

There is no doubt at all that when John was writing this letter and his account of Jesus' life and the visions of the end times in the book of Revelation that he had a very clear view on just how different a Christian is compared to one who is not. To John there is a strong distinction between the world and the church.

It is quite unnerving at times to think about how much he comes across as being exclusive and holier than thou. But we need to remember that he was writing during a time where his closest friends were being executed for their faith. He also knew that he was putting his own life at risk for what he was writing.

The world as John knew it was not a free-market economy, it was not a place where Sunday shopping and Sunday sports were primary concerns for the Christians. Rights and equality were not high on the agenda of ancient Greco-roman society. Loyalty, worship and simply struggling to stay alive in an environment that was brutal if you stepped out of line were the main priorities. The Christians were classified as subversive because they were talking about the fact that the roman emperor was not a god to be worshipped—in fact they rejected outright the religion of Rome and worse they spoke their mind about it too.

They were getting killed for this. In some sectors immorality was rampant, and even encouraged—it was common for married Greek politicians to own young boys as sex slaves. This was normal practice. The society on certain levels had a more communal aspect, but there were no checks and balances for those who had power. If you had power you had absolute power. There were no unions or courts in the way we have them now. The idea of an employee being able to take their boss to court for sexual harassment, or unfair working conditions was unheard of. Slaves weren't classified as people, but more like appliances.

Human rights were non-existent. You only had rights if you had power, and even that was subject to the mercy of the person who has power over you. I'm no historian but even from my surface reading of the line of Caesars each one

wanted to outdo the other in greatness. There was a sense that brutality and needless extravagance were virtues.

And so, in the Roman empire, it is easy to see how Caesar could become god. Anything he wanted would be done, no matter how ludicrous. Caesar was worshipped by the people and over time Caesar genuinely thought that he was God.

A central idea of what John calls “the world” was to be powerful which reflects accurately what we have come to know as the Darwinian ideal : “survival of the fittest.” This is the mantra of the modern age especially when it comes to economics.

Friedrich Nietzsche—a man more known for his statement at the turn of last century that “God is dead” came up with the idea that power is the primary driving force of what it means to be human. Everything we do is motivated by a desire to exert power over something else. And there is a strong sense where we cannot disagree. Look around, even the recent coup in the National party is a power struggle. Church politics is riddled with power struggles even in this congregation, and even now. It’s an irresistible urge for us to gain control over our environment. Bring the world under back to the centre of our universe.

Maybe this is why I like mucking around on computers so much—it gives me a sense of control, unless it’s a Microsoft product of course. I can get these computers to do what I want them to do. And I become their god!

Anyway back to reality. The desire for us to have power over other people and other things is what I think, stems from the root of all sin. And that root is the urge to be more important than anyone else. It is the opposite of love, not hate as is usually put forward, but self-centredness.

But for John when he was writing this book, he was witness to the violent outworking of power. The subversion of the underprivileged to the whims of the greater.

So when John talks about a community of love, it was in direct opposition to the prevailing ethos of his social setting.

The key here is the difference between two worlds characterised by opposite values : one desired to lord power over people and the other submitted completely to God through Jesus.

Now the reason I have laboured on this point is because even though our society in New Zealand today is not quite so barbaric we still have the same problem in that the pursuit of power and independence is part of our dream. It is different perhaps, because I don't think we are so driven to be powerful over people, but powerful over circumstance. We don't want to be the god of a nation, just the god of our own universe. And our universe is often constructed to make us feel better. And we achieve our dreams and we have dominion over our 1/8th acre section in suburbia. But I digress.

The point is that the power struggles are still there, and perhaps are even worse because with opportunity and choice comes the illusion of more control. I wonder if community thrives where there are fewer options. We might be non-controlling of other people (though that's doubtful) but we are in control of our own worlds, and to some extent when we feel in control we are like little gods of our domain. And it feels like all this society is becoming a collision of little worlds because we won't hear a peep out of anyone unless their borders are breached. But the more we isolate ourselves from community, the more we have the illusion of power. But the idea of power and building self is still as rampant a theme as it was back in John's day.

The thing is that because abuse of power today is not quite so barbaric and obvious I think that we miss it and even legitimise it. It is a very complicated subject and I don't know if we can completely work it through tonight so I'm going to say this, that the only kind of power that is worth legitimising is that which is totally submitted to Jesus.

This is why John says what he says about obedience being part of love. It's a whacky concept but it seems to make sense so let's unpack it a little.

Call it a rebellious nature if you want but I've always associated obedience with restriction. It is probably a lot to do with how mum used to make me tidy my room or do the dishes and I thought that she didn't really have the right to take up my time with such trivialities, thank you very much.

Actually probably one of the worst examples of my rebellious attitude is where some of the rules at Bible College

seemed so stupid that I really felt that I could just ignore them. Sometimes these rules were to do with credit and so the fact that I had deemed them stupid actually made no difference when it came to passing the papers—and so I would get lower marks. It was crazy that I got bitter about this . . . which says more about me than it does about anything else.

So strong is my desire not to be controlled by anything or anyone that I'm the type of person who when I see an exposed electrical wire, I just want to touch it. I had heaps of electric shocks when I was growing up, but that desire is still there. I don't want to be controlled by electricity.

And this is the point. I had seen obedience as a loss of power on my part. And so when I read in the bible about the need for us to be obedient to God I saw this as a threat to who I am as an individual.

And it is. There is no doubt in my mind that the minute someone tells me what I have to do then that person exerting their power over me, which means a loss of power on my part. And I begin to resent them. And in that resentment anger starts to well up and I start to work out ways of getting out of what they have asked me to do so I claim back my independence from them. If I were to obey them I would be admitting their power over me. I would be admitting weakness. How does love fit into this ugly equation?

We are living in an age where every life choice is determined by the wisdom of the self. Law is interpreted by self, rights are interpreted by self, relationships are interpreted by self and probably the worst of all, self is interpreted by self.

And this is where John is challenging our prevailing philosophy.

In this letter he has been talking about love being the key to living life to the full : Love of God and love of people and you will have life! This love is shaped so much by the example of Christ where he even laid his life down for us because of how much he loves us. This was to show how much he loved us, but also to show how much we should love others. Self sacrifice is the key.

There is something very profound about how John is characterising love for God as being obedience to his commands. Let's use an analogue.

(songs)

We have the parameters, we need only follow them and beautiful life will emerge. In submission to God's commands, our life will be fulfilling. And it's the submission thing that shows the love we have for God. Because we are respecting the fact that he is the author of life, he is the one who has ultimate control, and he knows how these bodies and emotions work best.

We need to let go of our own agenda, let go of ourselves and be renewed in Jesus.

It's a recurring theme in the bible that through our powerlessness God's power is shown. Paul talks about this extensively, and we find that Jesus says the same thing.

Washing the disciples' feet? Do you remember that story? Peter was right, what was Jesus thinking? And yet it showed so clearly what it meant to be a follower of Jesus. Have we ever considered for a moment what it means when Jesus said that he came to serve not be served? That is a staggering statement.

You know how we sing these songs about Jesus exalted, high in the clouds and on his throne? You know how we sing things like majesty and holy and worthy and we sing these things with all of our heart, and we imagine that the moment we see Jesus we would fall flat on our faces and worship him for he is Lord? It's a great picture, but according to the washing the disciple's feet story it will be more like this:

Jesus thanks you for your worship then comes around to your place and cleans the toilet and bathroom, washes your undies, takes out the garbage, cleans the kitchen and the pile of dishes that's so high it could be a landmark, fixes your dinner for me when I get home and then says "can I do anything more for you"? Sounds like a picture of everyone's ideal spouse to me. But do you see the point? He served us not just to set an example and that's cool, but to show through putting our interests and well-being above his, he shows exactly how much he loves us.

Did he lose power in that though? Not at all, in fact he tapped into a wonderful type of power, the power to give

people a sense of worth and value. Did it compromise who he was? Not at all, it was the essence of who he was. He accepted worship, but he also served.

So now I'm starting to see how obedience and love can go hand in hand.

God's commands are not there because he is a spoil sport, but because he is the author of life and the ultimate authority on love. And we can prove that by looking at the ten commandments. I want to divide us up into five groups. In these groups we're going to try and work out what is so loving about these commands.

1. You shall have no other gods before me.
2. You shall not make for yourselves an idol, nor any image of anything that is in the heavens above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: you shall not bow yourself down to them, nor serve them, for I, God your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and on the fourth generation of those who hate me, and showing loving kindness to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.
3. You shall not take the name of God your God in vain, for God will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. You shall labour six days, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to God your God. You shall not do any work in it, you, nor your son, nor your daughter, your man-servant, nor your maid-servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates; for in six days God made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; consequently God blessed the Sabbath day, and made it holy.
5. Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which God your God gives you.

6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.
10. You shall not covet your neighbour's house. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maid-servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbour's.

Obedience to these commands is love for God. This is why Jesus could sum up the law with his commandment. Love God, love people.

The final thing to say tonight is that as followers of Jesus, we do not have an option to treat this lightly. It could be argued that precisely because we treat this idea as an option that we don't seem to be relevant to the world around us. It's hard to tell something to people who don't want to listen. It's even harder when we're whispering. If we aren't communicating this—and by communication I mean action—it's small wonder that we aren't making a dent in this world.

And there is great cost in this, but the benefits surely must be there. Because it is through this love for God and obedience to his commandments that we actually end up having a faith that can conquer the world.

I used to think that our obedience would come as a result of the thankfulness that I have toward God for his grace and mercy. But I'm thinking that this is just wishful thinking, because the transformation is just a bit too slow.

Instead I think that we need to love God and obey his commands. But the key is not to lose sight of one over the other. And this is why John says we will live life to the full. But the question is, how.

THIS IS THE PRAYER OF
CONFESSION.

We hold in our hands the key to peace. Well, we'd better put it back in our pockets, out of sight and out of mind, because we know that if we were to use it, we would lose control of our individual destiny. Maybe we can bring it out again at church next week just to show we're still interested and maybe we'll use it then.

God help us to be more than this. Teach us your commands and let us know the strength to carry them out.

And now let God be ever present in your times of trouble, the Holy Spirit be your comfort and Jesus be the arms that enfold you as you bring peace to this world. Amen.