

THE FRUIT OF OBEDIENCE

To obey, in New Testament usage, means to give earnest attention to the Word, to submit to its authority, and to carry out its instructions.

Obedience in this sense is almost dead in modern Christianity. It may be taught now and then in a languid sort of way, but it is not stressed sufficiently to give it power over the lives of the hearers. For, to become effective, a doctrine must not only be received and held by the Church, but must have behind it such pressure of moral conviction that the emphasis will fall like a blow upon a percussion cap, setting off the energy latent within.

The Church of our day has soft-pedalled the doctrine of obedience, either neglecting it altogether or mentioning it only apologetically and without urgency. This results from a fundamental confusion of obedience with works in the minds of preacher and people. To escape the error of salvation by works we have fallen into the opposite error of salvation without obedience.

In our eagerness to get rid of the legalistic doctrine of works we have thrown out the baby with the bath and gotten rid of obedience as well.

The Bible knows nothing of salvation apart from obedience. Paul testified that he was sent to preach "obedience to the faith among all nations." He reminded the Roman Christians that they had been set free from sin because they had "obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you." In the New Testament there is no contradiction between faith and obedience. Between faith and law-works, yes; between law and grace, yes; but between faith and obedience, not at all. The Bible recognizes no faith that does not lead to obedience, nor does it recognize any obedience that does not spring from faith. The two are opposite sides of the same coin. Were we to split a coin edgewise we would destroy both sides and render the whole thing valueless. So faith and obedience are forever joined and each one is without value when separated from the other. The trouble with many of us today is that we are trying to believe without intending to obey.

The message of the Cross contains two elements: (1) Promises and declarations to be believed, and (2) commandments to be obeyed. Obviously faith is necessary to the first and obedience to the second. The only thing we can do with a promise or statement of fact is to believe it; it is physically impossible to obey it, for it is not addressed to the will, but to the understanding. It is equally impossible to believe a command; it is not addressed to our understanding, but to our will. True, we may have faith in its justice; we may have confidence that it is a good and right command, but that is not enough. Until we have either obeyed or refused to obey we have not done anything about it yet. To strain to exercise faith toward that which is addressed to our obedience is to get ourselves tangled in a maze of impossibilities.

The doctrine of Christ crucified and the wealth of truths which cluster around it have in them this dual content. So the apostle could speak of "obedience to the faith" without talking contradictions. And it can be said, "The gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth," and "He became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him." There is nothing incompatible between these statements when they are understood in the light of the essential unity of faith and obedience.

The weakness in our message today is our overemphasis on faith with a corresponding underemphasis on obedience. This has been carried so far that "believe" has been made to double for "obey" in the minds of millions of religious persons. The result is a host of mental Christians whose characters are malformed and whose lives are all out of proportion. Imagination has been mistaken for faith, and belief has been robbed of its moral content and made to be little more than an assent to gospel truth. And all this in the name of orthodoxy.

There is a mental disease fairly familiar to all of us where the patient lives in a world wholly imaginary. It is a play-world, a world of pure fancy, with no objective reality corresponding to it. Everyone knows this except the patient himself. He will argue for his world with all the logic of a sane man, and the pathetic thing is that he is utterly sincere. So we find Christians who have lived so long in the rarefied air of imagination that it seems next to impossible to relate them to reality. Non-Obedience has paralyzed their moral legs and dissolved their backbones, and they slump down in a spongy heap of religious theory, believing everything ardently, but obeying nothing at all. Indeed, they are deeply shocked at the very mention of the word "obey." To them it smacks of heresy and self-righteousness and is the result of failure to rightly divide the word of truth. Their doctrine of supine inaction is New Testament religion! It is the truth for which the Reformers died! Everything else is legalism and the religion of Cain.

All this we might pass over as merely one more of those things were it not that this creed of the moral impasse has influenced practically every corner of the Christian world, has captured Bible schools, has determined the content of evangelistic preaching, and has gone far to decide what kind of Christians we all shall be. Without doubt the popular misconception of the function of faith, and the failure of our teachers to insist upon obedience, have weakened the Church and retarded revival tragically in the last half-century. The only cure is to remove the cause. This will take some courage, but it will be worth the labour.

We are always in danger of falling victim to words. An unctuous phrase may easily take the place of spiritual reality. One example is the expression "Following the Lord." so often used among Christians, or its variation, "Following the Lamb." We overlook the fact that this cannot be taken literally. We cannot now, as those first disciples could, follow the Master over a given geographical area. We tend to think of it literally but at the same time feel its literal impossibility, with the result that it has come to me, little more than a nodded agreement to the truths of Christianity. It may startle us to learn that "following" is a New Testament word used to cover the idea of an established habit of obedience to the commandments of Christ.

Look at the fruits of obedience as described in the New Testament: The house of the obedient man is builded upon a rock (Matt. 7:24). He shall be loved by the Father and shall have the manifestation of the Father and the Son, who will come unto him and make their abode with him (John 14:21, 23). He shall abide in the love of Christ (John 15:10). By obedience to the doctrines of Christ he is set free from sin and made a servant of righteousness (Rom. 6:17, 18). The Holy Spirit is given to him (Acts 5:32). He is delivered from self-deception and blessed in his deeds (James 1:22-25). His faith is perfected (James 2:22). He is confirmed in his assurance toward God and given confidence in prayer, so that what he asks is given to him (1 John 3:18-22). These are only a few among the many verses that may be cited from the New Testament. But more to the point than any number of proof texts is the fact that the Whole drift of the New Testament is in that direction. One or two texts might be misunderstood, but there is no mistaking the whole tenor of Scripture.

What does all this add up to? What are its practical implications for us today? Just that the power of God is at our disposal, waiting for us to call it into action by meeting the conditions which are plainly laid down. God is ready to send down floods of blessing upon us as we begin to obey His plain instructions. We need no new doctrine, no new movement, no "key," no imported evangelist or expensive "course" to show us the way. It is before us as clear as a four-lane highway.

To any inquirer I would say, "Just do the next thing you know you should do to carry out the will of the Lord. If there is sin in your life, quit it instantly. Put away lying, gossiping, dishonesty, or whatever your sin may be. Forsake worldly pleasures, extravagance in spending, vanity in dress, in your car, in your home. Get right with any person you may have wronged. Forgive everyone who may have wronged you. Begin to use your money to help the poor and advance the cause of Christ. Take up the Cross and live sacrificially. Pray, attend the Lord's services. Witness for Christ, not only when it is convenient but when you know you should. Look to no cost and fear no consequences. Study the Bible to learn the will of God and then do His will as you understand it. Start now by doing the next thing, and then go on from there."