



# Shaping the Heart

## Spiritual Formation & the Christian Life

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### Simplicity

*“Because — and to the degree that — we lack a divine Centre our need for security has led us into an insane attachment to things.” Richard Foster*

*Simplicity is the discipline of gaining control over or removing altogether unnecessary distractions, vain attachments, or superfluous relationships that hinder our clear and focused walk with God.*

- *Simplicity forces us to identify and confront the volume of things we acquire in life that may hinder our spiritual fruitfulness. It is often true that the more we have, the more complex our lives become. “Lay up for yourself treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys” (Mt 6:20; see also 1 Tim 6:17-19). The implicit assumption in Mt 6:20 is that we can have too much in this life but can never have enough in the next. Moreover, it is now in this life that we work toward and for the future in the next.*
- *The discipline of simplicity frees us from our attachment to things and connects us to God as the sole Supplier of our contentment. “Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content” (1 Tim 6:6-8).*
- *Simplicity helps us see the value of a few deep relationships, rather than the breadth and often shallowness of many. “A friend loves at all times” (Pr 17:17). Or, “Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy” (Pr 27:5-6).*

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### Obedience & Discipleship

*Control is a deadly enemy to spiritual formation and disobedience is merely an attempt to gain or maintain control over our lives rather than live in accordance with Jesus’s commands.*

**In spiritual formation, obedience is the ongoing sculpting and fashioning of our life after the life of Jesus.** Since we have trusted God with our eternal life, does it not make sense that we can trust him with our earthly life? After all, isn’t obedience really just the tangible expression of our trust in God? Could it be that what stands behind disobedience is a lack of deep and abiding trust in God and his goodness? If we shored up and strengthened our trust in God, would not our obedient living come easier?

The first command Jesus issued to his disciples is “Follow me” (Mt 4:19; also Mk 1:17). Note that the command to follow Jesus precedes the task we are called to, namely “fish for people.” *Who we are* (followers of Jesus; **being**) *defines what it is that we do* (proclaim the Good News; **doing**) and never vice versa. We don’t become followers of Jesus by obeying, but show that we are followers of Jesus by our obedience. Interestingly, the first command is surely a prerequisite to fulfilling the last command Jesus issued: “Go therefore and make disciples...teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Mt 28:18-20). We must first be followers of Jesus before we can make disciples for Jesus.

The word for “disciple” in the Greek is μαθητής. As a verb it means “to learn and conform to.” Therefore, a disciple is one who adheres to someone’s teaching or instruction. In fact, as a noun μαθητής, or “disciple”, was a common first-century designation given to students. “The student [μαθητής] is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher.” (Lk 6:40). Therefore, a disciple of Jesus is an obedient follower of Jesus whose life gradually but certainly looks like their master.

If obedient living is an indication of our trust in God and his goodness, what is stands behind our trust in God? Is it not our love for God? What is the relationship between obedience and love?



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### *Obedience & Love: An Unlikely Relationship?*

Jesus explicitly insists upon a relationship between love and obedience. Read **Jn 14:15, 21, 23**. Jesus is not saying “If you obey me, then you will love me.” Rather, he says “If you love me, you will obey me.” Obedience is a sign of love and devotion; it is the tangible, visible expression of love. All who love Jesus obey him, but not all who obey Jesus love him.

It is unfortunate that the relationship between love for God and the laws of God gets confused. The biblical storyline of Israel repeatedly annotates this confusion between love for God and obedience to God (cf. **Ps 51:16-19; Mt 23:23-24**). The Apostle Paul makes it abundantly clear that the law was never to be seen as a means of establishing a relationship with God; a relationship that can only be established by faith in God (cf. **Gal 2:16; 3:15-28**). Instead, God’s law is a means of maintaining a relationship that is already established by God (**Rom 8:3-4; 1 Jn 4:19**).

Also, Jesus promised that his burden would be light (**Mt 11:28-30**). Believers are not under the yoke of duty but bound by the law of love (**Rom 13:8-10; Gal 5:14; Jm 2:8**), which finds its expression in obedient living.

***Love is to obedience as motivation is to action. Obedience without love is mere duty, while love without obedience is mere sentimentalism. The former depersonalizes relationships, and the latter demoralizes them. We obey God because we love him and not vice versa.***

With one command, viz., “love,” Jesus once and for all did away with the sterile observance of laws and rules *apart from* wholehearted commitment. In one way or another all of God’s laws and rules are expressions of our Father’s love for his children (see **Mt 22:37-40**; similarly, **Rom 13:8**).

Living obediently is an expression of our affection for God. Conversely, living disobediently is an expression of contempt toward God. Therefore, when I am living disobediently it is often my love for God that has weakened and in need of repair (see **1 Jn 2:3-6**). How do I love God more? By looking at the cross, the concrete and definitive expression of God’s grand and great love for us (**Rom 5:8**), which has been put into our hearts (**Rom 5:5**).

Obedience involves not only our active compliance to God’s explicit commands motivated by our love for God, but also our passive endurance under temptation and trial. It is God’s will that we endure pain and suffering (**2 Tim 3:12**). Yet we can be sure that God never demands more than he enables (**1 Cor 10:13**). When God requires our endurance, then he provides the moral strength and courage to carry on. Although the way of obedience is no easy road, we are promised God’s encouragement and comfort in the midst of our trials and difficulties (**2 Cor 1:3-4; 12:8-10; Heb 12:1-13**).

Finally, each week we pray “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Is this request an all-inclusive one or is it selective? When rolling off our lips each week, are we thinking abstractly or concretely? Do we seek God’s will only on a political or social level or do we also long for it on a personal level? This prayer must never exclude our obedience or conformity to God’s will. Unless and until God’s will is sought first in our hearts and expressed in our lives through obedience, then all other levels on which this prayer is prayed are secondary.