

The Especial Principle of Obedience Unto the Person of Christ

by John Owen

The sermon emphasizes the importance of love as the foundation of all acceptable obedience, with the person of Christ being the especial object of divine love.

Topics: "Love for Christ", "Obedience"

Description

John Owen emphasizes that love is the foundation of obedience to Christ, asserting that true obedience stems from genuine love for Him. He argues that any obedience not rooted in love is unacceptable, and that the love of God, particularly towards the person of Christ, is essential for believers. Owen warns against false pretenses of love and highlights that sincere love for Christ is necessary for true obedience and spiritual life. He cites scripture to support his claims, underscoring the importance of loving Christ sincerely and the consequences of failing to do so. Ultimately, Owen calls for a love that is both genuine and fruitful in obedience to Christ's commands.

Transcript

That which doth enliven and animate the obedience whereof we have discoursed, is love. This himself makes the foundation of all that is acceptable unto him. "If," saith he, "ye love me, keep my commandments," John xiv. 15. As he distinguisheth between love and obedience, so he asserts the former as the foundation of the latter. He accepts of no obedience unto his commands that doth not proceed from love unto his person. That is no love which is not fruitful in obedience; and that is no obedience which proceeds not from love. So he expresth on both sides: "If a man love me, he will keep my words;" and, "He that loveth me not keepeth not my sayings," verses 23, 24.

In the Old Testament the love of God was the life and substance of all obedience. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, thy mind and strength," was the sum of the law. This includes in it all obedience, and, where it is genuine, will produce all the fruits of it; and where it was not, no multiplication of duties was accepted with him. But this in general we do not now treat of.

That the person of Christ is the especial object of this divine love, which is the fire that kindles the sacrifice of our obedience unto him -- this is that alone which at present I design to demonstrate.

The apostle hath recorded a very severe denunciation of divine wrath against all that love him not: "If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema Maranatha," 1 Cor. xvi. 22. And what was added unto the curse of the Law we may add unto this of the Gospel: "And all the people shall say, Amen," Deut. xxvii. 26. And, on the other hand, he prays for grace on all that "love him in sincerity," Eph. vi. 24. Wherefore, none who desire to retain the name of Christian, can deny, in words at least, but that we ought, with all our hearts, to love the Lord Jesus Christ.

I do not so distinguish love from obedience as though it were not itself a part, yea, the chiefest part, of our obedience. So is faith also; yet is it constantly distinguished from obedience, properly so called. This alone is that which I shall demonstrate -- namely, that there is, and ought to be, in all believers, a divine, gracious love unto the person of Christ, immediately fixed on him, whereby they are excited unto, and acted in, all their obedience unto his authority. Had it been only pleaded, that many who pretend love unto Christ do yet evidence that they love him not, it is that which the Scripture testifieth, and continual experience doth proclaim. If an application of this charge had been made unto them whose sincerity in their profession of love unto him can be no way evidenced, it ought to be borne with patience, amongst other reproaches of the same kind that are cast upon them. And some things are to be premised unto the confirmation of our assertion.

1. It is granted that there may be a false pretence of love unto Christ; and as this pretence is ruinous unto the souls of them in whom it is, so it oftentimes renders them prejudicial and troublesome unto others. There ever were, and probably ever will be, hypocrites in the church and a false pretence of love is of the essential form of hypocrisy. The first great act of hypocrisy, with respect unto Christ, was treachery, veiled with a double pretence of love. He cried, "Hail, Master! and kissed him," who betrayed him. His words and actions proclaimed love, but deceit and treachery were in his heart. Hence the apostle prays for grace on them who love the Lord Jesus ἐνἀφθαρσίᾳ -- without dissimulation or doubling, without pretences and aims at other ends, without a mixture of corrupt affections; that is, in sincerity, Eph. vi. 24. It was prophesied of him, that many who were strangers unto his grace should lie unto him, Ps. xviii. 44, בְּנֵי נֵכָר יְכַֽחֲשׁוּ־לִֽי -- feignedly submit, or yield feigned obedience unto him. So is it with them who profess love unto him, yet are enemies of his cross, "whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things," Phil. iii. 18, 19. All that are called Christians in the world, do, by owning that denomination, profess a love unto Jesus Christ; but greater enemies, greater haters of him, he hath not among the children of men, than many of them are. This falsely pretended love is worse than avowed hatred; neither will the pretence of it stand men in stead at the last day. No other answer will be given unto the plea of it, be it in whom it will, but "Depart from me, I never knew you, ye workers of iniquity." Whereas, therefore, he himself hath prescribed this rule unto all who would be esteemed his disciples, "If ye love me, keep my commandments," we may safely conclude, all who live in a neglect of his commands, whatever they pretend or profess, they love him not. And the satisfaction which men, through much darkness, and many corrupt prejudices, have attained unto in the profession of Christian religion, without an internal, sincere love unto Christ himself, is that which ruins religion and their own souls.

2. As there is a false pretence of love unto Christ, so there is, or may be, a false love unto him also. The persons in whom it is may in some measure be sincere, and yet their love unto Christ may not be pure, nor sincere -- such as answers the principles and rules of the gospel; and as many deceive others, so some

deceive themselves in this matter. They may think that they love Christ, but indeed do not so; and this I shall manifest in some few instances.

(1.) That love is not sincere and incorrupt which proceedeth not from -- which is not a fruit of faith. Those who do not first really believe on Christ, can never sincerely love him. It is faith alone that worketh by love towards Christ and all his saints. If, therefore, any do not believe with that faith which unites them unto Christ, which within purifies the heart, and is outwardly effectual in duties of obedience, whatever they may persuade themselves concerning love unto Christ, it is but a vain delusion. Where the faith of men is dead, their love will not be living and sincere.

(2.) That love is not so which ariseth from false ideas and representations that men make of Christ, or have made of him in their minds. Men may draw images in their minds of what they most fancy, and then dote upon them. So some think of Christ only as a glorious person exalted in heaven at the right hand of God, without farther apprehensions of his natures and offices. So the Roman missionaries represented him unto some of the Indians -- concealing from them his cross and sufferings. But every false notion concerning his person or his grace -- what he is, hath done, or doth -- corrupts the love that is pretended unto him. Shall we think that they love Christ by whom his divine nature is denied or that those do so who disbelieve the reality of his human nature? Or those by whom the union of both in the same person is rejected? There cannot be true evangelical love unto a false Christ, such as these imaginations do fancy.

(3.) So is that love which is not in all things -- as to causes, motives, measures, and ends -- regulated by the Scripture. This alone gives us the nature, rules, and bounds of sincere spiritual love. We are no more to love Christ, than to fear and worship him, according unto ¹⁴our own imaginations. From the Scripture are we to derive all the principles and motives of our love. If either the acts or effects of it will not endure a trial thereby, they are false and counterfeit; and many such have been pretended unto, as we shall see immediately.

(4.) That is so, unquestionably, which fixeth itself on undue objects, which, whatever is pretended, are neither Christ nor means of conveying our love unto him. Such is all that love which the Romanists express in their devotion unto images, as they fancy, of Christ; crucifixes, pretended relics of his cross, and the nails that pierced him, with the like superstitious representations of him, and what they suppose he is concerned in. For although they express their devotion with great appearance of ardent affections, under all outward signs of them -- in adorations, kissings, prostrations, with sighs and tears; yet all this while it is not Christ which they thus cleave unto, but a cloud of their own imaginations, wherewith their carnal minds are pleased and affected. That is no god which a man hews out of a tree, though he form it for that end, though he falls down unto it and worshippeth it, and prayeth unto it, and saith, "Deliver me, for thou art my god," Isa. xlv. 17. The authors of this superstition, whereby the love of innumerable poor souls is depraved and abused, do first frame in their minds what they suppose may solicit or draw out the natural and carnal affections of men unto it, and then outwardly represent it as an object for them. Wherefore some of their representations of him are glorious, and some of them dolorous, according as they aim to excite affections in carnal minds. But, as I said, these things are not Christ, nor is he any way concerned in them.

(5.) I acknowledge there have been great pretences of such a love unto Christ as cannot be justified. Such is that which some of the devotionists of the Roman Church have endeavoured rather to express out of their fancy than declare out of their experience. Raptures, ecstasies, self-annihilations, immediate adhesions and enjoyments, without any act of the understanding, and with a multitude of other swelling

words of vanity, they labour to set off what they fancy to be divine love. But there wants not evidences of truth sufficient to defeat these pretences, be they ever so specious or glorious. For --

[1.] As it is by them described, it exceedeth all Scripture precedents. For men to assume unto themselves an apprehension that they love Christ in another manner and kind, in a higher degree at least, and thence to enjoy more intimacy with him, more love from him, than did any of the apostles -- John, or Paul, or Peter, or any other of those holy ones whose love unto him is recorded in the Scripture -- is intolerable vanity and presumption. But no such things as these devotees pretend unto are mentioned, or in the least intimated ¹⁴³concerning them, and their love to their Lord and Master. No man will pretend unto more love than they had, but such as have none at all.

[2.] It is no way directed, warranted, approved, by any command, promise, or rule of the Scripture. As it is without precedent, so it is without precept. And hereby, whether we will or no, all our graces and duties must be tried, as unto any acceptation with God. Whatever pretends to exceed the direction of the Word may safely be rejected -- cannot safely be admitted. Whatever enthusiasms or pretended inspirations may be pleaded for the singular practice of what is prescribed in the Scripture, yet none can be allowed for an approved principle of what is not so prescribed. Whatever exceeds the bounds thereof is resolved into the testimony of every distempered imagination. Nor will it avail that these things amongst them are submitted unto the judgment of the church. For the church hath no rule to judge by but the Scripture; and it can pass but one judgment of what is not warranted thereby -- namely, that it is to be rejected.

[3.] As it is described by those who applaud it, it is not suited unto the sober, sedate actings of the rational faculties of our souls. For whereas all that God requireth of us, is that we love him with all our souls and all our minds, these men cry up a divine love by an immediate adhesion of the will and the affections unto God, without any actings of the mind and understanding at all. Love, indeed, is the regular acting of our whole souls, by all their faculties and rational powers, in an adherence unto God. But these men have fancied a divine love for them whom they would admire and extol, which disturbs all their regular acting, and renders them of little or no use in that which, without their due exercise, is nothing but fancy. And hence it is that, under pretence of this love, sundry persons among them -- yea, all that have pretended unto it -- have fallen into such ridiculous excesses and open delusions as sufficiently discover the vanity of the love itself pretended by them.

Wherefore we plead for no other love unto the person of Christ but what the Scripture warrants as unto its nature; what the gospel requireth of us as our duty; what the natural faculties of our minds are suited unto and given us for; what they are enabled unto by grace; and without which in some degree of sincerity, no man can yield acceptable obedience unto him.

These things being premised, that which we assert is, that there is, and ought to be, in all believers, a religious, gracious love unto the person of Christ, distinct from, and the reason of, their obedience unto his commands; -- that is, it is distinct from all other commands; but is also itself commanded and required of us in a way of duty.

That there is in the church such a love unto the person of Christ, ¹⁴⁴the Scripture testifies, both in the precepts it gives for it and the examples of it. And all those who truly believe cannot apprehend that they understand any thing of faith, or love of Christ, or themselves, by whom it is called in question. If, therefore, I should enlarge on this subject, a great part of the doctrine of the Scripture from first to last must be represented and a transcript of the hearts of believers, wherein this love is seated and prevalent,

be made, according to our ability. And there is no subject that I could more willingly enlarge upon. But I must at present contract myself, in compliance with my design. Two things only I shall demonstrate: 1. That the person of Christ is the object of divine love; 2. What is the nature of that love in us; what are the grounds of it, and the motives unto it, in them that do believe.

In reference unto the first of these, the ensuing position shall be the subject of the remainder of this chapter.

The person of Christ is the principal object of the love of God, and of the whole creation participant of his image. The reason why I thus extend the assertion will appear in the declaration of it.

(1.) No small part of the eternal blessedness of the holy God consisteth in the mutual love of the Father and the Son, by the Spirit. As he is the only-begotten of the Father, he is the first, necessary, adequate, complete object of the whole love of the Father. Hence he says of himself, that from eternity he was "by him, as one brought up with him: and was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him," Prov. viii. 30 -- which place was opened before. In him was the ineffable, eternal, unchangeable delight and complacency of the Father, as the full object of his love. The same is expressed in that description of him, John i. 18, "The only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father." His being the only-begotten Son declares his eternal relation unto the person of the Father, of whom he was begotten in the entire communication of the whole divine nature. Hereon he is in the bosom of the Father -- in the eternal embraces of his love, as his only-begotten Son. The Father loves, and cannot but love, his own nature and essential image in him.

Herein originally is God love: "For God is love," 1 John iv. 8. This is the fountain and prototype of all love, as being eternal and necessary. All other acts of love are in God but emanations from hence, and effects of it. As he doeth good because he is good, so he loveth because he is love. He is love eternally and necessarily in this love of the Son; and all other workings of love are but acts of his will, whereby somewhat of it is outwardly expressed. And all love in the creation was introduced from this fountain, to give a shadow and resemblance of it.

Love is that which contemplative men have always almost adored. 145 Many things have they spoken to evince it to be the light, life, lustre and glory of the whole creation. But the original and pattern of it was always hid from the wisest philosophers of old. Something they reached after about God's love unto himself, with rest and complacency in his own infinite excellencies; but of this ineffable mutual love of the Father and the Son, both in and by that Spirit which proceeds from them both, they had neither apprehension nor conjecture. Yet, as herein doth the principal part (if we may so speak) of the blessedness of the holy God consist, so is it the only fountain and prototype of all that is truly called love; -- a blessing and glory which the creation had never been made partaker of, but only to express, according to the capacity of their several natures, this infinite and eternal love of God! For God's love of himself -- which is natural and necessary unto the Divine Being -- consists in the mutual complacency of the Father and the Son by the Spirit. And it was to express himself, that God made any thing without himself. He made the heavens and the earth to express his being, goodness, and power. He created man "in his own image," to express his holiness and righteousness; and he implanted love in our natures to express this eternal mutual love of the holy persons of the Trinity. But we must leave it under the veil of infinite incomprehensibleness; though admiration and adoration of it be not without the highest spiritual satisfaction.

Again, he is the peculiar object of the love of the Father, of the love of God, as he is incarnate -- as he hath taken on him, and hath now discharged, the work of mediation, or continues in the discharge of it; that is, the person of Christ, as God-man, is the peculiar object of the divine love of the Father. The person of Christ in his divine nature is the adequate object of that love of the Father which is "ad intra" -- a natural necessary act of the divine essence in its distinct personal existence; and the person of Christ as incarnate, as clothed with human nature, is the first and full object of the love of the Father in those acts of it which are "ad extra", or are towards anything without himself. So he declares himself in the prospect of his future incarnation and work, "Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth," Isa. xlii. 1. The delight of the soul of God, his rest and complacency -- which are the great effects of love -- are in the Lord Christ, as his elect and servant in the work of mediation. And the testimony hereof he renewed twice from heaven afterwards, Matt. iii. 17, "Lo, a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased;" as it is again repeated, Matt. xvii. 5. All things are disposed to give a due sense unto us of this love of God unto him. The testimony concerning it is twice repeated in the same words from heaven. And the words of it are emphatical unto the utmost of our comprehension: "My Son, my servant, mine elect, my beloved Son, in whom I rest, in whom I delight, and am well pleased." It is the will of God to leave upon our hearts a sense of this love unto Christ; for his voice came from heaven, not for his sake, who was always filled with a sense of this divine love, but for ours, that we might believe it.

This he pleaded as the foundation of all the trust reposed in him, and all the power committed unto him. "The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into his hand," John iii. 35. "The Father loveth the Son, and sheweth him all things that himself doeth," John v. 20. And the sense or due apprehension of it is the foundation of Christian religion. Hence he prays that we may know that God hath loved him, John xvii. 23, 26.

In this sense, the person of Christ is the first recipient subject of all that divine love which extends itself unto the church. It is all, the whole of it, in the first place fixed upon him, and by and through him is communicated unto the church. Whatever it receives in grace and glory, it is but the streams of this fountain -- love unto himself. So he prays for all his disciples, "that the love," saith he, "wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them," John xvii. 26. They can be partakers of no other love, neither in itself nor in its fruits, but that alone wherewith the Father first loved him. He loveth him for us all, and us no otherwise but as in him. He makes us "accepted in the Beloved," Eph. i. 6. He is the Beloved of the Father; as in all things he was to have the pre-eminence, Col. i. 18. The love of the body is derived unto it from the love unto the Head; and in the love of him doth God love the whole church, and no otherwise. He loves none but as united unto him, and participant of his nature.

Wherefore the love of the Father unto the Son, as the only begotten, and the essential image of his person, wherein the ineffable delight of the divine nature doth consist, was the fountain and cause of all love in the creation, by an act of the will of God for its representation. And the love of God the Father unto the person of Christ as incarnate, being the first adequate object of divine love wherein there is anything "ad extra," is the fountain and especial cause of all gracious love towards us and in us. And our love unto Christ being the only outward expression and representation of this love of the Father unto him, therein consists the principal part of our renovation into his image. Nothing renders us so like unto God as our love unto Jesus Christ, for he is the principal object of his love, -- in him doth his soul rest -- in him is he

always well pleased. Wherever this is wanting, whatever there may be besides, there is nothing of the image of God. He that loves not Jesus Christ, let him be 147Anathema Maranatha; for he is unlike unto God, -- his carnal mind is enmity against God.

(2.) Among those who are in the image of God, the angels above are of the first consideration. We are, indeed, as yet much in the dark unto the things that are "within the veil." They are above us as unto our present capacity, and hid from us as unto our present state; but there is enough in the Scripture to manifest the adhesion of angels unto the person of Christ by divine love. For love proceeding from sight is the life of the church above; as love proceeding from faith is the life of the church below. And this life the angels themselves do live. For --

[1.] They were all, unto their inexpressible present advantage and security for the future, brought into that recovery and recapitulation of all things which God hath made in him. He hath "gathered together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth, even in him," Eph. i. 10. The things in heaven, and things on earth -- angels above, and men below -- were originally united in the love of God. God's love unto them, whence springs their mutual love between themselves, was a bond of union between them, rendering them one complete family of God in heaven and earth, as it is called, Eph. iii. 15. On the entrance of sin, whereby mankind forfeited their interest in the love of God, and lost all love unto him, or anything for him, this union was utterly dissolved, and mutual enmity came into the place of its principle in love. God is pleased to gather up these divided parts of his family into one -- in one head, which is Christ Jesus. And as there is hereby a union established again between angels and the church in love, so their adherence unto the head, the centre, life, and spring of this union, is by love, and no otherwise. It is not faith, but love, that is the bond of this union between Christ and them; and herein no small part of their blessedness and glory in heaven doth consist.

[2.] That worship, adoration, service, and obedience, which they yield unto him, are all in like manner animated with love and delight. In love they cleave unto him, in love they worship and serve him. They had a command to worship him on his nativity, Heb. i. 6; and they did it with joy, exultation, and praises -- all effects of love and delight -- Luke ii. 13, 14. And as they continue about the throne of God, they say, with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing," Rev. v. 12. Their continual ascription of glory and praise unto him is an effect of reverential love and delight; and from thence also is their concernment in his gospel and grace, Eph. iii. 9, 10; 1 Peter i. 12. Nor without this love in the highest degree can it be conceived how they 148should be blessed and happy in their continual employment. For they are "all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for the heirs of salvation," Heb. i. 14. Were they not acted herein by their fervent love unto Christ, they could have no delight in their own ministry.

We have not, we cannot have, in this world, a full comprehension of the nature of angelical love. Our notions are but dark and uncertain, in things whereof we can have no experience. Wherefore, we cannot have here a clear intuition into the nature of the love of spirits, whilst our own is mixed with what derives from the acting of the animal spirits of our bodies also. But the blessedness of angels doth not consist in the endowments of their nature -- that they are great in power, light, knowledge, and wisdom; for, notwithstanding these things, many of them became devils. But the excellency and blessedness of the angelical state consist in these two things:-- 1st, That they are disposed, and able constantly, inseparably, universally, uninterruptedly, to cleave unto God in love. And as they do so unto God, so they do unto the person of Christ; and through him, as their head, unto God, even the Father. 2dly, Add hereunto that gracious reflex sense which they have of the glory, dignity, eternal sweetness, and satisfaction, which

arise from hence, and we have the sum of angelical blessedness.

(3.) The church of mankind is the other part of the rational creation whereon the image of God is renewed. Love unto the person of Christ, proceeding from faith, is their life, their joy, and glory.

It was so unto the church under the Old Testament. The whole Book of Canticles is designed to no other purpose, but variously to shadow forth, to insinuate and represent, the mutual love of Christ and the church. Blessed is he who understands the sayings of that book, and hath the experience of them in his heart. The 45th Psalm, among others, is designed unto the same purpose. All the glorious descriptions which are given of his person in the residue of the prophets, were only means to excite love unto him, and desires after him. Hence is he called חֶמְדַּתכָּל־הַגּוֹיִם, Hag. ii. 7, "The Desire of all nations" -- he alone who is desirable unto, and the only beloved of the church gathered out of all nations.

The clear revelation of the person of Christ, so as to render him the direct object of our love, with the causes and reasons of it, is one of the most eminent privileges of the New Testament. And it is variously attested in precepts, promises, instances, and solemn approbations.

Wherever he supposeth or requireth this love in any of his disciples, it is not only as their duty, as that which they were obliged unto by the precepts of the Gospel, but as that without which no other duty whatever is accepted by him. "If," saith he "ye love me, keep my 149commandments," John xiv. 15. He so requires love unto himself, as not to expect or approve of any obedience unto his commands without it. It is a great and blessed duty to feed the sheep and lambs of Christ; yet will not he accept of it unless it proceeds out of love unto his person. "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? Feed my lambs," John xxi. 15-17. Three times did he repeat the same words to him who had failed in his love towards him, by denying him thrice. Without this love unto him, he requires of none to feed his sheep, nor will accept of what they pretend to do therein. It were a blessed thing, if a due apprehension hereof did always abide with them that are called unto that work.

Hereunto doth he annex those blessed promises which comprise the whole of our peace, safety, and consolation in this world. "He," saith he, "that loveth me, shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and manifest myself unto him," John xiv. 21; and verse 23, "My Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him." What heart can conceive, what tongue can express, the glory of these promises, or the least part of the grace that is contained in them? Who can conceive aright of the divine condescension, love, and grace that are expressed in them? How little a portion is it that we know of God in these things! But if we value them not, if we labour not for an experience of them according unto our measure, we have neither lot nor portion in the gospel. The presence and abode of God with us as a Father, manifesting himself to be such unto us, in the infallible pledges and assurances of our adoption -- the presence of Christ with us, revealing himself unto us, with all those ineffable mercies wherewith these things are accompanied -- are all contained in them. And these promises are peculiarly given unto them that love the person of Christ, and in the exercise of love towards him.

Hereunto are designed the Gospel Gerizim and Ebal -- the denunciation of blessings and curses. As blessings are declared to be their portion "who love the Lord Jesus in sincerity," Eph. vi. 24, -- so those who love him not, have the substance of all curses denounced against them, even "Anathema Maranatha," 1 Cor. xvi. 22. So far shall such persons be, whatever they may profess of outward

obedience unto the Gospel, from any blessed interest in the promises of it, as that they are justly liable unto final excision from the church in this world, and eternal malediction in that which is to come.

It is evident, therefore, that the love of the church of believers unto the person of Christ is not a distempered fancy, not a deluding imagination, as some have blasphemed; but that which the nature of their relation unto him makes necessary -- that wherein they express their renovation into the image of God -- that which the 150Scripture indispensably requires of them, and whereon all their spiritual comfort do depend. These things being spoken in general, the particular nature, effects, operations, and motives of this divine love, must now be farther inquired into.

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