



Do you remember that we were in a sermon series in the gospel of John? The last message I preached in John was in December of 2016. We had planned to take a break from John to preach through Ephesians. I counted 47 messages in Ephesians which with other breaks and other speakers took almost a year and a half. The plan had always been to finish the book of John, so this is where we are at this morning. I don't expect you to remember the earlier message in John because we started that series three years ago. This entire book is the inspired, revealed Word of God and we honor every word on its pages but most people agree that the gospel of John and the letter to the church in Ephesus and two of the most amazing books in all of Scripture. It is humbling to even share them with you in sermons, so please continue to pray for me as we work through the remainder of John. If something good happens when I preach, give credit to the Holy Spirit. If I ever say something lunkheaded, blame me and please point it out to me. Alright? Here we go in John 14, starting at verse 15.

¹⁵ "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, ¹⁷ even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.

¹⁸ "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. ¹⁹ Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹ Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him." ²² Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, "Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?" ²³ Jesus answered him, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. ²⁴ Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me.

²⁵ "These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. ²⁶ But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your

remembrance all that I have said to you.²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.²⁸ You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I will come to you.' If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I.²⁹ And now I have told you before it takes place, so that when it does take place you may believe.³⁰ I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no claim on me,³¹ but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us go from here.

When I was a teenager I would occasionally listen to Paul Harvey. For those who don't know who Paul Harvey was, he was the Rush Limbaugh of his day. Harvey did a daily newscast and commentary for 58 years. So in the late 80's, I was excited to get a tour of Harvey's downtown Chicago offices by a friend who worked for him. My friend's job was to read dozens of small town newspapers from all over the country looking for interesting stories for Harvey's show. This friend was as generous as the day is long. He was a solid believer who eventually became an elder at their large evangelical church in Michigan. His dad was a pastor and he married a girl from a very strong Christian family. So I was surprised to learn one day that my friend had a rebellious past when he was a teenager. It just didn't seem to fit his present character, which was obviously a good thing. I asked how he had gone down that path in his teen years. Without missing a beat, he said a phrase I had never heard before: Rules without relationships leads to rebellion.

Apparently, his dad wanted well behaved children so that his pastor's family would look good to everyone around them. This is the classic parental mistake and you certainly don't have to be a pastor to commit this error. His dad had a lot of rules for him, but he never felt he had any kind of relationship with his dad. I think he felt like if he followed the list of rules his dad would accept and love him. But if you obey the rules for years and never get the reward of a relationship, you eventually give up. Rules without relationships leads to rebellion. Yes, he was laying the blame on his dad and maybe not taking enough responsibility for his own actions, but I never forgot what he told me.

For many people, this is not only their view of their father but also their view of God. They see God as someone who has lots of rules. They are told they must follow these rules if they want to be a good Christian. They may even be taught, or at least given the impression, that if they follow God's rules, God will love and accept them. This is, of course, the very definition of religion, is it not? But inevitably, merely obeying rules will not give you any relationship with the rule giver. When this happens, some people try harder and others just give up and rebel against the rules. Because as my friend discovered, rules without relationship leads to rebellion.

There's a soft side and a hard side to this dilemma. On the softer side of the spectrum is what this man said in 2015. "Wait a minute, did I just spend 10 years persuading kids to behave Christianly without teaching them Christianity?"¹ The man who said this was Phil Vischer, the creator of Veggie Tales. He has deep regrets about the fruit of his labors in the world of Veggie Tales. A few weeks ago I talked about this same idea, how children's Bible's and much curriculum for children do the same thing. They teach kids to be nice but never teach them why they should be nice. They are not the gospel and could not even be called 'gospel lite' because

there is no gospel in them. This does not mean that you should run home and burn all of your Veggie Tales DVDs. But we should recognize the vast shortcomings of resources like these and never depend on them to disciple our children.

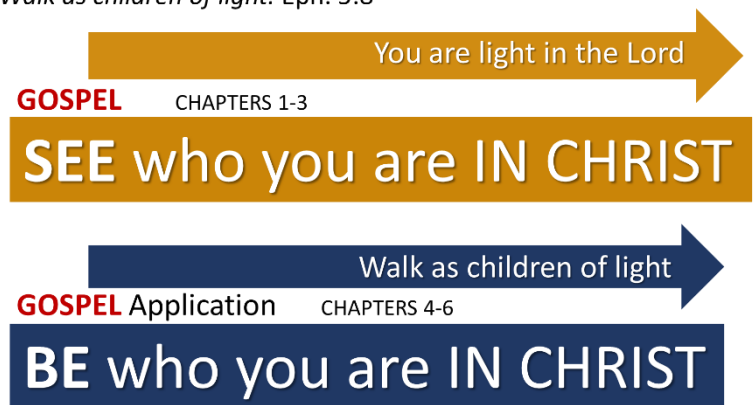
Veggie Tales is on the softer end of this spectrum but there is a much harder and more dangerous problem on the other end of the spectrum that happens when Christianity is taught as a religion; when the greatest love story ever told is reduced to a list of cold rules to be obeyed. When this happens subtly in Veggie Tales it's one thing but when it happens from the pulpit, it's dangerous heresy. But dare I say it happens in the majority of evangelical churches? I don't have stats to prove this but I have a sense it may be truer than we imagine. And this happens every time we separate the application of the gospel from the gospel itself.

This is why I was so careful not to do this while preaching through Ephesians. You probably got sick of seeing variations on this diagram but I think it is vital that we get this correct. Let me work through this one more time and then we'll see how it lays the foundation for our passage in John.

Ephesians 5:8 works so well for this diagram. This one verse has the gospel and the application of the gospel. "For at one time you were darkness..." This is the bad news. We were all darkness. We were not just walking in darkness, we were darkness. Such is the devastation of sin.

"...but now you are light in the Lord." That's the gospel. We were darkness but now we are light in the Lord. Obviously, this one verse does not tell you everything you need to know but you only need a few more verses in Ephesians to fill in the gaps. "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, 8 which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight..." (Eph. 1:7-8)

for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light. Eph. 5:8



But this is a perfect summary. We were darkness but now we are light in the Lord. Did you notice how your essential being has been transformed. We are light in the Lord. Just as we did not merely walk in darkness but we were darkness, after Christ's transforming work, we don't merely walk in the light, we are light in the Lord. Sin is completely devastating but the blood of Christ is completely transforming.

That is the power of the gospel but what follows is the application of the gospel. "Walk as children of light." I have usually called the first part doctrine and the second part application but to be more specific, the first part should be called the gospel and the second part is the gospel

application. Since or because you are now light in the Lord, the application of that transforming work is that you now walk as children of light. You are different so now, act differently.

But what happens when you try to act like a transformed person if you have never been transformed? You end up with Phil Vischer's ten years of regret where he finally realized he was "persuading kids to behave Christianly without teaching them Christianity." You can't apply the gospel power to your life if you have not been transformed by the gospel. If you rip the gospel application away from the gospel, you will always have one of two outcomes. Some people will try really hard and can live a decently good life according to all of the rules found in the Bible. That is, they can look "Christianly" without being a Christian. Some of them may be believers but they are living good lives in their own strength. So some will "succeed in obeying the rules but others will be like my friend who just gave up. He could not measure up to the rules in the Bible or to his dad's rules so instead, he settled into a pattern of rebellion.

Stripping the gospel from gospel application will always lead either to legalistic righteousness or rebellious licentiousness. This is not our faith. This is not Jesus. But like with so much false teaching, it is easy to twist the Scriptures into a religious rule book. How does all of this apply to the passage in John? Take John 14:15 for example. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." Here's how I could preach this passage.

"Do you love Jesus? If you say that you love Jesus, then you must obey his commandments. Are you not obeying his commandments every day? Then you must not love Jesus."

Do you see how easily I could turn this into a graceless, works righteousness kind of sermon? If you really struggled this week, I could easily hammer you into the ground with just this one verse. And since the verse seems pretty clear, I could use my position as a pastor and make my voice grow a little louder in this sermon and I could probably convince most of you that you either do not love Jesus at all or else your love is so small that you need a microscope to see it.

Now here's the thing. It's possible that some of you do not love Jesus. You may not be saved yet. Your love may be very small. These things may be true of you but if I preached this passage in this manner, I would be twisting Scripture to arrive at false conclusions. In other words, you may need to address your unbelief or your lack of love for Jesus, but I can't get you there by doing such damage to the Bible, especially to Jesus' own words.

But admittedly, at first reading, it does seem like you could preach this verse in this way. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." It seems like a pretty clear conditional clause. If this, then that. If you love me—that's the condition, then you will obey my commandments—that's the result. It's a simple conditional clause. I could say to Karen, "If I get paid on Friday, I'll take you out for a nice dinner." We all understand what that means. And we also understand that if I don't get paid on Friday, that I am no longer under any obligation to fulfill my promise of a nice dinner out. That's all pretty clear, right? So why then am I saying that Jesus' conditional clause is not to be understood the same way.

The key is what it means to love Jesus. It is a conditional clause. If I changed that, I would do violence to Jesus' words

They are different because we must interpret Scripture by other Scripture. That's a cardinal rule of Biblical interpretation. The Bible must agree with itself. Most of us know 1 John 4:19. We love, because—finish it—because he first loved us. Here we see clearly that God is the first mover in salvation. His love precedes and creates our love. But it wasn't exactly a foot race between us and God. He predestined his love for us from before the foundation of the world.

even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will (Ephesians 1:4-5).

There are many other passages² that teach in alignment with 1 John 4:19—we love because he first loved us. God is the first mover, the prime mover in salvation. And this is why we can love Jesus in return. We love because he first loved us. And this is what defines Jesus' words in John 14. If you love me, you will keep my commandments. Who is it who loves Jesus? The one who loves Jesus is the one who was first loved by Jesus.

Now consider the conditional phrase once again. If you love me—that's the condition—you will keep my commandments—that's the result. Who is the one who loves Jesus? The one who has already been loved by Jesus. His saving work has broken into this person's life. They were dead in their trespasses and sins, but God made them alive. They were enemies of God but now they are his friend. They did not believe in Jesus but now they do believe. This person loves Jesus and this is the same person who will keep his commandments. Do you see? It will happen. Obeying Jesus' commandments does not cause you to love Jesus but rather recognizing what God has already accomplished on your behalf, makes you want to obey his commandments.

It has to be understood this way. Otherwise, you turn the entire passage into a work based salvation. I'll show you what I mean by looking at verse 21. *Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me.* That's just another way of stating the same truth in verse fifteen, would you agree? It's the same. But look at the second half of verse 21. *And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.* So here's the progression. If you love Jesus, you will keep his commandments. But the other result is that the Father and the Son will love this person. Can you see why this is problem? Taken the wrong way, it is saying that God loves us because we loved him. This would completely reverse theater of 1 John 4:19 and every other passage that has God as the prime mover in salvation.

But what if you feel like you are not obeying Jesus' commandments? What does that say about you? Jesus' words bother you. You hear him say, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." You feel like a failure. You feel like you fall miserably short of keeping his commandments and you wonder if you love Jesus or not.

I can think of three reasons that you might feel this way. The first is that you are experiencing the fallen nature that we all possess. To love Jesus and keep his commandments seems like an impossible task and we're always falling short of the standard. So what you are feeling may just be part of the ups and downs of battling against our own sin. You may fail but that does not make you a failure.

The second reason you may be feeling this way is because you do not yet know Christ as your Savior. When I was sixteen, I knew a lot about Jesus but I did not know Jesus. I had not trusted his shed blood alone as the sacrifice for my sins. I knew he died for sins but not necessarily for my sin. If you have put off this decision or if you have been trusting Christ and your good works, you need to repent and place your faith in Christ alone. As Paul wrote in 2 Cor 6—“behold, now is the day of salvation.” Today could be your day of salvation.

And the third reason why you may struggle with this verse is because you don’t experience what it means to be loved by the Father and by the Son. You know in your head that you can’t work for your salvation but neither do you feel a closeness with Christ. You have good theology but little passion. This makes you wonder how much you love him.

One of the remedies for this is Luke chapter seven and the story of the sinful woman. You know it. A woman with a questionable past falls at Jesus’ feet, tears pour onto his feet. She wipes them with her hair and anoints his feet with precious ointment. Simon, the Pharisee who hosted the meal was disgusted by this woman of ill repute, so Jesus told a story.

⁴¹ “A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?” ⁴³ Simon answered, “The one, I suppose, for whom he cancelled the larger debt.” And he said to him, “You have judged rightly.” ⁴⁴ Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. ⁴⁷ Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.”

Tell me this. Did this woman have more sins than Simon? No, she did not, then why did she have more love? She had more love because her perception of Jesus’ love for her was immense. Her human brokenness allowed her to see what Jesus had done for her. She actually and powerfully experienced the love of Christ. They were not mere words, she felt it. It was not the theology of love she felt but the sweet reality of love. It pulsed through her veins and poured out through her tears of worship. She was in love with Jesus and would have obeyed anything he asked her to do.

This is what Jesus means when he said, *“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.* Our obedience is not the condition of our acceptance; it is the consequence of our acceptance. We obey because we were loved not so that we will be loved. This is the true gospel of Jesus and the only source of true power to change our hearts.

Rich Maurer
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¹ <https://www.christianexaminer.com/article/phil-vischer-shares-regrets-about-veggie-ales-and-how-hes-making-it-right/49630.htm>

² *But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe (Romans 3:21-22).*

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:4-6).