

Walking in Obedience

[Ephesians 4:17-32](#)

Discipleship Essentials - Part Four: Serving Christ

Dr. Gareth W. Icenogle

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Let us bow in prayer. Lord Jesus Christ. Now, with your amazing power to change us, transform us, heal us, to make us new people, we put ourselves in your hands by the power of your Word, the presence of your Spirit, to live and follow you, and the love of your Father. We pray this in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, in whom we gather and hear. Amen.

We see evidence all around us of a continual call to change life for the better. We see this week in Washington, D.C., the special national AT&T golf tournament to enhance the Tiger Woods Foundation. The point of the foundation is to help children grow up to better lives. It is catching the children at a young age and teaching them what might be positively ahead for them if they prepare well. We've also seen this past weekend a call to be careful about how we care for the earth in the Live Earth concerts that have gone around the world. A call to commitment, to live well with creation. There are many calls in our lives to make things better, to live well, and not to do things that are hurtful to creation and other people. This text is about learning to walk well in this world with Jesus Christ and with one another as human beings.

Like you, in my life I have some moments when I did not walk well. I can still remember with some pain a day in my life when I was in the fourth grade, and I was walking home – it'd always be a mile walk home from school. I was with a friend who was prompting me to do something I would not probably do on my own. The thing about community is it's for good or ill. We are prompted to do things well or to do things that are ill. As we were walking home, we noticed out in front of us was a young girl who lived down the street from us, who was just a little strange, we thought. And as young boys would sometimes do, we decided when we passed the orange grove to sneak around up behind her and frighten her. We threw some oranges at her, and she got very upset and started throwing oranges back at us. I look back on that moment as walking in the old way, a way that does not pay attention to the best for another person's life. I resolved from that point on I would not do that again to another human being. Besides, if I sneak up on you, I'll cast a very large shadow and you'll see me coming.

There are also moments in our lives when we're taught to walk the right way. Not too long ago I had an exercise coach that literally walked with me and worked with me on several days' a week schedule to be able to strengthen my body and to put me into better shape. She would work me very hard, and at the point I would get tired, she would say, "Let's walk." I would like to lie down and rest, but she would say, "Let's walk." She would coach me as we walked on how to walk well and how to walk for the best burning of calories. Walking is a very important metaphor in this text for living a new life and getting away from an old life pattern. It is particularly difficult to walk well when we're under pressure. In the storms of life and in the trouble, we tend to walk in ways that draw us back into our own patterns of protection. Life of obedience, life of following Jesus, is particularly difficult when we are in stormy times. This is why I believe the Apostle Paul in several of his letters calls us to learn to walk well, walk in obedience.

Earlier in the Ephesians text, there is the strong recognition that we are in trouble in our life. As we walk in this world, this world is full of patterns that are not helpful, that in fact are hurtful to people. Ephesians says being dead in your trespasses and sins, that is, stepping on one another, trespassing, and sins of missing the mark of God's best – those things in which you formerly lived into and walked in – they're patterns in this world which are not good, and they hurt people. We want you now to live into a new way of life, to walk in Christ, to walk in unity, to walk in holiness, walk in love, walk in light, walk in wisdom. As we said last week, then to finally stand in the face of evil. One must learn to walk in the Christian faith before one is able to stand under duress.

This text teaches us how we should not walk and how we should walk — to get rid of an old pattern and an old person and to take on a new pattern and a new person. To throw away the old clothes of how we act and to put on the new clothes of how we should act. And how does this happen? It happens around a change of our thinking pattern. It happens in the transformation of our minds. For in our old patterns, we are in the futility of darkened thinking — we didn't think well. We had our reason being darkened, we were alienated from God, and we lived a lot in our own ignorance because of the hardness of our own hearts. We resisted the mind of Christ. In this world, if we give in to some of the patterns, we will trivialize, traumatize, or anesthetize ourselves and one another. We're self-consumed, and we will tend to create chaos if we lose our orderly minds.

The text says there's a better way. It is to put on, in fact, a mind of Christ, a way of Christ, a behavior pattern that imitates Jesus Christ. For the good news is that the truth of life and how to live is embodied in Jesus. Jesus is the truth. And Jesus will lead us from practicing a life that is self-centered, self-abusive, lack of self-awareness, to become a peak person who is, in fact, aware of other people, serving other people, and willing to do and practice God's love for the world. Put off that old person, which is corrupted by a pattern of deceit, and put on a new person, which is empowered by the presence of the Holy Spirit. This is a partnership between God and us. God takes the initiative, and we respond by putting ourselves into patterns of discipline, from which we get the word obedience. This is not something we can just absorb by listening. We must walk into it. We must put it into practice.

Time magazine, in a recent article on the science of addiction, has reaffirmed the strength of changing one's mind. They point out in this article that the mind is the key to getting rid of addiction. For what happens in addiction, according to the article, is that the patterns of addiction grab hold of our brain and will not let go. They take hold of our memory systems, our reward circuits, our decision-making skills, and they condition us to a pattern that is not good. Addiction reduces cognitive skills and ability to change, analytical skills, decision making, and ability to learn. It hurts the mind, and it isn't just an addiction, but it's any habit that is hurtful, that trivializes our humanity. Extinguishing these urges is not a matter of getting the feeling to fade, but of helping the addict to learn a new form of thinking, a conditioning that allows the brain's cognitive power to take over. One has to have a new way of thinking.

One cannot just practice the old patterns. This is reaffirmed in another Newsweek article that was entitled, "Think Thin to Get Thin." A pattern of slowly paying attention to what we eat and how we eat, and letting the brain absorb new behavior patterns, so that we in fact change our way of eating. And a discipline to be attached to it, 42 daily skills for six weeks, and it needs to be done in the context of group accountability. We have learned in our culture that change for the better demands personal discipline and communal accountability. And that is the essence of this text. The Holy Spirit of Christ comes to us with the good news and calls us to change our pattern and delivers us the ability to do it with the support of the Holy Spirit and the people of God, but we must walk into it.

And so there are five sets of exhortations now listed in this text that give us some very fine focus on how we are to live this new kind of life. It can also be seen as ten commandments for a good community, for the essence of every one of these has to do with not just ourselves and our personal change, but how we make life better for each other, and how we make life better for the world in which we live.

The first one of these exhortations is about stop living in the lie. Stop living in self-deception and deceiving others. Live, in fact, into the new pattern of honesty and truthfulness. Tell each other the truth, tell yourself the truth, seek the truth in Jesus Christ, and speak the truth to one another in love. Why? Because we belong to each other. We are not individuals cut off and alienated from one another. We need each other. We must be connected. The argument is that if we are not one body, then we will die as rugged individualists, we will not be able to change. This is why we are in church. You cannot do it alone. It is important that we see ourselves as responsible for one another. We are one another's keepers. This is a painful thing for Americans to come to grips with, because we love our aloneness. We love our individualism. We love our sense that "I am a free agent, and don't bug me." The gospel calls us to a different pattern of life because that rugged individualism is destructive.

The second call here is to the connection about anger. Be angry, yes, but don't sin. It is not bad to be angry. In fact, anger shows that you are in touch with reality. If you are a person who does not get angry at

some point in time, then you are not a healthy person. I'm here to confess that I grew up a nice guy, and I had a hard time getting angry. I'm learning to get angry in my old age. Some of you have been really good at being angry, and you're learning to be more of a gentle spirit. We all have our patterns, but the call here is to be angry, but don't sin. Don't allow the anger then to take over your life. Don't allow the anger to rule your life. Don't allow the anger to rule the lives of your family and your friends. Don't end the day holding on to the anger that you may have developed in the middle of the day. At some point before you go to sleep, resolve it. An ancient pattern to give discipline to anger. Be angry, in discipline, but don't sin.

After all, even God is angry. But God does not allow the anger of himself to control the way he treats human beings. Why? Because if you harbor and amplify anger, then evil will become a part of your life. The hot line, the short line, to evil is for unresolved anger to take over and for us to begin to do things that do damage to one another and to ourselves. Stored-up anger will become aggressive, or passive aggressive, will become slanderous, triangulating, victimized, or victimizing, will put us under attack or to make us people of threat, undermine others, take vengeance, distort the truth, and the bottom line, the unresolved anger will do evil. It is the cumulative impact of unresolved anger that haunts this world in terrorism. Anger unmanaged, unresolved, undisciplined, will kill humanity. I believe it killed Jesus.

The third area, this has to do with not stealing, not taking what does not belong to you. Don't take for yourself something that belongs to another person. Now right away we think of money and things, but I would like to expand that "don't steal" to some other things. For example, don't steal their power. Don't steal their sanity, or their emotional stability. Don't steal their time. To me, one of the gravest infringements that we see people practice on numerous occasions is to see people dominate conversations and not let others talk. It's a form of stealing. People steal other persons' space and time. They steal the words. Instead, the text calls us to work to make a living. Work on that which is good. Work with our hands, our minds, our whole body, to do things that rather than take from others, give to others.

Bryant Myers in his book *Walking with the Poor* talks about the importance that we as Christians invest in the plans of how we will give away our wealth and help the poor gain wealth. There are others who need the benefit of our hard work. It's a very important part of our Calvinist Reformed tradition that we work hard and save and share our wealth. And when you work, you have something to give away – your skills, your discipline, and your wealth.

The fourth area has to do with what words we use and how we use them. Do not use corrupt words or corrupting words. Stop tearing people down with the language that you use. Do not say worthless things or hurtful things. Do not be demeaning or devaluing. Stop doing damage with your tongue and with your tone. Instead, build each other up. The word is "edify." Say things that help the other person to be encouraged and to grow, not to tear them down. For parents, this is particularly important for our children. Not that we do not correct them, but we correct them with edifying presence and words and tone. And when we talk to each other as husband and wife, as spouses, we do not do damage to one another that our children feel and see and hear and embody in their own lives. We speak to one another with the sense of wanting our children to receive the edifying and building up of our good marriage and our good relationship. Why? Because we can share grace with one another. We can be of help and benefit and blessing to one another. And you don't want to grieve the Holy Spirit. You do not want to shut the Holy Spirit down, because it's the Holy Spirit that gives you the freedom to be gracious and kind, to say good things to people.

And the fifth exhortation has to do with putting away every possible demonstration of unresolved anger. Anger is so important to deal with that it's spoken to twice in this text. In fact, anger is so important to deal with that Jesus spoke of resolving anger in the Sermon on the Mount before he dealt with any other issue of discipleship. Anger that is unresolved will do damage. And so the Apostle Paul says to stop bitterness and rage. Stop saying things in wrath and shouting in abusive language and malice. I love the two images here of these words. Stop raising a big stink, or a pungent smell, and stop snorting -- the literal translations of the words. Instead, be kind, compassionate, gracious, and forgiving. Bless each other. Why? Because Jesus Christ has laid down his life to be gracious to us and has given us the power to share that with other people.

I was talking recently with a person who is in middle management in a large department store. This

person had just gotten into the sales-management position, and had inherited several major star sales performers, some making multi-millions of dollars. While they're good at sales, this store manager has discovered that they're terrible at relationships. They're competitive, they're diva-like, they enter into conflict on a regular basis, and they have no clue on how to get along with each other or work together. Reminds me a bit of the dark side of Washington, D.C. And so what does the manager do? The manager spends most of her time coaching these stars on how to build healthy relationships and tame in their department.

And here is one of the reasons why this exhortation is so important to us. Because what we learn in the disciple of the faith in following Jesus Christ in obedience is to be used to teach others in this world around us on how to live well without hurting each other, particularly to live well in a star-infested culture. People who are used to getting what they want when they want it and being successful at it but killing other people on the way. They don't walk well.

Henri Nouwen said in his little book on Making All Things New – I encourage you to take that and read it, if you have not, it's a very short read. It's a key classic spirituality book. As Henri Nouwen says in Making All Things New, we tend to fill our lives up with such business and with a lingering feeling of unrest. We are preoccupied with stuff all the time – doing, doing, doing. And underneath that, we have an unresolved sense of anxiety and unrest, even to the extent, he said, in some cases, of impending doom. Something's going to go wrong, I know it. He says in all that, we're unfulfilled. We're discontent and bored. We lack meaning, and we become resentful, because we don't understand what's going on, even though we're working our tails off. He calls us to a quiet life, a life of reflection, where obedience means learning to listen to the Holy Spirit.

Unfortunately, the word “obedience” often has the image of an authority figure who would impose their will on you whether you want to do it or not, some haranguing parental figure. But he transforms that word and says, no, obedience is about a willingness to listen quietly to God and to have God change our minds. And so it is today that we need to help each other to listen well, so that we can walk well and we can help each other be different people, and not do damage.

I received an e-card from one of our members recently. It's a series of sheep that are walking along and grazing on the way. There's a head sheep and there's following sheep, and they walk and they munch, and they walk and they munch, and they walk and they munch. And after a while you can see the path that they've literally eaten over the hills into the future. They've eaten it together, and they've cleared the path together. The card culminates in this statement: Together His flock can do amazing things.

And that is the point of this text. It's not as individuals that we'll do amazing things, but as people that are helping one another to be changed, to be new people, to do amazing things. For God has given us the gift of Jesus to be in our midst, to give us a new mind. Put this mind on that was also in Christ Jesus, who did not exploit his relationship with God but humbled himself, became a human being, a servant, even laid down his life for us. That is the way of the new person. The old person wants to self-exult. The new person is willing to sacrifice. It is with that call in mind that we are invited to walk in obedience in Jesus Christ. Let us pray.

Gracious God, in Jesus you have invited us to see a sane mind, one who has a disciplined perspective, and one who can call us together to help one another walk in your spirit. Teach us to walk in obedience now, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.