
Desiring God's Commandments

The Joy of Christian Obedience

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Do you believe that God should be desired?¹ I cannot imagine a Christian who would say God should not be desired. But what if I modified the question slightly? Do you believe that God's *commands* should be desired? In my experience, people are hesitant to affirm that statement, owing in part to a stigma about God's commands. This stigma often springs from a deep-seated suspicion concerning the danger of legalism.

There is reason to be suspicious because a clear connection exists between law and legalism. God justifies apart from the works of the law (Rom. 3:28, Gal. 2:16). Our acceptance with God in Christ is radically free from self-righteous striving. Therefore, the gospel has the power to uproot a sinful addiction to self-righteous reliance upon the law. The gospel-centered movement, in holding up the finished work of Christ, has rightly attacked moralism and legalism.

But what about the opposite end of the spectrum? Some seem to have an allergic reaction to God's commands. The spectrum of responses ranges from suspicion to outright opposition. But does the Bible support this reaction? Paul rhetorically asked if the law was opposed to the promises of God (Gal. 3:21). He argued that there is no necessary opposition. We need to ask a similar question.

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1 Notice here the distinction between saying "God should be desired" and "I desire God." Our desire for God is not constant, and thus John Piper wrote the book *When I Don't Desire God: How to Fight for Joy* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004). But the truth that God should be desired is constant. It is always true.

Are the commands of God somehow opposed to the gospel of God? This article aims to demonstrate that there is no necessary opposition.

INVITATIONS WRAPPED IN OBLIGATIONS

The New Testament is chock-full of imperatives. How could New Testament Christians believe that they are free from all forms of obligation? One cannot read the New Testament and draw the conclusion that obligation to God's commands is a thing of the past because the old is gone and the new has come. The church urgently needs to think biblically about God's commands. Christians should not be addicted to law or allergic to law. How do we as Christians avoid the dual ditches of legalism and license?

My thesis is that *God's commands are invitations wrapped in obligations*. God's commands are more than obligations, but not less. It is a both-and, not an either-or. The invitation is the inner core of the command, and the obligation is the outer layer.

Some people never get to the core of God's commandments because they never get past the outer layer of obligation. The note of demand dominates the initial ethos of the imperative. It gives off a forceful opening impression. A command from the Creator confronts the creature, and so it initially comes across with only the commanding authority of demand. This note of confrontation and authority stirs up rebellion in unregenerate humanity. Romans 8:7–8 documents the response: "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God."

Apart from the Spirit, God's demand for obedience and submission feels like shots fired to sinful humanity. But in this article, I am focusing on born-again believers. The redeemed have an entirely different experience with respect to the commands of God. They feel the initial weight of the authoritative demand, but they look more closely and see the inner core of invitation. They are stirred by the invitation to intimacy with their Savior and King.

Therefore, I am advancing the thesis that God's commands are invitations wrapped in obligations. In what follows, I aim to support this thesis with three propositions that function like supporting pillars: (1) the distinction between union and communion, (2) the connection between command and communion, and (3) the nature of the new covenant.

THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN UNION AND COMMUNION

God's commands are not an invitation to *earn salvation*; they are an invitation to *enjoy communion*. This statement seeks to sever the connecting cord between God's commands and legalism. I have found that John Owen's categories of union and communion are the most effective two-handed scissors for making this cut.

Owen's book *Communion with God* was originally published in 1657. In this book, Owen is doing the important theological work of synthesizing two different textual themes in Scripture: (1) the grace that saves is radically free, and (2) the relationship that God has with his children is real and responsive, not robotic and static. Owen provides two crucial theological categories to explain the breadth and depth of these biblical themes: union with God and communion with God.

Union Is Constant, Communion Is Not

Union with God is a unilateral act of God's sovereign grace. It does not depend on human works, and so it does not fluctuate with our obedience or disobedience. Once we are joined to Christ through the gift of regeneration and faith, our union with God does not go up or down. If you are a Christian, you can never be more or less united to Christ than you are now. Justification by faith alone on the basis of the work of Christ alone is the only reason we are accepted by God. The work of Christ is so finished and so complete that our acceptance is sure and need not be supplemented.

Communion with God is different. It is a responsive relationship; it is not robotic or mechanical. God responds to our obedience or disobedience. Our obedience pleases him, and our disobedience displeases him. We experience the

ramifications for our choices at the relational level: we can experience intimacy with God, or we can feel distant from God. The ups and downs of this relationship are not owing to any sin on God's part of the relationship. He never fails us or forsakes us. Even God's displeasure takes place in the context of God's loving acceptance of us in Christ. He disciplines his children in love, not in anger (Rev. 3:19).

Kelly Kopic describes the essential difference in Owen's thought between union and communion and unpacks the practical implications of this distinction:

While union with Christ is something that does not ebb and flow, one's experience of communion with Christ can fluctuate. This is an important theological and experiential distinction, for it protects the biblical truth that we are saved by radical and free divine grace. Furthermore, this distinction also protects the biblical truth that the children of God have a relationship with their Lord, and that there are things they can do that either help or hinder it. When a believer grows comfortable with sin (whether sins of commission or sins of omission) this invariably affects the level of intimacy this person feels with God. It is not that the Father's love grows and diminishes for his children in accordance with their actions, for his love is unflinching. It is not that God turns from us, but that we run from him. Sin tends to isolate the believer, making him feel distant from God. Then come the accusations—both from Satan and self—which can make the believer worry that he is under God's wrath. In truth, however, saints stand not under wrath but in the safe shadow of the cross.²

We can now revisit the first supporting proposition: God's commands are not an invitation to *earn salvation*; they are an invitation to *enjoy communion*. In the

2 Kelly Kopic, introduction to John Owen, *Communion with the Triune God*, eds. Kelly M. Kopic and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 21.

light of the preceding explanation from Owen, we could update the language to say that God's commands are not an invitation to earn *union* with God, but they are an invitation to enjoy *communion* with God.

Therefore, a right understanding of union and communion will protect Christians from two pernicious errors that pervert Christian obedience. First, if we view God's commands as an invitation to union with God, then we have confused union with communion and have twisted God's commands into a legalistic ladder we use to climb for God's acceptance. Second, if we make obedience to God's commands a matter of indifference to God, then we have confused union and communion and have erased the entire biblical witness about pleasing the Lord.

The Possibility of Pleasing or Displeasing God³

Some may struggle with the concept that God would ever be pleased with our obedience or displeased with our disobedience, but the biblical witness is abundantly clear that Christians can please or grieve God. God's delight in obedience is not simplistic or legalistic. Christians, completely covered by the blood of Christ, completely and eternally accepted as righteous in Christ, can please or grieve God. Some don't seem to have a category for that. Therefore, we need to let the Bible do some category formation for us.

According to Scripture, pleasing the Lord should be our ambition whether we are on earth or in heaven (2 Cor. 5:9). Financial giving pleases God (Phil. 4:18). Our whole life is devoted to discerning how to walk in a manner that is "pleasing to the Lord" (Eph. 5:8–10). Our aim is not to please the Lord partially, but fully (Col. 1:10). Paul's apostolic instructions for the churches included how to please God. Paul even calls them to grow "more and more" in pleasing God (1 Thess. 4:1–2). More than that, the biblical writers present the Lord's pleasure as a motivation for Christian obedience (Col. 3:20; 1 Tim. 5:4; Heb. 13:16; 1 John 3:22).

3 I find Wayne Grudem's work very helpful on this point. See his essay "Pleasing God by Our Obedience: A Neglected New Testament Teaching" in *For the Fame of God's Name: Essays in Honor of John Piper* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 272–92.

At one level, the fact that one can do things to please the Lord shows that the converse is also true: failing to do any of the things mentioned above would displease the Lord. Sometimes the Bible is explicit with the reverse dynamic. For example, Peter says that if husbands do not treat their wives as fellow heirs of the grace of life, their prayers will be hindered (1 Pet. 3:7). There are also wide and sweeping commandments not to quench the Spirit (1 Thess. 5:19) or grieve the Holy Spirit of God (Eph. 4:30). We could also examine texts that unpack God's loving discipline toward believers (Heb. 12:10; Rev. 3:9).

Of course, mere actions do not please the Lord. He is pleased when we obey his commandments by faith. Without faith it is impossible to please him (Heb. 11:6). Whatever is not from faith is sin (Rom. 14:23). By faith, all of life becomes an opportunity to please the Lord, so we make it our aim to please him, whether we are on earth or in heaven.

Thus far, we have unpacked the categories of union and communion and have demonstrated the biblical truth that our relationship with the Lord is real and not robotic, in that Christians can please or displease the Lord. The second pillar will now attempt to connect the commands of Christ to communion with Christ.

CONNECTING COMMAND AND COMMUNION

If God's commands are invitations wrapped in obligation, then we need to show biblically where commands read like an invitation to enjoy communion. The Bible develops the connection between command and communion in both general and specific ways.

The General Connection between Command and Communion

Perhaps the clearest example at the general level is John 15:10–11.

If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I

have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

In this text, Jesus does not refer to the law of Moses, but to his own commandments: “If you keep *my commandments*” (v. 10). Notice the invitational structure of thought at work in Jesus’s words: “If you keep, . . . [then] you will abide.” Keeping the commands of Christ will lead to abiding in the love of Christ. The commands are an invitation for intimate communion or abiding in Christ. Jesus also stresses the reciprocal nature of love and obedience. John 15 says keeping the commands will lead to abiding in love, and John 14 says the reverse is also true: loving Christ will lead to keeping the commands of Christ: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (v. 15).

The invitational nature of Christ’s commandments shines even brighter in verse 11. The commands are an invitation to fullness of joy. Christ spoke these words to the disciples (including his commands) in order that “my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.” Obedience to Christ’s commands does not and cannot secure our union with Christ. The commands are an important part of our ongoing *communion* with Christ, not *union*. Christ’s commandments are an invitation for the internalization of Christ’s joy (“my joy may be in you”) and the maximalization of our joy (“your joy may be full”).

Specific Commands and Specific Kinds of Communion

We need to go further in establishing the connection between the commands of Christ and communion with Christ. Specific commands are an invitation for a specific kind of communion. We will consider three specific commands: (1) loving one another, (2) enduring suffering, and (3) giving sacrificially.

Loving One Another

First, Jesus gives the disciples a specific commandment in John 13:34 to love one another. He labels this love commandment as a new commandment, even though the command to love is not new in the sense that it is unheard of in the

Old Testament. It is new, however, in that the standard of reference is new. The love command in the old covenant was explicitly tied to the standard of self-love: “you shall love your neighbor *as yourself*” (Lev. 19:18). The love command in the New Testament is explicitly tied to the love of Christ as the new standard: “as *I have loved you*” (John 13:34).

The comparison at work in the comparative conjunction *as* is an experiential relationship, not just a logical one. One cannot love as Christ loves without first experiencing the love of Christ. One must receive this love, not just know about it. We also should not think of this dynamic as a singular, once-for-all experience. It is simply not true that we receive one experience of Christ’s love and then recall it and reiterate it many times. We are called to reflect continually what we are continually receiving as we abide in Christ. Receiving the love of Christ becomes a prerequisite for loving like Christ.

John the apostle also places obedience to God’s commandments in a relational context. Children of God keep God’s commandments and do whatever pleases him (1 John 3:22). The following verse further unpacks what John means by his reference to the plural “commandments” (v. 22). Surprisingly, the plural becomes a singular “commandment” in two parts: believe in the gospel and love one another (v. 23). Why does John regard these two actions as a singular commandment? These two actions are so closely related that they are like two sides of the same coin. In fact, John’s earlier discussion brought Christ’s love and our love together in an inseparable way: “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers” (v. 16).

Loving others and laying down our lives for them is an overflow of Christ’s loving us and laying down his life for us. We could see further dimensions of this interplay between the love of Christ and our love for others in the writings of the apostle Paul. One example is the connection between the command for burden bearing and the law of Christ. “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2). Here Paul draws a direct line between the cross of Christ (Christ carried our sins on the cross) and the law of Christ that calls us to carry one another’s burdens. The emphasis on the love of Christ in the law of Christ

gives it a greater gospel shape than the law of Moses because the cross is the new standard of love.

Enduring Suffering

The next specific command to explore is the command to endure suffering. Peter says that Christians have been called to endure suffering (1 Pet. 2:20–21). The reason Peter gives is “because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps” (1 Pet. 2:21). God graciously ordains suffering for Christians as a way to retrace the steps of our suffering Savior. Once again, this connection is more than logical; it is also relational.

The invitational and relational nature of suffering is perhaps most on display in Philippians 3:10. Suffering is part of the opportunity and invitation to know Christ. Knowing Christ includes the invitation to “share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.” We do not suffer for the sake of suffering. Paul is talking about suffering like Jesus suffered: for the sake of serving others in obedience to the Father. The passive voice in the Greek verb translated becoming like him probably signals a divine passive, meaning that God is causing us to become like Christ in his death. Sinclair Ferguson once said in a sermon that God makes us like Jesus the same way that Jesus became like Jesus: through suffering (Heb. 2:10; 5:8).

The suffering of Christ cannot be separated from the resurrection of Christ. Paul’s flow of thought is the same here: sharing in suffering and becoming like Jesus in his death will lead to the resurrection. Paul’s great desire is to “attain the resurrection from the dead” (Phil. 3:11). The phrase by any means possible models a measure of humility rather than false certainty. Paul did leave open the possibility that he could preach to others, but then find himself disqualified (1 Cor. 9:24–27). The brightness of future resurrection does not breed apathy, but diligent perseverance in pursuing Christ.

Giving Sacrificially

Third, the command to give sacrificially connects specifically to the sacrifice of Christ. No New Testament text commands believers to give ten percent of their income to the church. The tithe commandment came from a paradigm relating to the twelve tribes of Israel. The Levites did not own land like the rest of the eleven tribes, and thus the tithe was an essential part of ensuring that they could continue to survive and minister. Nehemiah 13:10–12 highlights an example of how much the Levites depended upon the tithe.

The Christian lives under a new paradigm. Paul addresses financial themes frequently, but he never specifies an amount or percentage. He calls each of the Corinthians to set something aside “as he may prosper” (1 Cor. 16:2). But Paul does not make reference here to a new paradigm. Paul shares the new point of reference for financial giving in the most sustained exposition of stewardship in the New Testament: 2 Corinthians 8–9. Sacrificial giving is grounded in the grace of Christ’s sacrifice, which is spelled out in financial imagery: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9).

The third and final pillar is the most significant load-bearing pillar. Unless the Lord changes the heart, his commands will be received only as obligation from the outside and will produce rebellion. Without the life-giving work of the Spirit on the heart, God’s commands will land on people merely as demand from the outside, not as desire and delight from the inside. Where can one find such capacity for change? Only in the new covenant.

THE NATURE OF THE NEW COVENANT⁴

This article has argued that God’s commands are invitations wrapped in obligations. The very nature of the new covenant involves the transformation of the heart and the internalization of the law so God’s commands are received as in-

4 Some of this material on the new covenant is based on my earlier work. See Jason C. Meyer, *The End of the Law: Mosaic Covenant in Pauline Theology* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009).

vitations to intimacy with Christ. God's commands feel less like *have to* (obligation/demand) and more like *want to* (desire/delight).

The new-covenant promise of Ezekiel 36:26 announces that God will give his people a new heart and a new spirit. Ezekiel further clarifies this promised newness by contrasting the old heart with the new one that will replace it: "I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh." This new-covenant work of heart transformation is closely connected with the presence of the Spirit and a transformed attitude toward God's commands. "And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules" (v. 27).

The new-covenant promise of Jeremiah 31 puts the same stress upon the transformation of God's people. The prophet contrasts the new covenant with the previous covenantal arrangement as seen in the phrases *not like* (v. 32) and *not anymore* (v. 34; cf. 30:8; 31:12, 40). The Lord will create Israel's obedience by changing Israel's heart (31:33). The "everlasting covenant" in Jeremiah 32:38–40 includes a similar description of what God will do. He will give the people one heart and one way. He will not turn away from them to do them good. He will put the fear of himself within them. Jeremiah also comments on what will result from this new-covenant work: "I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me" (32:40). God will not turn away from them, which will result in their not turning away from him.

A New Thing on the Earth

This new work of God corresponds with the new thing God promises to do earlier, in Jeremiah 31:22.

How long will you waver,
 O faithless daughter?
 For the LORD has created a new thing on the earth:
 a woman encircles a man.

This verse is somewhat confusing at first glance because of the word *encircle* (*sbb*). Some scholars contend that the term means encircle in the sense of protection. The “new thing” is a radical role reversal in which the weaker party (the woman) will now protect the stronger (the man). This interpretation, however, does not fit the immediate context or the overall context of Jeremiah.

A more satisfying solution is to recognize the metaphorical signals that Jeremiah provides the reader in the context. The woman clearly stands for “virgin Israel” (31:21), who wanders as a faithless daughter (v. 22) and now must return (v. 21). The man is a reference to Yahweh. The call for Israel to return to Yahweh is a consistent theme throughout Jeremiah. For example, Jeremiah 3 calls upon unfaithful Israel to return to her husband Yahweh (vv. 6, 8, 11, 12). Israel’s unfaithfulness and harlotry is a consistent theme. The Lord promises to heal the faithlessness of Israel (v. 22). This same note sounds in 31:18, where Ephraim asks that the Lord would “bring me back that I may be restored.” The Hebrew expression is a play on words using the verb *turn* (*šwb*). J. Gordon McConville rightly captures the sense of the expression: “Cause me to turn that I might turn.” His comments also bring out the theological connections with the new covenant. “In its brilliant succinctness, the Hebrew phrase expresses an antinomy which the theology of new covenant will endeavor to develop and complete.”⁵

When Jeremiah 31:18 and 31:22 are read together, we learn that the new thing the Lord will create is reciprocity in the relationship between the covenantal partners. Yahweh’s faithfulness is nothing new, but Israel’s covenantal fidelity is a new thing indeed. The unfaithful woman, Israel, will encircle (i.e., embrace) the man, Yahweh.⁶ God will act to create Israel’s obedience to him. Thus the metaphorical wordplay switches from Israel as the woman who wanders in infidelity (*šōbeb*) to the woman who will come back and encircle or embrace (*sbb*) the Lord when he creates the new thing, her fidelity.

5 J. Gordon McConville, *Judgment and Promise: An Interpretation of the Book of Jeremiah* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1993), 97.

6 So also Elmer Martens, *Jeremiah*, Believers Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1986), 194; Gerald L. Keown, Pamela J. Scalise, and Thomas G. Smothers, *Jeremiah 26–52*, Word Biblical Commentary 27 (Dallas: Word, 1995), 123.

This same note sounds again in the description of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31–34. The new thing in 31:22 and 31:31 is that God will ensure the fidelity of his covenant partner. Jeremiah 31:18 and 32:38–40 fill in further features of this transformation.

With Fear and Trembling

Paul's contrast between the old and new covenants in 2 Corinthians 3 presents the same picture. This passage is fairly familiar to most readers, and so I would like to showcase a similar picture through another passage in Paul: Philippians 2:12–13.⁷

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Notice that this passage has a command and a rationale. The command is “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (v. 12). The underlying rationale is “for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (v. 13).

It can be somewhat difficult to see on the surface, but Paul sets up a contrast between the old covenant and the new. Unlike the old-covenant people of God, who *disobeyed even more* in Moses's absence than in his presence (Deut. 31:27), the Philippians are the new-covenant people of God who will *obey even more* in Paul's absence than in his presence (Phil. 2:12).

This call for obedience is a summons to “work out your own salvation.” The way the Philippians work out this salvation is important. In the original language, Paul moves the phrase *with fear and trembling* to the front of the sentence for emphasis. Believers cannot have a cavalier attitude toward obedience.

⁷ Some of this material is based on my earlier work on Philippians. See Jason Meyer, “Philippians,” in *Ephesians–Philemon*, ESV Expository Commentary 11 (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018).

Their final salvation has a present outworking among the believing community in Philippi. Fear and trembling (*phobos kai tromos*) accompanied salvation (*sōtēria*, Ex. 14:13; 15:2) at the exodus, but there is one key difference. The fear and trembling at the exodus was external to Israel; it gripped the peoples surrounding them (Ex. 15:16). God’s new-covenant salvation is greater because God works fear and trembling *within* his people (“in you,” Phil. 2:12) because of their salvation (*sōtēria*) in Christ.

To Will and to Work

The ground in verse 13 is crucial for understanding the underlying reason we can work out our salvation: God is at work in us. The conjunction *for* (*gar*) shows that God’s work is decisively prior to our work. The call to “work out” (v. 12) must be informed by the fact that God “works in” (v. 13). Therefore, Christians work out that which God already worked in us. The conjunction *for* helps make the logic between the two verses crystal clear. It is true that we work and that God works, but we work (v. 12) *because* (*gar*) God works (v. 13).

This understanding of the decisive part God plays helps make further sense of the phrase *fear and trembling* in the previous verse. Paul’s preaching among the Corinthians was in “fear and much trembling” (1 Cor. 2:3), not because he had stage fright, but because he knew that his work of preaching was totally dependent upon God’s power as the decisive factor. In the same way, Christian obedience is a dependent work that is carried out with fear and trembling because God’s work is the decisive factor in our obedience. Our work is derivative of and dependent upon his decisive work.

Specifically, God’s work accomplishes our willing and working (“both to will and to work,” Phil. 2:13). God provides the desire (i.e., the will) for obedience and the power (i.e., the work) of obedience. Paul also wants the readers to know that God takes great delight in the work he does in the lives of his children. God is at work “for his good pleasure” (v. 13).

The new covenant promises are present as the implicit backdrop for this whole discussion. The closest parallel is Jeremiah 32:40–41.

I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the *fear* of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me. I will *rejoice* in doing them good, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul.

The similarities are important: (1) the text has the same term for *fear* (*phobos*) that is found in Philippians 2:12, and (2) the text has the same stress on God's pleasure or joy ("I will rejoice") in doing this internal work in the lives of his new-covenant people.

THE MEANING OF 'MUST'

Do we experience God's commands only as obligation? Or do we look deeper and see the summons for intimacy with God as an invitation to delight in God? The relational nature of communion with God needs to factor in to the way we think about God's commands and the meaning of the word *must*. People familiar with John Piper's ministry may remember that Edward John Carnell wrote something that gave Piper the inspiration for his famous illustration in *Desiring God* about dutifully giving his wife roses. Here is the paragraph from Carnell.

Suppose a husband asks his wife if he must kiss her good night. Her answer is, "You must, but not that kind of a must." What she means is this: "Unless a spontaneous affection for my person motivates you, your overtures are stripped of all moral value."⁸

In the same way, one could ask God, "Must I obey you?" God's answer is "You must, but not that kind of a must." In this sentence, there are two types of obliga-

8 Quoted in John Piper, *Desiring God* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2003), 93.

tions: one of mere duty and one filled with delight. God's commands are not an expression of mere duty or obligation. They also come to us with the aroma of invitation to delight ourselves in the Lord.