A man once came to me and said, “My marriage is falling apart. My wife says she doesn’t have feelings for me anymore, and my feelings for her are pretty much dead too. I guess it’s over, huh?”

He was startled by my immediate response.

“No, it’s not over. Read the Songs of Solomon and do exactly what it says, and throw in 1 Peter 3:7 for good measure, and you will save your marriage. Not only will you save your marriage, it will become great, far better than what you ever imagined possible.”

“What,” he responded with a tone of incredulity. “Just read those Bible passages and do what they say?”

“Yes, read and obey, dude, read and obey! And all will be well,” I declared with prophet-level confidence.

Still looking skeptical, he said, “But don’t we need some marriage counseling or something?”

“You may need counseling,” I said, “if you are especially stubborn and want to take the long, painful route to repairing your marriage. Good Christian counseling can be an immense blessing and sometimes is the only way forward. But it sounds to me like you have an emergency on your hands, so I’m giving you the shortest and fastest route to heal your relationship with your wife. Counseling takes a long time, meeting after meeting after meeting, with both of you sharing feelings, feelings, feelings, and potentially making one another mad, mad, mad...”
(exaggeration for effect). But if you want to bypass all of that and just git ‘er done, brother, read what the Bible says about marriage and obey.”

“Um,” he said with a hesitant tone of rebellion, “just obey? That sounds to me like mindless legalism.”

“That’s because you’re a spiritual wimp,” I fired back, but with a smile to lighten the blow. “Obedience isn’t legalism, unless you believe God is an arbitrary control freak who hates you. But if you believe God is on your side, a God of tender love who has only your best interest at heart, well, then, in that case, obedience is the most intelligent course you can take.”

**Obedience is not legalism.**

“But we don’t love each other anymore,” he said, as if he knew what he was talking about.

“Well, then,” I explained, “here’s the first act of obedience you should engage in: stop saying that, and never, ever, say it again. Not loving your wife is not an option according to Ephesians 5:25, and according to your marriage vows. So do not express those sentiments, not one more time, ever again. And in their place, begin expressing, on a regular basis, that you love your wife. Tell her, tell yourself, tell your children, your buddies. Talk her up, not down. Tell her how amazing she is, how beautiful she is, how blessed and happy you are to be her husband.”

“But what if it’s not true?” He was trying to wiggle loose.

“If it’s not true, then expressing it will be the first step of obedience in making it true! In fact, let me tell you a secret that has been lost by our feelings-obsessed culture: feelings follow actions wherever actions lead.”

“What?! Really?”

“Yes, really! Guaranteed! Countless couples in our emotionally egocentric culture get divorced because they follow their feelings. But here’s the thing: feelings are often stupid and cannot be trusted. What you can trust is the application of sound principles, which, when applied, produce good feelings.”

“So I’m just suppose to act contrary to my feelings?” He said this as if it was the silliest thing he’d ever heard.

“Yes,” I stated with absolute firmness. “If your feelings are telling you to end your marriage, defy your feelings and call them what they are—stupid, weak, selfish feelings—and act out a different picture.”

“That sounds . . . um . . . crazy.”

“No, what’s crazy is that you would consider ending your marriage because of your feelings. What I’m telling you is that if you really want to heal your marriage, actions are the fastest way to do that. Good, sensitive, beautiful actions toward you wife will literally create a new relational dynamic between the two of you. That’s not crazy, dude, that’s what total sanity looks like.”

But this article isn’t actually about marriage. It’s about the power of obedience to God’s word. Marriage is just one example of many areas of life concerning which God has something to say. My point is that obedient action to the inherently good principles of God’s word will invariably produce positive new realities in a person’s life. If that sounds like “legalism” to you, that’s either because you have a terrible misconception of God’s character or because you need to start at ground zero and be born again.

Obedience is not legalism.
And legalism is most emphatically not obedience.

Obedience is the love-motivated process of acting in accordance with God’s word because you believe that you are living under His favor and that He only has your best interest at heart. Obedience is trust, fueled by love, in action.

Legalism, by contrast, is the anxious effort to earn God’s favor because you believe, at least on an emotional level, that God’s love is conditional and therefore that He holds you at a distance until you prove yourself worthy. It is a form of religious narcissism, a way of keeping self as one’s center while projecting the illusion of serving God.

Once you come to Jesus in response to His love, just as you are, receiving salvation as the free gift of His grace, the instructions in His word look like liberty and feel protective. You’re like, “Wow, Lord, thank You for showing me the principles of life by which I can, by Your empowering grace, repair my broken relationships and flourish in every aspect of life.”

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Obedience, in this relational context, is voluntary, rendered from the heart. Paul says it like this:

> “Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness? But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you”  
> *(Romans 6:16-17, KJV)*

Paul is speaking here to the person who has come to Christ in response to His grace, not to the unbeliever. To those who have not embraced God’s merciful love, the idea of obedience can only feel like externally imposed bondage. But those who know God’s good character as it is revealed in Jesus make themselves voluntarily obedient to the Lord. But note Paul’s specific, qualifying language: “from the heart.” In other worlds, the obedience of the grace-immersed believer springs up from deep inside. It is composed of willing, affectionate faith that is lodged in God’s essential goodness.

There is a direct correlation between obedience and knowing. Jesus put it like this:

> “If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority” *(John 7:17)*.

According to Jesus, doing modifies knowing. One of the great rational fallacies of our scientific age is that knowledge consists of intellectual facts that reside outside of behavioral engagement. Scripture, rather, communicates a more holistic view of knowledge. We do not really come to know anything or anyone by mere objective thinking without subjective doing. In other words, one cannot truly know God by analyzing, contemplating, or intellectualizing data about God. Rather, God can only be known through what we might call experiential knowing, by relational engagement, by full-person interaction. Anything else is at best only knowing about God.
So Jesus basically says, *Do what I’m telling you and you will know, once you are on the inside of the doing, that I am telling you the truth straight from God.*

There are things that can only be understood from the inside. God’s word testifies to its veracity by the effects, the outcomes, the results it produces when its principles are implemented. God’s law looks and feels different from the inside than it does from the outside. Once you embrace its stunning vision of *life as relational integrity*, God’s law feels liberating rather than restricting. Obedience to God’s word places you in a position of commitment to people above and beyond your feelings, and sometimes contrary to them. And then—surprise, surprise—you are acting in the only manner that has the power to create positive feelings between yourself and others.

WHENEVER YOU ARE UNCERTAIN HOW TO PROCEED WITH GOD, THE SAFEST COURSE YOU CAN FOLLOW IS TO ENGAGE IN ACTIVE OBEDIENCE.

In the case of marriage, for example, the concrete commitment of two people to one another is the only framework within which the true nature of love can be understood. If you stand on the outside quibbling about your feelings, love will gradually vanish and your commitment to the relationship will die. But if a married couple remains on the inside of absolute commitment and actively obeys God’s word by engaging in beautiful actions toward one another, they will experience positive results in the form of security, trust and, yes, positive emotional feelings.

Whenever you are uncertain how to proceed with God, the safest course you can follow is to engage in active obedience. Simply do what God says, and things will get better, clarity will come, problems will diminish, and quality of life will increase.

The guy with stupid feelings about his marriage contacted me about a year after our conversation. “I thought my marriage was over,” he testified, “and I thought that what you were telling me was crazy. But you sounded so sure that I thought I should follow your advice and see what might happen. I read the Song of Solomon and other Scriptures about marriage, and I just started treating my wife the way God’s word says I should. And it was amazing to watch her come back alive to me! She was blown away and started treating me differently. And sure enough, just like you said, our feelings for one another started getting better and better, and now it’s like we’re dating again. We just really love each other more than ever.”

I was not at all surprised, because God is good and everything He says in His word is calculated to our present and eternal flourishing.

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