

The Discipline of Obedience

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"And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him" (Heb. 5:9). "And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him" (Acts 5:32). "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him" (John 14:23). "Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, as in your ignorance; but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, 'Be holy, for I am holy'" (I Peter 1:13-16).

Obedience is a word that may seem very dry to us. Our first response may be, "I know I should obey." But somehow, by the mercy and grace of Jesus, obedience must be lifted in our vision to a place of sweetness and strength. We must see the value obedience has in God's eyes, and see what takes place in our lives as we obey. Many times, we are waiting for God to do something that He will never do. God is faithful to do His part, but He does not do what we must do, and one of those things He has called us to do is to obey. In Jesus Christ, we have the ability to obey His word to our hearts.

As we have already seen in the scriptures above, the fruit of obedience is rich. The price of disobedience is also very high. *"Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief" (Heb. 3:17-19). "For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His. Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall after the same example of disobedience" (Heb. 4:10,11). "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience" (Eph. 5:6).* We do not want to concentrate on the negative, but only to see that the end of disobedience is separation from God and eternal judgment. God has made a way that we can be set free from every hindrance that keeps us from God, and in that place of liberty we find joy in doing the will of God from the heart. Let our hearts be encouraged to know that Jesus has made the way for us to be obedient sons, pleasing our heavenly Father.

Liberty to Obey God - A Beginning Place

Before considering some of the more specific ways obedience works in our lives, let us review the foundation. We must see clearly that God has brought us into a place of freedom where we can obey Him. Before our union with Christ by the Spirit, we all found ourselves in a state of spiritual death, unable to please God. We had no ability to meet the requirements of a holy God. We agreed that the law of God was holy and just, but no matter how hard we tried, we found that we could not control our own hearts. Romans 7 is Paul's commentary on his experience before he came to God. His cry was, *"Who shall deliver me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:24).*

We may question this, since God gave the law. Why would He give the law if man could not obey the law? I believe that there are at least three aspects to the law which may help to answer our questions. First, there was the civil law which controlled the outward actions of Israel. The law could judge and condemn a murderer. Men could obey that part of the law. Fear of the penalty of the law provided a restraint. Obedience to the law purged the outward expression of sin and lawlessness from the society

and restrained its "leavening" influence.

A natural man with proper training can be a good citizen of this world. He can be taught to respect the laws of the land. This is the meaning of the scripture that says: *"Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it"* (Prov. 22:6). Although this is proper, and every child should be so taught, this is not the righteousness that God requires. It was the righteousness that was possible under the law, but it falls short of dealing with the heart of man which is sinful. If this were the righteousness that pleases God, then Christ died in vain.

Secondly, there was the ceremonial aspect of the law. By this we mean all of the law that pertained to the tabernacle, the sacrifices, the temple, and the priesthood. All of this could be obeyed, because it dealt with outward actions. All of these parts of the law were types that pointed to Christ. Men who obeyed these laws as unto the Lord pleased God as much as they were able to without the life of God. The "heroes" of the Old Covenant such as King David and the prophets went as far as they could, but actions that were approved of by God at that time cannot even be imagined in the New Covenant. David was called a man after God's own heart, yet God also called him a man of blood, and for this reason did not allow him to build the temple. Can we imagine a prophet today taking up a sword and cutting off a man's head? We mention these things only to remind us how far away from the purpose of God men under the law really were.

Finally, there were the statements of God's heart in the law, possibly summarized in what is known as the Ten Commandments. Although many of these had outward expressions that could be judged, they also pointed to the heart of man. It is here that man begins to fall short. Man apart from God can be restrained from committing physical adultery, but the lust in his heart cannot be controlled. Up until the time of Christ, man was not judged by the law for what lay within his heart. But when Jesus came, he put outward and inward on the same level. *"You have heard that it was said, to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart"* (Matt. 5:27,28). Here is where man's inability is revealed. The law "Do not covet" only awakened the sinful heart, and in Paul's words, *"I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died"* (Rom. 7:9). Thus we see that this aspect of the law only revealed man's inability to meet the demands of a holy God, and left him condemned. This is important, however, for why does man need a savior if he is alive and doing very well in his own eyes?

When Paul said that concerning the righteousness which is by the law, he was blameless (Phil. 3:6), I believe he was speaking of the first two areas above, the civil and ceremonial aspects of the law. But when he said "that which he wanted to do he did not find the power to do," he was referring to the weakness of the flesh to affect the matters of his heart, before he came to Christ (Rom. 7:19). When we speak now of obedience, we are referring to these areas of the heart, for this is what God is after. If the heart is changed, then obedience flows from a pure heart.

When we are given a new heart and are united with Christ by the Spirit through new birth, then we have entered into what Paul describes in Romans 8. *"For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit"* (Rom. 8:2-4).

What then is the meaning of all of this to us? It means that although in ages past God overlooked some of the ignorance of men (Acts 17:30), He does not do so today. Christ has come and opened the door to

life. Men today are not judged by their right or wrong actions but on their relationship with Christ. We no longer have an excuse, and we cannot say, "I just can't obey." In Christ Jesus, God has brought us into a place of liberty. We have been freed from all that held us in bondage. We have been freed from the law (Rom. 7:6) and from the body of death (Rom. 6:6). We have been set free from that which made us sinners, namely death. We have been brought into life where we can be led by the Spirit and do the will of God from the heart. We have new hearts, on which God is writing His commandments by the Spirit.

Christ did what we could not do. He raised us from spiritual death to walk in newness of life. It is a place of glorious liberty! We are free from sin, death, and the law. We are no longer held captive; we are now free to obey God and do His will. Because of what God has done in Christ Jesus, He can now hold us responsible to abide in Him.

Are we convinced that in Christ we can do all things? Are we more than conquerors? Are we living in the victory that Christ has won for us? Are we standing fast in the liberty? This is God's place for each one of us from the first day until the last, here on this earth. Let us be convinced of what God has done for us in Christ and not make excuses. We *can* obey God. Not only can we obey God, but our obedience is the evidence that His love is finding expression in us (John 14:21).

If we find ourselves lacking, instead of making excuses, let us get on our knees before God and thank Him for His provision in Christ. Then let us turn away from our weakness and begin to draw in faith upon His strength. The glory of the New Covenant will grow in our hearts, and God will be glorified as we bear much fruit for Him.

The Engrafted Word Through Obedience

What does God give us at new birth? He gives us a new heart, a heart of flesh and not of stone (Ezek. 11:19). Then He says that He will write His Word on that heart (Heb. 8:10) and put His law in that heart (Heb. 10:16). "The heart" refers to the whole of the inner man, the mainspring of one's life. A man lives according to the dictates of his heart. Out of the heart the mouth speaks (Matt. 12:34). If our hearts are sinful, the only thing that can come out of our lives is sin. If our hearts are pure, goodness will be the result.

The only place we can get this new heart is from God, and He gives it by giving Himself when He comes to abide within our hearts. It is union with God by the Spirit, and the Lord says it is like a new birth, because we become a new creation at that time. The whole inner man is changed, made new by God. This is the one divine work of grace by which we are made one with God and baptized into the body of Christ.

But what we want to see here is that although God gives us a new heart or disposition at new birth, the outward man (our body and soul) are not made new. They were not sinful in themselves, but they have been instruments of sin up to that time, and will bear its marks. Now these faculties must be given over to God, and this is done through obedience. This is what is described in Romans 12:1,2. It is an active place, and does not happen automatically. God has done His part by giving us a new heart and bringing us into union and fellowship with Himself. But from that foundation it is our responsibility, through obedience to the Holy Spirit and the living Word being written on our hearts, to see our whole man set aside to God as a living sacrifice.

"Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word (or 'engrafted word') which is able to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not hearers

only, deceiving yourselves" (James 1:21,22). The engrafted word is the word which is made part of us (the "whole man") as we do the word. Hearing the word in our minds may be a beginning place, and hearing the living word in our hearts will author faith to move in God. But until that living word is acted upon, it does not take root in our lives and profit us. It is the doing of the word that strengthens us and begins to mature our expression of Christ.

It is here that so many fall short. They rejoice in the new heart, the new desires, and the new song that God has put within their hearts. The feelings that go with this are wonderful, and it seems like heaven has come to earth. But so often the joy is short-lived, because immediately an issue of life comes before them. The effects of the past life of sin stare them in the face. They are surprised, because they thought that Christ made everything new--yet here is some of the old. What then did Christ make new?

As seen above, Christ has made our relationship with God new, the heart new, and the ability new. But now from this new heart and new ability from God, situations of life must be dealt with. An undisciplined mind must be brought under the control of the Spirit. A weak and lazy body must be strengthened through exercise. An undisciplined and undirected family must be given direction and training. These and many other things must be dealt with through active obedience to God.

If we do not deal with these things, the weakness that results will sooner or later overtake us and snuff out the life of God. We will become disheartened, begin to take our eyes off Christ and become entangled again in worldly things. Our love will grow cold, and the things of earth will loom large once again. Why? Because we did not let the word take root in us through active obedience. We thought everything was done when we were born again. Is everything done when a baby is born? Life has only begun. The real labor comes in the long pull. Here is where we need the power of God. God is looking for finishers.

How is the physical body strengthened? Is it not through active exercise, pressing forward towards a goal? How is spiritual character formed in a man? Is it not through active exercise in the Spirit? It is not produced by sleeping, or by waiting on God to do something more. God has involved us, and it is only as our will (our whole man active) is placed in God's will in every area of our life, that we will begin to find a maturing expression of Christ, and see spiritual strength come to our lives. Although God has made every provision in Christ and the Holy Spirit, we must *walk* in every situation, every detail of life. We are not strengthened by dreaming about Christ. We are strengthened as we obey Christ. This is where we learn Christ, and this is where Christ is glorified in our lives. This is where godly character is built in our lives, and this is where we must be diligent.

However, we are not laboring on our own, but it is *God* at work within us, both to will and do His good pleasure (Phil. 2:13). The doing is obedience. Do we see the importance?

Obedience to Spiritual Authority

"Obey those who rule over you and be submissive, for they watch out over your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you" (Heb. 13:17). What shall we do with this instruction in a day when fear of cultism runs high, and with the full knowledge that there is only one mediator between God and man, which is Christ Jesus our Lord? May I encourage each one of us to look fairly at this question, because in the answer lies direction for our growth in God.

Before we can answer the question before us, we must see clearly the union that God has worked with man in the New Covenant. When instruction comes to us, it is always with the understanding that we

are in union with God by the Spirit and that the one giving the instruction is also in union with God. Apart from this foundation, there is no answer to our questions. We must be in union by the Spirit in order to be able to hear and discern the authority of God coming to us. We must also be in that same union to be able to speak words that have meaning in God, to anybody else. Jesus said, "Apart from Me, you can do nothing." Separate from a relationship with God, nothing that we say or do has any meaning to God. Closely coupled with this revelation, we must see that what God is doing, He is doing through men. He has not chosen angels, but vessels of clay. This is God's doing, His wisdom, and He does not make mistakes. So no matter how many problems this may seem to present to us, we must know that God does all things well. If there were a better plan, He would have given that plan.

The meaning of this to us is that we cannot run away and create a plan of our own. Neither can we run from problems when we have difficulty working out the life of God with other believers. The answer to our problems and our growth in God is to face the issues squarely, and let God show us the way through. He will, if we are willing.

Although we do not have space here to expand on this subject, the key to understanding the verse we have just quoted is to be able to hear God through man. We must listen to the vessel, but we must hear God through the vessel. If we are only hearing man, we cannot move in faith before God, and what we hear will not profit us. If I turn away from God's chosen vessels with the attitude that "I just want to hear God by myself," I will likely find heaven shut. If I hear anything, it probably will be, "Go back, and it will be told you what to do."

In the context of our subject here, we must see how important it is to come to a place of freedom in our hearts, where we can hear and obey instruction coming to us from God-ordained leadership in the Church. We are all "sheep," and we need watching over by men who are called of God. We may think at times that we can do without this leadership, but remember, it is God who made the plan, not men. One of the main reasons we do not mature is that we have not settled the issue of what place leadership through men has in our lives. Thus, although this is one of God's main provisions for maturity, we are not benefiting from it, and we are sickly, weak, and immature. In this condition, we are easy prey for the enemy, and he picks off those at the edges one by one.

"And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:11-13). This is the heart of God's plan for maturity. These are men called by God, set aside unto God for the purpose of God. They have a godly care, they meet God's qualifications for ministry, they hear God, and they speak as oracles of God (I Peter 4:11). They are examples to the flock, servants with a servant's heart, and they can say, "Follow me as I follow Christ." We are commanded to *"recognize such men"* (I Thess. 5:12). They do not take the place of Christ the Head in our lives, but they minister to get us into contact with and under the control of Christ. They are God's instruments in our lives.

The question before us is, do we know such men in our lives? More than that, do we obey them? If not, why not? If we do not know such men, then God wants us to know them because He cares for us. But He will not move beyond His plan even in His care, because He does not have two plans. If we come before the Lord with an honest heart, He will hear our cry and direct us to a place where we can feed if we are hungry. If we are proud, and feel that we can make it our own without such God-ordained help, then we must come yet lower until we see our need.

Perhaps we know men that we would recognize as those described above, at least partly, but we do not feel we can trust them enough to say that we could obey them. Why not? Have we faced the question squarely, so that the issues can be dealt with? Perhaps we feel that they do not meet God's qualifications. Have we sought God for what to do about that? Perhaps we feel they meet the qualifications, but that we do not really need their help in our lives. Does that stand before God? Do we see the value of outside help? Do we think we need watching over? If not, why not? I know these are searching questions. Many times we have the questions, but we do not take steps to get them answered, and all the time the days are turning into years and the maturing that God wants is not taking place in our lives.

When a foundation of trust is laid in a proper way, and we know what spiritual authority is and how to recognize it, we can benefit from God-ordained leadership in ways that we cannot even imagine. The questions at times are not easy, and we are dealing with spiritual matters, but it is not safe to ignore the questions and hope they will go away. They won't, and in the end we are the losers. We are not following man or dealing with man, but rather we are dealing with God and coming under His direction. However, He has chosen to work through man, and we cannot change that. All submission and obedience is unto God. In that place, are we ready to be led? Can we take instruction? Can we obey?

In What Do We Obey?

When we think of obedience, what things go through our minds? In what areas do we feel responsible to obey? We may answer quickly "all things," but are we sure we mean that? Perhaps we think of general areas such as "Love one another." Certainly that is included, but is obedience limited to general instructions? Most men, Christian or not, would agree that one should "love his neighbor." But general instruction of this nature, even though it is right, is not sufficient by itself to bring an increase in our lives. It must be made more specific so that we can respond.

It may be helpful at this point to consider the example of parents and children. General instruction is given to children in various areas such as the importance of treating their brothers and sisters with respect. But the children do not know how to do this. They must be given specific instruction in the real situations of life. Instruction and correction on the spot are given by the parents, which implements what was given in general terms. As children obey their parents, they learn what it means to show respect. They learn what conduct is acceptable and what is unacceptable. As they learn, their capacity for having better judgment on their own increases. If done properly, it will bring an increase of maturity and character because of what the parents see and because of the obedience that they require from the children. Now this is all natural and can be worked in any child by parents who know what they are doing. But the point we are making here is that maturity in the child comes only as there are very specific instructions or commands given, with obedience required in a proper attitude.

In the spiritual we do not have an earthly father; we have a heavenly Father, and we are His children. When we are born of the Spirit into His family, we are brought into a relationship with Him in which we are under His authority and can hear His commands. If we are not under His authority, or we are not listening to His instruction to us, how can we say that we are part of His family? *"For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God"* (Rom. 8:14). In the natural, if a son is disobedient, his father takes steps immediately to correct the wrong attitude. Our heavenly Father is a perfect father, and always moves to correct the relationship. If we are to continue to be a part of His family, we must respond to His loving correction and see every hindrance to our relationship with Him dealt with. If we do not respond, no training or maturity can take place, and sooner or later, we will find ourselves on the

outside.

The instruction that God brings to our lives is very similar to the instruction that an earthly father brings. He gives us some understanding, some light on our pathway, and it has meaning to us, but we do not see all of the implications at once. Then as we are in real-life situations, He brings very specific commands to our hearts. As a certain situation arises we "know" what to do. It is obvious, because the Holy Spirit has quickened God's word to our hearts and we see the application of what God has shown us. Here is where we must obey. If we let the situation pass by and do not obey, we grieve the Holy Spirit (who is God) and miss the opportunity to learn something more of the Lord. Not only do we miss the opportunity to grow in God ourselves, it is likely that others are also affected in a negative way. God has involved us in a very real way in the lives of other people.

The obedience that we are speaking of is always unto the Lord, and the Holy Spirit is the One who communicates this to our heart. He makes it plain that it is God, and no matter how the command comes to us, our response is to God. This is true even if the specific command comes through another member that God has chosen. The word through another member may come in various forms such as "Have you considered this?" or "Don't you think it would be good if you did that?" But the Holy Spirit takes that word, lifts it out of the natural, and speaks it directly to our hearts. We know in an instant that God is speaking to us, giving us a command to obey. The question is, do we see the importance of obeying that word when it comes to our hearts? Can we recognize the authority of God coming to us in this way?

Sometimes, the instruction or commands may come in a very specific way. This will be more likely when the word is coming to us through mature ministry and we have given that ministry a place in our lives. God gives the ministry, but for it to benefit us we must recognize the ministry and open our lives to the grace that is coming to us. Paul was a minister chosen by God, but he told the Corinthian church that they had restricted themselves by looking wrongly at things, and they needed to be reconciled to God and open up their hearts so they could receive what God had for them. (See II Cor. 5:18-20.)

God never forces Himself on us, and God-given ministry never forces or drives. God always extends a place to us, but we must open ourselves to receive. Have we given ministry a place in our lives? Have we desired help? When instruction comes to us, do we obey? Our growth in God would be much greater if we would come to grips with this area, and give ministry the place in our lives that God has intended. May I strongly encourage us to look at this area again and see God's plan in fresh light? We will benefit greatly, and God will be glorified.

Some Important Trouble Areas

If obedience is so important, why don't we always obey? Why would anybody stop and not go on? Let us consider a few areas that often trip us up. One critical area is that we must see clearly that *all* obedience is unto God. If Christ is our head, and we have come under the authority of God, then in reality there is only one authority in our lives, not two. We are always dealing with God, never with man. When we lose this foundation, then we cannot move in faith, and a thousand questions come to our minds. Fear enters in, we sit in the judge's seat instead of the learner's seat, and ministry cannot help us. We must remove ourselves from the judge's seat, and come back to a place of faith where God is in control of everything in our lives. If our hearts are not at rest, seeing that all authority has been given to Christ and that we can trust Him fully, then we cannot benefit from God's servants and we will only obey when it is convenient or seems right to us. This is not the spiritual obedience that we are speaking about, and it will not bring spiritual increase in our lives.

One other area that hinders us in obeying is a wrong concept of what we must see before we can obey. Often we want to see everything before we obey anything. Understanding usually does not come until we obey. When we obey we understand, as we go through the circumstances. We must know the lives of those who are leading us, and we must know how to hear God by the Spirit in our hearts so that we can recognize the spiritual authority of God when it comes to us. God only gives us enough understanding or vision to obey the one step that He is putting before us. Each step of obedience brings us to another place where we can see the next step. But if we never take the first step, our vision does not grow, our understanding does not increase, and we do not mature. We remain babes, ready to be taken in by the deceiver when he comes as an angel of light. The trials of life will overtake us, and we will not finish the race. These are not small things, because we are talking of issues of life and death. We need to deal with the issues, and get obstacles cleared out of the way so that we can obey with a clear heart and conscience before God.

Another reason we may not progress is that we are looking for a large area in which to respond--one that seems important to us. The steps God is putting before us do not seem significant in our eyes. We wanted to obey in some big area that would be seen before others. But the steps God puts before us are hidden, known only to Him and to us. We think that they do not really matter, but God thinks so, and He is the one who has made it plain to us. God usually does not put big steps before us, but only a series of little steps. The "big step" is really just one more little step at the end. But if we are not faithful in the little things, how will we ever get there? We won't, if we don't obey. Are we willing to obey, knowing that God knows best?

Sometimes we are waiting for a feeling or some big inspiration to motivate us. Can we do the will of God from the heart whether we feel like it or not? Do we only obey when we feel like obeying? Obedience that is based on feelings will not persevere in difficult times and reach the goal. Christ did not "feel" like going to the cross. The flesh indeed is weak, but perhaps the most critical time to obey is when we feel the least like doing it. You may be tired from a long day at work, but God says to rise and give yourself as Christ did. Love your wife. Serve your husband. Train your children. Wash your brother's feet. Can we obey when we don't feel like it? We must, if there is to be spiritual progress in our lives. God is there to strengthen us in those times it we are looking to Him properly.

Consistency in obedience is the price of realizing the goal of God in our lives. In Matthew 21:28-31, Jesus told the story of a man who had two sons who were told to obey. The first said he would not, but afterwards changed his mind and went. The second said he would go, but did not. Which one did the will of his father? Good intentions or promises do not profit. It is obedience that profits and brings the increase. Sometimes we get excited for a few days, but then we forget all about what God made real to us. How long can we walk in the word that God has brought to us? How long did Abraham have to walk in the word God brought to him before he received the promise? God says we are the sons of Abraham if we do as he did.

A proper relationship with God brings us to the place of doing the will of God from the heart. Anything less than this misses the purpose of God. Let our hearts rise in faith before God this day, filled with His love, doing His will in all things. Let us obey.