

The Trouble With Obedience

In a world that is bent on having its own way, it is tempting to believe that everything would be a lot better if people would just do the right things. We even have a tendency in Christian organizations to talk about obedience as if it were the basis for the Christian life. There are a ton of verses to back that up. What's more, we can name a number of areas in our own life where we have done the right thing simply because it was the right thing to do, and been better off for it. Unfortunately, that kind of obedience will not take us very far in the Christian life.

It would be one thing if everything Jesus asked of us were things we could actually do, like feed the dog or take out the garbage. But He asks us to love our enemy, return good for evil, forgive 70 times 7, never lust or harbor contempt — and the list goes on. He's asked us to do things we really cannot do!

Of course, one approach to this problem is to, "Go ahead and do the right thing even if you don't feel like it!" Well, there is something to be said for making good choices when I am able to do so. But if the only reason I do something or don't do something is because of what I am supposed to do, what does that say about the condition of my heart? If I have to override my whole internal process in order to say the words, "I forgive you," then I clearly do not have a forgiving heart, and it is quite doubtful that I have forgiven you at all.

It seems to me, that kind of obedience is what Jesus called, "Cleaning the outside of the cup." I'm thinking God had more in mind than strong willpower and compliance when He talked about obedience. And if we look a little closer, the problem gets even more interesting.

First, Paul says that no one was ever able to keep the *old* Law. Then along comes Jesus with His Sermon on the Mount and other sayings, and basically raises the bar higher than the Law ever was! Not only can you not commit murder, you are not even supposed to wish you could. Not only should you not commit adultery, you should not wonder what it would be like to do so. Well if we could not keep the old law, there is surely no way we can measure up to the new standard set by Jesus. So what does it mean to be obedient if the commands are impossible? And why do we keep preaching "obedience" as if it were a simple matter, when no one can actually do what we have been commanded to do? We need to back up and take another look at what Jesus must have meant by way of "keep my commandments."

Under the Old Covenant, obedience to the written law was paramount to their way of life. But no matter how hard they tried to keep it, the law could not produce character transformation. That was why God established a New Covenant founded on different principles. "For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law" (Gal.3:21; Heb.8). But that was not possible, so God gave us something else entirely.

Tragically, the Christian world has by and large failed to grasp the enormity of this paradigm shift, and has instead opted to substitute New Testament Principles for the Old Testament Law, all the while continuing in the belief that trying to do the right things will make you a good person. But Jesus did not just give us better principles to replace the law. He did away with the whole process of achieving righteousness through human

effort. And claiming that God gave us the Holy Spirit to provide the power to keep the new principles, only obscures the seriousness of this error on multiple levels:

1. That is not the main role of the Spirit.
2. Whatever power the Holy Spirit does give to us, it clearly does not change us automatically. If it did, we would be a lot farther along than we are. So something else must be involved.
3. If change comes from our hard work aided by the Spirit, we would have to conclude that how much effort we supply is what makes the difference (or worse yet, that God only helps those who try really hard) which runs contrary to Scripture.
4. If the Holy Spirit's job is to give us the power to keep His commandments, how do you explain burnout? How do you explain why people remain in bondage in spite of all their effort to be free? Wouldn't all that effort elicit the help of the Spirit and make it all possible? The evidence would suggest that is simply not the Holy Spirit's job.
5. God never intended to empower us to keep an external set of principles. He chose instead to write his laws on our heart. That means he wants to change our heart to act naturally in accordance with his laws so that we do not have to keep trying to do what our heart resists doing.

Writing His laws on our heart is a primary characteristic of the New Covenant, but it does not happen all at once. The reason we try to finish the task by committing ourselves to an obedience-driven process of growth, is because we do not know how to receive what we need from God. So we make the same mistake that the Jewish nation made: "Not knowing about God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God" (Rom.10:3).

If we intend to become Christ-like, we must acknowledge from the start that we cannot get there by direct effort. Our goal is to learn how to engage with God in ways that change our heart. As our heart becomes molded by God, we will then be able to live in the way God designed us to live, the way we are called to live. If that seems hard to grasp, it is only because we have not been taught how to live this way.

In order to begin finding our way out of this mess, we need to see clearly the fallacy of trying to grow up by following principles, and return to the original message of following a person, developing a functional relationship that gives life, and getting to know our Mentor who can actually help us with our struggles, not just cite laws from a distance. Because rather than try to coerce obedience from us, the Holy Spirit reveals to us the underlying causes for our malfunctions, heals the wounds that keep us bound in fear and anger, and shows us what we need to see in order to move forward. Our part in the process is to run to Him when we are in trouble, open ourselves to His teaching and training, and receive from Him what we need in order to grow and change.

Obedience to a beloved Mentor is very different from obedience to a set of rules. Take for example, Psalm 51, our quintessential psalm of repentance. Interestingly, no where in that psalm does David promise to not ever do those terrible things again. He makes no resolution to be different. He simply comes to God and acknowledges

that his heart is a lot worse than he had imagined; that he wants God to create a new heart for him that would never conceive of such things. In short, he is asking God to do for him what he cannot do for himself. That, my friend, is obedience! Submitting to the work God wants to do in our life.

Before we try to keep all the commandments that have to do with how we act in the world, we must first learn how to obey the invitations to be transformed: “Come to me” (Mt.11:28); “Abide in me” (Jn.15); “Believe” (Jn.6:29); “Listen” (Isa.55:1-3); “Drink” (Jn.4:14); “Be filled” (Eph.5:18); “Be transformed” (Rom.12:2). These are not euphemisms for going to heaven. They are the very basis for our life in God. And once we learn “the obedience of faith,” coming to His table and eating what He has set before us, listening to His voice as He mentors us in our own life – then and only then will the other things become possible for us. Because once we give Him a chance to write His laws on our heart, we will become “obedient” by our very nature, not by trying hard to do what is right.

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