

THE PILLAR OF CHRISTIAN CHARACTER

Second Olivet Missionary Baptist Church

Wednesday, December 5, 2017

Pastor Cyrus L. Thornton

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Obedience

The Believer's Covenant

The perfect companion to faith is obedience. The final stanza of the familiar hymn “Trust and Obey” summarizes quite well the partnership these two foundational attitudes have: “Then in fellowship sweet we will sit at His feet, or we’ll walk by His side in the way; what He says we will do, where He sends we will go—never fear, only trust and obey.” The line “what He says we will do, where He sends we will go” gives us a simple definition of spiritual obedience. It basically means submitting to the Lord’s commands, doing His will, based on what is so clearly revealed in Scripture.

FAITH AND OBEDIENCE INSEPARABLE

Jesus’ Great Commission to the disciples indicates just how foundational the matter of obedience is for believers: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” ([Matt. 28:19–20](#)). While verse [19](#) involves proclaiming the Gospel, seeing people saved, and having them publicly profess their faith in Christ, verse [20](#) builds on the new converts’ salvation experience. Disciples, or any mature believers, will teach new Christians to obey God’s commands in His Word and to submit to Him. The Great Commission delineates the two great essentials of the sanctification process, or the believer’s life in Christ—faith and obedience.

Obedience is so foundational that if it is not present in the life of one who claims to be a Christian, that person’s faith ought to be questioned. This truth is emphasized more than once by the apostle John: “Jesus therefore was saying to those Jews who had believed in Him, ‘If you abide in [obey] My Word, then you are truly disciples of Mine’” ([John 8:31](#)); “If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love”

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([15:10](#)). He reiterates the principle even more plainly in his first epistle: “And by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, ‘I have come to know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him” ([1 John 2:3–4](#)).

All who profess faith in Jesus Christ must also demonstrate that faith by obeying God’s Word. Otherwise, their profession of saving faith is suspect. The obedience of a true believer will be unequivocal, uncompromising, not grudging, and from the heart. Obedience is therefore an integral part of one’s salvation.

In fact, the apostle Peter describes salvation as an act of obedience: “... you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren ... for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and abiding word of God” ([1 Pet. 1:22–23](#)). “The truth” is the Gospel, which in essence is a command to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ ([Mark 1:15](#)). In the New Testament, the gospel message was always preached as a command (e.g., [Matt. 3:2](#); [4:17](#); [Mark 6:12](#); [Luke 5:32](#); [Acts 2:38](#); [3:19](#); [17:30](#); [26:20](#)). Because it is a command, it calls for obedience, and all who are genuinely born again have new spiritual life because they heard the truth contained in Scripture, believed it, and obeyed it.

However, the moment of salvation involves more than an isolated act of obedience. When anyone places his trust in Christ’s atoning work and receives His forgiveness of sins, he also acknowledges that the Savior is Lord and Master over his life. That means each believer has committed himself to a life of ongoing obedience, although initially he did not fully grasp all the implications of that commitment.

The reason we don’t immediately understand all the ramifications of our commitment to Christ is that God, through the Holy Spirit, must first give us that sense of dedication. It does not originate with us, but the Spirit produces in our hearts the willingness to travel the pathway of obedience to God as servants of Jesus Christ. That’s the process of sanctification, but it is only one phase of our salvation.

A well-rounded perspective on salvation and its fuller implications begins with a basic understanding of divine election. [First Peter 1:1–2](#) describes believers as those “who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.” *Foreknowledge* is often misinterpreted. It does not mean all people have operated by their own will, with God as a neutral observer looking ahead from eternity past to see who would believe in Him and who would not and then choosing to save some and reject others. Instead,

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foreknowledge means that before anyone was born, God lovingly predetermined to intimately know some individuals and save them.

The Greek word for *foreknow* denotes a predetermined relationship, which is the same concept that defined God's plan to choose Israel from among all the other nations. He could have chosen a more prestigious and powerful country to proclaim His truth to the world, but He sovereignly predetermined to have a special, personal relationship with Israel (see [Amos 3:2](#)). Jesus spoke of this regarding believers when He said, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me" ([John 10:27](#)).

Election according to God's foreknowledge is the first phase of salvation. The Lord predetermined before the foundation of the world to have a close spiritual relationship with certain people, those who have believed or will yet believe the Gospel before the end of the age.

Peter's next phrase in verse [2](#), "by the sanctifying work of the Spirit," brings us again to sanctification, the present phase of salvation. That which was in the decree of God in eternity past (election) moved into time through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. That means believers are saved by the agency of the Spirit: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God" ([John 3:5](#)). So the Spirit's sanctifying work begins when we are saved. Sanctification includes being set apart from the control of sin, death, hell, and Satan and being enabled by the Holy Spirit to live an obedient life, conformed more and more to the image of Jesus Christ.

Living a life of obedience is the third and future phase of salvation, as indicated by Peter's statement, "that you may obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood" (v. [2](#)). The overarching purpose of redemption is that all believers would live the remainder of their lives walking in obedience to the Lord. The apostle Paul illuminates and sums up this future phase of salvation in [Ephesians 2:10](#), "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

A COVENANT OF OBEDIENCE

Peter's brief expression in [1 Peter 1:2](#), "and be sprinkled with His blood," presents us with an interesting interpretive challenge. The apostle's words are relevant to our discussion of salvation issues, but at first glance their meaning may seem a bit strange or obscure. The meaning, however, was clear to Peter's original

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audience, which included many converted Jews. He was referring to the following key passage from the Pentateuch and the graphic ceremony it depicts:

Then Moses came and recounted to the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, "All the words which the LORD has spoken we will do!" And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. Then he arose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain with twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel. And he sent young men of the sons of Israel, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as peace offerings to the LORD. And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and the other half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!" So Moses took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."

—[Exod. 24:3–8](#)

As [Exodus 24](#) begins, Moses has just recently received God's law (the Ten Commandments and many other ordinances) on Mount Sinai. Prior to the new Mosaic law, God had revealed His will and ways to His people in many different fashions. But from now on His will would be written down in absolute specifics—everything in the moral and ceremonial laws and all the laws of social and economic life.

After he came down from the mountain, Moses, with the Spirit's help, orally recounted God's massive law to the people. And they responded orally with one voice of public promise, basically saying, "We will obey all that we've heard." Thus began a covenant-making process between God and His people. God agreed, in the form of the Mosaic law, to provide the people with a set of standards for behavior that when violated would have certain moral and spiritual implications. The people agreed, in the form of their willing public vow, to obey God's words and follow the path of righteousness that His law now established.

Following his oral recitation of the law, Moses (presumably throughout the night) wrote down, under the Holy Spirit's inspiration, all those words of the law. Early the next morning he built an altar at the foot of Mount Sinai to publicly symbolize the sealing of the covenant made the previous day between God and the people. To represent everyone's participation, the altar's prominent feature consisted of twelve stone pillars (actually stacks of stones), one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel. To further signify everyone's

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solemn resolve to obey God's law, burnt offerings and peace offerings of young bulls were made in the presence of the Lord.

Next, Moses did quite a fascinating thing with all the blood that was produced as the young bulls were slaughtered and prepared for sacrifice. Half the blood remained in large basins, and the other half Moses splattered on the altar, which represented God. This splattering of the blood was the next demonstrable, symbolic step Moses took to ratify the covenant.

Then, as if to reinforce the importance of its contents, Moses allowed the people a second opportunity to hear the law by reading all of the words he had recorded the night before. The people of Israel responded exactly as they had to the previous recitation of the law: "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!" (v. [7](#)).

Finally, Moses sealed the covenant made between God and the people by taking the blood from the basins and splattering it on the people. Blood was the physical demonstration that a commitment had been made between the parties. The blood on the altar symbolized God's agreement to reveal His law; the blood on the people symbolized their agreement to obey that law.

Thus the vivid symbolism of [Exodus 24:3-8](#) is an excellent parallel to the statements about salvation in [1 Peter 1:2](#). When Peter says, "and be sprinkled with His blood," the apostle simply means that when a believer trusts Christ, he accepts His part of the new covenant. God allowed the prophet Ezekiel to foresee this principle: "Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances" ([Ezek. 36:26-27](#); [Jer. 31:33](#)).

Thus, salvation was and is a covenant of obedience. God offered His Word, His means of grace, His blessing and care, and we responded by promising to obey. It's as if the blood that was splattered on Christ, the perfect sacrifice, was then splattered on us because of our acceptance of His new covenant. What a wonderful picture that is.

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OBEDIENCE IN PRACTICE

When we came to a saving faith in Jesus Christ, we entered a whole new realm of obedience. Prior to that, we had been obedient to the flesh, the world, and the devil and were controlled by all the various facets of sin. But as believers, we are now to be obedient to the righteousness of Christ.

[Romans 6:16–18](#) reminds us of what our position is in Christ and therefore what kind of obedient attitude we must have:

Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.

First the apostle Paul states the obvious fact that when someone presents himself as the slave of someone else, the primary issue is obedience—doing what the master says. That is true whether someone is an unbeliever and a servant to sin, or a believer and a servant to Christ.

Paul then takes that simple illustration and applies it to the crucial phrase “obedient from the heart” in verse [17](#). Heart obedience ought to be an overriding attitude and desire for any Christian. He or she ought to have such a strong desire for obedience that he or she constantly manifests obedience as a fundamental, inner trait of his or her Christian life. Believers become so obedient to what God’s Word teaches them that they become “slaves of righteousness” (v. [18](#)).

Other New Testament passages make it clear that it’s not enough for believers simply to hear or read the Word (see Jesus’ stern warning and sobering illustration in [Matthew 7:21–27](#)). The essential question is, Are they obeying it?

The apostle James addresses the importance of obedience when he declares, “Prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves” ([James 1:22](#)). Whenever someone is not regularly applying Scripture to his life, he is deceived about his true spiritual condition. James illustrates this principle this way: “For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks [literally, glances] at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has

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immediately forgotten what kind of person he was” (vv. [23–24](#)). Let me illustrate this further with a more contemporary example.

Suppose a man decides one day to shave off his beard or mustache. While he’s shaving, he’s interrupted by a phone call. When he completes his conversation, he forgets that he had been shaving and instead finishes dressing and goes to work, only to encounter the hilarious greetings of his coworkers, who tell him how silly he looks. That’s what it’s like with anyone who merely glances at the Word, turns away, and does not apply it. He doesn’t realize how bad his spiritual condition is and is deceived about his true spiritual needs.

That certainly applies to an unbeliever who hears the Gospel but does not take time to seriously consider it. The words of truth don’t penetrate, and he remains deceived about his true condition. [James 1:23–24](#) can also apply to a person who comes to church, hears the Word preached, makes a profession of faith, thinks he’s a Christian, but never applies anything he hears.

Regrettably, a genuine believer can also be deceived about the spiritual improvement he needs to make. He hears teaching about a certain area of the Christian life in which he falls sinfully short. But instead of applying Scripture to the deficient area, he lives as he did before and is deceived about the true status of his spiritual life.

James concludes by presenting a profile of the obedient Christian: “But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man shall be blessed in what he does” (v. [25](#)). In the original Greek, the verb “looks intently” refers to taking a close, prolonged look in order to properly assess something. You are to examine the perfect law of liberty, which is God’s Word that sets you free from sin and death ([John 8:32](#); [1 Pet. 1:23–25](#); [1 Pet. 2:2](#)), and abide by it. Only by being “an effectual doer” rather than “a forgetful hearer” will you be ultimately blessed. An attitude of obedience brings true blessing.

In conclusion, when we experienced salvation, we also made a simple but far-reaching covenant of obedience with the Lord. Therefore, the attitude of obedience must accompany the attitude of faith in the Christian life because they are both critical to our salvation. Those churches blessed to have believers exhibiting the twin pillars of faith and obedience will also be filled with joy, power, and blessings from God.