

The Life of Obedience

*who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for **obedience** to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance.* (1 Peter 1:2)

κατὰ πρόγνωσιν θεοῦ πατρὸς ἐν ἁγιασμῷ πνεύματος εἰς ὑπακοήν καὶ ῥαντισμὸν αἵματος Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, χάρις ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη πληθυνθείη.

secundum praescientiam Dei Patris in sanctificatione Spiritus in **oboedientiam** et aspersionem sanguinis Iesu Christi gratia vobis et pax multiplicetur

I. Introduction.

The Old Testament writers conveyed the idea of obedience figuratively by using verbs in the Hebrew language, which literally meant - to listen, to hear, to keep, to guard, to observe, and to live out. The Septuagint also uses literal equivalence of the Hebrew verb. For example ἀκοῆ ἀκούσητε (*akoē akousēte*) and φυλάξητε (*phulaxsēte*) which simply means to listen and to guard. But the Greek word ὑπακοήν (*upakoēn*) used for obedience in the New Testament (Rom. 1:5; 6:16; 15:18; 16:26, 2 Co. 7:15; 10:5, Heb. 5:8, 1 Pet. 1:2), has the precise nuance “to submit” and “to comply.” Obedience, therefore, can be well understood with the functions that are involved such as listening, keeping, guarding, observing, living, submitting and complying.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word obedience as: the action or practice of obeying; the fact or character of being obedient; submission to the rule or authority of another; compliance with or performance of a command, law, or the like; the action of doing what one is bidden. Obedience in the passive sense is defined as an obedience in which the subject allows himself to be treated according to the will of another; or in which he suffers without remonstrance or resistance.

In this seminar we are concerned about the biblical theology of obedience. It is, therefore, right to begin with what biblical obedience is not. We will attempt to clarify some of the misleading notions about obedience and then establish what obedience truly is.

II. What Obedience is Not.

A. Obedience is not Doing Good.

The objective of Christian obedience is not moral uprightness, observance of religious traditions, philanthropic services and “doing good” for the sake of good. It is possible that one, who is strongly involved in the pro-life movement, defending the Christian ethical view on abortion, doesn’t practice obedience. It was not necessarily the practice of obedience that led all those who fought the civil war and gave their lives to remove slavery from America. One does not become obedient by joining a band of those

who are practicing obedience. Obedience is neither obeying one's moral instinct nor obeying a set of religious laws, nor keeping of the traditions. Remember what Jesus said, "Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" (Matthews 7:22-23).

Christian obedience will certainly result in "good," however, it envisions more than goodness. It is a response to the higher divine call and is focused on a higher divine goal. C.S. Lewis in his book *Mere Christianity*, very vividly describes the frustrations of the "doing good" kind of obedience. He wrote:

"As long as we are thinking that way, one or the other of two results is likely to follow. Either we give up trying to be good, or else we become very unhappy indeed. For, make no mistake: if you are really going to try to meet all the demands made on the natural self, it will not have enough left over to live on. The more you obey your conscience, the more your conscience will demand of you. And your natural self, which is thus being starved and hampered and worried at every turn, will get angrier and angrier. In the end, you will either give up trying to be good, or else become one of those people who, as they say, "live for others" but always in a discontented, grumbling way – always wondering why the others do not notice it more and always making a martyr of yourself."ⁱ

B. Obedience is not Legalism.

Over emphasis on obedience can often lead to legalism. Many evangelical churches are guilty of preaching a theology that subtly promotes the idea Faith + Obedience = Justification/ Sanctification. Dr. John MacArthur in his article titled *Obedience: Love or Legalism*, quotes a letter from an anonymous pastor which is worth quoting here:

"I see a different emphasis in Scripture. Faith works through love (Galatians 5:6). The Christian obeys Christ out of sheer love for Him. Obedience for the Christian is not so much a duty as it is a delight. Believers obey because that is where they find their satisfaction, not because they are bound to do so. We obey out of love for Christ, not out of fear, and not out of duty. I believe this perspective is essential to joyous Christian living. It is the whole difference between legalism and true Christianity."ⁱⁱ

This statement alludes to what Jesus said in the gospel according to John in chapter 14 verse 15, "If you love me, you will obey what I command." However, MacArthur thinks that viewing obedience not as a duty but only as love does not free

obedience from legalism. One can even love legalistically and give credit to himself for it. According to MacArthur, any righteousness other than the imputed righteousness of Christ is mere legalism. True obedience must be grounded in Christ and what He has done for us rather than what we do for Him. We read such theological balance in Paul's writing to the believers in Rome, "*Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-- this is your spiritual act of worship.*" (Romans 12:1) Man cannot take credit for doing anything for God, for he can neither return his obligation fully nor outgive God. I am reminded of Isaac Watts who wrote, "were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small; love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all." These words express accurately the biblical theology on obedience. God indeed owns it all.

III. What Obedience Is.

A. Obedience is Obeying the God of the Bible.

Obedience is not going through a daily set of Christian disciplines or keeping up tradition, but listening to the living God and obeying Him diligently. But one may wonder here how to discern the voice of God? How do I know that God is speaking to me? How do I know that it is not a creation of my own disturbed mind? Let me talk briefly about how to hear God's voice.

First, let us consider the means through which God communicates. From the Bible and from the experiences of the saints, we learn that God has spoken to his people through various means. He has spoken through the Scripture; through nature; through dreams; through circumstances; through his body, the church; through individual men of God; through conscience; through the inner voice; through needs; through special visions, and so on. It is difficult to specify any particular means by which God speaks to us, for He is God. We conclude, therefore, that God is able to speak to us through various means. We need to be alert and sensitive lest we fail to discern.

Second, let us consider the content of what God may speak. More important than how we hear God speaking to us is what we hear God saying. We live in a post-Pentecostal period where one of the ministries of the Holy Spirit is to communicate to the believers on behalf of the Godhead. We read in John 14: 26 that the Holy Spirit is to remind of the things Jesus had already taught his apostles and disciples. We also read in Hebrews 1:1, that God has finally spoken to us through his son.

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. (Hebrews 1:1)

After Jesus ascended to heaven his apostles founded the Church with the central belief in the deity of Jesus. They took nearly 350 years to identify the books that were not contrary to the claims and teachings of Jesus Christ and canonized them. Today we have them together in one binder called Bible. This canonization was essential to protect the church from any claims or teachings that are contrary to the claims or teachings of Jesus

Christ. Canonization of 66 books implies that they are the supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct. All messages, revelation, or religious experience, or the interpretation of the scripture needs to be tested for its coherence in purpose and goal of the biblical theology. One that is contrary to the claims, teachings and the purpose of the biblical theology, cannot be from God of the Bible.

B. Obedience Springs from faith.

Although obedience demands human decision, obedience in a person is not caused by human will alone, but also by God. Christian obedience is of divine origin and is received along with the gift of faith. It is a mystery and thus cannot be described in words. Men and women of God from the past testify to a sudden change of desire to love and obey God after their personal encounter with God.

St. Augustine of Hippo in his *Confessions* wrote, “The effect of your converting me to yourself was that I did not now seek a wife and had no ambition for success in this world. I stood firm upon that rule of faith on which many years before you had revealed to me to her.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Paul wrote to the believers at Rome, “*Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith.*” (Romans 1:5) The last clause “obedience that comes from faith” can also be translated as “*obedience that springs from faith.*” According to Glenn Ann Davies, “This understanding of the phrase not only better suits the contents of the epistle with its distinction between faith and obedience, but it also better suits the immediate context of Romans 1:5 where it bears a direct relationship to Paul’s intentions with respect to his Roman readers.”^{iv}

Without faith it is difficult to obey God absolutely. One might obey God somehow religiously, but absolute obedience always emerges from absolute faith in the living God alone. The following scripture references explicate the role of faith in obedience.

“*By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.* (Hebrew 11:8)

“*By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son,*(Hebrew 11:17)

“*And when the LORD sent you out from Kadesh Barnea, he said, "Go up and take possession of the land I have given you." But you rebelled against the command of the LORD your God. You did not **trust** him or **obey** him.*” Deuteronomy 9:23

To encourage the process of sanctification in the life of believers at Philippi, Paul wrote:

“So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; 13 for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”
(Philippians 2:12-13)

Notice the first clause in verse 13, “for it is God who is at work in you,.” In Paul’s theology, Christians obey not because they are able to obey but they obey because God is at work in them. This can be best illustrated by the relationship that my automobile and I have while driving on the highway. I drive the car on the highway not because I am able to move the car but because the car’s engine is capable and so I drive. Obedience is therefore not entirely a human decision, but divinely enabled. Obedience springs from faith.

E. Obedience is Being a Slave of God.

The books of the Old Testament introduce God as the creator, sustainer, provider, and protector, but the New Testament focuses on him as the redeemer - one who purchased us from the slavery of sin, and liberated us from captivity to make us slaves of righteousness. Paul wrote this more vividly in Romans 6:16-23. Let us read:

*“Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey-- whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness. I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves. Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them **in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness**. When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become **slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life**. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

Christians are not servants but slaves purchased by the precious blood of Jesus Christ. Reminding the church at Corinth about the nature of this relationship, Paul wrote, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body. (2 Cor.6: 19-20)

Obedience therefore characterizes the nature of the relationship that one has with God. Is it a servant-master relationship or a slave-master relationship? The servant-master relationship is not only a relationship of legal obligation but also a relationship of free will.

Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced; burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. (Psalm 40:6)

This relationship also reveals the kind of benefit one is reaping and one will be reaping in eternity. One is set free and yet a slave to God and his laws is an oxymoron that only a child of God in true relationship can understand and enjoy.

C. S. Lewis beautifully illustrates the kind of relationship Christ demands. He writes:

“Christ says “Give me All. I don’t want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want You. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don’t want to cut off a branch here and a branch there, I want to have the whole tree down. I don’t want to drill the tooth, or crown it, or stop it, but to have it out. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked – the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself: my own will shall become yours.”^v

Obedience is not merely obeying but conforming to the likeness of Jesus whose teachings we should obey. In this conformation there is inner transformation of the person resulting to Jesus-like character, virtues and ambitions, and hence causing obedience in a person’s life. The obedience of a saint therefore is the living out of Jesus in that person.

F. Obedience is Absolute Compliance.

In contrast opposite to absolute compliance is partial obedience. First, let us consider what is partial obedience. Partial obedience is both changing the content of the instructions and also being inconsistent in the loyalty. The teachings in the Bible imply that persistent partial obedience does no good. It is a waste of time. God cannot be flattered or impressed with our tokenism, because He knows not only our attitude behind the actions but also knows our heart and mind. God cannot be impressed by the big sacrifice in the form of great charity work or monetary donations. Let us recall the story of Saul and Samuel.

But Samuel replied: "Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. (1 Samuel 15:22)

Partial obedience is dangerous because it gives a false notion of obedience. It also teaches one to escape the responsibility of obedience and prove one’s innocence by blaming one’s circumstances. Remember how Samuel defended his actions:

*"But I did obey the LORD," Saul said. "I went on the mission the LORD assigned me. I completely destroyed the Amalekites and brought back Agag their king. The soldiers took sheep and cattle from the plunder, the best of what was devoted to God, in order to **sacrifice** them to the LORD your God at Gilgal." (1 Samuel 15:20-21)*

Some of the contemporary justifications could be, "After all some obedience is better than disobedience," or "I am at least better than the guy next door." Partial obedience is also dangerous because it originates from the loss of awe and reverence for the Almighty God. Let us read first Samuel chapter 15: 9, 24, 30:

*But Saul and the army spared Agag and the **best** of the sheep and cattle, the fat calves and lambs-- **everything that was good**. These they were unwilling to destroy completely, but everything that was despised and weak they totally destroyed. (1 Sam. 15:9)*

Saul lost the awe of God. God's goodness got dimmed in the goodness of the livestock he saw.

*Then Saul said to Samuel, "I have sinned. I violated the LORD's command and your instructions. I was **afraid of the people and so I gave in to them**." (1 Sam. 15:24)*

Saul lost the fear of God in the fear of the people and he gave in to them.

*Saul replied, "I have sinned. But **please honor me before the elders of my people and before Israel; come back with me, so that I may worship the LORD your God**." (1 Sam. 15: 30)*

Saul lost his ambition for honor in the eyes of the Lord but was obsessed with his honor in the eyes of the people. Temporal honor took precedence over eternal honor.

Saul failed in absolute compliance because he was:

- Looking at the temporal good and he got preoccupied so much that the eternal good slipped away from his mind.
- Conscious of human beings and the reality of their dynamics so much that he unconsciously exited from the majestic omnipresence of God.

Obedience is therefore living above our circumstances. No matter that our best knowledge and understanding is required to be betrayed and our best interests are put at stake, obedience must be sought with an absolute compliance. Take the case of Abraham and imagine what possible justifications he would have used to evade obedience.

Last but not the least.

G. Obedience is Being Faithful to the Calling of God.

In the first seminar, we talked about the four levels of call. They are:

1. Call to a saving Relationship.
2. Call to a sanctifying life of Discipleship.
3. Call to be on mission with God.
4. Call to a specific Task

Obedience is seeking earnestly to be faithful to the four levels of call.

IV. Why Obedience?

A. Obedience is the Ultimate Occupation.

The scripture is clear that in the end time all nations will obey God. Let us read some of these scriptural references:

*The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the **obedience** of the nations is his.* (Genesis 49:10)

*By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: Before me every **knee** will bow; by me every tongue will swear.* (Isaiah 45:23)

but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him—(Romans 16:26)

*Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all **dominion**, authority and power.* (1 Corinthians 15:24)

Obedience is the salient feature that will characterize the relationship between the nations and the ultimate Ruler. Therefore the daily obedience of an individual is a foretaste of the coming reality. In other words, our daily obedience is part of the bigger picture. One needs to begin living and abiding in the Kingdom of God right here on the earth before one enters into it on the last day.

B. Obedience is the Primary Purpose of Selection.

According to the apostle Peter the purpose of God in choosing us, through the sprinkling of the blood of His son Jesus and preserving us through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, is obedience.

*who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, **for obedience** to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance.* (1 Peter 1:2)

The ultimate purpose of the calling is certainly divine but one cannot achieve the higher purpose of calling without fulfilling the primary purpose, which is obedience. If the Toyota Camry is made to run on the lead free gasoline, one cannot run it on diesel. God's ordained purposes are fixed; we are to run our lives through obedience alone.

C. Disobedience is a Serious Offence.

There is no buffer zone between obedience and disobedience. Either one is in obedience or disobedience. The Scripture clearly states that disobedience is a serious offence before God.

*Then the Spirit of God came upon Zechariah son of Jehoiada the priest. He stood before the people and said, "This is what God says: 'Why do you disobey the LORD's commands? **You will not prosper.** Because you have forsaken the LORD, **he has forsaken you.**'"* (2 Chronicles 24:20)

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. (Matthews 7:21)

*And we will be ready to punish every act of **disobedience**, once your obedience is complete. (2 Corinthians 10:6)*

*Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things **God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient.** (Ephesians 5:6)*

*As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of **the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.** (Ephesians 2:1-2)*

*He will punish those who do not know God and do not **obey** the gospel of our Lord Jesus. (2 Thessalonians 1:8)*

*For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not **obey** the gospel of God? (1 Peter 4:17)*

*It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them **did not go in, because of their disobedience.** (Hebrews 4:6)*

Therefore the best alternative for His people is to put all their effort into obeying God with absolute compliance.

D. Obedience is Rewarding.

Obedience has a cumulative effect on our psychology and behavior. Through daily obedience one develops one's self-esteem. One begins to see oneself not from the perspective of human opinion about him but from the opinion of God.

*Now if you **obey** me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine (Exodus 19:5)*

Every act of obedience accumulates confidence for the next obedience. And with every act of obedience one discovers inner fulfillment and happiness. Just as every disobedience gather inner guilt and shame, obedience gathers inner joy and peace. Through obedience one learns how to live above one's earthly circumstances and to face the cruel reality of life boldly. Listen to the words of Saint Paul. The irony of this passage is that he is writing this from a dungeon where he waiting to be executed:

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day-- and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing." (2 Tim 4: 7-8)

Death is inevitable and it will come to all but some die the death of Judas Iscariot while some die the death of Stephen. Obedience makes those differences.

We also learn from scripture that obedience is rewarding not only on the earth but also in heaven.

*"Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your **reward** in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets. (Luke 6:23)*

*"since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a **reward**. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. (Colossians 3:24)*

*"Behold, I am coming soon! My **reward** is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done." (Revelation 22:12)*

"and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." (2 Peter 1:11)

V. Conclusion:

Obedience is not "doing good."

Obedience is not keeping up with the requirement of the tradition.

Obedience is obeying the God of the Bible.

Obedience is Being Faithful to the Calling of God.

Call to a saving Relationship.

Call to a sanctifying life of Discipleship.

Call to be on mission with God.

Call to a specific Task

Obedience springs from faith. It is a gift of God.

Obedience is free will slavery

**Obedience is an absolute compliance.
We obey God because it is our ultimate occupations,
because he called us to obey,
because we will be judged,
because there is a reward for the obedience.**

ⁱ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone Book, 1996), 169.

ⁱⁱ *Trust and Obey: Obedience and the Christian*, ed. Rev. Don Kistler (Morgan: Soli Deo Gloria Press, 1996), 51.

ⁱⁱⁱ Henry Chadwick, *Saint Augustine Confessions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 153.

^{iv} Glenn N. Davies, *Faith and Obedience in Romans: A Study in Romans 1-4* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 30

^v C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone Book, 1996), 169.