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# HOW TO BEGIN WITH INDICATIVE-IMPERATIVE

A Simple Introduction to a  
Home-Changing Principle



# **How to Begin With the Indicative-Imperative Principle**

*A simple introduction to a home-changing principle*

## How to Begin With the Indicative-Imperative Principle

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*And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*  
– John 17:3

*The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.*  
– 1 Timothy 1:5

These verses indicate that it would be a mistake to reduce the Christian life down to mere obedience. The Christian life is really about enjoying God and walking in loving relationship with him (John 17:3). God has demonstrated himself as a loving, gracious, and merciful father, not a harsh task master. Our love for and enjoyment of God is the fertile ground out of which true God-glorifying obedience flows (John 14:15). I think we have gotten that backwards. Many have been turned off to Christianity as a result.

Key Bible figures such as King David, John, Paul, and Peter demonstrate in technicolor who God is and God's unsurpassed love for his people. His love shown in his works from Genesis to Revelation and most especially in Jesus Christ's accomplishment for us is something so awesome and compelling, that it literally changes a person. God's love is what changes us, not our selfishly motivated attempts at obedience.

God's people doing the right things but out of the wrong heart has been a problem throughout history. God is concerned about our hearts! He is concerned that we love him. His love melts our hearts and our wills to want to glorify him.

God is so good! He has made a way for us to glorify him out of love that is a genuine joy to us. *Do we really believe that?* How God's love compels us to obedience is the subject of this resource. This is extremely important to us as individuals first, but just as much as parents. What are we passing on to your children if it is not a genuine love for God that compels growth and service?

### **What is The Indicative-Imperative Principle?**

Throughout the Bible\*, but most especially in the Apostle Paul's writings, we see something theologians call, "The Indicative-Imperative Principle". It is not mentioned as such in the Bible. While it is known in the seminary, tragically, it is little known in many homes. But this is an extremely important principle to understand because it puts God's love to work for us.

The term itself might sound complicated, but it is really quite simple. The indicative i-n-d-i-c-a-t-e-s who we are because of who God is and what he has done for us. The imperative tells us how God wants us to live. God designed the two to work together. Here's how:

Because I am in Jesus Christ (the indicative), I can live obediently for him (imperative). Said another way, who I am in Christ (the indicative) is the basis and strength out of which I live obediently (imperative).

The order is extremely important. The indicative always precedes the imperative, not the other way around. As parents, we can unwittingly teach the reverse when our focus is on teaching right and wrong apart from a captivating view of God. When this happens, we get the wrong picture of God.

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### Why is it Important?

A person who has entered into a relationship with God will want to glorify him in how they live each day. To do that, we have to be concerned about the reason why we want to obey him.

We tend to think of our self-willed obedience as the way we grow in Christ and earn his love and blessings. Not surprisingly, when we face trials, challenges, and our sin; we can wrongly assume that God is angry because our performance was not up to his standard. This attitude actually drives us away from God. It does not create in us a desire to repent and turn from our sin.

This is not the way God designed his relationship with us to work!

God designed our relationship with him to work in a special way; a way that depends on his love and not our own performance. To be clear: what we do is still very important but we cannot depend on it to do what Jesus has already done! Jesus has already earned everything for us and gives it to us—free.

He is not glorified when we think our good performance earns his love, blessings, or avoids his displeasure. Wrongly motivated obedience does not honor God (Isaiah 29:13, Matt. 15:8).

His love is what makes our obedience possible.

This is why identity is so important. The many riches found in our new identity in Christ are gifts from God that express the depth and richness of his love for us (Eph. 1:3, 3:18-19). We respond to that love through joyful, obedient living.

The Westminster Confession of Faith, Shorter Catechism, Question #1 asks: “What is the chief end of man? Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” God’s glory and our joy are not separate ends, but one in the same end.

The Indicative-Imperative Principle helps us remember that God’s call to obey is always rooted in what he in love has already done for us. This means that we can walk with him freely, for his glory, out of joy because our relationship with him is already established and assured in Christ.

While younger children may not fully grasp the principle, we all learn together. We grow at different paces but we do grow as we pursue Christ together. As we study the Word of God together as a family and begin to see this prolific design in scripture, younger children catch on. When we are conscious of this principle in our study of the word and the joy it produces begins to take root in our hearts, the Holy Spirit will use it to equip us and our children for effective service.

**\* Note:** The principle is most clear in the New Testament, particularly the Epistles, but it is also illustrated in the Old Testament as well. *God has dealt and continues to deal with his people the same way. Our obedience should be in joyful response to who he is and what he has already done.* For example, the Psalms are chocked full of statements about the greatness of God and his mighty acts. This knowledge causes the Psalmist to respond in praise and obedience. When we begin to see this principle at work in the scriptures, the scriptures come alive to us in new ways that create real joy and a desire to glorify God.

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Let's look at this principle in scripture.

### Simple Examples of the Indicative-Imperative Principle in The Bible

#### **WE OBEY BECAUSE WE ARE FREE**

*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me... - Exodus 20:2-3ff*

Indicative – We are rescued from slavery to sin

Imperative – We shall have no other gods before him (and the rest of the 10 C's)

#### **WE LOVE BECAUSE HE LOVED US**

*Beloved, if God so love us, we also ought to love one another. – 1 John 4:11*

Indicative – As God has love us

Imperative – Love one another

**NOTE:** We do not love others because they deserve it or because we want them to like us in return. Neither of those glorify God. There is only one reason powerful enough and that glorifies God by which we can truly love another person (because to love means we must endure with them when its hard!) and that reason is that God has loved us first.

#### **WE FORGIVE BECAUSE HE FORGAVE US**

*Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. – Ephesians 4:32*

Indicative – As God in Christ forgave you

Imperative – Forgive one another

**CONSIDER** how often we try to forgive our spouse, child, sibling, friend or co-worker just because “the Bible says so” without giving any thought to the fact that God loves us and forgave our own, greater debts against him. Our sin against God is far greater than any sin anyone can sin against us.

#### **WE PUT SINS TO DEATH BECAUSE WE HAVE DIED AND BEEN RAISED WITH CHRIST**

*If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death therefore what is earthly in you... - Colossians 3:1-5*

Indicative – You have been raised with Christ, You have died and your life is hidden with Christ

Imperative – Seek/set your minds on the things above. Put to death what is earthly

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### ***WE PRESS ON (GROW) IN YOUR FAITH BECAUSE CHRIST MADE US HIS***

*Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. – Philippians 3:12*

Indicative – Because Jesus has made me his own

Imperative – I press on

### **Family Practice – Applying the Indicative-Imperative Principle at Home**

Following are some passages that you can study on your own, with your spouse, or even with your children.

#### **1. TRAINING CHILDREN**

*Read Deuteronomy 6:4-9 (Imperative)*

- *What specific directions did God give Israel for how they were to train their children?*
- *What do these directions tell us about the scope of our calling as parents?*

*Read Deuteronomy 6:20-23 (Indicative)*

- *What are the things God had done for the people of Israel so that they could fulfill the commands of 6:4-9?*
- *What is the central theme of what God has done?*

**CONSIDER** how often you as a parent have heard someone talk for an hour about some practical aspect of child-training (backed-up with imperative scripture!) only to never talk about what God has done (indicative) to give you the joy and strength to make it possible? Many leave such a meeting with a heavy weight, or with an inflated sense of what *they* can do. Often, parents are left to define their “why” in terms of meeting the expectations of other people, making sure their children succeed, or avoiding the failures associated with youth. God spends time, giving us solid reasons why we should obey him.

*Read Ephesians 6:4*

- There are two imperative commands in this verse. One is negative. The other is positive. What are they?

*Read Ephesians 1:3-23*

- How many indicatives can you find in these verses?
- How often have you read or thought of Ephesians 6:4 and tried to do it without any thought given to what God has done so we can do it? Can you remember how those attempts worked out? How did you approach the “doing”?
- In what ways can a parent’s weak understanding of the indicative lead to exasperated children?

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- Is there more to what we are to instruct our children in than just the do's and don'ts?
- 1 John 5:4 tells us that our victory is our faith. How does the indicative emphasize the importance of faith? If it was just about doing what's right, what role would faith play?
- Both the indicative and imperative are important. But given your own experience, what do you need to spend more time paying attention to in the word?

### **2. CHILDREN OBEYING THEIR PARENTS**

- Ephesians 6:1-2 are favorite verses of parents everywhere! Don't we love to quote them to our kids, *especially* when they have done wrong? In fact, those two verses are probably among the first verses we have them memorize. What has normally been their response in the moment to such reminders?
- Learning what is right and wrong is not that hard to a child. No question, we need to teach the dos and don'ts. Yet, when we catch them doing right or wrong, what is our first response? With frustration, we might say something like, "Didn't you know I told you not to do that? The Bible says..." What are we missing as parents?!
- The truly hard part and the area we need to work on is the "want to" to make the right choice. How does attention to the indicative help us help our children make the right choices? Which usually needs more emphasis in our parenting work, the indicative or the imperative?
- Read Ephesians 1-3. Select identity statements (indicatives) that specifically address the heart of each of your children to help them honor and obey (6:1-2).
- How aware are your children of the powerful resources God has given them for obedience provided in chapters 1-3? How might an understanding of the context (Chapters 1-3) change their attitude towards obedience and honor?

### **3. HUSBANDS LOVING/WIVES SUBMITTING and FATHERS NOT EXASPERATING THEIR CHILDREN**

- *Marriage is addressed right before the parent/child relationship in Ephesians. But the indicatives are the same.*
- *Our roles as spouses and parents are different but require the same resources. How does this actually help simplify our spiritual focus in our homes? How does it make Bible time as a family something that everyone can benefit from?*

#### **Helpful Reminder**

Context! Context! Context! When faced with a scripture that you do not understand, the first thing you do is step back and look at the larger context, including verses immediately before or after, whole sections, and chapters, even.

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If you are still not finding clarity, find other scriptures on the same topic or tangential to it to compare. This is called contextual interpretation. Allow what is clear to help interpret what is unclear. This rule applies to our efforts to keep the indicative-imperative together.

With the indicative-imperative, you may have to zoom out to find each part of the indicative or imperative.

Remember that the Bible contains several genres of literature. Some of the books are history, law, poetry, narrative, prophecy, gospels, or Epistles. You still find this principle illustrated, perhaps not as clearly or directly as in the New Testament, but it is there. The whole of the Bible is God's revelation of himself and his mighty acts to redeem his chosen people through his Son, Jesus Christ.

### **Marinating Effect**

We need to pay much closer attention to the indicative in scripture. The indicative is where we see God for who he is and how he has so powerfully equipped us to live joyful lives for him.

2 Corinthians 3:18 says that we are transformed as we focus on Christ. The Greek work here for transformed is the same word from which we get the word, metamorphosis. While effort is required in our transformation, the real power and the change itself is the work of the Holy Spirit as he melts and reshapes our hearts with the precious gospel indicatives. This change process usually occurs as a result of our taking time to focus on, or as we like to say, marinate, in these gospel truths. It changes the disposition of our hearts toward God in a way that we are increasingly motivated by God's love that gives us joy and power to seek to confess sin, repent, and live obediently to him.

Check out step three of the four step process we at Home In Him use to help families. In Step Three, we talk about four patterns in home life that will help you and your family marinate in these gospel truths!

### **Final Word**

*From him [Christ] as from a fountain, sanctification flows into the souls of the Saints: their sanctification comes not so much from their struggling, and endeavors, and vows, and resolutions, as it comes flowing to them from their union with him.* —Jeremiah Burroughs (1599-1646)

### **Resources for Further Study on the Indicative-Imperative**

#### **Books:**

NOTE: None of the following books are an exclusive treatment of the principle but they do address it in the context of the change we seek in the Christian walk. In some cases, the book does not even use the term but you will see the concepts put to use by these authors.

*Holiness by Grace* by Brian Chapell

*Gospel Parenting* by Paul Tripp

*The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification* by Walter Marshall

*Redemption Accomplished and Applied* by John Murray

*How Does Sanctification Work?* By David Powlison



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*Real Hope for Your Home* by Eric Wallace

### Articles:

*The Imperative-Indicative Balance* by Brain Chapell  
[www.9marks.org/article/the-imperative-indicative-balance/](http://www.9marks.org/article/the-imperative-indicative-balance/)

*The Indicative and The Imperative A Reformation View of Sanctification* by Michael S. Horton  
[www.monergism.com/indicative-and-imperative-reformation-view-sanctification](http://www.monergism.com/indicative-and-imperative-reformation-view-sanctification)

*The Imperative Follows The Indicative* by Len Joson  
<https://lenjoson.com/the-imperative-follows-the-indicative/>

*Indicative and Imperative* by Herman Ridderbos  
[www.monergism.com/indicative-and-imperative-herman-ridderbos](http://www.monergism.com/indicative-and-imperative-herman-ridderbos)

*Imperatives—Indicatives=Impossibilities* by Justin Taylor  
[www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/imperatives-indicatives-impossibilities/](http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/imperatives-indicatives-impossibilities/)