

Love without obedience (John 15:9-17)

My desire to clean the kitchen was an exercise of love. Then my mom asked me to do what I was already planning to do—and my gift turned into affliction.

by [Brian Bantum](#) in the [May 2, 2012](#) issue
sponge in kitchen
[Thomas Demarczyk](#), Getty

As a teenager I occasionally had moments of spontaneous helpfulness. I'd wake up and say to myself, "Today I am going to clean the kitchen for Mom." Deeply satisfied with my initiative, I would spend the day soaking in the satisfaction of being a wonderful son. Then I'd return home from school and my mother would greet me, ask how my day had gone and tell me she needed me to clean the kitchen. And I'd bristle with resentment.

With that simple command my initiative hardened into a burden, and cleaning became one task among many other unwelcome requirements of the day. My desire to clean the kitchen had been an exercise of love, but now something had shifted inside of me, turning my gift into affliction.

If this is the case with a simple task, how will I respond when Jesus commands me to love? Surely his is an even more demanding request. A command to love sounds binding—it may degenerate into a list of things to do, a fulfillment of duty, instead of leading to the reciprocating love of two "free" individuals.

With the benefit of time and distance (and children of my own) I realize that obedience and love are connected—the love that remains my choice has at its heart the boundaries and patterns that determine relationships. This is what I will do, and this is what I will not do.

I heard only "command" in my mother's request. I heard limitation. I heard my mother robbing me of the acclaim and the satisfaction of an act being *my act*. What I did not hear was her need, her desire for help. I did not hear her calling to me in relationship. By separating her command from her relation to me I depersonalized her and reduced her to a pawn that existed to help me establish *my* capacity to choose. I also depersonalized myself, because I missed seeing that it was me she sought for help, me with whom she desired to participate in homemaking. I was being called a friend. I was being called to love.

Perhaps love without obedience is not really love. Perhaps this is what Jesus is confronting us with in his own life—that love is never love on its own terms. Love is always tied to obedience because obedience is tied to hearing, recognizing and bending ourselves into the will and desires of the one who's before us.

Jesus commanded his disciples to love as he himself loved God the Father, and his love for the Father is characterized as obedience that saw his life, death and resurrection as an invitation to humanity to participate in God's life and work.

Jesus' command to love is an invitation to friendship—not one in which we set the terms but one in which we see the other's hopes, the other's desires, the other's possibilities, and live into them even though we're unsure of what God will do, unsure of the people who will hear or of the gentiles who will speak in strange tongues and in the power of the Holy Spirit and amaze us.

This is not only about interpersonal relationships—about my obedience to my wife or my boss. Perhaps as communities, as churches and gatherings of people gathered by Jesus’ love and obedience—obedience as love—we have become too sure about the limitations of love.

In this election year we hear the certainty of the Republicans’ or the Democrats’ plans for our nation. “Our country needs a new direction,” many say. We hear of the legal, social and moral necessity to keep out illegals or to be “tough on crime.” Yet when some cry out, “Listen! People are dying, people are without homes, people are being arrested and questioned for no other reason than they *look* like they could be committing a crime,” they are met not with love, but with a cold sense of duty to an abstract command, to an ideal grounded more in a concept we’ve created for ourselves than anything given to us in Christ’s birth, life or death.

Others cry out, “We must care for the unborn, life is blessed!” or “A woman’s choice is a priority!” But in all of these commands to listen, we come to resent the one who gives the command, and we refuse to listen to the desire, the invitation and the possibility of God’s movement and grace in the other side.

When we hear Jesus’ command to love we must hear a command to see, to listen and to bend into the life of Christ and into the lives of others who seem strange to us. In that bending we will find ourselves in wonder as “even the gentiles” declare the works of God, and perhaps we will be surprised with who we become.