



From:
John Dear, SJ: The Questions of Jesus - Challenging
Ourselves to Discover Life's Great Answers
An IMAGE book published by Doubleday, 2004
ISBN 0-385-51007-1

OBEDIENCE

Why do you call me "Lord, Lord," but not
do what I command?

(LUKE 6:46)

At the culmination of Luke's Sermon on the Plain, after blessing the poor, the mournful, the hungry, and the hated; after cursing the rich, the full, the laughing, and the popular; and after commanding us to love our enemies and be as compassionate as God, Jesus asks, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' but not do what I command?"

"I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, listens to my words and acts on them," he continues. "That one is like a person building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on

rock; when the flood came, the river burst against that house but could not shake it because it had been well built. But the one who listens and does not act is like a person who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, it collapsed at once and was completely destroyed" (Luke 6:46–49).

In Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, Jesus does not ask the question but gives a sober declaration: "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the reign of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name? Did we not drive out demons in your name? Did we not do mighty deeds in your name? Then, I will declare to them solemnly, 'I never knew you. Depart from me, you evildoers'" (Matthew 7:21–23).

These crucial texts tell us that Jesus does not care for lip service. Rather, he expects actual obedience to his commandments. He does not egotistically look for us to call him "Lord, Lord." Rather, he wants us to do what he commands. This is his chief concern. He expects us to love our enemies, be as compassionate as God, forgive one another, and follow him on the path of active nonviolence into the world. He wants us to live life to the full and not be destroyed by the flood that will inevitably hit each one of us. And Jesus knows that the only way we can survive life's crises and disasters is to put his words into practice, not just call out to him. We have to do it ourselves. For Jesus, active nonviolence and compassionate love are not only requirements of the spiritual life: They are the only practical way to make it through life.

But who obeys Jesus? Millions of us call him Lord, but few of us love our enemies, show compassion to the weak, or forgive those who hurt us. Jesus marvels at our lip service and daily disobedience and warns us to heed his words. He does not want to say to us, "Depart from me, you evildoers." He does not want us to do evil but to do good.

Why do we call him "Lord, Lord," but not do what he commands? Sure, we like Jesus; we call him Lord and Savior. But most of us fundamentally do not agree with his political and social teachings,

so we simply disregard them. We presume, instead, that it does not matter. We think he will not notice. We assume we know better than he does about how to live in our concrete world of the twenty-first century. In fact, we are so brainwashed by the culture that we cannot go against our nation. We must offer our allegiance first to the flag "and to the republic for which it stands." We can never love our enemies, such as the Iraqi people, or show compassion to Muslims and people who are different. That would be un-American. We do as we are told and try to protect our way of life, our interests, our investments, our imperial ambitions. We go along with everyone else. We wave the flag, put up our yellow ribbons, support the troops, sing patriotic songs, ignore the plight of the poor, turn away from the cries of our bombing victims, try to make more money, honor the rich and the famous, and remain silent in the face of war and nuclear weapons—all the while calling out "Lord, Lord!"

If we are not careful, the day will come when we will appear before Jesus only to discover, much to our shock and bitter disappointment, that we do not know him and he does not know us. On that day, he will say, "I never knew you. Depart from me."

Jesus wants us to take his words to heart and put them into practice. He is concerned about what we do with our lives. He has given us concrete instructions about how to live, how to love, how to serve, how to make peace, and how to forgive. This Gospel work is the most important task in life. If we fulfill his commandments, he will know us and we will come to know him—and he will rejoice because of our good deeds.

Why do you break the commandment of
God for the sake of your tradition?

(MATTHEW 15:3)

Why do we break the commandment of God for the sake of our tradition? Because tradition means everything. Tradition is our life, our culture, our world, our god. Tradition is a paramount

force in our lives. We do what we do because it has always been done that way. We hold our religious services, perform our rituals, honor the honorable, and maintain our culture—warts and all and worse—because that's the way it's always been. Those who bring change are troublemakers. Our traditions, the culture tells us, must be kept at all costs.

Centuries of fidelity to tradition have elevated our traditions so that now we presume they have been handed down from on high. For many, tradition has become more important than love, life, the needs of the poor, or the peace of humanity. We spend our lives upholding and idolizing our traditions, while the world goes to hell with its wars and neglect of the poor. Yet tradition can be a strong obstacle to life and the God of life. It can prevent us from pursuing God's reign of justice and peace.

The culture of war insists that we keep its traditions running smoothly. This is our highest calling, we are programmed to believe. We observe our secular feast days, honor the culture's symbols, do as we are told, and cheer on our all-American traditions. On Memorial Day and the Fourth of July, we raise the flag, shoot our rifles, and praise our soldiers for killing in the name of God and country. We keep the tradition alive but disregard the commandments of God, such as those bedrock, bottom-line pronouncements: "Thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal, put away your sword, beat your swords into plowshares and love your enemies." Placing America and its traditions on the same pedestal as God, if not higher, we eventually forget what God commands. And before we know it, we forget God too. God becomes a sweet, sentimental fantasy or a vengeful idol who fuels our traditions and their aspirations to dominate the world.

This is precisely what the Pharisees did. They placed their traditions, laws, rules, and authority over and above God. They idolized their traditions and in the process broke God's commandments. Jesus' constant attempts to point out this fatal flaw only insulted and infuriated them. Eventually they killed him in the name of their tradition and then carried on with business as usual, with blood on their hands.

If we take Jesus seriously and put his biblical commandments

foremost in our lives, sooner or later we will have to break with tradition and follow God's law wherever it leads us. We will resist our nation's wars, protest its nuclear weapons, refuse to join the military, demand that our troops come home, vote for politicians who stand with the world's poor, call for nuclear disarmament, create religious communities rooted in nonviolence, resist the ongoing oppression of the poor, and seek God's reign of justice and peace with all our strength.

As Keepers of the Word we will find ourselves in trouble with the Keepers of the Tradition. People will ask, "Who do you think you are? What gives you the right to break with our traditions? How dare you rock the boat and disrupt the culture!" We will be harassed and persecuted as un-American, unpatriotic, leftist, communist agitators and social misfits. But we will remember God's commandments, and we will notice how others have long forgotten God's commandments. We will even feel compassion for the Keepers of Tradition, because we realize that they do not know what they are doing.

Obedience to God's commandments is the top priority of Jesus and the spiritual life. As we contemplate his commandments of non-violent love and act according to them, we will find ourselves in opposition to the culture's disobedience. But even as we go against the grain and become marginalized, we will discover a new spiritual freedom in our love for God and God's law. Even if everyone else adheres to tradition in disobedience to God's law, we will obey God's commandments. We may suffer for our stand. We may be wildly misunderstood as being "political," especially by church leaders. But ultimately but we will be found faithful before the God of the commandments, and we will rejoice.

It is never too late to obey God's law. We can begin anew every day to obey God's commandments of love. If more of us turn back to those difficult but beautiful Gospel commandments, not only will our hearts and lives be disarmed and healed, but over time our culture will be transformed from a culture of war into a culture of peace, from a culture of violence into a culture of nonviolence, from a culture of death into a culture of life.

What were you arguing about on the way?

(MARK 9:33)

This question appears in two variations, one right after the other. After Jesus' transfiguration, he comes down the mountain with Peter, James, and John to find a large crowd watching the remaining disciples arguing with the scribes. "What are you arguing about with them?" Jesus asks the disciples (Mark 9:16). A father had asked the disciples to heal his possessed boy but they are unable to drive out the demon, and an argument breaks out. After Jesus heals the boy, he and his disciples leave and begin a private walking journey through Galilee, where he tells them over and over again, "The Son of Humanity is to be handed over to the authorities and they will torture and kill him, and three days after his death, he will rise" (Mark 9:31).

When they arrive at the house in Capernaum, Mark writes that Jesus immediately asks the disciples, "What were you arguing about on the way?" The phrase "on the way" is a first-century term used to describe the journey of Christian discipleship. The disciples grow silent and bow their heads. It turns out they had been arguing among themselves, "on the way," about which one of them is the greatest. Jesus had just explained to them that he is about to confront the forces of injustice in Jerusalem and will be arrested, tried, tortured, and executed, and they ignore his announcement and start arguing about themselves and how great they are! Jesus is about to die, and they focus on only themselves. He is warning them about the horrific nightmare that lies ahead "on the way," and they debate their egotistic ambitions. It would be funny if it were not so tragic.

Jesus could explode, reprimand them, or kick them out. But he does nothing of the sort. Instead he simply proceeds to describe what true greatness looks like. "If anyone wishes to be first, they shall be the last of all and the servant of all," he tells them (Mark 9:35). It is an upside-down vision of the world, a great challenge, and the most noble calling, to spend one's life in service of the entire human race. More than any other human being in history, Jesus fulfills this defini-

tion of greatness. He is the greatest of all, and the disciples, at this point, remain clueless.

Today, Jesus still expects his followers to obey his commandments of love and compassion. He calls us to love one another and our enemies. He leads us "on the way" to the cross, to share in the Paschal mystery of suffering, love, death, and resurrection. But how do we Christians respond? We argue among ourselves about which one of us is the greatest. Little has changed.

"What were you arguing about on the way?" Jesus asks us. How do we answer? We too may find ourselves bowing our heads in silence and shame before him. Can we learn to let go of our pride, ego, and the need to argue so we can become one another's servants and try to serve everyone, as Jesus did?

What does Jesus say to us as we argue among ourselves? Let it all go. Let go of your ego, your pride, your pursuit of honor and fame. Let go of your selfish demands upon others that they must serve you. Let go of control and domination over others. Let go of your problems, ambitions, career, greed, and need for achievement and accomplishment. Instead, serve one another. Serve the poor and the disenfranchised. Serve the hungry, the homeless, the sick, the imprisoned, the young, the elderly, the dying. Let go of your need to argue and follow me through humble, loving, unconditional service of suffering humanity.

Who then is the faithful and prudent steward whom the master will put in charge of his servants to distribute the food allowance at the proper time?

(LUKE 12:42)

Jesus wants faithful disciples who will carry on his work of love and justice. He struggled throughout his life to form disciples who understood his way of active nonviolence and compassionate love, who

could remain faithful when he went home to heaven. He loved his community members and tried hard to get them to serve as he served, to obey God's commandments, and to live in his spirit.

"Be like servants who await their master's return from a wedding," Jesus tells his disciples, "ready to open immediately when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds vigilant on his arrival. Amen, I say to you, he will gird himself, have them recline at table, and proceed to wait on them. And should he come in the second or third watch and find them prepared in this way, blessed are those servants. You must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Humanity will come" (Luke 12:36-48).

Although these beatitudes exult the true disciple, Peter balks. "Lord, is this parable meant for us or for everyone?" he asks, confused by all this talk of eternal service and perpetual vigilance.

"Who then is the faithful and prudent steward whom the master will put in charge of his servants to distribute the food allowance at the proper time?" Jesus asks Peter in response. "Blessed is that servant whom his master on arrival finds doing so. Truly I say to you, he will put him in charge of all his property."

The Gospel uses two adjectives to describe the type of disciple Jesus is looking for: "faithful" and "prudent." To be faithful means to keep the faith; to maintain constant, consistent allegiance; to be reliable, true, conscientious, dutiful, and loyal, come what may. Jesus wants servants who will remain obedient their entire lives, who will never give up, who will never abandon him, and who will love him until their last breath. To be prudent is to exercise sound judgment in practical matters, especially concerning one's interests; to be cautious and discreet in conduct, not rash, but circumspect. Jesus also wants servants who are wise, who are careful to do what is right, who live unselfish lives in pursuit of God's reign of justice and peace.

Who is the most faithful and prudent servant of God the Creator who ever lived? Surely, Jesus of Nazareth! But the Gospel asks us today, "Who among you is the faithful and prudent servant?" If we reflect on the people we have met, we probably can count several ordinary, everyday saints we have known—relatives, friends, or coworkers.

We all know the shining examples of faithful and prudent servants like Mahatma Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero, Ita Ford, Philip Berrigan, Jean Donovan, and Thomas Merton.

Jesus' cumbersome question leads us to reflect on our own desires and spiritual goals. Do we want to be faithful and prudent servants of Jesus our master? Do we want to be found faithful when he appears before us? If so, then we have another set of questions to address. Do we need to change our direction and spirit in any way so that we fit more faithfully into Jesus' gospel? How can we persevere in this long-haul Gospel life so that, when we die, we leave behind a committed life and find ourselves before Christ, radiating faith and devotion?

We all respect Jesus, certainly, and it is worth the energy to end up in his company. That is reason enough to strive to be his faithful and prudent servants, so that when we finally meet him, he smiles and says to each one of us, "Here is my faithful and prudent servant, my friend. Welcome."

Why are you testing me?

(MARK 12:15; MATTHEW 22:18)

One would think that if some holy person miraculously healed the sick, raised the dead, walked on water, inspired hope, and pointed us toward God, we would all rejoice and welcome this person with open arms. Instead, Jesus was met time and time again with resistance, harassment, doubt, and rejection. People challenged him, ridiculed him, questioned him, objected to him, mocked him, threatened him, and eventually killed him.

When the Pharisees and Herodians came after Jesus "to ensnare him in his speech" and "trap him" with their loaded question about paying taxes, Mark writes, "Knowing their hypocrisy, Jesus asked, 'Why are you testing me?' " Matthew's version takes a slightly different twist: "Knowing their malice, Jesus asked, 'Why are you testing me, you hypocrites?' "

The authorities tested Jesus because they were full of malice,

jealousy, and violence. Because they did not believe a word he said, they wanted to do away with him, either by exposing him as a fraud or assassinating him. Jesus saw all this coming and knew where it would lead: to crucifixion. Nonetheless, he asked them, as he asks us, "Why are you testing me?"

According to the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses instructed the Hebrew people to serve God alone. "You shall not follow other gods, such as those of the surrounding nations." Then he continued, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test, as you did at Massah, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God, and the ordinances and statutes God has enjoined on you. Do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord, that you may, according to God's word, prosper and enter in and possess the good land which the Lord has promised" (Deuteronomy 7:13–18).

Centuries later, while fasting in the desert, Jesus was tempted by Satan, who led him to the parapet of the Temple and said, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down." Jesus quoted Deuteronomy, saying, "It is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test'" (Matthew 4:5–7).

The gospel teaches that we should not test God, and therefore we should not test the nonviolent Jesus. He does not deserve such unjust treatment from us. Unfortunately, however, each one of us breaks this commandment and at some point starts testing God. We test Jesus saying, "If you are the Son of God, prove it!" We resist him, doubt him, and reject him. In our worst moments, we too do not believe Jesus.

Why do we test Jesus? Because we doubt him. We despair. We are afraid. We are unhappy, lonely, sad, and miserable. We are impatient for love, happiness, and God, and we do not know where we are headed, except into the great unknown, the mystery of death. If Jesus is, as he claims to be, the Son of God, we should test him—or so the world tells us.

But instead of testing Jesus, the Gospel calls us to believe him, love him, accept him, affirm him, support him, defend him, and trust him. If we are his obedient servants, we have no need to test him. In

fact, we have no right to question him. Rather, our duty is to help him with his work of nonviolent transformation, to do what he wants us to do.

Faith in Jesus summons us to love Jesus with all our hearts. That love leads us to put our hope in God, and faith, hope, and love for Jesus give us the freedom to live in perfect trust. We no longer need to test Jesus or God. Rather, we can do what he says, even if we do not fully understand it, knowing that it must be right. From now on, we walk in his footsteps, not testing God but obeying the commandments, doing what is right, and trusting God, every step on the way, right into the Promised Land.

Is it not written: My house shall be called
a house of prayer for all peoples?

(MARK 11:17)

Many of us would probably prefer if Jesus were more like Buddha: sitting in the lotus position, telling us that God loves us, and leaving it at that. But Jesus went further. He served the poor in Galilee, then embarked on a walking campaign of creative nonviolence to Jerusalem, where he confronted the ultimate institution of religious and imperial injustice: the Temple.

The Temple was a huge building, like the Pentagon, the U.S. Capitol, the White House, and the National Cathedral all rolled into one. The authorities told the very poor that God lived in the Temple and everyone was expected to come to Jerusalem once a year at Passover to offer sacrifice to God, or they would not be offering God true worship.

These corrupt religious authorities considered the poor to be unclean, even subhuman, so they set up a hypocritical, unjust system which taught that in order to worship God the impoverished masses had to pay a hefty fee to buy the appropriate lamb or at least a dove for an authentic sacrifice acceptable to God.

The Pharisees and scribes, working with the empire, made a for-

tune. Each year at Passover, the population of Jerusalem jumped from 50,000 to 180,000. The very poor could only afford to buy doves, but they were taught that their offering made them clean and able to worship.

The only hitch in this vast, corrupt, unholy business was that the Roman coins used by the people, and needed to purchase the doves, portrayed the face of Caesar on them. Caesar claimed to be divine, and technically these idolatrous coins were not allowed in the sanctuary. So the Pharisees created a bank in the sanctuary alongside the slaughterhouse, so that the idolatrous Roman money could be changed into “holy” Temple money. Of course, a large tax was taken in the process—again to support the corrupt ruling, religious officials. They had a very profitable system, which brought them not only riches but power and prestige.

After three years on his journey to Jerusalem, Jesus entered the Temple, saw this unjust scheme—the collaboration with the empire, the oppression of the poor, and the abuse of God’s house—and took immediate action. According to Mark, he “drove out those selling and buying, he turned over the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves, and he did not permit anyone to carry anything through the Temple area” (11:15).

Jesus would not tolerate injustice, especially in the name of God. He would not allow unjust structures to rob the poor in the name of his beloved God, so he disrupted the whole operation. He did not want to merely lower prices for the poor; he was not trying to help the poor get a good deal on doves. He did not try to reform the Temple. Rather, he called for an end to the entire cultic system.

This action in the Temple is the boldest political statement in the entire Bible, the culmination of Jesus’ lifelong obedience to God and civil disobedience to imperial and religious injustice. This dramatic event is recorded in all four Gospels. (Only the miracle of the loaves and the fishes and the Crucifixion also appear in all four Gospels.) According to Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus’ action resulted in his arrest, trial, torture, and execution.

It is important to note that Jesus does not hurt anyone, strike

anyone, whip anyone, kill anyone, or bomb anyone. He is not violent, but he is not passive either. He shuts down business as usual. Only John’s account says he took a whip, but the actual Greek word refers to a cord typical of the times, used for cattle. If there were cattle in the sanctuary, Jesus would have let them go, using the cord that the cattle owners brought with them.

Jesus’ nonviolent direct action offers a model for activists and heroes of justice. Mahatma Gandhi walked calmly to the sea, picked up the illegal salt, broke the salt laws, and was arrested, and it was he who ultimately brought down the British Empire and its unjust rule over India. Dr. King walked peacefully through the park in Birmingham, broke the segregation laws, and was arrested and jailed, and he ultimately brought down Jim Crow segregation. Daniel and Philip Berrigan entered the military headquarters in Catonsville, Maryland, on May 19, 1968, with seven others, took draft files, burned them with homemade napalm in the parking lot, and were arrested and imprisoned, and they ultimately helped end the unjust Vietnam War.

As Jesus turned over the tables, he asked, “Is it not written: ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples?’ Yes, the prophet Isaiah wrote that God’s house is open to all” (Isaiah 56:7). “But you have made it a den of thieves,” Jesus said, quoting Jeremiah (7:11). “The chief priest and the scribes came to hear of it and were seeking a way to put him to death,” Mark concludes.

If Jesus is so zealous for God, God’s house, and God’s justice, if he is so disturbed about injustice in the Temple and gives his life to confront unjust structures that oppress the poor, what does that mean for us his followers? We too have to resist injustice, seek justice, and confront the structures of institutionalized violence. Our churches must become houses of prayer and quiet contemplation, not places of business where there is buying, selling, and profit-making. Our churches must be places, where everyone is welcome—people of every race, language, gender, class, and religion; the elderly, the disabled, the immigrants, the homeless, the hungry, the gays, the lesbians, even our enemies. God freely welcomes everyone, and from now on, Jesus insists, we will too.