

Called to Obedience

Philippians 2:12-18

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Obedience is not our favorite word. We think that it involves hearing a lot of “don’ts” about things that are irresistible like money, power, sex, and chocolate. Or hearing a lot “dos” about things that are easily resisted like missions, Bible study, and giving. But for the Apostle Paul, obedience doesn’t mean dos and don’ts. It means being in love.

*** You can't get through the day without hearing a lot of dos and don'ts. “Do drive carefully. Don't speed.” “Do succeed. Don't fail.” “Do be reasonable. Don't be absurd.” Sometimes these dos and don'ts get a little confusing; like when we say, “Do be careful, but don't be afraid to take risks.” “Do work hard, but don't work too hard.” “Do be yourself, but just don't be yourself too much.” Our society has a lot of rules and laws, both written and unwritten. Sometimes obeying them is more of an art than a science. Even though we aren't flattered to hear it, the people who succeed are the ones who are good at the art of obeying the rules.

Then, after a week of practicing this art. We come to church on Sunday, hoping to get a clear sense of exactly what God wants. As one woman told me once, “Just tell me the rules. I'm really good at following rules.” But no, at church you keep hearing all about this thing called grace. Periodically someone will ask, “How long are you planning to preach about grace?” And I am always tempted to respond, “Well, until you get it right.”

The hardest thing to grasp about the grace of God is that it turns our understanding of rules and obedience upside down. Here we learn to work hard at obeying God, not in order to be acceptable, but because by grace we have already been accepted.

The closest correlation we have to this radically different call to obedience is the dynamic that occurs in a loving family. When we were children, we learned that if we were very good with dos and don'ts, it made Mommy and Daddy happy, and if we were bad, it made them upset. But in a healthy home, children soon discover that Mommy and Daddy love them even when they aren't happy about what just happened. We can even say that as children mature they want to do well not in order to make their parents love them, but because their parents have already made it clear that they love them unconditionally. When they are grateful for the love that they have received, a mark of their maturity, they will want to do that which is right.

On the cross of Jesus Christ, God has already accomplished all the work necessary to save our souls. That is why Jesus' last words included the phrase, “It is finished.” It's like a masterpiece of art that is done. You can't add to it, but can only behold the beauty and be grateful for the grace when you discover this masterpiece of salvation was for you.

Gratitude, then, is the only way on this side of the cross that we can discuss obedience. But precisely because we are grateful, we had better be talking about obeying God since obedience to God's law is the way we express our gratitude.

Even in the Old Testament, the law was seen not just as a bunch of burdensome dos and don'ts that regulated life, but as a means of drawing close to God. The prophets came along to help interpret this law saying things like, “What has God required of you but to do justice, love kindness, walk humbly.” It was all a way of drawing near to God. The difference that the cross makes is that we now affirm God has drawn close to us. In the passion of Jesus Christ, the love of God was made clear. And obedience is nothing more, or less, than a way of saying to God, “I love you, too.”

Now, in order to say I love you, too, we still seek to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly. But even in affirming our love for God with this obedient lifestyle we still need the grace of God. If we were left on our own to demonstrate gratitude for the sacrifice of God's son, we would never find a response that is worthy enough. So by grace, God has not abandoned us to proving ourselves worthy of his sacrificial love. He gave us the Holy Spirit who is drawing us closer and closer to the obedience of Christ.

Paul tells us today to, “Work out your own salvation,” or we could paraphrase by saying work out its implications, “with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you to will and to work for his good pleasure.” Why is there fear and trembling as you respond to this amazing grace of salvation? Because God is at work in your life. The Holy Creator, who once pushed back the darkness and chaos to establish light and beauty in its place, has now begun a new creation in your life. And things will change, beginning with your heart. So receiving grace involves a lot of change. That is where the obedient work under the power of the Holy Spirit begins.

When couples who are planning to be married sit in my office to discuss their marriage, they always describe their love as a gift for which they are so very grateful. No one has ever said, “I deserve his love. Lord knows I've earned it.” No, they know it is just grace. But that is when the changes begin. Once they decided to embrace the gift of love, they took on a lot of work. So they make plans for a wedding. So many plans. Even more challenging they make plans to weave together two different lives, shaped by two different families. They carefully try to coordinate careers, plans, dreams, and lifestyles. Along the way they have to engage in the hard work of compromise and sacrifice. If you ask them, “Why are you going through all this hard work?” they will tell you, “Well, we're in love.” Right! No one goes through all that in order to fall in love, but because the love has taken over their lives. That is who is the Holy Spirit is -- the love of God that takes over our lives.

St. Augustine described the trinity by calling the Father the Lover, the Son the Beloved, and the Holy Spirit the Love that proceeds from them into your soul. That is as frightening as falling in love. Now the work of obedience begins. But it doesn't feel like work. It feels like love.

Many years ago we stopped asking brides to vow that they will obey their husbands. Now the vows are identical. But I sometimes

wonder if we made the right change. Maybe what we should have done was to ask both the husband and the wife to obey each other because obeying is one of the purest forms of love. Not because you've got to, but because you choose to.

In the second half of our passage today, Paul gets very specific with illustrations of loving obedience. The first thing he tells us is, "Do all things without murmuring and arguing." Do you want to tell God you love and obey him? Stop complaining. Paul goes on to say that if you just stop complaining you will be as distinctive in our world as the stars that shine in a dark sky.

In his rule of the medieval monasteries, St. Benedict reserved his sharpest rebukes for monks who complained. It was enough of an offense to merit excommunication. Benedict knew that complaining was a deadly disease that can destroy a community. Worse yet, it reveals how little of God's love we have received, because the complainer was not grateful. That's why they got kicked out of the monasteries. You may want to bring St. Benedict's rule to your workplace tomorrow. Or better yet, just resolve to be a star in the dark sky of complaints around you.

Secondly, Paul says to obey God is to hold fast to the Word of Life. That is a reference to the Holy Scriptures. Hold fast to your loving commitment to live out of the Bible. Get into an adult Sunday School class or one the Bethel classes. Learn the Bible. It may not be politically correct. It may not be a guide for getting ahead of others. But it is your only means for getting ahead with life. That is why we call the Bible, "The Word of Life." It has the power of life.

Last month when my family was vacationing in the wilderness, I saw a huge flat rock that had cracked. Out of this crack stood a small sapling of a tree pushing the rock aside. The rock appeared so much stronger. But it wasn't. The sapling had something more power than rock. The sapling had life. In the Word of God we discover a way of life strong enough to push aside any of the impenetrable forces of earth. Ask the black church in South Africa. Ask the liberated churches that used to suffer behind an iron curtain. Ask those who are succeeding in the marketplace with ethics. They will all tell you that obedience to the biblical way of life always prevails.

Thirdly, Paul tells us that to obey God means to rejoice. We don't usually think of joy as an issue of obedience, but Paul did. He said this, remember, while he was in prison for his faith. He said it, because he believed that in the Spirit-filled life, joy is always a choice. Your reasons for joy have nothing to do with the circumstances of life and everything to do with the salvation you have already received. Evelyn Underhill once compared our obedience to God to that of the sheepdog. First, it has learned to listen to the shepherd's voice. Secondly, it does what is commanded. Immediately. Third, and just as important, the sheepdog always, always, performs its duties with a wagging tail.

If you try to reduce biblical faith to a bunch of rules and regulations, you'll miss the point of the cross where your salvation is already finished. But if you begin with the love you have already received, obeying the commands of the Good Shepherd will become your highest joy, your grateful response, and your best opportunity to say, "I love you, too."

God of grace, fill us with so much of your sacred love that it will frighten us to discover that our lives are no longer our own, but have been lost in the joy of loving you with tender obedience. Amen.