

Obedience Begins With Awe!

Ralph Blair's Keynote at ConnECtion 2013, June 1, 2013 at The Lodge at Kirkridge

Here's how Jesus wrapped up what's called, "The Sermon on the Mount." Let's hear God's Word.

Don't sit in judgment on others, unless you want to be judged with the same harshness. For, it will be on the basis of your judging others that God will judge you. The same measure you use on them will be used on you.

And, how can you see a speck in the eye of a brother or sister when you don't see the stump in your own eye? How can you say to them: 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while, look, there's that big stump in your own eye? Hypocrite! First, get that stump out of your eye. Maybe, then, you'll see clearly enough to get a speck out of the eye of a sister or brother.

Don't give what's holy to dogs. Don't show your pearls to pigs. They'll trample them. Then they'll turn on you and slash you with their teeth.

Ask, and you'll receive. Seek, and you'll find what you need. Knock, and the door will be opened for you. For, all who ask will receive, all who keep on searching will find and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

Who among you, if your child asks for bread, would give him a stone? Or, if your child asks for a fish, would you give her a snake? Even though you're evil, you know how to give good gifts to your children. Then, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask!

Therefore: Whatever you want others to do for you, do the same for them. This is the whole point of scripture, the Law and all the Prophets.

Enter at the narrow gate, not at the wide road to ruin. Yet, many do choose the way that's wide, for the narrow path that leads to *real* life, is difficult. Only a few find it.

Watch out for *false* prophets. They're ravenous wolves disguised as harmless sheep. Recognize them by what they produce. You don't get grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles, do you? Likewise, good trees produce good fruit but a bad tree produces bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit. And a bad tree cannot produce good fruit. Any tree that fails to produce good fruit is cut down and burned up as useless. So, be discerning in dealing with prophets, taking careful note of what they produce.

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord!' will enter into the heavenly kingdom, but only those who continue to do what my heavenly Father wants them to do. On Judgment Day, there will be many who'll say to me, 'Lord, Lord, didn't we preach in your name! Didn't we exorcise demons and didn't we do many miracles in your name!' But, I will tell them plainly, '*I've never known you. Get away from me, you evildoers.*'

So, everyone who *hears and obeys* what *I* say is like a *wise* person who built a house on rock. Rains came down, floods came up and winds blew and beat against that house. Yet, it did not collapse, for its foundation was on rock.

Obedience Begins With Awe!

Everyone who *hears* what I *say* but *doesn't obey* is like a *foolish* person who built a house on sand. Rains came down, floods came up and winds blew and struck that house. It collapsed. And, it was a total disaster.” (Matt 7:1-27)

May God *bless* our *hearing* of these words of warning, comfort and call and may God *help* us to *obey* what we hear.

Well, this world's in a mess! Have you noticed? *This* is no Golden Ruled world. Ever notice *we*, ourselves, are a mess? How do *we live* the Golden Rule – treating “them,” as we want “them” to treat *us*? Do we seek *justice* for “them” or *just us*?

Throughout the Bible, the story of God's people is one of complaint and noncompliance, griping and ingratitude, sin, recidivism and one excuse after another. It was true in Jesus' own circle. It was the case, too, in 1st century Christian assemblies. And it's been the recurring theme throughout church history. People who *claim* to be Christians have had to be warned again and again against their self-righteous self-centeredness.

Nostalgia claims that, in *her* day, things were in *less* of a mess. But, of course, Nostalgia's memory has *always* been a mess!

After the terrorist attack at the Boston Marathon, Governor Cuomo said it “reflected the ‘new normal’.” Well, we know what he *meant*, but, what's really *new* in yet *another* blast of “same old, same old” self-indulgence and self-righteously rationalized revenge? What's new about what Jesus called *this world's routine* – “wars and rumors of wars” – *wherever* in the world or in *our own* backyard or bursting from the back burners of *our own* bitter minds? What's *new* about *sin*?

Now, there *was* enough of a remnant of God's image in folks that some in Boston risked their lives to rescue victims and capture the culprits. Still, the aftermath prompted the predictable culture war commentary, the “same-old, same-old” *self-serving, self-indulgent self-righteousness* with little, if any, *self-awareness* or *self-criticism*.

There *is*, however, something *new* about sin *today*. It's an *elitist twist* on *depravity* – a postmodernist *denial of undeniable evil* – though, even in the '50s, Sondheim had the savvy, and so did his Jets, to mock this diagnostic drift: We're “depraved on account of [we're] deprived.”

One perceptive critic of such PC re-branding of evil is Columbia University humanities professor Andrew Delbanco. He's a Jewish secular liberal who laments the loss of a sense of *radical evil* that remains, in his words, “an inescapable experience for all of us ... in ourselves as well as in others.” He sees that we've lost even a basic *vocabulary* for evil, and that, what he calls the “liberal psychologizing” of evil, *explains* it *away* as mental disorder. He regrets that, now, there are “only symptoms – symptoms and no sins.” In a PBS interview, he warned: “If you see the world through a psychological frame of mind, a circumstantial frame of mind, then your impulse is going to be to understand [evil] from the perspective of the evildoer.”

Walker Percy, Southern novelist, physician and devout Catholic convert, also found this newly entrenched sophistry disheartening. He said that, in spite of the experienced enormity of 20th century *evil*, things were evidently going to “have to get even worse before people realize that they don't have the faintest idea what sort of creature man is. Then, they might want to know. Until then,” he said, “one is wasting one's time” trying to tell them.

Obedience Begins With Awe!

The DSM-V, latest edition of the American Psychiatric Association's diagnostic manual of mental disorders, adds to this liberalizing confusion by adding *psychiatric nomenclature* for what's been, throughout human history, "simply part of the human condition." The wise chairperson of DSM-IV warns there'll be "many harmful unintended consequences" of DSM-V, among them, "a reduced sense of personal responsibility." (Allen J. Frances)

Well, we *all* try to explain away *our* misbehavior any way we can. But, in *that evil* effort, we *confuse* ourselves. So, we fail to come to a *realistic diagnosis* of *our* evil as well as the evil of *others*. Thus, we fail to come to a *realistic solution*. *Defensively* we render ourselves *defenseless*. In *denial* we fail to deal with *deadening*, and finally, *deadly* dangers we need to face.

Now, our defensive *denial* shows that it's *not* hard to *see* that *we're* at least *some* of the world's mess. But *denial* also shows that it *is* hard to *admit* that *any* of the mess is *our* fault. And, this makes our mess, messier. It's made still messier when *we* blame *others* for *our* messing up.

G. K. Chesterton knew better. A London newspaper had asked readers, "What's wrong with the world?" Chesterton wrote back: "I am." If each of *us* would admit, "*I am* what's wrong with the world," there'd be *less* wrong with the world. And, recognizing *our* responsibility would *empower* us to have some *control* over the mess. Responsibility *is* the ability to respond *well*.

Unlike Chesterton, *we* tend to be quick to reply, "*I am*," to very *different* questions. "What's *right* with the world?" "*I am!*" "Who is wronged?" "*I am!*" But, to *claim*, "*I am* what's *right* with the world" reveals that *I am* part of what's *wrong* with the world. To *admit*: "*I am* what's *wrong* with the world" reveals that *I am* part of what's *right* with the world. To *claim*, "*I am* the *wronged* of the world" reveals a pathetically pinched perspective on the world. So, if we really want to be *in the right*, let's do ourselves the favor of readily admitting when and where and how and why *we're in the wrong*.

In fact, why not do ourselves a really *big* favor and *insist* on our *right* to all the advantages of *seeing and admitting our wrong*? If I *can* admit that *I am* part of what's wrong, then there's something *I might* do to solve the *part* of the problem *I am*. But, if I say that, even here in the backwater of my world, what's wrong is always someone else's fault, I give up whatever *I might* do to get on top of *my* part in the problem. After all, *I can't* change *him* or *her* or *them*. And waiting for those we blame to change for the sake of a blamer will do *nothing* to make things better *for* the blamer. So, blaming gets us more *frustrated*. We then get even *angrier* as we *miserably* fail to get on top of the problem. Failing to get control over our *self-defeating* habits, we fail to get control over our undesired circumstances.

Thus, we make *of ourselves* even *more* of a mess as we try to do what does *nothing* to clean up any mess. Strange as it sounds, nobody appreciates being blamed – *especially* when *they're* at fault. So, the more we blame *them*, the more they'll *retaliate* in defensiveness against *us*. Isn't that nice!

And, the more we blame *others*, the more we reinforce our own sense of *guilt* and *fear*. After all, defensiveness *knows* it's *not innocent*. So, inside our own cover-ups, we experience

Obedience Begins With Awe!

exposure. This gets us even more anxiously angry. The first mistake is failing to see that, dressing up in camouflage *created* by one's self, one's going to *see through* the cover-up.

But, wait! *Seeing through* our cover-up is a very *hopeful* sign! It means we can *see* where *we're* in the *wrong*. So, *we can do* what *we can do* – indeed, what *we ought* to do – to move toward what's *right*, what's *just* and what just might *help*.

Now, *all alone*, *we aren't all* that's wrong with the whole world. Too *bad!* All alone, *we're* not even *all* that's wrong in *our* little corner. Too, *bad!* See, we can't fix any *other's* mess.

But, we can *realize* we're all in this mess together since we're *co-conspirators*: we *all* try to have it *our* way. And, we've *been* *co-conspirators against each other* – and against our Creator – ever since Eden.

The Bible story of Adam and Eve is the story of Adam and Steve and Amy and Sue and Tom and Dick and Harry, too. It depicts the *self-centeredness* we see in *others* while *we're* busy *judging* them from within *our own self-centeredness*. So, it takes no imagination to see how *others misbehave* and how *they defy* even God. They *define* reality to suit themselves – as *we* do. *We're* trying to suit *ourselves* all the time. So, we can *readily identify* with this misbehavior in others. However, we *refuse* to identify ours with theirs, for their wrongdoing is too close to our own. So, we make a *big deal* over *theirs*. That seems like a *better deal* than making a big deal over ours. But it's *not*. Thank God, a troubled conscience can free us to take charge of our misbehavior.

As the residents of Eden did back then, and as all around us do today, we *intend self-improvement*. However, how good is our *aim* at *self-improvement* when we *ignore reality* and *improvise* to suit ourselves? There we go again, trying to suit self! The Creator has written reality into every square inch of the universe. He's revealed reality in writing and in the Word made flesh. Do we improve ourselves by erasing what *he's written*? Do we improve ourselves by replacing it with *our scribbles*?

Today, we have cool clichés, miscalculated to do just that. Few catch on to the fact that these catchphrases are lies. People say: “Well, that may be *your* reality, but it's not *my* reality!” Are they coming from *beyond* time-space or simply from the crawl space of a cramped mind? People who make use of this chichi irrationality seem oblivious to their *imposing their own* dogmatism on all whom they *accuse* of dogmatism. And, what could be more stupid than *creatures* contriving to *correct* their *Creator*? No wonder the psalmist says: “Fools say ‘No!’ to God.” And, rightly, he goes on to see that we're *all* such fools. (Ps 14:1ff) But, don't try telling that to fools – to *any of us*.

Grabbing for fantasies, we're the *first* to be *fooled*. *Latched* to fantasies, we're the *last* to *admit it*. It's all so *predictable*, yet it's *unpredicted*. Blindsided, we lead ourselves into even more unintended consequences: disappointment, disillusion, despair and, ironically, into either a more hell-bent determination to grab at further fantasies or an ill-advised self-preservation via cynicism.

Tempted to *defy* God by *redefining* God to suit ourselves, we'd better be able to *hear* the hiss of a snake. For, when *we* assert an arrogantly *assumed autonomy*, setting up ourselves as *self-sufficient*, it's a set-up for the same disaster that befell the man and woman in Eden.

Obedience Begins With Awe!

The creatures tried to counter their Creator's claim with counterfeit claims. Their Creator, who'd later identify himself as *Yahweh, I AM*, was defied by creatures with an "I am" of their own. But God, *alone*, can be described by the indicative of the verb, "to be": *I AM! I will be who I will be!* Period!

Derived from nothing, dependent for everything, yet brought into being in God's image, humanity rebels and postures a *pretended* autonomy. "*I am self-made! I am my own!*" Jean-Paul Sartre boasted: "Man is *nothing else* than what *he makes* of himself!" Not true! Man's *so much more* than the *mess he makes* of himself. But, left to himself, this so-called *self-made* man makes of himself a *self-deceived* fool, ever trying and ever failing to impress himself, others and even God. All the evil affectation! – as if no one sees through it, as if God is not omniscient!

So, as we *damn* ourselves daily, we *damn* well sense it. That's why we're so *damned defensive* and why, left to our own devices, we're *adrift* and *damned*, alone on our own. No wonder we're anxious!

Choosing *our* way to *save* us from the emptiness and the chaos we sense, trying to *make* us *safe* from our *self-centered self-doubts*, we're stuck in a mess that's pervasive and persistent. Every foolish effort to save one's self only reinforces the sense of danger that fuels the fears. We fear we're not who we *should* be. We fear we *don't* have what we *need*. We fear that, at this rate, we *won't* ever have what we *need*. And, we're so *self-deceived* we call all this bizarre *self-centeredness*: "low self-esteem"? We try to cheer up with *me-centered* mantras and solicit affirmation from others. But, since *me-centered* mantras *are* the *problem*, they *can't* be the *solution*. And since others are suffering from this same *self-centeredness*, so-called "low self-esteem," they can't *afford* to affirm us with much more than their *own* solicitation of affirmation *from* us.

So, we keep looking in wrong *ways*, wrong *places*, to try to *find, fake, buy* or *steal* the coveted self-esteem. But look, if we'd have any *more* of this *foolishly self-centered* esteem, we'd be in more of a mess than we sense. It's esteeming ourselves with *obscenely misplaced self-centeredness* that rewards us with so-called *low* self-esteem.

Is there anyone over whom *we* lose *more* sleep than *ourselves*? Is there anyone's welfare we worry *more* about than *our own*? Even in most of our worry about *others*, don't *we intrude* at the very *center* of what we worry *about*? So, what *but* deepest anxiety can we expect if we have but *self* to bank on after having banished the God of all glory and grace, the only One who does love us unconditionally and rescues us from ourselves and from evil itself.

Still, all these fears of ours are *helpful clues* that, *by* ourselves, *in* ourselves and on our *own*, we're *not* safe. We're *not* who we *need* to be. We're *not* who we *ought* to be. And all of this is very good to know. It's very good to know that we *don't* have and *won't* have and *can't* have what we *need* to have, *in* and *of* and *by* *ourselves*. But it isn't good *enough* to know *only* this.

Scripture tells us *why* we're not who we *ought* to be, who we *need* to be, and, who God *meant* us to be. Here's how a Hebrew prophet put it: "Like sheep, we've all *gone astray*. We've all turned to *our own way*." (Isa 53:6) There it is again: *our own way!* Yet, thank God, all of our *self-doubts* say that, down *deep*, we've no doubt we *don't* measure up. All our *defensiveness* says the same thing. We're *lost* and we *know* it! *Admitting* it is another matter.

Obedience Begins With Awe!

But, failing to *do* what Jesus said was the *point* of the Law and the Prophets – i.e., treating others as we want to be treated – we’ll be *cannibals*, chewing on our indigestible self-obsessions while devouring others and spitting out what’s left of them when we’ve no longer any use for them.

Well, how can we turn from suicidal and homicidal self-centeredness to self-giving love? How can we use *our* sense of need to clue us into seeking the welfare of others in need? Good questions! And, the scriptures offer good prescriptions!

A 1st century writer to Jewish Christians quotes King David’s exclamation of amazement: “What is humanity that You, O God, are *mindful* of us, that You, O God, *care!*” (Heb 2:7; Ps 8:4f) As a young shepherd, David had stared in awe at the stars. Now, as monarch, he writes of the Majesty on high. What he saw in those night skies over Bethlehem and Jerusalem was brighter than what we see of those same stars through all the distracting glow of city lights. Yet, what *we* see of those stars – and far beyond them – is informed by what *he* could not even begin to grasp: how *unimaginably vast* is what he was looking at. The distance to the edge of our presently *observable* universe is nearly 50 billion light years. Some light beyond that can reach us some day. But light at greater distances is flying away from us, flying *faster* than even the speed of light itself. We’ll never see that light. David knew *none* of this. Yet *his* view was informed by what *we* so easily blind ourselves from seeing: How *unimaginably glorious* is the Creator who declared, “Let there be light!” and there it was.

David contrasted the *spacious* skies above him with the *selfish* humanity *around* him and *within* him. Yet, in awe of the God he knew, he trusted that, humanity was somehow even *more* significant to God than all those stars.

In English translation of that New Testament quote from David, we read that, “God made humanity a little lower than *angels*.” The later writer did use the Greek word for *angels*. But what David wrote in Hebrew did not refer to “angels.” He wrote that humanity was created “a little lower than *elohim*.” *Elohim!* God’s magnified name! *We’re* made a little lower than *God!* In his culture’s three-tier cosmos, David saw us on earth as but a little lower than the One who resides in the heaven above the firmament of those awe-inspiring skies. David, the *king*, recalls that God *crowned* humanity with glory and honor and *enthroned* us with vice-regency under God, over all the earth.

Yet, as scripture says, each of us falls far short of what God intended for us from the beginning. And, since every human group is comprised of human beings, every human *group* falls far short of what God intended for human *society*. This includes *every* race, ethnicity, class, political party, religion and so on. Neither *gender* nor *sexual orientation* is excluded from the population of the self-preoccupied. So, neither gender nor sexual orientation can save us from ourselves.

When asked who *he* was, Chesterton replied: “Whoever I *am*, I’m not *myself*.” None of us *is* who he or she was *created* to be. None of us *is* who God *meant* him or her to be. Do we each have Chesterton’s good sense to know that, “Whoever I *am*, I’m not *myself*.” There’s *another*, far *better* me, who God has had in mind for me to be – from the beginning of the world.

Obedience Begins With Awe!

Well, how did our forebears in Eden *fix* their own foul-up? They *didn't*. Oh, they *tried*. As we do, they tried a *cover-up*. But, as we know, cover-ups are done in *distress* and under *duress*, so that, there's not a lot of time to cover up all the embarrassing parts. Their few fig leaves left a lot exposed. And, they *felt* exposed because they *were* exposed. So, they *hid out*. But even forests of fig leaves can't hide us from our own sensed shame. In all our postured pride we're privy to what we pretend isn't exposed. And, surely, we can't believe we can hide from the grieving wrath of *Omniscient Love!* So, the blame games began early on. The woman blamed the snake and the man blamed the woman. The man blamed God, too, for giving her to him.

Still, though, God *loved* them and set into motion their future redemption. He began by clothing their shame and graciously driving them out of Eden lest they do themselves even more damage than they'd already done to themselves.

In the fullness of time, Jesus, God's Son, came to earth to face temptations on our behalf, *living* the *obedience* we *fail* to live and, on the cross, he laid down his own life on our behalf, *paying the penalty we'd not survive* if we had to pay it ourselves.

Says the writer to Hebrews: "Christ came into the world, applying a Psalm to himself: 'You, O God, do not delight in *ritual* offerings, but You prepared a *body* for *me*. And I said, 'Here, I am ... I come to *do* your will.'" (Heb 10: 5ff; Ps 40:6f) For ages, Jews offered *animal* sacrifices for their *own* sin, but with no further *obedience*. (Jer 7:21-24; Hos 6:6; Amos 5:21-27)

In *full obedience* down to death, Christ sacrificed *himself* to atone for *our* sins. Neither celibacy nor reparative pretense, neither orientation-discordant nor same-sex marriage substitutes for Christ's substituting himself for us at the cross. Christ's death was our death. Christ's resurrection was our resurrection.

Now, with but a hint of this mystery of *God's* unmerited mercy to us, we can be awakened to awe and gratitude, *freed in Christ's righteousness* and *freed for* the *praise of obedience* to his call to *love one another* from the *rich bounty* of his own *unfathomable love* for us and for "them."

But, the Hebrews pastor says: If we *claim* Christ as "Lord" but *keep on refusing* to *obey* him, he's *not our Lord*. If we persist in neglecting discipleship, failing to meet together to encourage each other in faith and love and, rather, go our own ways, prioritizing the things of *this* world from which, to save us, *Christ sacrificed himself*, we *trash* his gift of salvation. (Heb 10:29-31) How is he *our Lord* if he's not *Lord* of our *lifestyles*, Lord of our *daily lives*?

God's old Covenant commandments were prefaced by that Covenant's preamble, recalling God's rescue of his people from Egypt. The *imperatives* for *human* action were based in the *indicative* of *God's* action. What *we ought to do* is rooted in what *God did*. "*I am* the Lord, *your* God, who saved *you*. So, don't count on *other* gods!" (Ex 20:2) In *awe* of God's rescue and wise warning about useless idols, his people *ought* to respond with the *gratitude of obedience*. *Ought begins with awe!*

Lost in the wilderness of *this world's ways*, everything every day is, at *best*, a *bad* mixed bag. *Freed* from hostage to Egyptians, they hold *themselves* hostage to selective memory and fantasies of garlic and onions in "the good old days" of slavery. (Num 11:5f) Instead of awe, they awfulize! They gripe over God's daily provision of manna, missing the point that, had they

Obedience Begins With Awe!

been given a more mouthwatering menu, they'd have had yet *another excuse* to remain mired in the wilderness and not move on to God's Promised Land. What are our own foolish fantasies of lost garlic and onions?

We're *lost* if we count on *daydreams* to save us from ourselves. We're lost if we count on *others* to save us from ourselves. We're lost if we count on *ourselves* to save us from ourselves. And, we're lost, too, if we try merely to *grunt up* some *grudging* gratitude by "counting our blessings." *Our coveting idols of fantasy will always outrun our counting.*

But, we need to see that every *mixed* bag in *this* world is a Godsend that says: "Not *here!* Not in *this!* However good, *this* isn't *it!* This isn't *why* you were created! *This* won't *do* for your *deep* need! Well then, what *will* do? No. That's a *stupid* question. Here are *wise* questions: *Who* will do? *Who* has *done* it? We *need* to *know* God *intimately* and *experience* his *unmixed* love. We can't *buy* his love. We can't *earn* his love. We can't *forge* it. We can't *fake* it. God's love is *freely given*, though the *cost* to *him* is beyond our comprehension.

Knowing God's amazing love, his welcoming embrace in Christ, we're safe *with* the One we always were *meant* to be with. Here is *Presence* more powerful than any problem. Here is *perspective* deeper than all our *self*-focused and petty complaining permits us.

This writer to Hebrew Christians told them: "Fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and accomplisher of our faith, who, for the *joy* that was set before him, *endured* the cross, *despising* the shame." (Heb 12:2) *We* are that joy that was set before him, for whom he endured all! Are we *in awe* at this or are we *indifferent* to this?

Listen to some lines based in this Bible text, written by a woman after her wealthy husband left her when she went blind. "O soul, are you weary and troubled? / No light in the darkness you see? / There's light for a look at the Savior / and life more abundant and free! / Turn your eyes upon Jesus / Look full in His wonderful face / and the things of earth will grow strangely dim / In the light of His glory and grace." (Helen Howarth Lemmel)

David had confessed his own depravity: "My evil deeds overwhelm me ... they're more than the hairs of my head! Please, O Lord, deliver me!" But redeemed by God's grace, David rejoiced in grateful obedience rather than in all of Israel's religious rituals. In joy, he exclaimed his praise: "I can't keep quiet about your righteousness, O God! I don't keep your salvation to myself! I tell the truth of your loving-kindness to all!" (Ps 40:9-12)

As David humbly wrote of God's care for him in spite of his depravity, so Rusty Goodman did when he wrote these lines: "When I think of how he came so far from glory / Came to dwell among the lowly such as I / To suffer shame and such disgrace / on Mount Calvary take my place / Then I ask myself this question, 'Who am I?' / Who am I, that a King would bleed and die for / Who am I, that he would pray, 'Not my will, Thine, Lord' / The answer I may never know, / Why he ever loved me so / that to an old rugged cross he'd go, for who am I."

Who, indeed! Who are *we*? David answered: "a little lower than *elohim!*" Said John: "Dear friends, we're already God's children. What we *will* be isn't completely clear. Yet we do know that when Christ appears we will be like *him* for we'll see him as he is." (I John 3:2-3) As Chesterton knew, whoever we *are*, we're *not* yet *ourselves*. Said Paul: "We know that all things are working together for the good of those who love God – those whom he has called according

Obedience Begins With Awe!

to his plan. He's known us all along and has appointed us to be conformed to the image of his Son, the firstborn among many children." (Rom 8:28-29)

Is *our* awe of God and his love *profound enough* to prompt *our* glad obedience, *grateful enough* to want to please *him* above all else, *rejoicing enough* that we *can't keep quiet* about the great Good News of God's amazing grace?

Today, this world's mess includes a sadly vocabulary-challenged sense of *awe*. Anything *but* God is touted as, "*awesome*." Cindy Adams says she's *had it* with the overuse and misuse of "*awesome*." So has British poet and painter John Tottenham. Unfortunately for him, he now lives in L.A.

We're spammed with: "*Awesome Results! Melt your fat! Must watch video!*" "*Fifteen awesome things you can make out of a pizza box*" – like wall art or a pizza bib. Next time you hear someone say, "It was, like, *awesome*, man!" feel free to ask, "You mean, like a pizza bib?"

It gets worse. Thousands of American teenage girls are tweeting their infatuation over that self-confessed Islamist terrorist in Boston. They insist he's innocent. They say he's too "*awesome*," too "*cute*," to be guilty.

That's a tricky thing about *evil*. Paul says the Satan shows up "*as an angel of light*." The Satan cited Psalms to tempt Jesus to sin. (II Cor 11:13f; Matt 4:6) And wasn't that snake said to have been the *shrewdest*? (Gen 3:1)

Now, *we* may roll our eyes at foolish teenagers, look down our noses at the verbal deficiencies of Californians and think it's ridiculous to call a pizza bib "*awesome*." But, frankly, are *our* claims to be *in awe of God* any less ridiculous? Just how *is* our *claimed* awe of God *lived out* daily, nightly? Do we *communicate* Jesus' love to others? How is any *awe* of God prioritized in us?

So, let's revisit those verses from the Sermon on the Mount – *in awe and awareness* of God's holiness, glory and amazing grace.

In awe of God's holiness, can we see how it makes no sense to sit in harsh judgment of *others* when *we* could not stand such scrutiny? F. D. Maurice, 19th century theologian, confessed: "Ah! ... The sins of others produce such sin in me, and stir up my unsanctified nature so terribly." In awe of the holy grace of God, can't we see that our nitpicking at others is nothing but self-serving rationalization for our own self-righteousness?

In awe of his atonement, aware of offense others take at Christ's cross, why would we look for *hospitality* from *hostile secularists*?

Why *continue* sharing the gospel with those who *keep on rejecting* the gospel? Why entrust *gospel ministry* to anyone who downplays or denies the gospel?

In awe of God's goodness, do we see the wisdom in *asking* our *heavenly* Father for what *he* *knows* we need, *seeking* him who *sought* for us and saved us from our sinful, selfish self-seeking?

In awe of God's grace to us who are *unworthy*, can't we show grace to *all* others? Maurice Boyd said it often: "*God loves us into loving and smiles us into smiling*." Jesus noted that we *know* very well *how* to treat others since we *know* very well *how* we want to be treated. That's

Obedience Begins With Awe!

empathy. Jesus said it's the whole *point* of the Law and Prophets. Knowing *we're* loved so *richly*, can't we *afford* to love others – aware that, there's plenty more love where our love comes from?

And, in awe of God's grace, why would we *not* go *with him* on his *narrow* way that leads to *life*, for the *wide* road's *lifestyles* lead to *ruin*. Why would we *not* go with him? Why? Well, when we're all tied up in ourselves, we really don't give a damn about him.

In awe of God's grace, why would we waste our time listening to *false* teachers who *impugn* the Gospel and push *their* propaganda that, though popular and even PC, will soon pass away as other fads now *passé*. So, why would we listen to *them*? Well, maybe we prefer preachers who pander to *our* priorities, *our* prejudices, *our* plans.

And, in awe of God's glory, aware of God's grace, why would we settle for pious prattle instead of the privilege of gladly obedient action? Why? Well, maybe we think it's more fun to fight culture wars. But such a *self-indulgent* adrenalin rush cannot match the joy of thankful, awe-inspired obedience to our Lord.

In awe of God's glory and grace, *apathetic* "obedience" is *no obedience*. Blasé believers *don't* serve *the Lord!* *Their* priorities aren't *his*. Obedience to the Lord is *a lifestyle under his Lordship*. *Persistent indifference* ends in *exclusion* from Christ's king-dom. Posers may use the lingo, "Lord, Lord," but Jesus says, he'll say to them: "I've *never* known you. Get away from me, you *evildoers*."

Jesus' words were David's words once. Agonizing in illness, he'd soaked his pillows in tears, deeply troubled by an "insidious suspicion that [advisors] were right, perhaps God had indeed deserted" him! (Peter Craigie) He mourned that, "In Sheol [death] he'd no longer be capable of praising Yahweh!" Then, recovered, he dismissed those self-righteous advisors: "Get away from me, you *evildoers*." Note well: David's anticipatory grieving was over his fear of the *loss* of awe for his Lord! (Ps 6)

So, where are the *mourners* among *us*, sorrowing over *our* sins, despairing of doing better and fearing *our* loss of daily *fellowship* with the Lord? Jesus called *these* folks, the "fortunately *poor* in spirit" who *will* inherit the kingdom of heaven. (Matt 5:3)

Saved from the *sands* of self-righteousness and safe on the *rock* of God's *grace*, we can *hear and do* what Jesus said: "As I have *loved* you, *love each other*." (John 13:34) Wesley put it like this: Let's "do all the good we can, by all the means we can, in all the ways we can, in all the places we can, to all the people we can, as long as ever we can!" *That'll* keep us busy. *That'll* keep us safe from cesspools of self-pity. Jesus said it's by our *loving* each other that friend and foe would know we're *his*. (John 13:35)

Recently, a "Reflection" page of Redeemer Presbyterian's order of worship carried a quote from Wendy Kaminer of the Secular Coalition. She asserted: "As an article of faith, this doctrine of salvation by grace and grace alone is remarkably unappealing to me. It takes, I think, remarkable disregard for justice to idealize a God who so values belief over action. I prefer the God who looks down upon us and says, 'I wish they'd stop worrying about whether or not I exist and start obeying my commandments.'" She *misinterprets* what she *belittles*, sets up an *incoherent* either-or, fails to see the *basis* for obedient action and preaches *her* dogma while

Obedience Begins With Awe!

damning a caricature of *them* and *their* dogma. Well, so do we *all!* That's why we all need God's mercy.

Directly under *Kaminer's* opinions on Christian faith, the church posted these words from the 1561 *Belgic Confession*: "It is so far from being true that [salvation by grace alone] makes us remiss in a pious and holy life, that on the contrary without it, we would never do anything out of love to God, but only out of self-love or fear of damnation. Therefore, it is impossible that this holy faith can be unfruitful; for we ... speak of a faith which is called in Scripture, a 'faith working through love' which excites us to the practice of those works which God has commanded in His Word. [Otherwise] we would always be in doubt, tossed to and fro without any certainty, and our poor consciences would be continually vexed if they relied not on the merits of our Savior."

So, we don't obey God to pay Him *off*. We don't obey God to pay Him *back*. *Giving* is *God's gift!* And, *gifted* with gratitude in *awe-fueled awareness* of God's saving grace in Christ, we're *freed* to obey our *Creator, Savior* and *Lord*. To *know* him is to *obey* him and to *obey* him is to *love* him, for he, it was, who *first* loved us, *giving* us *ourselves* and *giving himself* for us.

One of the first songs I ever sang in Sunday school was, "Trust and Obey." After D. L. Moody closed an evangelistic meeting in 1887, a young man stood up to share his witness. As he spoke, it was obvious to many that he knew very little about the Bible or Christian doctrine. But, what he said, touched everyone: "I'm not quite sure, but I'm gonna trust and obey."

Deeply moved, Moody's music director jotted down his words and they became the hook for that new hymn, "Trust and Obey." That humble young convert knew that, to *obey* starts in a trusting *awe* of God!

In 1956, I was a freshman at Bob Jones University and in my first class of New Testament Greek. I learned that, of the two Greek letters rendered into English as our letter "O" – the letter, *omicron*, had the "aw" sound while the letter, *omega* had the "oh" sound. We were told to pronounce words beginning with *omicron* with an "aw" sound and words beginning with an *omega* with an "oh" sound. Sounded right to me. But, according to the textbook, that "aw" sound should resemble the sound at the beginning of the word, "obey"? "AW-bey"? Back in Youngstown, we'd always said "OH-bey." I now had to learn to "AW-bey."

Well, that's the way it is with *obedience*. Doing it *our old* way, beginning in *our own* strength of *will*, we'll likely *abort* obedience. But, in the *awe* of the Lord, we're moved to the *joy of a grateful obedience*. *Obedience begins with awe!*

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