

"RELATIONSHIP PRECEDES RESPONSIBILITY"

(Romans 8:12-17)

(Abraham Kuruvilla)

Preaching for alignment with divine will in the text is not justification oriented; that is, obedience in application can never earn merit toward salvation. Rather, it is sanctification oriented, intended for those already in relationship to God. And, in Scripture, relationship to God is always followed by responsibility. That is, when men and women come into relationship with God, God always gives guidance as to how they should then live—that is, in accordance with the precepts, priorities, and practices of his ideal world, his kingdom, his will. Indeed, such a theme resonates through the Pentateuch. God elected a people; then he required of them obedience to his will. It is notable that the Ten Commandments (responsibility) were prefaced by an announcement of relationship: "I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exod. 20:2). Relationship always precedes responsibility. Yahweh's being the Israelites' God—a relationship inaugurated prior to the giving of the Mosaic law—has significant bearing upon the people's subsequent responsibility to be holy. Yahweh had separated his people to himself as his possession; therefore, they were to be as holy as he was.¹ "First God redeems Israel from Egypt, and then he gives the law, so obedience to the law is a response to God's grace, not an attempt to gain righteousness by works."² In other words, obedience is the response of God's people to his prevenient operations of grace: relationship precedes responsibility. The initiation of the divine-human relationship was entirely a unilateral divine act of love and grace, one that was (and always is) apprehended from the human side by faith alone.³ Thus, God's plan, all along, has been to direct the behavior of those who were already his children. A relationship with God always precedes the responsibility of the people of God to accede to the will of God to be as holy as God.⁴

Therefore, a loving relationship with God should result in the keeping of his commandments, as the New Testament is not hesitant to point out, particularly in Johannine literature: John 14:15, 21; 15:10, 12; 1 John 2:3-5; 3:22-24; 4:21; 5:2-3; and 2 John 6. And it is the role of each pericope of Scripture to portray what the will of God is (the theology of the pericope, what happens in God's ideal world, in his kingdom), so that we, God's children, might be aligned to it in the power of the Spirit to become holy, as God, our Father, is holy.⁵ Pericopal theology thus provides the text's direction for holiness, and the preacher's task is to help God's people discern and apply this theology into the concrete circumstances of their lives.

Their obedience would then be the discharging of their responsibility to reflect their relationship with God. And through this obedience, God is glorified as his people manifest his holiness and image Christ to the world.



¹ See Lev. 19:2-3 ("You shall be holy, for I, Yahweh, your God, am holy. . . . I am Yahweh your God") and the numerous echoes throughout the chapter (and even book) of "I am Yahweh" (19:4,10,12,14,16, 18,25,28,30,31, 32, 34, 36, 37, etc.).

² Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 117-18 (emphasis original).

³ In fact, once the divine-human relationship was established, not even disobedience could sever it, for Scripture itself provided for reconciliation: atonement could be made for falling short of the perfect standard of God. Because of the saving grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, that forgiveness has been applied to all those who believe in his atoning work.

⁴ This is a practical holiness, of course, not a positional holiness (in Christ, positional holiness has been completely accomplished for the child of God).

⁵ This will of God expressed in each pericope is a gracious invitation extended by God to his children, offering them the possibility of living in his way in his ideal world. Yet it should not be forgotten that although it is an invitation that can be refused, repudiation of that gracious call comes with grave consequences. However one conceives of God's invitation, its prescriptive and normative nature should be borne in mind. Hence, the gracious invitation is also a divine demand—not peremptory, not capricious, not tyrannical, but loving, tender, and merciful.