

# BELPRES CHURCH

## **You've Heard It Said**

John 14:15-25

Speaker: Dr. Dudley

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Well, great to see all of you here in the room and those of you joining us online, thank you so much. The scripture today, there's two excerpts from John 14 and Psalm 119. John 14, Jesus is talking, "If you love me, keep my commands and I'll ask the father and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever, the spirit of truth. I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you. 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. Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My father will love them and we will come to them and make our home with them. Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you. I do not give you as the world gives." And then Psalm 119, "Oh how I love your law. I meditated on it all day long."

Earlier this week, a friend of mine showed me this picture of a woman named Hatchet Woman. That's how she's known. Her real name is Carrie Nations and in the early 1900s she would go into bars and throw rocks at bottles of alcohol and destroy entire inventories. So bars put up signs that said, "All nations welcome except Carrie Nations." And at one point her husband was joking with her and said, "You should use a hatchet instead of rocks to do more damage." And she said, "That's the only sensible thing you've ever said to me since we've been married." And so she started using a hatchet ever since then. And the Wikipedia article on her dryly notes, "The couple divorced in 1901. They had no children." I bet they didn't.

Can you imagine, you're sitting there, you're sipping a drink and she comes in with a hatchet and starts smashing up bottles? What a terrifying person, but that's the image I think we sometimes have when we hear one word that Jesus uses in this passage. "Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching." Obey me, obedience. And I think we

have this image that God is like hatchet lady, some cosmic puritan in the sky haunted by the nagging suspicion that someone somewhere is having fun and it is his job to hatchet it out. We're doing a sermon series where we're contrasting the things that we hear our culture say with what Jesus says. And one of the things we hear in our culture a lot is you just need to do what's right for you. You just need to do what's right for you. Do you?

Now, there's some good in this message. I mean, self-care is important. So there's some good in this message, but it sometimes drifts way too far into thinking I am my own moral authority. As long as it doesn't hurt anyone else, which usually means we're just ignoring the ways it's hurting other people, I get to decide what's right for me. And so in our culture, that word Jesus uses, obedience, feels confining and oppressive because we define freedom as freedom from any constraints to getting what I want. Nobody can tell me what to do. It's like a T-shirt I once saw that describes my life. It said, "You can't tell me what to do. You're not my daughter." That's my life, and that's often the attitude in our culture. Nobody can tell me to forgive folks who've hurt me. They don't deserve it. Nobody can tell me to give at least 10% of my money to God's work. It's mine. Nobody can tell me to keep sex only inside of marriage. That's so repressive.

And I'm not talking about people who don't go to church. No, no, no, no. I'm talking about folks who do. I'm talking about myself because often I just want what I want and so I do not like the word obey. I do not like it in a house. I do not like it with a mouse. I do not like it, Sam I am. I don't want to obey. But the problem with being our own moral authority is we're not. To say I get to decide what's right for me is so naive because it ignores the fact that we are all under the controlling authority of something or someone, our desire to be admired or the desire for material things or sexual lust or the need to achieve, or whatever else our culture and media says that we're supposed to have. And if those things get threatened, we get stressed out, we get defensive because that's what we're living for. And so those things become bondage to us.

See, it's not a question of whether I'm going to obey or not. We're all obeying something. The question is, what? And Jesus says, "Obey me and I will set you free from the stress, the bad consequences, broken relationships that following our culture sometimes leads to." But as I said, sometimes it is hard to obey because sometimes Jesus tells me to do things I do not want to do and he tells me to stop doing things I want to keep on doing. There's a humorous scene in the Barbie movie where a man is explaining to a woman, better phrase would be mansplaining to a woman, all the reasons the Godfather movies are brilliant. And when that scene came on, my wife just turned and looked at me. I'm like, "What?" Because I do that all the time to men, to women, young, old, anyone who will listen, and I know the morality of those movies is awful but artistically, the crosscutting in the baptism scene, the way Godfather Two is structured like a fugue, the commentary it is on them.

See, there I go. I can't help myself. And it's similar to obeying Jesus. There's some things I can't help myself. I just want to do what I want to do. But one of the big reasons obeying

Jesus is hard for us is we do not understand. We have no clue. We have no clue and we are completely wrong about what we think obedience is all about. We just have it all wrong. When my friend showed me the picture of Hatchet Lady, he said both Martin Luther King and Hatchet Lady were moral reformers. It's just that Martin Luther King made a difference and she didn't. Because, see, there is a big difference between saying, "I'm going to force you to obey. I'm going to compel you to obey," there's a difference between that and, "I have a dream." One is about repression. The other is about future possibilities. And it's the same way with obedience. Obedience isn't about what I can't do. It's about what could be. It's not about what I can't do. It's about what could be.

And yes, that might mean that there are some things I can't do to get to that better what could be, but it's all about where I put the emphasis. Am I focused on the obey part or the better what could be which inspires me to obey? In this passage, Jesus says, "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives." And in the Bible, the word peace never means just absence of trouble. That's the world's definition of peace. The Bible word is shalom and it means complete social, physical, economic, and spiritual flourishing in every dimension. And what Jesus is saying in this passage, there's a reason he includes it in this passage, he says, "Obey me and the result will be that you will flourish." And we don't have to do this alone. Jesus says, "I will ask the Father and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever, the spirit of truth. I will not leave you as orphans."

And he's talking about the Holy Spirit, which is his spirit living inside of us. And the Holy Spirit nudges us to do right things. The Holy Spirit helps us have faith in Jesus. The Holy Spirit comforts us, helps us experience God's love, helps us obey. I got an email from a woman I know in another state and she said in her email she said she was deeply offended by some comments a woman in her church had made to her. And my friend in her email said, "My initial reaction was to blast her right back, but the Holy Spirit reminded me to wait, which I did, for a day. And I prayed for the Lord to give me clarity and to listen before speaking. And God was so good in guiding me. I realized she was blasting outward and her comments landed on me, but were not aimed at me. But I was so caught up in them, I took them personally, but the Lord helped me to let it go and have a much better interaction with her the next day."

The Holy Spirit helped her obey, and that ordinary thing, the thing you and I encounter, daily stuff, an ordinary event, the Holy Spirit helped her obey, and the result was what could have been a lot of anger ended up with peace for my friend and healing and reconciliation and a better relationship with this woman. So then, how do we obey Jesus to get to that better what could be? How do we do that? One word, love. Love is the fuel. Love is the engine that drives it. In this passage, Jesus says, "Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me and the one who loves me will be loved by my father, and I too will love them and show myself to them. Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My father will love them and we will come to them and make our home with

them." So over and over Jesus repeats the words love and obey because he's saying there's a connection between loving him and obeying him.

The problem is our loves are often in the wrong order. We love success or reputation or money or achievement or sex or power more than we love Jesus. And so the Holy Spirit helps us reorder our loves so that we can obey. First, he helps us love and be loved by Jesus. I think sometimes when we hear these verses, "anyone who loves me will keep my commands", I think we hear it as if Hatchet Lady were reading it to us. I'll love you if you obey me, but Jesus never says "I'll love you if", never. He loves us no matter what we do or don't do. The Bible says God demonstrates his love for us in this. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. It also says we love because he first loved us. Jesus never says, "I'll love you if you obey." He says, "I love you no matter what. Full stop." So this isn't Hatchet Lady Jesus, "You better obey or else." It's also not passive-aggressive Jesus.

He doesn't say, "If you love me, you'll prove it to me by keeping my commands. Oh, you didn't keep my commands. I guess you don't love me. No? Nevermind. After everything I've done for you, but I'll be fine. No, just kick me to the curb. I'm fine." He doesn't say that. Jesus doesn't say, "If you love me, prove it to me by obeying." He's not passive-aggressive Jesus. He says, "Anyone who loves me will, just will, naturally obey my teaching." If we experience his love, then that helps us love him and that helps us want naturally to keep his commands. We're never going to be perfect, we're still going to sin, but over time, the more we experience Jesus' love, the more we love him in return, and the more we just naturally want to do what he tells us to do. The goal is not to keep his commands. The goal is not to keep his commands. That's the outcome. The goal is experience his love, which helps us love him, and then we obey.

Second, the Holy Spirit helps us love God's commands, which may seem weird. Most of us think of laws, command as something you need, but not necessarily something that you love. But the other text we read today, Psalm 119, is a long love poem to God's law. And it says things like, "I delight in your commands because I love them. To all perfection I see a limit, but your commands are boundless. Oh, how I love your law. Your statutes are my heritage forever. They are the joy of my heart." This guy really likes God's law. Why? Because God's commands are the Google Maps of our soul that lead us to flourishing. And then, finally, the Holy Spirit helps us love the better what could be. So let's take one of God's commands that many, many, most Christians actually ignore, give at least 10% of our money to God's work in the faith community that we're a part of.

And a lot of Christians say, "You know what? The Bible doesn't really say that. It's not really in the Bible." And you're right. Here's a few verses where it does say that, but other than that, the Bible is just silent. Why does God tell us to do this? To make us miserable? No, it's about the better what could be. We stress out less about money when we give it away, which sounds contradictory, but when we give, we see God provide, which gives us more confidence. We also get the joy of knowing that we're a part of

making someone else's life better. And that just feels good. Plus, and maybe a really big thing in our area, we discovered that we can be happy, we can actually be happy with less, sometimes even happier with less. A while back, I told you a story about a time that my wife and I had taken our kids to Disney World. We were in the park and I brought them dinner, and when I brought the dinner on the trays, our kids said, "Thank you, dad."

And the guy next to us said, "Your kids thank you when you feed them. How did you get them to do that?" And I said, "Well, I think part of it is my wife and I give a good chunk of our money to our church and other Christian organizations, which means that we can't always do a trip like this every year and so we have to save up for it, and they get to anticipate it. And when it happens, they're not jaded, but it's a treat. And so they're grateful." See, giving is about the better what could be. Same with a command to keep sex inside of marriage. Why does God say that? Well, every study, secular study, every secular study shows that the most sexually satisfied people are actually people in happy marriages, because sex is best with someone with whom you can be completely transparent, flaws and all, they've promised never to leave you so you don't have to hide and pretend. It's true intimacy. We flourish best when we follow God's commands because he made us, he knows what is going to make us flourish.

And when we disobey his commands, that's like a truck trying to float in water. It wasn't designed to do that so it sinks. Disobeying God has natural consequences. I remember one time when my kids were little, I took them to the Seattle Science Center, and my daughter had a little toy ninja with her, and I said, "You better leave that in the car or you might lose it." Well, she snuck the toy ninja into her pocket anyway and took it into the Science Center. And can you guess what happened? She lost it. And on the way back to the car, she was stomping her feet saying, "Stupid Science Center. It lost my ninja," as if that was the Science Center's mission. The Science Center, "We just want to lose your toys." Now, she got what she wanted, take the toy with her, but she got the natural consequences of disobeying her father, me. And she knew it. She knew it. I didn't have to say, "I told you so." I didn't have to say, "That'll learn you." I didn't have to say, "Next time you're going to listen to me."

I didn't have to say any of that, but I did. But God is a better father than I am, and he never says I told you so. He says, "Walk in my ways and you will flourish." And then you're going to be able to say things like, "I used to be a slave to resentment, but I followed God's commands to forgive people who'd hurt me, and now I'm free. I used to be a slave to addiction or guilt or shame or lust, but now I'm free." As Pastor Tim Keller puts it, "Now that Jesus is my master, nothing masters me." And I think a lot of times all we see is the obedience, the first step, the hard thing, because sometimes it's hard, the hard thing God calls us to do or not do. But it's like we just look at that and we don't look to the end of the road. Look to the end of the road because at the end of the road of obedience is a better what could be.

So then practically, how do we do this? Practically? First, experience Jesus' love. His love helps us love him, which helps us obey. So experience his love. And you know how because we talk about it all the time. Prayer, where we're especially focusing on those thoughts that they're coming from God. They're not our thoughts. Read the Bible because in the Bible God tells you how much he loves you and also tells us his commands for flourishing. That's part of why we're doing a Bible reading plan between now and January as a whole church. Three times a week, there's a passage to read and some questions to guide you, and we're doing this all together as a church to experience God's love more. And it's not too late to start. There's information on our website or at the welcome desk. But also let the Bible read you, critique you. The most helpful passages of scripture are actually the ones we don't like because they expose the ways that maybe we're not walking in God's commands.

Prayer, scripture, and then worship is such an important way to connect our hearts to God, the music gets into our hearts, the word is preached, especially when we do this in person together as a community. Because being with other Christians reminds us, look around the room, we're not alone. And the Holy Spirit moves in more powerful ways when we worship together. Online is great for when you can't get here. So this is no shame. Keep joining us online when you can't get here, but also don't miss out. Worship is more powerful when we're together in the same room. Experience Jesus' love through prayer, scripture, and worship. And then, second, ask God to show you the better what could be. If you're having trouble obeying God on something, don't try to obey with more willpower. Ask God to show you the better what could be.

There's a man in this church who by his own definition was a workaholic and it was bondage for him because it resulted in a lot of stress for him. And one of the consequences of his workaholicism was it left his wife feeling lonely and frustrated and unloved, and she ended up having an affair. For two years, they lived separately but didn't get a divorce, but gradually through prayer, through scripture, through worship, they began to experience God's unconditional love for them, which helped them love him more and trust that his commands were meant for their flourishing. This man began to see how deeply his workaholicism had wounded his wife, the hurt that he'd caused her, and he just started to want to obey God's commands to love her as Christ loves the church. And she began to see that her affair had left her more insecure, not less insecure, because one of the things she knew for sure about this other guy was that he was willing to cheat with her, cheat with someone else's wife, which means he probably didn't value commitment all that much.

And through a lot of prayer and listening and a lot of asking of forgiveness, they didn't just put their marriage back together again, they now have a great marriage fulfilled with intimacy and joy. Their obedience led to a greater what could be. It works in our personal lives like that. It works on a corporate level. There's a church in Washington, D.C. that shows Jesus' love to ex-prisoners, and after they're released from prison, people

from this church help them find jobs. Sometimes the prisoners will live with people in this church. Every morning, church members and these ex-convicts do a Bible study together in a coffee shop in an under-resourced neighborhood in Washington, D.C. and then in the afternoons, they rebuild homes for families that can't afford it. And they get to know the kids in the neighborhood and they tell them their story and they warn them against gangs and drugs. And because they're ex-prisoners, they have a lot of street cred with these kids, and so they listen.

From this neighborhood, you can see the Capitol Dome where politicians argue about the best ways to help the poor while just a few blocks away a whole neighborhood is being restored and kids are being transformed because church members are obeying Jesus' commands to care for these ex-convicts and ex-convicts are obeying Jesus' commands to lead a better life. Obedience just works. It even works in those little daily interactions like the one I told you about, the woman who wanted to lash out in anger but the Holy Spirit helped her respond better. So what obedience is God calling you into in order to experience his better what could be you? Do not do it alone. This community is here for you and Jesus is here for you, and you will find your freedom in following him.

So as I close, I'm just going to invite all of us to close our eyes, and I'm going to read the lyrics from a modern worship song that is a paraphrase of Psalm 119, that long love poem to God's law. And as I read it, I just invite you to make this your prayer today and this week. So Jesus, turn your eyes upon me for I know that there is mercy in your sight. To all creation I can see a limit, but your commands are boundless and have none. So may your word be my joy in meditation from the rising to the setting of the sun. Your statutes are my heritage forever. My heart is set on keeping your decrees. Still my anxious urge toward rebellion and let your love keep my will upon its knees. God, you are my God and I will ever praise you, I will seek you in the morning, and I will learn to walk in your ways and step by step you'll lead me and I will follow you all of my days. Amen.

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### **Discussion Questions:**

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*Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.*

**Opening Question:** Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

**Scripture Reflection Questions:** Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:



- What do you feel when you read this scripture (excited, angry, worried, etc....)? Why do you think that is? (Explain in your group and then take that response to Jesus in prayer this week.)
- As you read this scripture, where does it challenge your current cultural context?

**Sermon Reflection Questions:** Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- In these verses Jesus repeats himself a lot. Why does he do this? What points is he trying to drive home to his disciples?
- If we obey because we are compelled by Jesus' love for us how might you live differently this week?

**Closing Question and Application:** Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

**Closing group prayer:** Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.