

Obedience 101

Loving God with all your Heart Part 9

Psalm 63:3 8-7-11

Summary: The prodigal's brother is an example of the wrong kind of obedience – even though he did everything his father said to do. We draw near to the Father in fellowship by preference-type obedience (fight desire with desire). The greatest kind of obedience (and the most joy-producing kind) is loving one another.

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Luke 15:11-32 Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. 13 "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. 14 After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. 16 He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. 17 "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! 18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' 20 So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. 21 "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was

dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. 25 "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 27 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' 28 "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. 29 But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' 31 "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

Introduction: The Prodigal Son's Brother

Is there anybody here who has been kind of a Prodigal Son – your story is kind of like his? You strayed for a while then came back? In my lifetime I have heard quite a few people compare themselves to the Prodigal Son. Never once, that I can remember, have I heard someone say, "I'm more like the older brother in that parable." The main purpose of that parable is to expose the sin of the people who are like that older brother. The sad thing is the people who are like the brother usually think they are doing it the right way, and they are proud of the fact that they are not like the Prodigal. But the whole point of the parable is to show that the Prodigal (at the end of the story) is the example of the right way to obey God, and the older brother is an example of the wrong way.

Review

Today is part 9 of our study on loving God. The goal of the whole study is that we might increase our love for God, which comes through delightful, satisfying experiences of His presence. So we are focusing on how to have those. How do you have actual, literal, personal interactions with God?

And we found last week that it is different for the different members of the Trinity. We have fellowship with the Father one way, and with Jesus in a different way, and with the Holy Spirit in another way. From the Father the main thing we receive is love, from the Son we receive mainly grace, and from the Spirit we receive mainly fellowship.

2 Corinthians 13:14 May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

So when we get all this love from God the Father, how can we respond in a way that is an act of fellowship with Him? What is unique about the way we are to interact with the Father as opposed to the Son or the Spirit? Answer: We interact with the Father with a father-child kind of relationship. And there are four basic markers of the way a child love his dad. He loves being around his dad. He trusts his dad. He fears his dad. He obeys his dad. So we have fellowship with God the Father when He expresses His love toward us and we respond by delighting in His presence, trusting in His providence and wisdom and provision, fearing Him, and by obeying Him. And that is where we left off – obedience. Obedience is the most basic responsibility of a child toward his father.

Obedience is Fellowship when it is a Delight in God's Will

That is not to say you are automatically having fellowship with God just because you are doing something He said to do. All those years that the Prodigal was off squandering the father's money on wild partying – what was the older brother doing?

Luke 15:29 But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never

disobeyed your orders.

He did everything his father told him to do. And yet he is the example of the wrong kind of obedience. True obedience is more than just following orders. The only true obedience is obedience that flows out of a certain kind of relationship.

This is another area where people will often reduce their relationship with God down to being like an employer/employee kind of relationship. Why does an employer want his employees to submit to his authority and do what he tells them to do? Because he needs the work to get done. If his employees don't do the work he tells them to do then he is out of business. That is not the reason we obey God. We don't follow His commands because He needs them followed. God does not need us to stay in business. The purpose of God's Law is to reveal His heart. Whenever God gives a law, He is revealing His will - a desire in His heart. And we want to conform to those laws not because God needs our help, but because we love Him, and we desire to conform to His will. The more you love God the more you care about what He cares about. So we conform to the will and desires of our Father so that our heart is close to His heart.

But what do you do when your heart is not close to His? What if He points to something and says, "That's sin - I hate that" and it is something your heart loves? Then what? Just grit your teeth and keep slaving away like the older brother? No - that is not true obedience. The true obedience was when the Prodigal finally decided that he preferred even the lowest place in his father's house over the world.

Obedience through Preference

Psalm 63:3 Your love is better than life

There is not any verse in the whole Bible that has been more helpful to me in fighting against sin in my life and changing desires in my heart than that one. And to understand why, we need to think through all three of the key terms in that verse: **life**, God's **love**, and **better**.

Life

We will start with **life**. The emphasis of that word is not biological life. He is talking about all that makes up human life (eating and drinking, houses and possessions, money and work, family and friends, vacations and recreation - all the various parts of life) - and especially the best parts. The reason I say "especially the best parts" is he is drawing a comparison designed to glorify God. He is obviously not saying, "God, Your love is so amazing it's better than the crummy parts of life - it's even better than getting the flu." He is making a statement about the incalculable value of God's love. So the point is that God's love is better than life at its best. It is better than food, better than fun, better than riches, better than sex, or fishing or skiing or fifty-yard-line Superbowl seats, or getting promoted, or getting married, or having kids.

And this verse is true for every person in the world, which means God's love is better than any part of *anyone's* life. That means God's love is better than standing on stage with thousands of fans screaming your name. It is better than a private jet, or ruling the world or anything else any human being has ever experienced in this world. "God's love is better than life" means it is better than all the best things in everyone's life.

God's Love

So that is the word "life" - now let's look at the word "love." The Hebrew word is HESED, which refers to God's gracious disposition toward His people that grants access into His presence.

Psalm 5:7 But I, by your great love (HESED), will come into your house

Experience – not fact

Probably the easiest mistake to make here would be to think this is talking about the mere fact of God's love. It is not the fact of God's love that is better than life – it is the experience of it. If you look at the context of Psalm 63 you can see that this love is something David does not have in verse 1 but he did have in verse 2. The fact of God's love is always the same, but our participation in it varies from day to day – and the thing that David is saying is better than life at its best is the actual experience of God's love. That is what David is seeking.

God sometimes withdraws (and not always for sin)

Last week we found that the word for “presence” and the word “face” are the same word in the Hebrew. You experience God's presence only when He turns His face toward you. When He turns His face away, that cuts you off from access to joy. And do not think of that as always being a sign of His displeasure. God may temporarily turn His face away from you for the same reason He did it with Job – to expose the genuineness of your faith for His glory. Or He might do it to expose a weakness in your faith that needs to be exposed. He might withdraw His presence for the purpose of increasing your thirst for Him. So don't think that just because you are going through a desert that God is displeased with you. Sin does provoke God to turn His face away, but He does it for other reasons as well.

Sometimes a desert has to do with our seeking the wrong way

And I will also add this – don't think that just because you are not finding joy in Him that it means He has turned His face away or withdrawn His presence. There are times when His presence is right there, and sweet fellowship with Him is available, but we fail to experience it because of the way we are seeking it.

1. Inattention

Usually it is just simply inattention. Sometimes God draws near to you and expresses His love for you by enabling you to enjoy some earthly pleasure, but you miss the potential experience of His presence because all your attention is on that earthly pleasure rather than on the fact that your ability to enjoy it is a gesture of God's love for you.

2. Ignorance

Another possible reason is ignorance. If you have been taught superstitious mysticism you will be looking for the wrong thing, and if you have been taught dead orthodoxy you won't be looking for it at all. So you may fail to experience His love just because of ignorance about how it is experienced.

3. Self-Pity

A third culprit is self-pity. We can get caught up in self-pity over some hardship that we are blind to God's goodness. Self-pity refuses to see anything good – including God's love. Remember the 5 to 1 rule – think five thoughts about God for every one thought about yourself.

4. Lack of wholeheartedness in seeking His presence

A fourth possibility when you are in a desert is it could be a lack of earnestness in your seeking Him. God will not dishonor His name by allowing Himself to be found by halfhearted seekers. If we put forth a lame, halfhearted effort, it will not work.

5. Unbelief

A fifth problem is unbelief. We do not really believe what He has said about forgiveness of sins,

so we wallow in guilt and regret all the time. Or we don't really believe what he says about how much he delights in the saints, and so we fail to delight in the saints. Or we don't trust His promise to take care of us, or we don't believe what He says about the importance of ministry, or we don't really believe His promises about reward. Anything that the Bible says, that you don't believe (or are unaware of) – that can hinder your ability to experience His presence. So there are a lot of possible explanations for why we do not experience His presence even when it is available.

Better

OK, so with that background on what David means by God's **love** and **life**, the term **better** explodes with meaning. The direct experience of God's favor that grants access into His presence is to be preferred above the absolute best anyone's life has to offer. So, if someone asks you, "Would you like an all-expense paid, three-week vacation to your favorite place in the world?," if you thought like David, your answer would be, "Sure - if the vacation will turn out to be a direct experience of God's favor. But if not then no – I don't want any part of it!" If you actually believe God's love is better than life at its best, then obviously you would rather have an experience of God's love than anything life has to offer – if it were a choice between the two. If you had a choice between the most spectacular activity in the world without the direct experience of God's favor, or sitting in a freezing cold dungeon with rats and snakes but with the direct experience of God's favor - if you truly believe that God's love is better than anything in life, you would choose the dungeon. And you would choose that not just because it is the right thing to do, but because it would actually be more enjoyable to you and more fulfilling. It would bring more joy, more comfort, and more satisfaction to your heart than the dream vacation without the favor of God. That is why there are billionaires who commit suicide and martyrs who have been singing with tears of joy while being burned at the stake. An experience of God's love is better than life at its best.

How this helps with temptation

So you can see how this will help with fighting temptation. The reason certain sins have such an incredibly powerful pull on our hearts... – is because our souls are convinced that we can get more satisfaction from that sin than from following God's way. Your head knows that isn't true, but your soul – that part of you that is in charge of desires and cravings – thinks it is true. And when that is the case, you can resist for a while, but not for long. Unless you can do something to reverse the inclination of your soul toward that sin, you will never have lasting victory. Think of a person who has been enslaved by alcohol and is now trying to quit. For years he has been getting drunk a couple times a week, and now he resolves not to get drunk anymore. On Monday he gets slammed with the temptation fifty times. He is so strong in his resolve, and so disciplined and has such strong willpower that he manages to resist that powerful temptation forty-nine straight times. But on the fiftieth he finally caves in and gets drunk. The next day he is tempted one hundred times. And he resists every single one. Same thing on Wednesday and Thursday. On Friday he is tempted one hundred times again, and he resists ninety-nine of them, but caves in once. He is exhibiting incredible willpower – resisting more than ninety-nine percent of the temptations. But it is not doing any good. He is getting drunk twice a week.

More Desire, not Less

And he can talk to himself all day long about the harmful effects of getting drunk, but it is not going to do any good because even if he succeeds in somehow reducing his desire for alcohol, if there isn't something your soul sees as a better alternative – you will keep choosing that sin. There are people who cannot stop biting their finger nails. Is that because they are getting intense sensations of pleasure from it? No. They get the tiniest amount of pleasure from it, yet they cannot stop because even though their desire to do it is very small, it is still bigger than their desire to do anything else

when they are bored – so they still cannot resist. Unless there is something else you desire more, then you will chose the most desirable option even if it is barely desirable.

However, if your desire for some sin is really, really, super-powerful, but there is something else that you desire even more, then it is easy to resist that sin. The way to take the power out of a temptation is by finding something you desire more. If you have a box of cookies in the house and you are constantly tempted to eat them, the solution is easy – buy a box of better-tasting cookies. Then you won't be tempted at all with that first box.

And if you question whether this is the way God wants us to fight against temptation, just remind yourself of the fact that God is constantly offering us rewards as motivations for following His way. The fact that God uses reward to motivate us – and the staggering size and magnitude of those rewards – shows that God wants us to be driven by strong desires. The goal is not to reduce your desire for the wrong way; it is to increase your desire for the right way. C.S. Lewis said , “We are ... like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in the slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by an offer of a holiday at sea. We are far too easily pleased.”¹

Two Banquets

We have seen throughout this study that the longings and cravings of the soul are called hunger and thirst in Scripture. And in Proverbs 9, folly sets up a big banquet and calls out to everyone, “Come and feast!” How do you resist that? The key to resisting it is in the first half of the chapter, where he uses the exact same terms to describe another banquet – wisdom's banquet. And wisdom is also calling out to everyone, “Come and feast!” God does not want you to go without eating. He created you with a voracious appetite, and He expects you to feast. The only question is which banquet table are you going to prefer? It is all about preference. So many people think the Christian life is all about saying “no” to the feast. But if you try that, you might be able to say no ninety-nine times in a row, but you will eventually cave in.

God does not want you to deny your soul satisfaction and fullness and pleasure. He wants you to sit down and chow down. So here is how you pray for victory over sin:

Psalm 141:4 Let not my heart be drawn to what is evil ... may I not eat of their delicacies.

Psalm 36:8 [Those who take refuge in You] feast on the abundance of Your house; You give them to drink from Your river of delights.

Preference glorifies God

Even if you had so much self-control that you could stand in front of the world's feast and resist indefinitely without caving in, how would that honor God? How does it glorify God if you just say “no” to some sin? That glorifies no one but you. You do not honor a chef by fasting. You honor a chef by preferring his food over other food. Every time you prefer God to something else, You show Him to be greater than that other thing – and that is the heart of worship; showing the greatness and excellence and desirability of God. So the more appealing a sin is the more ability you have to glorify God by preferring Him over that thing. If I have a choice between playing a video game or hanging out with you, and I prefer to hang out with you, that shows you to be a somewhat desirable person. You are at least better than a video game. But what if the choice is between hanging out with you and going on a Caribbean cruise? If I prefer you at that point, that really says a lot about what a wonderful person you are. But if I just say “no” to a cruise and then stay home, that does not say anything about you at all. It does not honor you unless my reason for saying “no” is because I prefer being with you. We glorify God when we prefer God. And when we prefer money, or TV, or leisure, or pornography – whatever we prefer, we glorify those things as the highest treasure.

1 C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), 25-6.

Imagine you have a son. You love him with all your heart. And in your neighborhood there is a gang of delinquents who spend all their time destroying things and terrorizing people – and one day your son is out in the front yard and that gang comes along and tries to get him to join them. So you go out there and call your son to come to you. And those boys say, “No – forget about your dad. Come with us.” Your son looks at you, looks you right in the eye, then turns without saying a word and walks off with those boys. He has done more than just make a bad decision about his future. He has done something to his relationship with you. He has shown that the company and approval of those boys means more to him than your company and your approval. That is what we do to God the Father whenever we choose to sin – every time. But when we truly obey, we honor God because it is a turning of our back to that gang and toward our Father, and that shows Him to be our great treasure.

Christ is a Treasure

It all boils down to how much you treasure the God.

Matthew 13:44 **The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.**

What drove him to sell everything he had? Self-control? Commitment? No, it was joy. He wanted that treasure so much more than he wanted all his possessions, he could not wait to unload all his stuff to get it.

Preferring and Despising

So fight desire with desire. The key to overcoming sin is preferring – preferring nearness to God over the pleasure of sin. And the good news and bad news about preferring is this - each time you are presented with a choice, and you genuinely prefer one option over the other that has the effect of causing the heart to despise the rejected option.

Matthew 6:24 **No one can serve two masters ... he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.**

You cannot hold on to both because the more you prefer one, the more that makes your heart begin to despise the other one. To despise does not mean to hate. It means to think little of, or to regard as small or unimportant. When you choose something over God that makes that thing big in your heart, and it also makes God smaller and less important in your heart. That is one of the problems with deciding to sin and just thinking, “It is OK – I’ll just repent later and ask forgiveness.” That does not work because even if you do repent later, some serious damage is done. God is now smaller and less important in your affections and that sin is bigger and more delightful in your affections. So now all temptation is going to be harder for you to resist, and finding joy in God is going to be that much farther from your grasp.

That is the bad news. But that same principle is also great news, because each time you prefer God over evil (and when I say “prefer” I don’t just mean you chose Him. I mean you chose Him because you actually desire His presence more than you desire that sin) every time you do that it actually trains your heart to despise that evil, so it becomes smaller in your affections. So use all temptation as an opportunity for this special kind of fellowship with the Father, where instead of just saying “no” to the sin, you say, “God, I want You more than I want that.”

The Greatest Kind of Obedience: Loving His Children

That is the right kind of obedience. That will bring you into His presence and will generate joy in your life – every single time you obey in that way – no matter what particular command you are

obeying. However, there is one command that God gave that stands out among all the others. There is one particular act of obedience that enables greater fellowship with God than any other. No other kind of obedience pleases Him more. What is it? Well, out of all the things God ever created, which does He care about the most? The Church. The thing God loves the most in all His creation is His children. So the command that will bring you closer to God than any other is the command that you love His children – your brothers and sisters in Christ.

The Prodigal's older brother thought he had obeyed his father so perfectly, and yet he was 180 degrees away from his father's will in his attitude. That is the main point of the parable. Jesus told that parable to show those grumbling Pharisees in verse 2 that they are like that older brother – with an attitude the exact opposite of the heart of God. They grumble while all of heaven is rejoicing, and it is all because they don't love repentant sinners.

You cannot love God without caring about what He cares about, and He cares about His children. If I want to come over to your house to spend some time with you, but I call you up first and say, "Make sure your kids aren't there, because I really just can't stand them" – I don't think our friendship is going to be going anywhere.

Connected to the First Commandment

This is why when the guy in Matthew 22 asked Jesus which was the #1 commandment, Jesus answered by giving him #1 and #2. He did not ask for #2, but Jesus had to give both because loving God and loving the people God loves are connected so inseparably that you absolutely cannot have one without the other. The person who claims to love God but cannot get along with Christians is a liar. People in the church will hurt you, disappoint you, stab you in the back – and that is a terrible thing. However if that is all you can see, and your disappointment makes you blind to the work of the Holy Spirit in the saints so you see nothing but our failures – you are despising the work of the Holy Spirit.

How to Increase Your Love for People

Love People because God Loves Them

So how do we obey this command? How do you increase the love in your heart toward all of us – or toward that one person you find so hard to love? Or toward your spouse, or your kids? How do you increase love?

The most obvious way is to consider God's love for them. Think about how dear that person is to God. Think about the joy God has in them, and the grief He feels when they suffer. Think about the Cross. Think about the price Jesus was willing to pay to purchase that person. How valuable is that person to the Father – how valuable would someone have to be for you to be willing to give up your only son to die a horrible death for them? When the people were insisting on carrying out their freedoms even if it caused a brother spiritual harm Paul said:

Romans 14:15 Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.

When pastors were tempted with laziness Paul said:

Acts 20:28 Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.

Increase your love for people by giving more thought to the price Jesus was willing to pay to purchase those people.

Their love for God

And don't just think about God's love for them. Think also about their love for God. In Romans 14 Paul has a chapter all about how to love those people in the church who rub you the wrong way in the way they worship God. How do you love people like that?

Romans 14:6 He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.

They are trying to honor Christ! You might disagree about whether their way really is the best way to honor Christ, but still – isn't it a delightful thing to you that they at least have that motive? This evil world ignores and blasphemes God every day. They mock Him, joke about Him, use Him as a curse word, blow Him off – and that bothers us. So when we finally run into someone who desires to honor the Lord Jesus Christ – even if they are a little mixed up on the best way to do it – doesn't the fact that they want to honor Jesus make you love them? If not, it means your love for God either does not exist or it is on life support.

Enemy Love

“But what if the person isn't a Christian?”

Most of what Scripture says about loving others has to do with loving other believers. That is definitely the emphasis. However, we are to have some love even for unbelievers. We do not love them as much as we love believers, because God does not love them as much. But He does love them, so if we love Him we will love them. Jesus even commanded that we love our enemies and persecutors (Mt.5:44).

So what kind of love are we supposed to have for our enemies? Like any word, the word “love” can be used in various ways, some of which emphasize one particular aspect of the word's semantic range over others. Passages that speak of love alongside terms such as “from the heart,” “compassion,” “deeply;” or with family images (such as “nursing mother,” or “compassionate father”) – those kinds of references emphasize the emotional aspect. And that is what you see in the passages that talk about loving one another in the Church. But you do not see that kind of emphasis in the texts that call for love of enemies. The focus of those passages is more on acts of kindness. In Luke 6, for example, Jesus begins by commanding love for enemies and then expands on what he means with other descriptions:

Luke 6:27-28 Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.

So the emphasis there is on doing good, blessing, and praying for them. However, it would be going too far to suggest that emotion has no part at all. If Jesus wanted to communicate the idea of action devoid of emotion He could have said, “do good...bless...pray for” without using the emotional term “love.” The examples of enemy love in Scripture involve emotion. In Psalm 35 David's enemies mistreated him in horrible ways, but then when they got sick David begged God to heal them. And when God would not heal them David bowed his head in grief as though weeping for his own mother. That is emotion. When Saul died, David lamented with deep sorrow. Jesus was moved with compassion for His murderers while they were murdering Him.

So yes – the emphasis with enemy love is more on the actions and deeds; however there is still an emotional component. Even persecutors of Christians were made in the image of God, and if we love God, that image will mean something to us. And not only does God love unbelievers, he strongly desires that they be loved by his people. That is why He offers rewards to those who love their enemies. You offer rewards for that which you desire – so this is something God desires. He likes it.

He enjoys seeing unbelievers receiving love from His people, and knowing that God enjoys that should motivate our hearts to love unbelievers.

And of all the emotions involved in love, the one that rises to the top when it comes to loving unbelievers is not so much desire for their company, or delight in their character, but rather compassion. When you think about the fact that they are going to face God's fearsome wrath, it should draw out a response of compassion.

Conclusion

People debate about which Psalms are actually Messianic psalms – psalms that are prophecies about the Messiah who would someday come. But one psalm we know for sure is about the Messiah is Psalm 16. We know that because Peter quotes it in Acts 2, and then says this:

Acts 2:30 David...was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. 31 Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay.

So Psalm 16 is about the Son of God – the Messiah. Listen to the heart of the Messiah as He speaks to His Father in this psalm:

Psalms 16:2 I said to the Lord, "You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing." 3 As for the saints who are in the land, they are the glorious ones in whom is all my delight. ... 11 You have made known to me the path of life; fullness of joy is in your presence, perpetual pleasures are at your right hand.

Look to the Father as your only good – the only source of joy. Then take delight in the holy ones who are so precious to Him. And you will have access to perpetual pleasure and fullness of joy as you draw near to the Father in fellowship.

Benediction: 2 Corinthians 13:14 May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.