

## Freely chosen obligation

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Few biblical concepts are more important and less known than the Hebrew meaning of *hesed*. We have no English equivalent. It is often translated as "love" or "kindness," but the actual meaning goes deeper than that.

*Hesed* implies a covenant relationship. That means that two or more people are bound to each other by some mutually agreed-upon responsibilities: "You do this for me and I will do that for you."

The most common covenant relationship in our culture is marriage. Each party vows to do specific loving things for the other for the rest of their lives. In some sense, just signing a work contract is also a covenant. One party promises to work so many hours, the other promises to pay the worker the agreed-upon wage.



Biblical Israelites conceived of the relationship with God as a unique covenant. Yahweh promised to do specific things for them and they promised to do certain things for Yahweh. Exodus 19-24 describes the covenant the Israelites entered into with Yahweh at Mount Sinai. Both parties have their responsibilities checked off. But it is important to note that though these six chapters stress the obligations between them, Exodus 20:6 says something that goes way beyond obligation. Yahweh promises to "bestow *hesed* down to the thousandth generation on the children of those who love me and keep my commandments." Over and above the terms of the agreement, Yahweh also commits to freely bestow *hesed*.

*Hesed* within a covenant goes beyond obligation, is something the other person can't demand of us. Yet, if we withhold it, our covenant will start to wither away. *Hesed* invites us to do something freely in the midst of fulfilling obligations we are no longer free to ignore.

One of the challenges entering a covenant becomes apparent when we realize that we have surrendered some of our freedom. We have gotten ourselves obligated to another person, often exclusively, for the rest of our lives. When any relationship starts to feel like a burden, we can fall into the pattern of just doing enough to maintain the agreement, nothing more. Eventually we even begin to hedge on some of our real responsibilities, especially if we are offered more exciting alternatives. That's when the full meaning of *hesed* ideally kicks in.

Paul reminds his readers that one of the perks of being an imitator of the risen Jesus is the freedom it offers. Matthew agrees. Examples of this freedom are clearly outlined in the Sermon on the Mount. The whole thing is

based on *hesed*.

Several examples are part of our Gospel passage. Disciples have their freedom limited. Matthew's Jesus teaches them how to overcome the coercion by doing something totally free, something the oppressor did not expect or require. The disciple of Jesus turns the other cheek and goes the extra mile.

With good reason, Jesus tells his followers, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." How can we imitate God? By practicing *hesed*. It is part of the freedom God has made available to us.

Paul also believes that we can reflect some of God's attitudes, but he uses a different metaphor to describe it. He reminds the community in Corinth that they are not only God's temple, but that the Spirit of God dwells in them. Therefore, God's frame of mind ought to be our frame of mind. A Christian brings God's holiness, or otherness, with them wherever they are or whatever they do. And though we might not know exactly how God would act, we get a hint by exercising the freedom God's disciples have integrated into their lives.

Christians commonly believe that Jesus was the first one to say, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The saying predates Jesus and Christianity by at least 10 centuries. What Jesus did was to broaden the idea of neighbor to include everyone, even our enemies.

If we at times find our faith burdensome, it could be because we have never taken it as far as Jesus invites us in living our faith. Only when we go beyond the level of our responsibilities do we discover how freeing and exciting our faith in the risen Jesus can be. A faith that does not practice *hesed* is not the faith of Jesus. Long before we get to heaven we can experience God's loving kindness, and Jesus is eager to show us how.

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