

Relationship with God

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[0 : 00] 15 through to 17, a part of scripture you will know well, but one that will keep the theme of this morning consistent throughout the service.

So in Genesis chapter 2, verses 15 through to 17, we read, now hear God's word, the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and kept it.

And the Lord God commanded the man saying, you may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but the tree of knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat. For in the day that you eat of it, you shall surely die.

And of course, the question that we're raising is, why does God command us? And the answer may not be what you think.

Well, let us continue by listening quicker than the virus, as it has done. And as the church, obviously the members meeting has been postponed and a number of other things will have to change.

[1 : 14] But no doubt you'll find these things out as we go. Gerald will keep you in touch, I'm sure. The second service that takes place after this one, you know, more people have started coming back.

The jury, children, and parents are back, which is lovely to see. Because it took a while for the second service to take off. But hopefully, we don't want anything to disrupt what's taken so long to sort of get back.

Because people, whether they realize it or not, need routine and need structure. And, well, that could just be me speaking, but I think we will need it.

Well, let's turn to our reading for this morning, which is found in John 15, verse 10. Just the one verse, partly because we're reading John, and John is detailed to say the least about it.

But I'm going to be drawing in several verses throughout Scripture, namely the one that we have read already from Genesis. And, of course, this one in John 15.

[2 : 24] And John 15 as a whole. But I'll reflect back on over the chapter. But it's this particular verse that, if anything, we can have stuck in our mind and heart this morning. I pray that it would be this.

So, Jesus is speaking about being the vine, the Father being the vinedresser, and every branch in him, that is us, that bears fruit.

The Father prunes so that we would produce more fruit. The idea is that in union with Christ, we are a productive people, and the production is fruit.

That fruit is fruit of righteousness. In verse 10, this is how Jesus defines relationship with God, and, of course, us with him.

If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love.

[3 : 23] I'll just read that again, just so it can sort of settle. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love.

So, you'll notice there that Jesus is making a comparison between your relationship with him and his relationship with the Father. In other words, his relationship with the Father is to be reflected in your relationship with him.

But understanding how relationship with God works sounds fairly easy in one sense, but I want to sort of strip away some ideas that might just creep in because of how we understand relationship with each other.

Now, there are three ways of looking at relationships, and this is why we read Genesis. We didn't read the part where God said it's not good for man to be alone, and therefore he created the woman.

But if we were to read that, and we were to read other passages out of Galatians, what we would end up with is relationship being understood on several different levels.

[4 : 36] Firstly, relationship between human beings, that is, between a man and a woman, between a woman and a woman, a man and a man, sons and daughters, and all those interconnected relationships, they are all to live under, firstly, a relationship with God, or they can't function properly.

What Jesus is doing here is he's saying, your relationship with me needs to reflect my relationship with the Father. That's the way that it's meant to be. And then he says, I want, I command you to love one another.

So the love for one another is to be reflective of the Father's love for the Son and the Son's love for us and out into the people. Now, of course, when a man and a woman gets married, for instance, and they make commitments, they're making commitments, but they're not commanding one another.

The husband is not commanding the wife to love him. God commands the wife to love the husband. The wife is not commanding the husband to be a certain way towards her.

It is God who commands the husband to be a certain way towards her. And so the relationship down here on the ground before people is one of commitment, but the relationship between people and God is one of commands.

[5 : 54] Okay, hopefully we understand that, because that's quite an important distinction to make. The relationship between each other is one of commitments, reciprocal commitments, and, of course, our commitment to God following his commands will affect the relationships we have with each other.

But we don't command one another to love each other. Jesus commands us, but we don't get to command anyone else. We are to follow the command of Jesus and then fulfill that in terms of commitments.

And so within human relationships, there's this idea of reciprocation. But even reciprocation is a terrible word to use of human relationship, because it carries this notion of sort of payback.

If you're this way with me, then I'll be this way with you. And on a human level, that happens because the power of reciprocation is a strong one, that if someone does something for you, that feeling that you have to do something back for them just springs up the moment you receive the gift from them.

So this idea of reciprocation kind of kicks in. When God created the world, he did not create the world for reciprocation. And our relationship with God cannot be defined as a reciprocal one, where God gives and we give back.

[7 : 25] The command that God gives us to define our relationship with him, again, is not because he is God and we are people, and therefore our relationship is defined by one of authority.

God's bigger and stronger than we are, and therefore we must do as we're told. That's not why the commands were given. So why does God in Genesis, with the creation of the man and the woman, define relationship with him in terms of keeping a command?

And why does Jesus in John 15 define our relationship with him and the Father in salvation in terms of commandment keeping? Why is it so important to understand our relationship with God in this way?

Commandment keeping. And it might sound like a conditional command. Well, in many ways it is a condition. When people say that God's love is unconditional, I know what they mean, but what they're saying is not strictly true, that God loves us unconditionally.

Yes, but not in the way that you think he does. We receive God's love unconditionally, but it's not unconditionally accomplished.

[8 : 45] If it was unconditional, then there would be no need for Jesus to die on the cross. No need for him to suffer. Because God could just love us regardless of our sin.

There's no conditions. You've not broken anything. But the very fact that there are conditions allows us to understand that the reason God loves us is because Jesus Christ met every single one of the conditions that need to be met.

And one of those conditions is perfect obedience to the commands of God. So when we say God loves us unconditionally, what we really mean is we receive God's love because Jesus Christ met all the conditions.

He lived the perfect life and died the perfect death in our place. Now that is very different from saying unconditional love because if you say unconditional love, you'll end up in the position that my brother was in in questioning my mom.

Well, if God's love is unconditional, then I can do whatever I like because God will love me anyway. Because that would be the very definition of unconditional love. It really doesn't matter what I do because God loves me unconditionally.

[9 : 56] So what we mean is is God's love comes to us through us not fulfilling conditions because we can't, but rather because Christ fulfills every condition on our behalf.

So we are brought into relationship with Christ by his perfect obedience. So it's not unconditionally, but rather it's on the basis of Jesus Christ fulfilling every condition, dying in our place, being a substitute.

exchanging our sin for his righteousness, that we are now imputed with his righteousness. There's so much there that can be explained when you remove this confusion about unconditions or, you know, there being no conditions.

What Jesus is explaining here is what relationship with God is like and is like with him now that you are saved. This idea of abiding in Christ, in Christ abiding in the Father, and both of it being on the basis of commandment keeping.

So we do not keep the commands to keep ourselves saved. We keep the commands of God as a way of abiding in the love of God. So I want you to be very clear that when I mention here about God defining a relationship with the Son and the Father as commandment keeping, that I'm not saying that this is a kind of works righteousness or a work salvation where you are abiding in the love of God by commandment, so that you are keeping yourself saved by commandment keeping.

[11 : 32] You have been saved because Jesus met the conditions, but you abide, as Jesus says here, in the love of him by keeping his commandments. So our salvation does not depend on our obedience.

It depends on the perfect obedience of Christ, but our relationship, our relating within the relationship of God that is bearing fruit for God, fruit of righteousness, depends on this commandment keeping.

And the question we're going to ask this morning is, why? Why is commandment keeping the important part of relationship with God? Why is it so necessary? And what we begin to realize is that when we read the very beginning of when God created man, he put him in a garden full of yeses in one no.

Now, of course, man was given perfect freedom to obey the commands of God. He was the only neutral person ever to live.

Everyone after that, you've got, I could go through the Latin words, but we won't because I haven't got time for that. But there is a relationship here between Genesis and John, and hopefully you can see the relationship is based on the fact that God gives commands to those who belong to him as a way of defining the relationship of how we are to relate to God and how God relates to us.

[12 : 59] When God created man to be productive in the garden, to turn over the soil and produce fruit, he gave him the land to start with. The reason why man was created to work is because God works.

And if man is made in the image of God, he has to work because that's the only way he can reflect God who works. So man working is just one way of image bearing.

And so man is to work, he produces fruit, God provides for us by enabling us to be able to provide for ourselves. That's the creation story. And as we see this unfold, that man has potential, that he is able to break off a branch and split the branch on its end and put a piece of flint in the end and suddenly it's an axe.

Man has a potential with stone and wood to make a tool which can then make the hoeing of the ground easier. So God created a world that was perfect but it was not complete.

Or else there'd be no reason for God to say, multiply, go forth and multiply, go and tend the ground. So it's a perfect creation but it's not a complete one because it has all this potential.

[14 : 17] It has the potential for producing fruit in exactly the same way you do in your relationship with Christ. Christ is the vine, the Father is the vine dresser, you are the branches and there is potential there by abiding in the vine for you to produce fruit.

There's no reciprocation. Your fruit bearing is not giving back to God what God is giving you. If you think about it in terms of a vine and a branch and fruit, it's just one flow through.

There's no backward and forward. It's just the end result of all of those things being in perfect union. And that's exactly what we see in the creation ordinance.

That God put man in the garden to produce fruit and God has put us in Christ to produce fruit. And so the relationship is not one of reciprocation because as we know, God is in need of nothing.

God didn't create the world in order to receive something. God didn't even create the world in order to receive thanksgiving because God is in need of nothing.

[15 : 23] Now it's right to give thanks for what God gave us, but God being in need of nothing has not created the world to get something from it because that would imply that God is somehow lacking.

And God is not lacking. God is a God who gives. And when we speak of God loving Adam and Eve or God loving us, to love is to seek the good of the other.

So Adam and Eve remain in God's love in creation and the command that God gives is for them to remain in that relationship.

But God is in need of nothing. Man isn't going to go off and do something that he can bring it to God and go, this is for you because God is not in need of anything.

Rather, the relationship in creation is the same as the relationship in John 15, that through perfect union, fruitfulness, potential fruitfulness, is there, this idea of growth, not reciprocation.

[16 : 27] God has done this for me, therefore I must do this back, as if we are autonomous people that just so happen have to give thanks to God for what he has done for us. No. That there would indicate that both parties are independent and you have this to and fro between them.

That's not the relationship we see either in creation or in John 15. The John 15 illustration of the vine and the branches and the fruit is a clear one, that through perfect connection, perfect union, fruit is produced.

And so therefore, we get to enjoy the work of God by being in union with Christ, by being in union with the Father as Adam was in creation.

What I find striking about the creation account is that God never has to be described. God is known by Adam. He walks with Adam in the cool of the day. He never has to be described.

There's this idea of perfect relationship where Adam knows God through relational terms and through the work that he has been given. So why the command?

[17 : 38] Why have the command to define their relationship? Well, the command is this, that the garden was a place full of yeses and only one no.

And the one no was that they were not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. And this is because if there is knowledge of good and evil, therefore there is good and evil.

You can't have the knowledge of something unless that something exists. So, when God created the world, we must bear in mind that evil existed.

We're not saying that the world that God created was perfect, but in order for there to be a knowledge of good and evil, it would mean that a knowledge, evil has to exist.

And so God commands the man to not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil because he's too young. He's not mature enough to be able to handle that kind of knowledge.

[18 : 37] And so, the command is stay away from it. And so, the man and the woman had perfect freedom to obey that command. There was nothing sinful in them that would give them the impulse to disobey God.

Rather, the impulse was created by desire, someone presenting something in front of them that says, well, you don't have this. You can have it if you do this.

And then, of course, they break the command of God. But they were given freedom, freedom to obey God's command. And it's that freedom that helps us to understand and demonstrate how our relationship with God works.

The freedom that they had to obey the command was a freedom to be kept from sin and judgment. When God kept, when God commanded his people, he was keeping them from something.

He was not keeping the knowledge from them as though I'm hiding something that you can't know. He says, no, the tree of knowledge of good and evil, it's there.

[19 : 45] But I don't want you, I don't want you to go down that road. So, when we say, when the devil says, well, God's keeping something back from you, you don't have everything that you're meant to have, understand the command in the first place.

When God commands them not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, he wasn't keeping it from them, he was keeping them from the consequence of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. And so, the command was keeping them from being separated from God.

The command was actually keeping them within the relationship with God, keeping them abiding in the vine, to use it in terms of John 15. By their obedience of the command, they were able to enjoy their relationship with God and, of course, the relationship with the rest of creation.

But, of course, the moment they go against the command of God, they are separated not only from God but from his garden and separated from God means that you die in the same way in John 15, that a branch that does not abide in the vine withers and dies.

You cannot have life outside of the source of life. And this is how the relationship works in Genesis and in John 15.

[21 : 03] And so, the command of God means this, that autonomous living is not possible. What better way is there to explain to a person that they cannot be autonomous than to give them a command?

And the command is a demonstration to the people that those who seek to command their own life will actually die.

That those who seek to command their own life will separate themselves from the one who actually gives life. That autonomy is the idea of I am going to try and determine my own productivity.

I am going to try and determine my own fruitfulness. I am going to try and determine the outcome of my life. But autonomy in creation is separation.

Autonomy is not about authority. Autonomy is not about you having desires. Autonomy is not about you not having your own will. You can have all of those things within following the command of God.

[22 : 14] but autonomy as understood today and strictly understood is trying to command your own way of life separate from the commands of God.

And of course if you misunderstand the commands of God and just see them as God commanding us because he's the stronger one, then you misunderstand the purpose of the command.

The command is that which keeps you safe. It's that which keeps you in relationship with him. It's that which keeps you abiding in his love to use John 15.

Why? Because the branch cannot bear fruit by itself as Jesus puts it in John 15. You have to be in the vine. Nothing can come out of your life unless it is connected to the source that through you can produce that fruit.

And that's the image that we are given. That autonomy is separation and therefore autonomy is fruitlessness. Because following the command is abiding and that produces the fruit that we have as it is in the garden so it is in John 15 with Jesus.

[23 : 28] So living our Christian life in light of God's commands is how the relationship works, not what makes the relationship in the first place. It is the perfect obedience of Christ which brings you into relationship with God and keeps you in relationship with God, might I add.

But it is your abiding in Christ by obeying his commands that causes your life to be fruitful. Because autonomy is a means of separating.

It's a means of separating the branch from the vine. And throughout scripture there are perfect examples of this. one is Luke 15 with a parable of the two sons that are lost.

One is lost away from home and one is lost at home which is of course reflected in the beginning of the parable of the lost sheep which is lost away from home and the lost coin which is lost in the home.

So Jesus gives us a lengthy parable, not three parables, just one. And the beginning of the parable is about something that's lost away from home and something that's lost in the home. And so by the time you get to the two sons you're able to recognize that both are lost, they're just lost in different areas.

[24 : 42] One is lost away from home and the other is lost in the home. But what we understand if we use the illustration of the younger brother that goes off and spends all his money, the moment he is separated from the father he doesn't end up in a far country with a big house, several cars, and he has nothing.

Because the whole point is his separation from the father is only a matter of bankruptcy, it's a matter of decline. Autonomy doesn't produce life, autonomy doesn't produce fruit, it doesn't produce anything good.

And as I say with young people, the attitude that they have when they consider the future, and this is one that I had for a long time because boys perhaps more than girls, I don't know, perhaps that's not fair, but autonomy is like jumping off a very, very tall building and halfway down saying it's alright so far.

Of course it's alright so far. Nothing's happened yet, but you are reaching your end very, very quickly. That's autonomy. Autonomy allows you to think that it's alright so far.

Because like anything, when you cut a branch off a tree, it doesn't wither and die immediately. But you see that if it doesn't have that continual source of life, then of course it withers and dies eventually.

[26 : 06] And that's the illustration that Jesus gives in John 15. So here's the conclusion. Our enjoyment of God's love in part comes down to how we respond to his love.

In other words, if we are to receive Jesus' love in the same way that Jesus receives the Father's love, if we are to receive Jesus' love, love in the same way Jesus receives the Father's love, then we must abide in Jesus in exactly the same way Jesus abides in the Father, which is through obedience.

Let me say that again. if we are to receive Jesus' love in the same way Jesus receives the Father's love, then we are to abide in Jesus in exactly the same way Jesus abides in the Father, which is through obedience. That's how Jesus is defining the relationship in John 15 10.

And this is why Jesus says, if you love me, you will keep my commandments, because the very command is the very definition of relationship, not autonomy.

Okay? Commandment-keeping defines relationship, whereas commandment-breaking defines autonomy. So commandment-keeping is not oppressive, it's the very definition of relationship.

[27 : 34] So here's the exhortation as we close. I want you to understand, very importantly, that you are brought into relationship through the perfect obedience of Christ, and you will be kept in relationship with God through the perfect obedience of Christ.

It does not depend on your obedience. However, your relationship with the Father in terms of your fruitfulness depends on you abiding in the love of the Son through obedience to his commands.

This is the relational aspect of your new relationship. This is how you are to relate within the relationship you now have. Commandment-keeping is fruitfulness, whereas autonomy is commandment-breaking, which is separation and unfruitfulness.

Human brokenness, sinfulness, and corruption is simply the definition of autonomy from God. Human brokenness, corruption, and sinfulness is autonomy, because commandment-keeping is the very definition of relationship.

So in short, Jesus saves us by his perfect life and obedience, and we enjoy our reconciliation with God and abide in the love of Jesus through our obedience.

[28 : 57] So Jesus Christ saves us by his perfect obedience, and we enjoy the relationship we now have through our obedience. And that is how God has defined our relationship with him.

Why? Because Jesus wants our relationship with the Son to reflect his relationship with the Son. That he wants our relationship with Jesus to reflect Jesus' relationship with the Father.

That's image-bearing. Amen. Amen. Now may the God of peace, who brought you again from the dead, our Lord Jesus, the great Shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with every good, that you may do his will, working in us, that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever.

Amen. Amen. Amen.