

Mother’s Day is the perfect time to talk about family resemblances. And when you talk about family resemblances, you’re talking about physical appearances, but you’re also talking about mannerisms and things that you say just like mom did. What’s really interesting is when people pick up mannerisms and language from someone you’re not related to, like a close friend. Sometimes, you can identify with a friend so strongly that you unconsciously imitate each other.

Jesus and his disciple John had that kind of friendship. That is reflected in John calling himself “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” It is reflected in John taking Jesus’ mother Mary into his home at the time of Jesus’ crucifixion. And it is reflected in the writings that John left to the Church. The close relationship between John and Jesus is evident in the way John says things. You can hear Jesus in it. When you compare the epistle lesson with the gospel lesson for today, it’s as if the same person is talking. It sounds like John has absorbed Jesus’ teachings to the point that he speaks with his Master’s mannerisms. So it should not shock us too much to learn that what John says is challenging, uncompromising, and truthful, just like Jesus. The resemblance is striking.

Just like Jesus, John links love for God with obedience to his commandments. That sounds simple, but if you take it seriously, it’s pretty provocative. John says, “If you really love God, you’ll obey him.” And he goes on to say that “his commandments are not burdensome.” You might be thinking to yourself, “Oh really? Not burdensome? God’s command to always love and forgive—not burdensome? God’s command to love others as we do ourselves—not burdensome? Does John know what he’s talking about?”

Well, don’t forget, he was perhaps Jesus’ closest friend. And therein lies the key to understanding the link between love and obedience. Like the apostle John, you and I are invited into friendship with Almighty God. If we think of obeying God’s commands in some kind of impersonal way, then we will always be hit with the Law. That is to say: commands are rules, and by nature, we break rules. By nature, we resent anyone who tells us what to do. We will, however, on occasion, listen to a trusted friend. We will listen to the perspective of someone whom we know really cares. This is what Jesus is saying to you in the words of John 15.

He says, “I consider you my friend. I’m not some faceless deity in the sky ordering you around, trying to make your life miserable. I am your friend who loves you. Jesus defines for us the greatest test of friendship: “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” Think of some of your best friends—the people you love spending time with—the people you have shared so much with—the people you can be yourself around. Now ask yourself—would you die for them? Sometimes people do just that.

Consider the life and death of Marine Corporal Jason Dunham. In April 2004, while leading a patrol of his Marines in an Iraqi town near the Syrian border, a nearby Marine convoy was ambushed. Corporal Dunham led his squad to the site of the attack, where he and his men stopped a convoy of cars that were trying to make an escape. As he moved to search one of the

vehicles, an insurgent jumped out and grabbed the Corporal by the throat. The Corporal engaged the enemy in hand-to-hand combat. At one point he shouted to his fellow Marines, "Watch his hand." Moments later, a grenade rolled out. Corporal Dunham did not hesitate; he jumped on the grenade to protect his fellow Marines, using his helmet and his body to absorb the blast.

A friend who was there that day put it this way: "Corporal Dunham had a gift from God. Everyone who came in contact with him wanted to be like him. He was the toughest Marine, but the nicest guy. He would do anything for you. Corporal Dunham was the kind of person everybody wants as their best friend." Despite surviving the initial blast and being given the best of medical care, Corporal Dunham ultimately succumbed to his wounds. And by giving his own life, Corporal Dunham saved the lives of two of his men.

Jesus would call that the ultimate expression of friendship. You may see where I'm going with this. Jesus can call you his friend because he laid down his life for you. He's proven his friendship to you in the most extreme way possible. Because of our inability to love and obey, we deserve the blast. That's not going to happen now, thanks to a Friend who loves so fully that he would voluntarily take the impact himself. He laid down on the cross beam for you. That is friendship. That is love. He did it to claim you as his friend forever. I've had great friends throughout my life, and they've been very good to me, but they've never done that. They didn't suffer what I should have suffered. They didn't die what should have been my death. Only Jesus did that. Only Jesus could. What a friend we have in Him!

And since He has done this for us; since He calls us friends, that changes the whole way we look at the idea of obedience.

Think again of someone you consider a close friend, if not your best friend. If they ask you to do something, how will you generally respond? Most of the time, you will do whatever you can to help a friend. Even if it means shuffling your schedule and sacrificing personal time, you'll do it precisely because that person is your friend. You do it, not out of fear or obligation, but because of a bond of love and friendship.

Since Jesus demonstrated His friendship by laying down His life for us, we, in turn, can call Him our Friend. More than that, the Holy Spirit enables us to treat Him as our Friend. That means we can come at the concept of obedience not in some detached way, but our response is wrapped up in friendship with the One who paid for our sins with His death! In other words, because Jesus has extended to you his nail-scarred hand of friendship, you can live His way, with Him, not out of fear or obligation, but because of a bond of love—because He is Friend and Savior to us.

As John writes, "His commandments are not burdensome." Now we can see why. Friendship with Jesus transforms "ought to" into "want to" and "got to" into "get to," because we know how far He is willing to go to help us.

Chances are you've never heard of Mike Dunlap, who was an assistant basketball coach at the University of Oregon. We don't have time to re-cap his career, but there's a comment about him that is worth mentioning, that applies to what we're talking about. Dunlap's former

athletic director says this about him: “He’s very demanding of his players, but he would run through a wall for them and they know that. So they run through walls for him.”

Jesus ran through a wall for you. He did far more than that. He actually went through hell, so that, when he was done, he could call you His friend. Where does this friend belong in your life?