



The Essentials of Disciple-Making

Session Five: Obedience—The Heart of Discipleship

THE LESSON AT A GLANCE

Over the last few weeks, we have examined the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:36-40) and the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20). In the Great Commandment, Jesus taught that loving God and loving others is the ultimate expression of the law. In the Great Commission, He commanded us to make disciples both by baptizing new believers and by teaching them to obey His commands.

In John 14:15, Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commands.” When we love Christ sincerely, we want to obey His commands to love God with all our hearts, souls, and minds, and to love others as much as we love ourselves. Everything in Scripture points to these two pillars.

As we follow Christ, our obedience and love should be an example for others to imitate, not because we are perfect followers of Jesus, but because we follow a perfect Savior who helps us walk in obedience and love.

TODAY’S SCRIPTURES

John 14:15-17; 1 Corinthians 10:23–11:1; 13:1-3

THE MAIN IDEA

Jesus said if we love Him, we will obey His commands. As we reach people for Christ, we also help them to mature in the faith through loving obedience to Him.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Can I really say I love God if I willingly choose to disobey Him? What needs to shift for me to live authentically in Christ in both love and obedience?

SCRIPTURE IN CONTEXT

John 14:15-17 Jesus said loving Him is expressed through obedience. This is easier said than done. No matter how hard we try, obeying Christ perfectly is impossible. God has given us the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus called the Counselor, to be with us forever and equip us to follow Christ.

1 Corinthians 13:1-3 Blind obedience isn’t love. We could obey every law in the Bible perfectly, but without love, our actions would be worthless. Obedience expressed through loving God and others is the call of Christ for believers.

1 Corinthians 10:23–11:1 As Paul discussed the freedom that is ours in Christ, he reminded the church in Corinth that freedom in Christ should result in loving care toward others. As we lead others through relationships, mentoring, or teaching, we should be mindful that obedience to Christ and authentic love are caught more than are taught. In community, we help one another to walk in love and obedience.



START HERE

When we think of the Great Commission, we may focus on the command to “make disciples” by going and baptizing. However, the second part of the commission, “teaching them to obey,” is as important as the first. The Great Commission includes both evangelism and discipleship. As we lead others in discipleship, we should encourage them to obey Christ, and we should model that obedience in our own lives. Obeying Christ for a lifetime isn’t easy. We need authentic community as we encourage one another to love God and others.

DISCUSS

Can we really love God if we are not obeying Him? Can we really obey Him if we are not loving others? Why do you think Jesus commands us to do both? What is difficult about living this out?

REVIEW AND DISCUSS THE TEXT

1. Obedience to Jesus is the ongoing heart of discipleship.

John 14:15-17: *“If you love me, you will keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever. He is the Spirit of truth. The world is unable to receive him because it doesn’t see him or know him. But you do know him, because he remains with you and will be in you.”*

Unpacking John 14:15-17

Do you remember your first job? Where did you work, and what kind of responsibilities did you have? For many, our first jobs were less about the work we produced and more about how we learned to be employees. Could we get to work on time? Did we show initiative and take on extra responsibilities or find work rather than standing around in slow moments? Could we be a good team player? Could we be entrusted to work diligently even if our boss was not watching? Those early days in the workforce are critical to learning how to be the kind of employee that others want to hire.

In John 14:15-17, Jesus prepared the disciples to carry out His mission after His crucifixion and resurrection. Following Jesus’s ascension, the ongoing work of carrying out the Great Commission would fall to these twelve men and the believers who came after them. How could they carry out the Great Commission in His absence? How can we? It’s not hard to imagine that Jesus’s words were confusing and a little frightening. In the chapters that follow, these same men denied and fled from Jesus in His most vulnerable hour. How could they be entrusted to carry out Christ’s mission on earth?

The heart of discipleship is obedience to Christ’s commands: “If you love me, you will keep my commands” (v. 15). Love for Jesus is expressed through obedience. In the same way that an employee demonstrates faithfulness and integrity by working diligently, even when the boss is



not around, believers demonstrate our love and faithfulness to Christ by obeying Him daily. The call for obedience is repeated in Jesus's Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20: "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you."

We are commanded not only to make disciples by converting and baptizing new believers, but also to continue the discipleship process through helping believers grow in obedience to Christ's commands.

Discipleship is crucial in the life of the church. Individuals who state belief in Christ and are baptized but never grow in their faith through instruction and obedience lack maturity. Likewise, those who learn about Jesus but never by faith receive Him as Savior lack a genuine conversion experience. The heart of discipleship is both accepting Christ and continuing to grow in Him toward maturity. It is important to note that we will never fully arrive at perfect maturity until heaven. Paul said it this way, "Not that I have already reached the goal or am already perfect, but I make every effort to take hold of it because I also have been taken hold of by Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:12).

Obedience is the spiritual fruit of love. Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commands." You might be thinking, "I love Jesus, but I frequently disobey Him with my thoughts, words, or actions." None of us, whether we are new believers or longtime Christians, walk obediently every day and in every area of our lives. Christ is not calling us to perfection; He is calling us to growing faithfulness motivated by love. Without love, our obedience is self-serving and proud. In Matthew 23, Jesus warned the Pharisees of this way of living: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which appear beautiful on the outside, but inside are full of the bones of the dead and every kind of impurity. In the same way, on the outside you seem righteous to people, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matthew 23:27-28). Our obedience to God is to be motivated by our love for Him.

Later, in one of his letters, John said, "This is how we know that we love God's children: when we love God and obey his commands. For this is what love for God is: to keep his commands. And his commands are not a burden, because everyone who has been born of God conquers the world. This is the victory that has conquered the world: our faith" (1 John 5:2-4). Love for God overflows into love for God's children. As we love the people Jesus loves and serve them in His name, our obedience leads to growing love.

We obey the one we trust, and we trust the one we love. If a parent asks a child to do something or warns him or her of danger, ideally, the child obeys because he or she trusts the parent. If your company announces a new process or policy, you obey it because you want to keep your job but also because you trust your company to make decisions that benefit the organization. We obey Jesus because, through His Word and, over time, we come to believe in Him and trust that His way is best. Thankfully, though obeying Jesus is challenging, we do not do so by our own strength.



In this passage, Jesus reassured the disciples that their own willpower would not determine their obedience, but they would be strengthened by the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus called a counselor. An earthly counselor hears what you are going through, empathizes, and offers support, encouragement, and guidance. The Holy Spirit is the perfect counselor because, unlike earthly counselors who may hear and support incorrectly or incompletely, the Holy Spirit knows everything we need and leads us in complete truth. We can trust the Holy Spirit to instruct us, lead us, and correct us. The more we obey Him and experience the joy of walking in step with Him, the more our love and obedience grow.

DISCUSS

- *When was a time you had to obey a rule you didn't understand at work or school, but later came to see the wisdom of that standard?*
- *Why is it incompatible to love God and maintain a pattern of willful disobedience? Why is an obedience problem ultimately a love problem?*
- *How does the Holy Spirit help you obey God's commands? How do you seek to rely on the Holy Spirit daily as you follow Jesus?*

2. Obedience to Jesus is rooted in love for God and others.

1 Corinthians 13:1-3: *If I speak human or angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so that I can move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give away all my possessions, and if I give over my body in order to boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

Unpacking 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

If you have ever been to Chick-fil-A, you've undoubtedly picked up on something noteworthy: It's "their pleasure" to serve you. What makes Chick-fil-A so special is not their sandwiches, fries, or lemonade. It's not their playland or impressive speed in the drive-through. What makes them special is how they serve. Chick-fil-A knows that serving people with genuine care and hospitality is how you retain a strong customer base. In fact, Chick-fil-A trains their employees in something they call "second-mile service." They go out of their way to serve their customers, from sparkling bathrooms to little touches like fresh flowers and mints. It's "their pleasure" to serve their customers, and they communicate their dedication in big and small ways.

When we love someone, or something, we will serve them as an expression of our love. Jesus said, "If you love me, you will obey my commands" (John 14:15). But what exactly was He commanding us to do? Did Jesus mean Christians are supposed to obey all 613 Old Testament laws? The Ten Commandments? The Sermon on the Mount? Last week, we reflected on The Great Commandment: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your



neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands” (Matthew 22:37-40). As followers of Jesus, we are called to love God and love others. The more we love God and experience His love, the more we desire to love others.

As we learned last week, the entire law is summed up in the command to love God and love other people. Just as we can’t separate loving God from loving others, we can’t separate love from obedience. The ultimate pursuit of obedience to God is the ultimate pursuit of love for God.

But what does this look like practically? How do I love my neighbor of a different faith, or no faith? How do I love my wayward teenager? How do I love my spouse when he or she has hurt me? How do I love the coworker who is vying for my job? How do I love my church when a leader or church member has let me down?

While the answers to these questions are nuanced, we begin with the command to love people the way Jesus did. First Corinthians 13, often called the “love chapter,” describes the perfect love of Jesus. In verses 4-8, we read that love is patient and kind, that it rejoices in the truth, that it protects, trusts, hopes, perseveres, and never fails. We also learn what love is not. It does not envy, is not proud, it does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking or easily angered, it does not keep a record of wrongs, and it does not rejoice in evil. Only Christ loves perfectly in the way Paul described in these verses.

It is essential to note that this love occurs within the context of community. Hebrews 10:24-25 says, “And let us consider one another in order to provoke love and good works, not neglecting to gather together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day approaching.” In an authentic community with other Christians, we pursue this way of love together, and God uses others to spur us on for His sake. As we share a difficult situation with a Christian friend or mentor, they might be able to see an option we have not considered or gently rebuke us where we are steering off course. Sharing our struggles with other believers is one way God gives us the support and encouragement we need to run our race faithfully.

Obedience devoid of love isn’t true obedience. Paul said, if we obey just for obedience’s sake, we are the “a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (v. 1). Obedience isn’t just about *what* we do—it’s about *why* we do it. God wants us to obey Him because we trust Him, as those who have experienced His love. When we have truly experienced His love, we will grow in our desire to express that love to others, which in turn draws us closer to Him.

DISCUSS

- *Have you ever experienced genuine hospitality in a business or restaurant? Or even in another’s home? How did it affect your desire to return to that place?*
- *How is it possible to do the “right things” before God but still be in the wrong?*



- *When has another believer challenged the way you were loving (or not loving) someone else? How did you receive their feedback? Why is this type of community vital in the discipleship process?*

3. True discipleship requires transparent modeling of love and obedience.

1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1: *“Everything is permissible,” but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is permissible,” but not everything builds up. No one is to seek his own good, but the good of the other person. Eat everything that is sold in the meat market, without raising questions for the sake of conscience, since **the earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it**. If any of the unbelievers invites you over and you want to go, eat everything that is set before you, without raising questions for the sake of conscience. But if someone says to you, “This is food from a sacrifice,” do not eat it, out of consideration for the one who told you, and for the sake of conscience. I do not mean your own conscience, but the other person’s. For why is my freedom judged by another person’s conscience? If I partake with thanksgiving, why am I criticized because of something for which I give thanks? So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or Greeks or the church of God, just as I also try to please everyone in everything, not seeking my own benefit, but the benefit of many, so that they may be saved. Imitate me, as I also imitate Christ.*

Unpacking 1 Corinthians 10:23–11:1

When you join a new company, you must learn more than just the job. You must learn the basics of using the key cards and the coffee machine, set up and memorize new passwords, and learn the culture of the new place. Is this company focused and intense, or do they prioritize collaboration and community? How do people dress, and how much time do they spend together outside of work? Figuring out the visible and invisible culture of a new job can be a daunting task. Fortunately, many companies have learned that integration happens faster when new employees are paired up with a mentor or colleague to facilitate their onboarding process. Having an inside perspective on how to navigate the new culture helps employees learn firsthand how to assimilate.

In 1 Corinthians 10:23–11:1, Paul addressed a particular cultural issue in the church in Corinth. Meat that had been sacrificed to idols in a pagan temple was later sold in the meat market for consumption. Paul pointed out that everything on earth belongs to God, and therefore Christians were free to partake without judgment. However, believers among them might have either felt personal conviction about eating meat sacrificed to idols, or unbelievers might be confused by the Christian’s expression of personal freedom. In those instances, Paul said, it is better to refrain from partaking, “out of consideration” (v. 28).

In Christ, we are set free from merely maintaining the letter of the law and now seek to follow the heart of the law by loving God and others. However, Paul warned that just because the



believers had been set free from some of the ceremonial obligations of the Torah, not every experience of freedom was for their benefit or the benefit of others around them. When faced with these moments, Paul instructed them to prioritize the good of others over their own preferences. In other words, love for others is to be the driving motivation behind our expression of freedom in Christ.

After giving practical advice on how to appropriately handle food served at a non-believer's house (vv. 25-30), Paul pointed them back to the heart of the law: "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or Greeks or the church of God, just as I also try to please everyone in everything, not seeking my own benefit, but the benefit of many, so that they may be saved" (vv. 31-33). Notice the integration of loving God and loving others in Paul's words. Out of love for God, we live for His glory. One way we glorify God is by joyfully obeying Him and dedicating the entirety of our lives to God and for God. At the same time, Paul repeated our obligation toward others.

Further, Paul only called the believers to do what he was already doing. Paul recognized that believers and non-believers watched the way he lived and made assumptions about the reliability and trustworthiness of the gospel based on his actions. Because of his love for God and others, he sought to live in a way that would lead others to faith. He laid down some of his own preferences and permissible expressions of freedom in pursuit of loving others and demonstrating authentic faith.

Paul lived his life in such a way that he felt comfortable telling others they could learn from him and follow his example. At first glance, this might seem arrogant. Very few of us would advise others to imitate our faith walk completely. We rarely feel like we are getting it right, and even when we are consistent in one area with Christ, we know we are lacking in other areas. How could Paul be so bold?

The key lies in the second part of his statement: "as I also imitate Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). Paul was not saying that all his actions were perfect, but that he followed a perfect Savior. What's worthy of imitation is a life lived in pursuit of the heart of God. In this sense, it is as if Paul was saying, "Join me. I'm following Jesus, so follow Him alongside me. We'll get there together!"

As we grow in our personal discipleship, we will also grow in our Christian influence. Others will watch and see how we express our faith in Christ through the way we live by loving God and others. Paul later wrote in 1 Timothy 1:5, "Now the goal of our instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith." Paul understood that love is the ultimate goal, and he modeled his ministry around it. Paul sought to produce believers who loved God and walked obediently with Him, and he knew one of the most effective methods for this was by living as an example for others to follow.

Whether we are in leadership or not, other people are watching our lives to see if we practice what we preach. As Christians go about their day-to-day lives, they are a walking commentary



on the gospel for others. Is our love for God and others easy visible to others and worth following? If other believers followed our example of faith, love, and spiritual discipline, would spiritual maturity be the natural outcome? Do the people who know you best (family, close friends, etc.) see the authenticity of your faith when no one else is around? Does your life demonstrate to a non-believer the difference that Jesus makes?

We belong to Christ, and we belong to one another. We are called to obey Christ by loving Him and loving others authentically. When we do, our lives are worthy of imitation, not because we are perfect, but because Jesus is, and we invite others to follow us as we follow Him. When we are part of an authentic community with other believers, we see the fruit of each other's lives and also their struggles. We support one another in loving God and others as we all wrestle with the practical application of living out Christ's commands daily.

Unfortunately, we often think of this backward. Many leaders believe they must cover up their shortcomings and present a picture of someone who "has it all together." They might gloss over their struggles to impress others, or as a way of presenting themselves as worthy of God's call to lead. But this often hurts the church more than it helps.

What the world needs to see are authentic though imperfect believers in Christ seeking to love God and others in grace and truth. If we want to disciple others, whether leading our own home and family, mentoring a coworker or friend, or serving in church leadership, we earn the right to speak into other people's lives through transparent modeling of love and obedience. As we draw near to Jesus in love and obedience, we too will grow into those who can say, "Imitate me, as I also imitate Christ."

DISCUSS

- *How have you learned what it means to follow Jesus through the example of others?*
- *What would be the outcome of someone following your example of following Jesus? How is God speaking to you about this?*
- *What prevents us from authentically sharing the difficult parts of our lives with other believers? How can hiding our struggles hurt our influence and the church community we belong to?*

GOSPEL FOCUS

Christ did not merely call us to obedience motivated by love; he modeled it. Philippians 2:5-8 says, "Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus, who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited. Instead, he emptied himself by assuming the form of a servant, taking on the likeness of humanity. And when he had come as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a



cross.” Jesus obeyed God by giving His life in exchange for ours. His sacrifice made a way for our sins to be forgiven, so that we might love God and others for eternity. When we come to faith in Christ, we are set free from the obligation and punishment of the law. Now, we obey Christ as an expression of our love and gratitude, not to earn His favor. The natural expression of a relationship with God is loving the people He brings into our lives.

REFLECT ON THE TEXT

DISCUSS

- *How does the Holy Spirit help us obey Christ? How can we seek to grow in listening to His voice daily?*
- *Where might you be displaying obedience devoid of love for God and others? What needs to change?*
- *How could Paul say, “Imitate me, as I also imitate Christ”? How can this be true even for new believers?*

RESPOND TO THE TEXT

We are called to obey Christ by loving God *and* loving others. The two cannot be separated. What would obedience without love look like? What about love declared in word but lacking obedience? How do the two inform and support each other?

APPLY

Paul said his life in Christ was an example for others to follow. Where is your life worthy of imitation, and where do you need to grow in love and obedience? How does the church encourage honesty and growth in us?