

What Does God Expect of Me?

By Marilyn Adamson

If you are like many Christians, you want to please God with your life. At the same time, in all honesty, sometimes you get tired trying to live the Christian life. Sometimes it just feels like it's way too much pressure.



When I was an atheist, sin was never an issue to me. I wasn't particularly aware of it. I didn't really experience guilt. But when I became a Christian....whoa. I found out there were things I was doing that God did not want in my life. I also became aware of the need to love others, to read the Bible, to pray, to witness, to disciple others, etc. And at times I thought, "It was way easier being an atheist." Now that I knew God, I felt a tremendous sense of responsibility to please him with my life. I would read the Bible, read a command, and it seemed that verse after verse I could honestly say, "Yep, good idea. I need to do that more."

Fortunately God taught me something in Scripture that totally freed me from this highly responsible, performance mind-set, so that I could see God again and deeply enjoy my relationship with him. There is a huge principle in Scripture that is throughout Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, 1&2 Corinthians...it's all over the place.

Here it is: God does not demand perfection in you. God is not expecting you to measure up. God never thought that you could live the Christian life, nor does he expect that you could actually meet his holy standards. If he thought that you could, he wouldn't have come to earth to die for you. But he did.

Jesus said to the crowds, "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." So, it is true that God's laws, his commands, require perfection. And if we were to be accepted by God based on living up to his commands, we would have to be perfect. No wonder Jesus came to save us from the penalty of our sins!

God is aware of the gap between his perfection and your sinfulness. Even as Christians, there is a constant tension within us to try to close that gap, so that we feel more comfortable, so that we feel closer to God. Some will try to close the gap by trying to lower God's standards: "God doesn't really mean..." Others will try to close the gap by trying to raise their performance: "I'll try harder..."

What does God say about this gap? It's there and it will always be there. But you, who have put your faith in Jesus, received him into your life, have been forgiven, declared righteous, precious in his eyes, held in his hand of care. You are completely his and he loves you unconditionally, in spite of the gap.

"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand."¹

It is likely however that you will come to a point in your life where you begin to think that surely God must now want some repayment.

The purpose of this article is to keep you from falling into the trap of feeling like you must now perform for God. Scripture cautions against this, because it will rob you of the joy of knowing Christ.

So, let's take a serious look at what God says about your relationship with him. Let's look at the ground rules, what he says about relating to him.

How you became a Christian

When you became a Christian, look at the weight of responsibility God carried in that process vs. your effort:

- God chose you before the foundation of the world and called you to be his.²
- God came to earth for you.³
- God personally died for your sins.⁴
- God made sure someone explained the gospel to you.⁵
- God offered to come into your life.⁶
- God gave you the desire to know him and respond to him.⁷
- You turned to him and received him.
- God entered your life, declared you righteous and forgiven, and called you his own.⁸

You became a Christian by simply responding to God in faith. That is the same way he wants you to live the Christian life...by simply responding to God in faith. The weight of responsibility (and ability) stays with God. You may be thinking, "That seems simple enough. What's the big deal?" The problem is that almost every Christian gets tripped up on this at one time or another. Why?

It is human nature to think that you owe God for what he has given you. It is also human nature to think that now that you know the Bible a little, now that you know a little bit about prayer, or now that you may understand a little about talking to others about God...now it's time to take on the responsibility of being a "good Christian." There is nothing that will more quickly zap your joy in knowing God.

And if, on your own, you don't come to this erroneous conclusion that you must now perform for God, then other Christians, unfortunately, are very good at making you feel a measure of guilt, pressure and expectation to obey God better. This article (hopefully) will give you an understanding from Scripture about how to live the Christian life without beginning to feel a weight of false expectations to perform for God. It will show you how deeply God loves you and how he wants you to relate to him.

God has not set up your relationship with him as contingent upon you, but rather contingent upon himself. Let me illustrate from these verses:

How are we acceptable to God?

You were declared forgiven by his grace (his kindness), because of Jesus' death for you. You received his gift of forgiveness by believing that Jesus has paid for your sin, right? You didn't earn your forgiveness. You simply believed God when he says he has forgiven you.

"...when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy."⁹
"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us..."¹⁰

Ok, now that you are a Christian, do the rules change? Does God now have a long list of expectations for you? No. Now you may think, "Wait a minute. The Bible is FULL of commands. You can't read a paragraph without being told what to do." That is true. But while God gives you commands, he also tells you that you can't fully obey them. In fact, he tells you that the harder you concentrate on trying to obey them, the more that you will see your sin.¹¹ Also, the harder you try, the more you might feel like a failure, deserving of God's judgment and condemnation, and thus the more distant you will feel from God.

The apostle Paul talks about this frustration that he also felt. He looked at God's law and said, "The commandment is holy, righteous and good." Yet as much as he tried to live according to it, he kept on sinning. He said, "I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out...the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing."¹² In complete frustration he says, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" His solution? "Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!"¹³

The feelings of failure, sin, condemnation need to be faced with Scripture. "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."¹⁴ "For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!"¹⁵

So when you look at God's commands, don't attempt to obey them on your own effort...but instead ask God, who lives inside of you, to produce that in you. If God says to love each other, he doesn't intend for you to march off with enthusiastic responsibility and show God how loving you can be. Instead he wants you to depend on him, "God, I ask you to live in my heart and cause me to see this person as you do, and put love in my heart for this person in the same way that you love them. I cannot love them on my own, but ask that your great love would be produced in my life for them."

What is the difference?

It is the difference between independently trying to perform for God, verses depending on God and relying on him to live through you. We do not mature into independence from God. We mature only by remaining dependent upon him, and that's the way he wants it. He wants you to enjoy the freedom and love of being in relationship with him, trusting him, depending upon him. He is not expecting you to perform for him.

The Bible refers to God's commands as "the law." Now that you are a Christian, you are no longer under the law or under God's judgment and condemnation – instead you have forgiveness and eternal life. You have been set free from the law's demands.

Paul said, we "know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified."¹⁶

How much does Paul focus on God's commands and trying to fulfill them? "...I died to the law so that I might live for God...I have been crucified with Christ...Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"¹⁷

Before you received Jesus, you were distant from God, able to only know God's commands, and you were under God's judgment. But now you know Christ and his Spirit lives within you.

God says, "I will put my laws in their hearts and I will write them on their minds." And in the same place he says, "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more."¹⁸ So, instead of the law being outside you, hovering over you with its demands, God has placed his law within your heart, and as the Holy Spirit changes you, he gives you an increasing desire to do what pleases him. Over time, as you grow in your relationship with God, he will continue to build in you the desire and capacity to live a holy life before him.

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."¹⁹

God has a plan for your life, to use your life to benefit others and for his glory. Your relationship is now with God, with his life living in you, producing good works in you.

What to do with sin?

Now let me pose this question: What if you ask him to produce something in your life or to free you from a particular sin, and you still struggle? What if you still see your bad temper or you still see yourself giving into temptation, or you see yourself failing to pray or read your Bible like you think you should? Then what? Would that be the time to begin taking on the responsibility of the Christian life and give it your full effort? No. The moment you begin to try to perform for God, the more you will see your failure, the more you will distance yourself from God, and the less joy you will have in knowing him.

It is easy for a Christian to think that God rewards effort, because that is how our entire society is set up...be responsible, work hard, give it your best effort...and you will be rewarded. A Christian can look at the commands in the Bible and think, "Yes, if I try hard enough I can do this." And they are headed for a lot of frustration,

because the Bible says that focusing on the law brings only one thing...an awareness of your sin. God has not set up your relationship with him as effort & reward. He has set it up that instead, he wants you to trust him to produce in your life what pleases him.

As long as you live on this earth you are going to sin. You will never be perfect in this life. Not only do you know that, but God knows that. As you recognize sin in your life, confess it, and believe what he promises you:

"If we confess our sin, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."²⁰

Be patient in letting God change you

Focus on getting to know God. Pursue knowing him better through prayer, reading the Bible, being in fellowship and teaching with other Christians...all of that is good. But your faith is not to rest in your effort, but instead in God's ability to work in your life. Jesus said it's like grapes on a vine. Jesus is the main vine and he said we are like the branches. "Remain (or abide) in me and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me."²¹

Jesus went on to say, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love."²²

What about Jesus saying "obey my commands"?

The right way to live, the way that you will experience a more abundant life as Jesus talked about, and become more easily convinced of his love for you is by doing what he says. Jesus said, "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."²³ He wants you to live according to what he says is right and experience his love and have joy as a Christian. But the way that you obey his commands is by relying on him as you approach those commands.

So when I see a verse in the Bible where God says, "Do this....", I immediately say to God, "Good idea. I want my life to please you and I ask you to build that into my life through your Spirit. Give me the ability to obey you in this way. God, I am headed for disaster if I think I could obey this on my own. But I ask you to change my thinking or work in my life whatever way you need to, that my life would line up with this verse." And then I don't worry about it. I might write out that verse and learn it, think about it, maybe even memorize it. But my faith to do it remains in God.

He has freed you from the demands of the law, and welcomes you to rest in him, dependent upon him...where you can fully enjoy the intimacy of knowing him.

"So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God."²⁴

"We have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit..."²⁵

"Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes."²⁶

"And to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness..."²⁷

1. Romans 5:1,2
2. Ephesians 1:4; 2 Timothy 1:9
3. John 3:16
4. Romans 5:8
5. Ephesians 1:13
6. Revelation 3:20; John 1:12,13
7. Revelation 3:20
8. I John 3:1; Colossians 1:13,14; Ephesians 1:4; John 1:12
9. Titus 3:3-7
10. Ephesians 1:7
11. Romans 3:20
12. Romans 7:18,19
13. Romans 7:24,25
14. Romans 8:1
15. Romans 5:8-10
16. Galatians 2:16
17. Galatians 2:19-21
18. Hebrews 10:16,17
19. Ephesians 2:8,9
20. 1 John 1:9
21. John 15:4
22. John 15:9
23. John 15:10,11
24. Romans 7:4
25. Romans 7:6
26. Romans 10:4
27. Romans 4:5