

“This book is exactly what Christians like me need, who both see our inadequacies and God’s tall orders. Jonty Allcock offers a pathway of grace-fuelled obedience—a pastoral word to the tired, discouraged, lazy and indifferent. God’s people need this word, and God has raised up this pastor and this book to be that word.”

DANIEL DARLING, Vice President, Communications, Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, Southern Baptist Convention

“This is one of those unusual Christian books that speaks with the earthy voice of the practical pastor and—at the same time—with the careful tones of the skilled theologian. So much good and meaty theology informs the realistic practicality! I hope this book will prove widely useful.”

CHRISTOPHER ASH, Writer in Residence, Tyndale House, Cambridge

“Here is an encouraging and digestible book about obedience! The biblical path to obedience is plainly laid out, with the necessary first step: “I can’t”. But what a blessing to consider the subsequent steps that in fact lead us to obey: “I’m sorry”, “Please help”, and “Let’s go”. I’m grateful for this call to follow the Lord Jesus with joyful obedience.”

KATHLEEN NIELSON, Author, Speaker

“Jonty Allcock is one of the most engaging gospel communicators in the UK today. This uplifting and challenging book will liberate believers from the despair and frustration of feeling that God asks us to do the impossible. While God does give us humanly ‘impossible’ commands, the glorious good news is that he makes it possible for us to obey them! If you want your life to be transformed from crushing and dutiful legalism to heartfelt longing to obey, then read this book.”

JOHN STEVENS, National Director, Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches (FIEC)

“This practical, biblically-grounded book will encourage prayerful obedience to the Lord Jesus. Jonty writes not only realistically but also engagingly of wholehearted Christian discipleship. *Impossible Commands* will do us good!”

WILLIAM TAYLOR, Rector, St Helen’s Church, London

“Jonty Allcock helpfully shows us all that God’s commands are serious, but the power to obey those commands is ever present. I was challenged, encouraged and strengthened.”

COURTNEY REISSIG, Author, *Glory in the Ordinary*

“Joy and obedience should be natural partners in the Christian life, but too many of us have driven a wedge between them. Here Jonty helpfully reunites them with clear diagnoses and biblical remedies. He is realistic about the battles Christians face but optimistic about what, in the power of the Spirit, Christians can hope for. This book is encouraging, practical, helpful and important.”

ADRIAN REYNOLDS, Associate National Director, FIEC

“*Impossible Commands* is dynamite. Reading this book made me reflect again on the amazing reality of the Christian’s union with Christ and the powerful indwelling of the Holy Spirit. I’ll read it again with new believers and older ones too, especially those who, like me, get stuck in spiritual ruts.”

SARAH ALLEN, Hope Church, Huddersfield

“With illustrated clarity, pastoral warmth and heart-searching persuasiveness, Jonty Allcock unpacks how disciples of Jesus should think about the impossible commands of God. Every disciple will identify with the struggles described in this book; every disciple, however long they have been following Jesus, will find help and hope in this book.”

JONATHAN PRIME, Associate National Director (Pastoral Ministries), FIEC

“A deeply hopeful book that is nonetheless grounded in the gritty reality of our continuing battle against sin. Easy to read, biblically faithful and refreshingly practical, this book will help many to walk a journey of change with God.”

JOHN RISBRIDGER, Minister and Team Leader, Above Bar Church
Southampton; Chair of Council, Evangelical Alliance

“Writing with the same thrilling clarity as in his preaching, Jonty offers us a fresh and exciting perspective upon the apparently impossible commands of God, giving us real hope of experiencing the joy of obedience that Christians long for. I thoroughly recommend this book!”

RICHARD COEKIN, Director, Co-Mission; Senior Pastor, Dundonald Church,
SW London

IMPOSSIBLE COMMANDS



HOW TO OBEY GOD WHEN IT
SEEMS THAT YOU CAN'T

Impossible Commands

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Introduction: An impossible dream?

Imagine a life where obeying God was a source of deep and satisfying joy. Imagine a life where obedience was not a burden, but instead became the desire and longing of our hearts.

Does that sound like an impossible dream?

It might surprise you to know that this is the sort of life the Bible encourages us to pursue. God sets before us a life of joyful (not miserable) obedience. That's why you find people saying things like this to the Lord:

*Your statutes are wonderful;
therefore I obey them.* (Psalm 119 v 129)

Obedience is driven by a joyful wonder at the goodness of God's commands. The writer of this psalm doesn't obey because he has to. He obeys because he wants to.

But I'm probably not alone in finding that my experience of obedience is not often like that.

Yes, I know that I'm supposed to obey God—but that's where it ends. It's something I'm *supposed* to do.

Like taking regular exercise, eating healthy food and going to the dentist.

I know I should do those things, but they're not high on my “things-that-bring-me-joy” list. I try to avoid them. I put them off as long as possible. And when guilt gets the better of me, I do the bare minimum required. So I find excuses, or I redefine the rules so that “healthy food” means drinking Diet Coke instead of Regular, and only eating cake on days with a “y” in their name.

Many Christians live their lives feeling they should obey God, so they try to obey God but find it impossible. That either leaves us feeling crushed and guilty or we work hard at excuses and at redefining the rules to avoid that nagging guilt.

You probably don't need me to tell you that this is a profoundly unjoyful way of life. We can quickly get ourselves into a mindset where we define ourselves as “failing” in the area of obeying God. We can be pretty pessimistic and negative about ourselves. God's commands just make us feel bad.

This book is about obedience—but not that sort of obedience.

I want to invite you to rethink why we obey and how we obey. It would be great to be asking God to move

obedience from the category labelled “supposed to” and transfer it to the category labelled “want to”, and from “can’t” to “will”.

That is what we need. Not simply a change in our behaviour but a change in our desires.

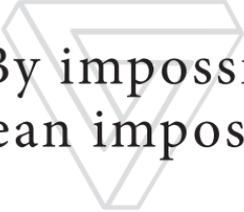
We’re going to see that obedience really matters. It’s no good shrugging our shoulders and using God’s grace as an excuse to ignore the reality of sin. God saves us for obedience. But we have to know what sort of obedience he has saved us for.

Imagine you’re working on a ship. You’re slaving away in the engine room, where it’s hot and the diesel fumes fill your lungs. The pounding of machinery fills your ears and drowns out every other sound. You can hardly breathe and feel yourself suffocating.

Isn’t that what obedience to God can often feel like?

It doesn’t have to be that way. I want to invite you to leave the engine room and head up to the deck. We need to take a deep breath and fill our lungs with the beautiful grace of God. Breathe in his love and forgiveness. Fix your gaze on Jesus, the One who died to pay for our disobedience. Feel his mercy and approval.

There is a way to obey God’s commands and enjoy it. And it starts with realising that when you think those commands sound impossible, you’re right—they are impossible.



1. By impossible, I mean impossible

There are some things in life that are hard. It would be hard to fit a camel in the back of a medium-sized family car. It would take some effort, a bit of sweat and a whole lot of determination. But I reckon it could be done. I confess I've never tried, but it's not out of the question.

That's not what this book is about. We're not talking about something that is hard.

A camel through the eye of a needle? That's a whole different ball game. It's well beyond the reach not just of reality but also the wildest stretch of human imagination. Even the most optimistic and enthusiastic camel contortionist is not going to attempt that one.

That is what this book is about. We're talking about something that is absolutely and utterly impossible. Completely beyond the reach of human ability. I know it sounds strange, but if we're ever going to find joy in our

obedience, it really does start here. Obedience to God's commands is impossible for us.

In Mark chapter 10, Jesus used this dramatic image to help his disciples understand what it meant to follow him. He said:

*It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle
than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of
God.* (Mark 10 v 25)

Jesus wasn't just saying it's hard: he was saying it's impossible. Until we face up to this impossibility, we will be stuck in an endless cycle of effort, sweat, determination and disappointment.

Yes, we can

There is something in us that doesn't like to be told that things are impossible. We live in a "can-do" culture with a whole generation that have grown up being told they can do whatever they want.

Numerous voices tell us constantly that there is no such thing as "impossible". You can do whatever you want to do, and you can be whatever you want to be. I went to a primary-school assembly a few years ago to watch one of my children sing. The whole class sang beautifully, with beaming faces.

With eager hearts they told us that they could do anything—absolutely anything—just so long as they believed in themselves.

This is the culture we're living in. On the surface it seems positive and lovely, but in reality it's devastating. It simply is not true. When we fail, it is our fault. After all, we had the power—we just should have believed more.

We have all heard the Olympic athlete who has just won gold saying something like, "This proves that anyone can do anything if they just believe".

But, of course, it doesn't prove that. For the one winner, there are hundreds who have failed. Hundreds who have dedicated their lives to pursuing the Olympic dream and have fallen short.

And many of us approach the Christian life with exactly this mindset. We think that we should be able to obey God's commands if we just try hard enough.

So we spend our lives trying to shove the metaphorical camel in the back of the metaphorical car—and feeling euphoric when we make some progress and worthless when the hump is still sticking out the window.

We think we can do it. We're told we can do it. We know we're supposed to be able to do it. If we aren't able to do it, there is something wrong with us. So we all pretend we are doing it when deep down we know we aren't.

That is the madness of our lives. It is the slavery of the impossible.

No, we can't

Only Jesus can break this endless cycle. He is far more blunt with us. When it comes to God and his kingdom, we can't "do it". We just can't. No matter how much we try and how hard we push, the camel won't go through the eye of that needle. We convince ourselves it must be possible; we think that perhaps we are the exception. We aren't.

We imagine that if we just try a bit harder, we can obey God, please God and enter his kingdom.

But we can't.

"Impossible" is a word that must be part of our Christian vocabulary. I'm not talking about a defeatist, small-minded negativity. I'm talking about a realistic and resolute honesty. And here is why this matters so much: *it's only when you embrace the impossibility that you are standing right on the very edge of true freedom.*

After Jesus has explained that it is impossible for us, do you know what he says next? Jesus does not say that it is impossible—and therefore you might as well give up trying. He does not say that impossibility leads to defeat. Instead, he utters these deeply profound and magnificent words:

With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God. (Mark 10 v 27)



“Honestly facing up to the
impossibility of my own
obedience leads me not to
despair but to the God who is
able to do all things.”



I M P O S S I B L E
C O M M A N D S

There it is: there is the true freedom of what it means to be a Christian. Honestly facing up to the impossibility of my own obedience leads me not to despair but to the God who is able to do all things.

That is true for getting started on the Christian life, and it is true for every act of obedience we take in following Jesus. Many of our problems in living for Jesus stem from the root problem that we think we can do it. We think that we have the power within us. We set about trying to push the camel. In this book we're going to see that understanding the impossibility is the first step to obedience.

A man who thinks he can

Let's back up a bit and see what has led up to Jesus using such a striking image.

It starts with a man. Mark doesn't tell us any more than that at the start of the story. In verse 17 he simply introduces us to "a man".

As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

(Mark 10 v 17)

The man gets a couple of things very right.

He wants to know what he needs to do to be part of God's great kingdom. It's good that he's bothered about God's kingdom—he can see that it really matters. God

is bringing all things in this world together under his appointed King, Jesus. That is God's plan for the world, and this anonymous man wants to know how to get in on it.

And it is good that he comes to Jesus. Clearly he has understood that there is something about Jesus that is significant.

The man cares about the right thing. He comes to the right place.

But this man has got one thing very wrong. He wants to know what he has to do. He has a high view of his own ability. He has a lot of confidence in his power to obey.

So that is where Jesus starts.

“Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honour your father and mother.’”

(Mark 10 v 18-19)

Jesus points the man to God as the ultimate standard of good and begins to list the commandments. The man is completely unperturbed by all this.

Teacher ... all these I have kept since I was a boy.

(Mark 10 v 20)

He is oozing self-righteousness. What a staggering claim to make. He has worked hard; he has kept the rules; he has tried his best. It all looks good.

But Jesus sees things differently.

Love

The next sentence is key. Here it is: *Jesus looked at him and loved him.*

This is the only man in the whole of Mark's Gospel that we are explicitly told that Jesus loved. That's striking because of what the love of Jesus looks like in this story.

Jesus loves this man too much to allow him to continue in his self-deluded little world of sweat, hard work and determination. He is not willing to stroke the man's ego and tell him how wonderful he is. Instead, Jesus issues a command.

It isn't hard to understand what Jesus is saying. He isn't being vague and unspecific. But this one command undermines the whole foundation that the man has built his life on. Here's the command:

"One thing you lack," [Jesus] said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." (v 21)

There is no room for negotiation or confusion. Here is what Jesus requires of this man. He must sell everything.