

POINTS TO PONDER

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶And I will ask the Parent, who will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees God nor knows God. You know God, because God abides with you, and God will be in you."

— *John 14.15-17*

"We often think of commandments as duties or obligations; things we only do out of a sense of moral requirement, often imposed by others. And if we imagine an authoritarian God in whom we must obey or else receive a punishment, then this makes sense. But what if God, and Jesus, are not authoritarian, but egalitarian? What if they see love as something we not only feel, but do, as we see others as our equals and not our inferiors?

Maybe our idea of God as a parent, whether as a father or a mother, is influenced by our own parental relationships, and how we were treated as a child by our parents, guardians, or caretakers. Hopefully, we had more good times than bad. Hopefully, our memories, or our current interactions, with our parents are more healthy and unconditionally loving than something other than that.

But whatever our reality with this has been or still is, we also hopefully can understand what it would be like to be loved by a parent who had unconditional love for us – a love not contingent upon our behavior, not contingent upon whether or not we obey them, and not contingent upon whether we lived up to their expectations of us or not. Because that is what real love looks and feels like. It is knowing we are loved irregardless of whether we always do the right things, or even if we hardly ever do the right things.

Real love does not manipulate or coerce us into thinking we have to perform or act in a certain way in order to be loved by the other. Whatever may have been the motives or thinking of the gospel writer to tell us that we will act in a certain way if we really love someone, we must be wise to what love truly is so that we don't think of love in a toxic way. We must interpret love as it truly is, else we risk never really allowing ourselves to ever experience true love.

How we interpret these words is important to our faithfulness to love itself. If we see love as a transactional relationship of obedience to another as a requirement for loving or being loved by them, then we are already misappropriating the word 'love' for some other reality that is not really love. Love, unconditional love, doesn't involve this kind of reciprocity. Other forms of love do; such as friendship love, erotic love, and other forms of love that are not agape love. But agape love is, by definition, unconditional. That is what makes it sacred and holy. It is freely given and received for its own sake, not out of some ulterior motive that requires any reciprocity.

So, if we interpret these words as being transactional, then let us concur that it is not agape that we are speaking about. However, the word in the text is agape. And so, if we are to admit this is talking about unconditional love, then it no longer makes sense, unless John misspoke, to see it through a transactional lens. We need to interpret the words not literally, but figuratively. We need to ask ourselves: 'Since it is apparent that it can't mean that I can only love God or Jesus if I am obedient to their commandments (since to do so would be self-contradictory with the very meaning of agape), then what does it really mean?'

In asking myself that question, it makes sense that Jesus (or John, using the voice of Jesus) was speaking to something deeper and more meaningful in telling us that we will keep their commandments if we love them. Since 'if' is a conditional word, we must interpret it in an unconditional way.

The best way I see of best making sense of these words, rather than simply dismissing them as untrue, is by recognizing their philosophical, cultural, and religious context in the Greco-Roman-Hebrew world in which they lived. Love was considered by many to be the cardinal virtue of all of the virtues; the one that mattered most. Jesus went even further in claiming that love was the epitome and culmination of all of

the other virtues, as when he was asked what was the greatest commandment and that he responded that it was love, and that all of the other commandments or moral principles we were to follow were summed up in love alone. In other words, for Jesus, to know and do love is to act in accordance with all of the other virtues. This was an idea proposed by Aristotle over 300 years before Jesus. It was premised on the additional idea of the “unity of the virtues” – the view that if we cultivate and habituate any virtue completely, we must also do the same for all the other virtues, since to not be excellent/perfect in any virtue would necessarily entail that we aren’t excellent/perfect in any of them, given how interconnected and interdependent the virtues are with one another.

Seen in this context, ‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments,’ doesn’t assume conditionality or reciprocity. Rather, it means that if we truly know and live by love, then we will undeniably know and live by all of the other virtues. And, as Jesus told us, this is what it means to live by the spirit of the law, and not just the letter of the law. By living by the spirit of the law, we not only fulfill all of the requirements of the law, but we go beyond this to also have the right motivations and intentions, the right attitude and moral reasoning, and the right spiritual disposition by which we act genuinely in a virtuous way.

Today, many dismiss such enlightened and magnanimous virtuosity as unobtainable; but the great teachers and mentors of that time fully had faith that such virtuosity was possible and achievable by any who committed themselves to living virtuously in a community of like-spirited persons. For Aristotle, this is why we need true friends, those who mirror the virtues back to us, who help us to develop a virtuous life, and enable us to sustain that life. For Jesus, this is why he had disciples who gave all that they had, and lived in communal relationship with one another, giving and receiving unconditional love to one another. Love cannot be experienced individually; it has to be experienced within a community – else we are merely ‘loving’ ourselves, which is hardly unconditional if we are not also willing to love others.

Consequently, the words simply mean: ‘By loving me (or anyone for that matter), you will necessarily act in all of the ways that God would have you to act – not simply fulfilling all of the commandments to the letter of the law, but also fulfilling their spirit. By loving me truly, unconditionally, you prove that you love everyone and everything unconditionally, for you would not be able to love me in this way if you weren’t simultaneously able to love all in the same way.’

The Advocate, often identified as the Holy Spirit, is that personification of virtuous character that exists not only in God and Jesus, but in all who follow in the same way of virtue. Because the virtuous life is seen as the epitome of all human aspirations and divine character traits, it also has the ‘Spirit of truth’ residing within it. Truth and virtue become one; neither be able to fully be itself without the other. And this interdependency between all that is good reveals how God/the divine/the sacred abides or resides within all who know God and live by God’s ways.

To explain this reality in words is difficult, but it is the mystical expression of John’s words that suggest all of this cultural, religious, and philosophical tradition. We love, therefore, not because we have to or are commanded to do so; we love because that is what we must do if we are to possess a character epitomized by love. There is no other option. It is, as expressed elsewhere in scripture, ‘written on our hearts.’ And that is precisely when we know that God lives in us.”

— Rev. Bret S. Myers, 5/10/2023

“¹⁶And I will ask the Parent, who will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees God nor knows God. You know God, because God abides with you, and God will be in you.”

— John 14.18-19

“The Parent of Jesus is the Parent of all who follow in his ways...who lives by the unity of virtues and sacred values. Virtue is passed from parent to child. Children are taught to emulate their parents, and in that

Jesus and his followers emulate God, they know and abide with God. Indeed, God abides with and lives in all who live by the virtues and values of God.

Do we recall when Jesus' earthly family came to speak to him while he was preaching and he replied that his true family are those who do the will of God? That was his point: that the children will act like the parent, will have the same character traits as the parent, and will have the same spirit of the parent. The parent abides and lives in the children. We see it written on their behavior, and their character.

Jesus is telling his followers that just as he has had God abiding and living in him, so, too, may all who follow in that same way. That is the "good news" he has to share to the world: we are all capable of letting love live in and through us. We can all be virtuous."

— Rev. Bret S. Myers, 5/10/2023

"On that day you will know that I am in my Parent, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Parent, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

— John 14.20-21

"This is essentially a reiteration in slightly different words from what was just said in the prior verses. Because it is highly symbolic language revealing mytho-poetic truths, John feels a need to say it in different ways so that his hearers may come to understand it with one of the verbal formulations he uses.

Here, he speaks of the Parent/God who is in us all who follow in the Parent's way – i.e., the way of the unity of the virtues. All commandments are fulfilled when we live virtuously (i.e., by the Spirit), for we go beyond the legalisms of the law to fulfill the honorableness of its intention and spirit.

When unconditional love is experienced, it is experienced for all. A loving God loves all. A loving human being loves all. This is its unconditional and universal quality. To have it purely means to have it all circumstances and towards all beings and creation. It is overflowing, like an unending stream. It cannot be contained.

The caveat, of course, is that though God, Jesus, and we can give this unconditional love to others, they may not experience it as such if they themselves have not developed unconditional love within themselves. Only those who have experienced it for themselves in how they love others can truly know what it means to be loved unconditionally by others. The irony is that we can only genuinely feel unconditional love from others when we have ourselves developed unconditional love for others."

— Rev. Bret S. Myers, 5/10/2023

"Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, 'Rabbi, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?' ²³Jesus answered him, 'Those who love me will keep my word, and my Parent will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. ²⁴Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Parent who sent me.'"

— John 14.22-24

"The last point in the commentary above explains why Judas doesn't yet get it, and why Jesus is trying to instruct them on what it means to love and be loved. Jesus is not singling himself out as the only one they need to truly love. That would be a contradiction of the very nature of agape. Rather his point is that only until they can come to truly love the one they assume that they most love can they ever be said to love. And this is not because they must love him first or more than others; but rather that until they can actually love, they can neither love Jesus nor anyone else. When they do come to love Jesus, they will, as virtuous beings, simultaneously love everyone – even as God and Jesus love them and everything. It's an either-or with agape: Either you love everyone and everything unconditionally, or else you really don't love at all. There is no middle ground; only lesser forms of love.

Jesus can tell them that he and God loves them, and it may make them feel better or even assured that God does love them. But having that feeling is quite distinct from actually knowing love within oneself, where one loves God, Jesus, everyone, and all things created. Love is not a feeling. It is a spiritual state of being. It will be manifested in ethical acts towards all, but it is first experienced as an awakening of recognizing that if we love ourselves, we must also love all others. It has to be unconditional and universal – else it is not agape love.

Once that love is experienced within oneself, when it becomes one's own spirit or state of being, then we recognize that we have found our true home – a home that is not a physical place, or even a set of relationships with family and friends, but rather a home that is present with us always because it lives within us rather than being something outside of ourselves. Home is that spiritual understanding that when we love unconditionally and universally, that it doesn't matter what our circumstances are or who we are with, love will be our response to all of life.

When we come to that truth, then we understand that everywhere is home, and everyone is included in our sense of home. Love makes it so."

— *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 5/10/2023*