelia” is used in the context of the jailer doing exactly what the Roman magistrate commanded him: “…they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to keep them securely. Having received such a charge, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.”

The word “entole” means “commandment, order” \(^{15}\) or “that which is authoritatively commanded”. \(^{16}\) “Entole” is used in verses such as Matthew 5:19, 19:17, 22:36, 22:38, Mark 12:28, 12:31, Luke 18:20, John 13:34, 14:15, 14:21, 15:10, 15:12, Romans 13:9, 1 Corinthians 7:19, 14:37, Ephesians 6:2, 1 Timothy 6:14, 2 Peter 2:21, 1 John 3:22, 3:23, 3:24, Revelation 12:17 and 14:12. 1 Corinthians 7:19 says: “…but keeping the commandments of God is what matters.” In Matthew 5:19, Jesus declared: “Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

The word “dogma” means “a formalized rule (or set of rules) prescribing what people must do” \(^{17}\) or “decree, command”. \(^{18}\) The word “dogma” is used in Luke 2:1 and Acts 17:7 for the official decrees or orders of Roman Emperors. In Acts 16:4, the word “dogma” refers to the absolute rules which the Apostles and elders at the Council of Jerusalem decreed. Throughout church history, numerous church groups made up their own dogma or rules which were contrary to Scripture. But these are different from the Bible-based dogma to which Acts 16:4 refers.

The word “kanon” means “a rule involving a standard for conduct” \(^{19}\) and “rule, standard”. \(^{20}\) This word is used in Galatians 6:16: “And as many as walk according to this rule, peace and mercy be upon them…” and Philippians 3:16.

The word “ennomos” which means “being under obligation imposed by law”, \(^{21}\) is used in 1 Corinthians 9:21 when it says that New Covenant believers are “under law towards” the Law of Christ: “to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law.” Note this verse says that even though New Covenant believers are not under obligation to the Mosaic Law, they are under obligation to the Law of Christ.

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\(^{14}\) Ibid.
\(^{15}\) Bauer, page 269.
\(^{16}\) Louw and Nida, page 426.
\(^{17}\) Ibid.
\(^{18}\) Bauer, page 201.
\(^{19}\) Louw and Nida, page 427.
\(^{20}\) Bauer, page 403.
\(^{21}\) Louw and Nida, page 428.
Bible Study Questions

1. Does the New Covenant stress the importance of believers obeying God’s commands?
2. What does John 14:21 teach about obedience to God’s commands?
3. What is wrong with the view that believers only need to obey His New Testament commands in their hearts but not necessarily in their external actions? Give Biblical proof for your answer.
4. Explain what is wrong with the view that a Christian is appointed to manifest Christ but not necessarily good works.
5. Discuss what is false about the view that the only commands which New Covenant believers need to obey are the love command and doing what the Holy Spirit guides us internally.
6. Why are the commands of the New Testament absolute rules and not just flexible guidelines?
7. What does Matthew 14:3-5 teach us about John the Baptist’s attitude to obeying God’s commands?
8. Explain why the original Greek New Testament words for “command” and “commandment” show how false is the modern humanistic philosophy that God’s commands are just flexible guidelines and not absolute rules.