

Another Look at Authority

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Introduction.

- A. One of the great things about being a teacher is that during the teaching process, you very often learn as much as you teach. I certainly find this to be true during the times that I teach the adult Bible class. However, it's even more true when I'm teaching non-Christians. Those from outside the church don't have the same Bible background we do, so they come at things from a different perspective that makes me think.
- B. I had a number of these thought-provoking moments during my recent study with our new sister Marissa. She began by asking why we don't use instrumental music, and from there, we moved to a general discussion of authority. She started asking some good questions that I hadn't thought about before, and I quickly realized that I didn't understand Bible authority as well as I thought I did. Thankfully, the Bible rescued me from myself, and she ended up obeying the gospel, but I knew I needed to do some thinking about our discussion.
- C. In retrospect, I think the big problem I was having was that I was presenting Bible authority in purely legal terms, and when we're presented with a law, our natural reaction is to see how much we can get away with and still be within the bounds of the law. When I pay my taxes this year, I'm going to give the federal government everything I owe, but I'm not going to give them a penny more. The problem is that this legal model in many ways does a disservice to God, because it trains us to think of Christianity too in terms of how much we can get away with. Lest we fall into this trap, let's take another look this evening at authority.

I. Love and the Commandments.

- A. This look needs to begin by examining the relationship between love and the commandments. At first blush, it might not seem logical to us that such a relationship should exist. The United States government does not make laws for us because it loves us. Instead, those laws are enacted to maintain public order. Likewise, we do not obey the government because we love it, at least not in the deep, personal way we love our families.
- B. By contrast, however, love is at the center of God's design for us. Consider the words of Jesus in Matthew 22:37-40. Jesus says these things in response to a question about what the greatest commandment is. However, his answer makes it clear that the command to love is not merely first in a series of similar, ranked things. Instead, love for God and love for one's neighbor exist on a higher plane than the other commandments. Jesus says that the Law and the Prophets depend, literally hang down, from the commandment to love. Paul further explains this idea in Romans 13:8-9. He informs us that love is the fulfillment of the law, that all the other commandments are given to us as applications of this principle that is central to Christianity. That means that if we try to understand Christianity without taking love into account, it's like trying to understand baseball without knowing what a run is. We're totally missing the point.
- C. So, then, if Christianity is all about love, why isn't the Bible about a sentence long? Why doesn't God just say, "Love Me, love your neighbor, and have a nice life"? The basic problem is that we don't understand how love should express itself without help. We aren't wise enough to grasp that no, lying to our neighbor is never loving, until God explains it to us first. A much worse problem, though, arises when we try to figure out how to be loving to God. At least, when we deal with other human beings, we can assign our likes and dislikes to them, because we're humans too. We can't do that with God, though, because God is completely different.
- D. Look at how God describes Himself in Isaiah 55:8-9. God is not just a little bit above us, He's a lot above us, and what makes sense to Him does not necessarily make sense to us. We see a good illustration of a similar difference every day in the relationship between men and women. I love my wife. I want to buy her presents on Valentine's Day because I know it makes her happy. However, all the goodwill in the world won't help me if I buy her presents according to my tastes. I know what I would want for Valentine's Day. I think power tools are pretty cool, and a nice, new reciprocating saw, for instance, would look great in my garage. I think tickets to a Tigers game this fall would make for about the greatest Valentine's Day gift in the world—for me.
- E. The problem is that my wife is not me. My wife is a girly girl. Her idea of a power tool is a stand mixer, and she has about as natural an interest in football as I have in figure skating. I can have the best intentions in the world, but if I give her a saw and Tigers tickets for Valentine's Day, I'm sleeping on the couch!
- F. The differentness of God presents us with the same problem in serving Him. We don't naturally have any idea of what He wants, and He's told us we don't. That means that if we try to give Him what we think He should want, we're likely to be offering up the spiritual equivalent of saws and football tickets. That won't work.
- G. This is precisely why John says what he says in 1 John 5:3. This is why if we love God, we will keep His commandments, because those commandments give us insight into pleasing Him that we would not otherwise possess. We turn to the word to learn His will in just the same way and for just the same reason that I will ask my wife what she wants for a present before I go shopping. I want to please her, and I want to make her happy, and I need her to tell me how. When I listen to her, I come up with things that I would never have

arrived at on my own. I have zero interest in flowers and I don't eat Godiva chocolates, but those are what she told me she wanted for her Valentine's Day presents. Just like that, as God's children, we want to please Him, and we want to make Him happy, but we need His input to tell us how. Many of the commandments of God's word seem strange to us. They're things at which we would not arrive on our own, but those are exactly the things to which we need to listen, for they arise from the difference between God and us. If we really love God, we will hear the teaching of His word and we will follow as perfectly as we possibly can.

- H. We see Paul define the scope of this hearing and following in 2 Corinthians 5:9. When Paul speaks of presence and absence, he is referring to being present with the Lord in heaven and absent from the Lord on earth. Essentially, he's telling us that eternally, no matter where we are, pleasing God ought to be the primary ambition of our existence. Valentine's Day only comes once a year, but it's always time for us to express our love for God by giving Him all the things that He's told us He wants, both from our lips and from our lives.

II. Applying the Principle.

- A. Now, that all sounds great in theory: we express our love for God by keeping His commandments. But what does that mean? How, exactly do we go about figuring out from God's word what He wants us to do? Actually, this is not hard. We take the same common-sense process we use every day and apply it to the Bible. True, God is different from us, but He's smart enough to communicate with us in ways we understand.
- B. The first way we do this is quite obvious: by listening to the commands of God. We see an example of three such commands in Hebrews 13:15-16. Let's start with the back end first. What we see here are two very general commands. As Christians, we are supposed to do good and share. These commands give us wide latitude in how to carry them out, just like my wife does when she tells me she wants flowers for Valentine's Day. That means that I can go to the store and buy tulips, roses, carnations, or even all of the above, with the expectation of making her happy, because all of those fulfill her request for flowers. In the same way, if we do good by saying kind words to a brother, picking up a wallet somebody dropped and giving it to them, or shoveling our neighbor's driveway when they're out of town, God is pleased with all of them.
- C. The command in Hebrews 13:15 is different because it's more specific, just like my wife was specific when she told me she wanted Godiva chocolates. The logical effect of that specificity is to exclude all other options. When my wife says she wants Godiva chocolates, she doesn't mean that Hershey Kisses will also do. She means that she only wants Godiva chocolates, and if I show up with some inferior substitute, that's not going to be pleasing to her. Look at the way God does the same thing here. He starts out with a general command: offer a sacrifice of praise. I can think of lots of possible ways to fulfill that general command: singing, playing a trumpet solo, or even spiritual dancing. However, the next clause excludes two of those three possibilities when it defines praise as the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name. It means that only things we say or sing can be part of this pleasing sacrifice of praise. The other options are logically excluded.
- D. The next way we learn what pleases God is by imitating the examples of good conduct that He gives us. This too is familiar to us. In real life, my wife did not come straight out and tell me she wanted Godiva chocolates. Instead, it was part of a conversation that went like this: She said, "My boss Tracy was gone during the middle of the workday today." "Why?" I asked. She replied, "He drove over to Tinley Park to the Godiva store there to buy his wife some chocolates for Valentine's Day." Folks, it was not by accident that my wife inserted that bit of information into the conversation! She did that to let me know that if I imitated her boss's example by buying Godiva chocolates for MY wife, that it would make her happy. We see a similar example in the gathering recorded in Acts 20:7. It's not just random chance that God inspired Luke to record this. Nothing in the Bible is chance. The God who is wise enough to meticulously design the universe is also wise enough to meticulously design His word. He mentions that they partook of the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week to let us know that if we partake of the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week, we will also please Him.
- E. The final way that we can examine Scripture to learn how to express our love for God is by looking for things that are not explicitly mentioned in Scripture, but are logically a part of things that are. Let me give you an example. As part of our Valentine's Day celebration, my wife also asked for Chinese takeout for Valentine's Day dinner. I know that's not a typical romantic dinner, but pregnant women do tend to want to eat unusual things. She didn't explicitly say that she wanted me to go down to the garage, get in my car, and drive away to get it, but I still did that without fear that it would make her unhappy. She knew just as well as I did that you can't have Chinese takeout for dinner without driving over to the strip mall and taking the food out.
- F. This same logic applies to many of our religious practices today. For instance, look as you will, you won't find a passage in Scripture that explicitly says churches are to buy buildings to meet in. However, you will find Hebrews 10:25. This passage commands Christians to assemble. Our congregation can't assemble in a house, as early Christians did, because none of us have houses that are large enough. We can't assemble on the riverbank, as early Christians did, because we would freeze in the winter. We can't split up into two assemblies because that would violate other Scriptures. What we're left with, then, if we want to express our love for God by obeying His command to assemble, is buying or renting a building of our own.

Conclusion. If you want to show your love for God by keeping His commandments, start this evening.