

Love and Obey

Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498) was an Italian Dominican friar and preacher active during the Renaissance in Florence. He was known for his exhortations for Christian renewal. He denounced clerical corruption, despotic rule, and the exploitation of the poor. During his lifetime the printing press was invented (Gutenberg's press, 1453), Machiavelli, Copernicus, and Martin Luther were born; Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* were published, Columbus made his voyage to the New World, while Botticelli painted frescoes in Rome, Da Vinci painted the "Last Supper," and Michelangelo completed the "Pieta" sculpture in St. Peter's cathedral in Rome. So, why am I telling you all this?

Well, in some ways Savonarola was a for-runner of Reformation leaders like Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin. In his own words: **"We must regenerate the Church ... God remits the sins of men and justifies them by his mercy. There are as many compassions in heaven as there are justified men upon earth; for none are saved by their own works."**¹ That sounds very much like something John Wesley would say.

That's interesting, Pastor, but tell me again why you're talking about this Savonarola? There is a story that, at start of his ministry, Savonarola noticed an elderly woman who used to come and pray regularly before a statue of the Virgin Mary. One day, he mentioned to an elderly priest who had been serving in the cathedral for many years, "Look how devoted this woman is. She comes every day to offer prayers to the blessed Mother of Jesus. What a marvelous act of faith."

But the elderly priest replied, "Do not be deceived by what you see. Many years ago, when the sculptor needed a model to pose for this statue of the blessed Mother, he hired a beautiful young woman to sit for him. This devout worshiper you see here every day is that young woman. She is worshipping who she used to be."²

Perhaps she thought she was serving God with her devotion, but when there is another motive, it isn't really worshipping God, is it? ... it's simply doing "my will" rather than "my heavenly Father's will."

Sometime during the Last Supper, before he went to the Cross, Jesus said to His disciples: ***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, John 14:21.***

We could read this verse, and many have, as implying that if we just do our best to follow all the commands Jesus gives, like love my neighbor, feed His sheep, make disciples, baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, give generously to build His church, if we do these things earnestly then He will love us. But that would be a wrong understanding. He *is* saying that **when you truly love Him you will want to do as He directs.** Those who have genuinely received Christ's forgiveness of sin, love Him for it because they know they truly are sinners and cannot save themselves. They are motivated to serve Him because they love God and are so grateful for His salvation from the darkness of sin. Let us never forget that ... **God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Romans 5:8.**

Think of it like this: There was a controlling, demanding husband who insisted that his wife conform to his rigid standards. She was to do certain things for him, in a certain way, as wife, mother, and homemaker. He made lists of his rule and her duties. In time she came to hate him as much as she hated the lists. By and by he died and in time she came to love another man whom she married. The two of them lived in heavenly harmony. Joyfully she devoted herself to his happiness and welfare. One day she came upon one of the lists her first husband had written for her, crumpled and stuffed into the pocket of a jacket. As she read the list, she was astounded to discover she was doing for her second husband all the things her first husband had demanded of her. He second husband never required these things, yet she was doing it all as an expression of love.³ **Obedience follows love.**

Don't we know that we cannot save and sanctify ourselves? We cannot atone for sin; we cannot redeem the world; we cannot make holy what is unholy. That is the work of God, done through Jesus Christ, who has made atonement for all our sin. Our realization of that great act of God – to be able to say "He died

for me, even me” – is the foundation of our loving obedience to Christ. In a very real sense, His atonement is worked out in practical ways. **Every time I obey** – and remember He has freed us from sin so that we *can* choose to obey – **I step into His light**, and His atoning power cleanses me from sin. Turn away from obedience and darkness and sin rule again. When we obey Him, out of love for Him, His light is as clear as a sunbeam and the profoundest truths of God become ours. When we obey Christ in all the daily-ness of life, in haphazard circumstances, they become pinholes through which we see the face of God. And when we stand before God we will discover that through obedience many, many people were blessed. Once the redemption we have in Christ wells up in our souls to the point of conscious and unconscious obedience, His grace will rush through us to other lives.⁴ **...as the Father has loved me, I have also loved you; abide in my love, John 15:9-10.** To stay in His love, walk in His light, obey His direction as you stand on the solid rock of His atoning grace, is to abide in our Heavenly Father’s house.

Jesus gave His Church a single great Commission. He said: *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age, Mt 28: 18-20.* Though He has commanded us to “make disciples of every nation” most Christians feel ill-equipped to do so. We might rather give a little money to someone else to do it. But making disciples does not mean that you have to walk around with a billboard on your back saying “Repent before the Day of Judgement” while looking thoroughly miserable. It means more than Sunday Christianity – though that is how we are recharged. **To obey our Lord** requires prayer - for in that way we get to know the will of the Father. Loving Jesus means that His will not mine must be done. It means helping others in the Church fulfil their God given potential, and being happy with their success. It means sharing with others the hope you have in your heart. It **means gently telling others how Jesus has made a difference in your life.**

It means having a heart for the lost in our neighborhoods and workplaces -even if it means stepping out of our own comfort zones. Loving Jesus simply means looking for opportunities to share your faith in Christ. How many of us would be here today if the early Church had not fulfilled the Great Commission? What if Peter, Andrew, James and John had gone back to fishing and Mary and Martha had gone back to housework? If we really love him, we would be passionate about this. We don’t share our faith with others out of a sense of obligation – but out of a sense of love. Knowing that He always has something better for us, we are open to whatever the Lord has in store for us.

Too many people, both inside the Church and outside think that Christianity is all about keeping rules. They picture God as a stern father or boss, who doesn’t want us to have fun and who must be obeyed. But that is not at all what Jesus is saying when he speaks these words: *If you love me, you will keep my commandments. Our Lord never demands, coerces, or manipulates us into keeping His commandments.* To be sure, He is clear about what He expects of us... but then He leaves it to us to obey Him. He does not want our forced obedience. **He desires our willing adherence to the life and lifestyle that He is prepared to renew in us,** so that we may have the desire to live as God designed us to live, in ways pleasing to God as before sin entered in. That is what we can communicate to others.

A heart being renewed by the Holy Spirit can genuinely love the Lord. That is why Jesus says “if you love me...” The last chapter of John’s gospel recounts a poignant moment between the risen Jesus and the apostle Peter. Jesus asks Peter three times, “Do you love me?” Each time, when Peter says yes, Jesus commands him “Tend my sheep.” When has Jesus asked you “Do you love me?” Perhaps more times than you’ve heard? Each time Jesus asks it is an opportunity to obey Him in the next instant.

In Revelation chapter two, this is said of the church at Ephesus: *I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance.... Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first, Rev. 2:2-5.* Let us not be like the church of Ephesus, rather let us be the church that genuinely loves our Savior. We keep God’s commands because we love Him. God is interested not just in our deeds, but in the motivation for what we do. Put another way, **God is interested in our hearts.**

Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it, Prov. 4:23.

¹ <https://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1201-1500/savonarolas-preaching-got-him-burned-11629883.html>.

² Rev. Martin Dale, sermon “If You Love Me You Will Keep My Commandments” April 30, 2021; (<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/if-you-love-me-you-will-keep-my-commandments-revd-martin-dale-sermon-on-love-256241>).

³Ibid.

⁴ Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost For His Highest*, November 2.