



Obedience:

The Key That Opens All Doors

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Obedience is not a positive word these days. For some it seems cold and harsh. For others it carries overtones of legalism in religion or control in other venues. Perhaps for all of us it challenges our inherent drive toward autonomy and the individualistic bent that pervades our culture. As Americans we do not want anyone telling us what to do—not even God.

But how many of us have stopped to think that our wariness of obedience may be keeping us from one of the great keys to the enjoyment of God and the transformation of our lives? Are we aware that the Bible and the saints throughout history affirm the insight of John Calvin that “all true knowledge of God is born out of obedience”?

The High Cost of Disobedience

It takes only a moment’s reflection to realize that the cost of disobedience has been high. The world as we know it is not the good world God originally created, nor do we human beings much resemble the image of God in which we were first made. Tragically that image has been shattered, and the world is filled with sin, sorrow, and suffering. The “break” began with one act of disobedience by our first parents. By a deliberate choice, rooted in pride and unbelief, they acted in defiance of God’s revealed will. And their self-centered drive for autonomy has passed down to every human being. Perhaps Woody Allen spoke for us all when he famously said, “The heart wants what it wants.”

With our own hands, we forged the chains that bind us, and we now lack the power to free ourselves from them. We want to do what we want to do and cannot es-

cape. Our only hope lies outside ourselves, in the One who loves us and gave himself up for us.

The Blessings of Obedience

When we grasp an understanding of the blessings of obedience, we find them utterly astounding. Because of his great love, God has made a way for us to be reconciled to him and freed from our bondage to sin and self. Our predicament can be reversed if we will forsake our rebellion and return to him. And this is now possible because God has sent his only Son to rescue us. Jesus came to earth and lived a life of perfect submission and obedience to the Father’s will. The supreme expression of his obedience was submitting to the shameful, humiliating, and excruciating death of crucifixion, which was also the supreme expression of his love for the Father (John 14:31). In this act of self-sacrificing love, he “who knew no sin” became sin for us “so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). His perfect obedience to God’s law as God’s loving and faithful Son can now be imputed to us, and our disobedience can be laid upon him, setting us right with God, if we choose it.

Our freedom begins when we respond to the love of God as it meets us in Jesus’ call to repent and believe the gospel (Mark 1:15). In Greek, these two verbs are in the imperative mood and thus are commands to be obeyed. They summon us to turn from the disobedience of unbelief to the obedience of faith (Rom.



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1:5). And the gift of faith makes this possible for us. Confident trust in Jesus and his message gives us life, turns us around, frees us, and sets in motion a great reversal in our lives.

This transforming reversal progresses as we follow Jesus Christ, who says, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). Following Jesus means taking steps forward in what might be called “the obedience of faith”—moving steadily away from our former areas of disobedience and back into the will of God. The power to do this comes from the Holy Spirit, whose work it is to conform us to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:13, 29). Though there will be times when we disobey, there is forgiveness as we repent and return to the Lord. This process of discipleship or sanctification, which restores the image of God in us, takes a lifetime and is completed only in the world to come. But we can make great progress in this world, which should be our highest priority.

The Key to Obedience

C.S. Lewis said, “Obedience is the key that opens every door.” But how do we obey without falling into legalism? Through love. Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). Just as Jesus’ love for the Father was expressed in his obedience, so our love for Jesus is expressed in our obedience (John 14:31; 15:9-10). Ours is not the obedience of one who seeks to justify himself before God but the obedience of one who, in grateful love, seeks to please him “who loved us and gave himself up for us” (Eph. 5:2; Gal. 2:20). Thus we may speak of “the obedience of love.” As with faith, the source of this love is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Sonship, who draws us to the Father’s love. And Jesus has promised his help: “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth” (John 14:16). To the one who, by the Spirit, embraces the obedience of love, Jesus goes on to say, “I will love him and manifest myself to him” (14:21), and, “My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (14:23). Thus, as John Stott once said, “the test of love is obedience and the reward of love is the self-manifestation of Christ.” This promise of personal intimacy with the Father and the Son enabled by the Spirit takes us to the very heart of the trinitarian life, a life of grace that is free from law. A life in which we joyfully will to do the will of God and to please him in all things.

This is the heritage of all who have come to a living faith in Jesus Christ. If we would enjoy the fullness of this life, let us embrace the obedience of faith and love and daily seek to walk by the Holy Spirit, through whom all these blessings come (Gal. 5:16–25). And in prayerful meditation upon Jesus’ words, let us ask the Spirit to teach us and transform us more and more into his image.

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