



Motivating Asian Americans to Obey Jesus

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Introduction: An Analogy

If someone were to ask me why I love my wife, I could offer various reasons, and each one would promote a particular view of our relationship

| Reason | Expected Outcome | Focus On |
|---|---|---|
| Because I have to | None | Some standard, law, or principle that defines what I have to do in marriage. |
| Because of what I get from her in return | Extrinsic (something I get after I love her) | What she gives me, but it sounds utilitarian and conditional. |
| Because I owe her a debt | Extrinsic | What she's given me. This is oriented on the past. It doesn't sound that honoring. If this debt is paid off, is my commitment over? |
| Because I'm thankful that she loves me | Extrinsic | Quality of our relationship. It's better than above; it's more honoring, but still conditional, perhaps. |
| Because I'm learning to be a loving person. It's good for me | Intrinsic (something I get when I love her) | Me and my own process of growth. Is unconditional, but seems a little lopsided because her uniqueness is not mentioned. Couldn't I get this from anyone? What makes her unique and special? |
| Because I delight in who she is and I receive so much from her | Intrinsic | Me and Her. Very honoring because it reflects feeling and sincerity rooted in who she is vs. simply what she does for me or what I get. |
| Because I have somehow changed because of her. She is connected to my heart, to me, and loving her is now a part of who I am. | Intrinsic | Me transformed in Us. Out of all the reasons, I think this one reflects the most permanence and the deepest impact she makes on me. It is now impossible for me to talk about "me" without talking about her. |

As we go down this table, the more honored my wife and our marriage becomes.

Likewise, if someone were to ask me why I love God and why I serve Him, I could offer various reasons, and each one would promote a particular view of our relationship. The bottom four are perhaps the most desirable, in that order. We will focus in this section on the last motivation: Being motivated to love and serve God through our union with him and our identity in Christ.

Scriptures

Paul also dealt with this question in Romans 6. When he imagined someone asking him, “What then, shall we sin that grace may abound?” in Rom.6:1, he faced the question of Christian motivation. What motivates us to obey God?

Is it because we just have to, even when we don't feel like it? Because we get things from God? Because we owe God a debt? We can go down a list very much like the one given above. Let's look at how Paul answered the question.

Romans 6:1 What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase? 2 May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it? 3 Or do you now know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death? 4 Therefore we have been buried with him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. 5 For if we have become united with him in the likeness of his death, certainly we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection, 6 knowing this, that our old self was crucified with him, that our body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin; 7 for he who has died is freed from sin. 8 Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him, 9 knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; death no longer is master over him. 10 For the death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life that he lives, he lives to God. 11 Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Questions

1. What are some other ways Paul could have reasoned?
2. In v.2-4, what does Paul say happened at the Cross? Who died there?
3. What is the old self? How did it die?
4. What happened at the Resurrection? Who rose there?
5. Typically we think of only Jesus going through the Cross-Resurrection. Here, Paul says that we participate in it. How does that affect you?
6. Because of the Cross-Resurrection transformation, what do we have? (We have newness of life (v.4), freedom from sin (v.7), and life with God in Christ (v.11).)
7. Can we experience this Resurrection power and identity apart from being ‘in Christ’?

A Hierarchy of Motivational Language

When answering the question, “Why obey God?” here is a range of possible answers, with comments. In order of increasing importance:

1. “Because you should be thankful.”

Surprisingly enough, there is little to no New Testament evidence of thankfulness being used as a motivation for obedience. Thankfulness is a responsibility unto itself, but not a motivation for further obedience. Ironically, the obligation to feel thankful never engenders thankfulness. And thankfulness never engenders enough power to actually empower Christian obedience, so this language not be used in any context.

2. “Because you owe God a debt; don't you know how much God has sacrificed for you?”

The language of debt is often used by those whose parents also used it on them (especially with Asian Americans). And it can be initially effective with people who have been conditioned to respond to this type

of motivation, but it is unhealthy. It defines the cross as only happening to Jesus and not to us within him. This language is not found in the New Testament. It should not be used in any context.

3. “Because you’re far from God right now.”

The language of distance is effective with people who have been conditioned to respond to it via manipulation by others, or people who have not had a sense of closeness and intimacy with authority figures (like parents, coaches, teachers). But this directly conflicts with the language of being ‘in Christ.’ It is true that James in his epistle says, “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you,” but this is not meant as if it were an arduous thing. It is a simple act of prayer, corresponding with the ease of “if any of you lacks wisdom, ask God.” It reflects God’s eagerness to restore relationship with us. Thus, a preacher should not say, “Don’t you know how far from God you are?” Instead, s/he should say, “Don’t you know how NEAR God you are? Jesus lives in you by his Spirit! All you need to do now is yield to him!”

4. “Because God commanded it”.

This is used in the NT, but should be used carefully. Out of my personal experience, I think if commands are used infrequently in conjunction with identity-level motivation (above), it can be very effective.

5. “Because it’s good for you; God means it for your good.”

This is an appeal to self-interest. It is notable that Paul does appeal to self-interest in Romans 6:19-21 when he says, “What benefit did you then derive...?” But this comes after identity-level motivation in Romans 6:1-11 and 6:15-18. Additionally, while the miracles of Jesus and especially John’s presentation of Jesus’ teaching (on abundant life, eternal life) implicitly uses this type of reasoning (“your life could be better”), by itself, however, it does not comprehend the fact that the “you” being addressed has fundamentally changed (cf. Gal.2:20) so as to make identity motivation possible. Appealing to self-interest has some support in New Testament texts, but ignores instances of identity motivation which are numerically greater and have greater weight based on their position in theological argumentation (cf. Rom.6:1-11, 1 Cor.6:18-20). It does not address the core need of people who need to understand union with Christ.

6. “Because it’s good for you and your enjoyment of God testifies to His goodness and glorifies Him.”

This type of motivation is called Christian hedonism and has been developed extensively by John Piper. Most of the strengths and weaknesses associated with Christian hedonism are shared with the simple appeal to self-interest. This appeal pushes one step further than the language above in that it requires us to demonstrate our subjective enjoyment of God and His purposes, not just acknowledge theoretically that God’s ways are for our good. This is both a strength and a weakness. On the one hand, it is true that joy is often lost in contemporary Christianity. On the other hand, suffering and grief are hard to integrate into this framework, and it may cause certain people to fake enjoyment and satisfaction with God because their witness presumably depends on demonstrating these attitudes.

7. “Because it’s who you are in Jesus.”

This is most preferable and should be the most frequently used. Jesus has changed you by entering into you and the purpose of your life is now to be consistent with who you already are. This is identity motivation, similar to an educator telling a struggling student, “It’s not like you to get these bad grades; you’re a smart kid, and you’re not living according to who you are.” This has long been known to be the most effective form of motivation for students in schools. It is a powerful way of speaking that is empowering and yet clear in its expectations. It is also theologically required by a “dying with Jesus, rising with Jesus” view of the cross/resurrection. Christian preachers should use this language the most frequently.

Redeeming the Language of Obligation

| Debt Obligation | Identity Obligation |
|--|---|
| I have to do this because someone else gave me the responsibility | I have to do this because this is who I am in Christ. |
| I have to serve because Jesus died on the cross for me (and I have to try to pay him back) | I have to serve because the same Jesus, who died on the cross to serve me, lives in me to serve others |
| I have to serve because I owe the fellowship | I can serve in the fellowship, but whether I do or not, I must live a life of servanthood because Jesus defines my life. Serving in the fellowship is one good context in which to do this. |
| I have to serve because I can't really say no to all these needs around me. | I have to serve other people as Jesus directs me because Jesus entrusts me with his life |

Some people (typically non-western peoples and perhaps most significantly in the U.S., Asian Americans) feel stuck in debt-obligation and fundamentally misinterpret the Cross. They see it as a transaction between an angry, demanding God and a compliant Jesus that they just look at and benefit from. Therefore Jesus has paid a debt on their behalf and they are in debt to him.

Others (typically individualistic white Protestant Americans) wanting to avoid all language of obligation also have a hard time with the true nature of the Cross, usually because of the same misinterpretation. They view the Cross as simply an exterior transaction which we look upon and benefit from. Thus, the Cross is seen as *interfering* with Christian obedience because it apparently offers forgiveness for all disobedience without properly compelling us into obedience. However, individualistic Protestants also have a hard time with the real implications of union with Christ. They want to preserve the autonomous individual, and thus have a hard time redefining the individual as joined to and recreated in Jesus.

Some sample texts these people will have a hard time dealing with are:

| Sample Texts | Incorrect View | Correct View |
|--|--|--|
| For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion, for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel. For if I do this voluntarily, I have a reward, but if against my will, I have a stewardship entrusted to me. What then is my reward? That, when I preach the gospel, I may offer the gospel without charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel. (1Cor.9:16-18) | (1) God twists my arm using psychological coercion. God has made me a debtor to Him and because I can never pay Him back, He can call the shots totally. | There is joy in my obligation, because I'm obligated to be who I really am, the person in whom Jesus lives. When I preach the gospel, I'm being who I truly am in Christ because it's all about him. And even when I preach the gospel free of charge, I express the life of Jesus in this way, because he gave his rights up for others, and does so through me, too. I am not obligated to do something for which I'm inadequate; I'm obligated to do something for which God makes me adequate. |
| I am under obligation to both Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. (Rom.1:14) | (2) This language doesn't really mean what it says. | |

Identity-obligation is based on a participatory view of the Cross-Resurrection (i.e. the Cross is a doorway into the Resurrection) and appeals to our participation in God's new creation in Jesus and by the Spirit.

Lessons for Staff Work

How do I motivate students to obey Jesus (assuming that I am respecting their boundaries and the uniqueness of their life situation)?

- The language of opportunity and “it’s for your best,” is perfectly acceptable in this framework
- In addition, we can access the language of identity, which is likely to be increasingly effective over the next few years:
 - (Regarding clear cut issues) Listen to Jesus because he defines who you are. He calls the shots.
 - In general, love and sacrificial service are to characterize your life because that’s how Jesus will pour his life out through you. Serving in a particular way in this fellowship may be a great opportunity to let that happen (or it may not be the right opportunity at this time, but the overarching opportunity/responsibility is there).
 - I think you’ll be blessed by attending ____ because it’s one way to learn more about this Jesus who lives in us.
 - You might want to take this opportunity to grow because you’ll learn about and experience more of him in your own life.
 - You might want to (dialogue about injustice, take risks with your time, lead this Bible study, etc.) because it’s a good opportunity for Jesus to express his life through you. Others will feel loved, you’ll probably experience some healing, and you’ll probably get more insight into the way God has uniquely gifted you.

Biblical Images to Use

- John 4:1-42: The vessel; e.g. the thirsty Samaritan woman who needs the Spirit inside her to make her feel whole and complete as a person, and empower her to live a godly life
- John 15:1-8: The branches which must abide in the vine to bear fruit
- 2 Corinthians 4:6-11 and Luke 6:45: The earthen pot holding a valuable treasure