

"WE MUST OBEY GOD"

"Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

The boldness of the apostles in conducting their religious meetings in the territory of the enemies of Christ had certain obvious results.

1. Indignation. Acts 5:17.

The members of the Sanhedrin were divided in their opinion of the apostles. Some were filled with admiration of them, and others with exasperation because of them. But here the opposition was desperate. Drastic action was deemed necessary.

2. Incarceration. Acts 5:18.

Led by the high priest, the Sadducees arrested the apostolic group and placed them in the public prison, to be kept securely until the morning when the Sanhedrin would convene for the trial. The Sadducees hated the apostles because of what they stood for and what they preached. The crime of which the apostles were accused was nothing more than that of preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. The resultant success of their preaching was something which they were not willing to tolerate.

3. Emancipation. Acts 5:19.

That very night the Lord sent His angel to open the prison doors, and to release the prisoners. The angel brought out the apostles and shut the doors without the keepers hearing or seeing what had been done. How vain are all bars and bolts to shut in those whom God would have released! The angel commissioned the apostles to go back to the same place where they had been preaching and teaching, and to continue to proclaim the gospel to the people, as if nothing had happened.

On the part of the apostles, there was no hesitation at all as to what they would do. It is not for any Christian to hesitate, reason, or delay when duty is plain. The apostles took their assignment seriously. They were convinced that they must obey God rather than men, as they went to the temple immediately and began to teach again.

There is not a door to which our Lord does not have a master key. No combination of men and demons can shut a preacher in jail when the Lord wants him to preach in a pulpit. The Lord Jesus referred to Himself as "He that openeth and no man shutteth, and shutteth and no man openeth."

On the following morning, the members of the council were called and all the Senate of the children of Israel, and when, with dignity, they assembled, they sent for the prisoners whom they were determined to condemn. Soon the officers returned and reported that the prison was still standing in the same place, and the prison doors were shut safely, the keepers were standing faithfully on guard, but upon investigation they had discovered that they were keeping guard over an empty prison, for the prisoners were not there. You can imagine the astonishment of the members of the council when this report was received. They may have asked themselves, "What can we do with men whom prisons cannot hold?"

To add to their terrible perplexity and frustration, a messenger came in and reported as to the whereabouts of the apostles. Not only had the prisoners escaped, but instead of hiding as might have been expected of them, they were actually standing in the temple and teaching the people. Probably, the thing that infuriated the members of the council most of all was the defiance of their authority. When the disciples were ultimately brought before the council, the high priest promptly charged them with disobedience. He said, "We straitly charged you that ye should not teach in this name, and behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us." Apparently, they were unable to understand why the commands of such important people should be disobeyed.

This early church at Jerusalem presents a pattern of what present-day churches ought to be. Those were indeed earnest days and full of stirring events. Men went forth to conquer a hostile world, not, of course, by sword, or atomic weapons, but by the preaching of the gospel of Christ which they believed to be the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth. It is only by a reversion to this type of church life that churches can make progress today.

Representing himself and other apostles, Peter arose to answer the charge and make his defense. What will his answer be? If he is a mere politician whose life is influenced by intimidation or governed by patriotism and compromise, he will capitulate to the orders of the council and recant. In his commendable reply, he shows himself to be the very opposite. Peter here proves himself to be a Christian statesman of the highest order, a man whose life is ruled by the principle of right. Hear him as he speaks those memorable words: "We ought to obey God rather than men."

I. A Principle.

"We ought to obey God rather than men." Here we have a great principle and doctrine. It is the sovereignty of God, Whose sway is supreme and Whose will ought to be the law of our lives.

Why ought we to obey God? For the simple and sufficient reason that He is God, and that beside Him there is none else. You do not need any other reason than that. Since He is God in very truth, He has the right to command the obedience of His creatures. Your first duty and supreme obligation, whoever you may be, and whatever your past, whatever your present standing, whether your life be circumscribed, or whether it be richly lived and widely influential, whatever your situation in life, your supreme obligation is to obey God simply because of Who He is.

Moreover, you should obey God because He made you. God has a proprietary right in you for He made you for Himself; He endowed you with all the qualities you possess in order that He might indwell you, and that through you He might be glorified. We are made for God. Now that we belong to Him, we must obey Him. You belong to God; every breath you draw, you draw from Him; every power you possess, you receive from Him. "He giveth to all life, and breath, and all things." The air you breathe is God's; the very life that throbs within your breast is His, and He can snuff it out in the fraction of a moment if He so desires. Your business is to obey God.

You ought to obey God because your redemption was wrought out by the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. You ought to obey God because your good, as certainly as His glory, consists in such obedience. If you would have peace, joy, and power, and if you would learn the true meaning of life, you must obey God. Your spiritual well-being depends upon your giving God the first place.

Obedience is an imperative principle because:

1. God demands it.

To His ancient people God said: "Ye shall walk after the Lord your God, and fear him, and keep his commandments, and obey his voice" (Deuteronomy 13:4). To His apostles the Lord said, "Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life" (Acts 5:20). God has a will respecting our conduct, so we ought to obey Him. We owe Him our obedience on every count, for He is our Creator, Preserver, Redeemer and Possessor.

2. God deserves it.

God deserves our obedience because of the goodness and mercy that He lavishes upon us through Christ our Saviour. God prefers our obedience to our sacrifices. God deserves and expects our absolute obedience. Who are you to presume to know better than God what is best for you? Who are you to have the audacity to question the wisdom and the judgment of God? Every commandment that God gives is for your good. When God forbids you to do something, it is not because He is trying to withhold something from you that is good for you. It is because He knows that it is not best for you to have it. Do what the Lord commands and leave the consequences with Him.

II. A Practice.

The apostles were practicing obedience as God demanded and deserved it. The practice of obedience must have certain characteristics.

1. It must be intelligent.

Knowing the will of our Lord, we must translate it into action.

2. It must be intentional.

To be acceptable to God our obedience must be intentional. It must be an expression of inward love and outward loyalty to Him.

3. It must be immediate.

Confronted with a challenge, the instant reply of the Apostle Peter was, "We ought to obey God rather than men." Whatever the circumstances or consequences, we must obey God.

"Ours is not to reason why;
Ours is not to make reply;
Ours is but to do or die."

III. A Purpose.

1. An objective purpose.

To Peter and his brethren the objective purpose of obedience was to witness to God's saving plan and power. Those obedient men said, "We are his witnesses of these things" (Acts 5:32).

2. A subjective purpose.

They experienced God's sovereign power when they received the Holy Spirit. If any Christian does not know the power of the Holy Spirit in his life, it is because he is not obedient to the Lord.

IV. A Product.

Obedience to God produces a quality of life that is characterized by:

1. Healthy development.

The more these men obeyed the Lord, the greater became their knowledge of Him. Growth in grace and in the knowledge of Christ are ever and always a product of obedience to Him.

"Light obeyed increaseth light;
Light rejected bringeth night."

Some are still babes in Christ because they have refused to obey the light which has been given to them.

2. Holy dedication.

"The Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him" (Acts 5:32). Peter made it abundantly clear that the infilling and indwelling of the Holy Spirit is dependent upon Christian obedience. When once is obedient to the Lord, he exemplifies a Spirit-controlled life of dedication. A life of righteousness can only be enjoyed when the Lord is obeyed.

3. Happy discipleship.

"They departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name" (Acts 5:41). Even though they endured much suffering, they went on their way rejoicing. How true are the words that we often sing:

"Trust and obey,
For there's no other way
To be happy in Jesus,
But to trust and obey."

Happy discipleship is the product of a life of obedience. If a Christian is not enjoying his Christianity and his church membership, it is simply because of his personal disobedience to the Lord. The solution to his problem is in the word obedience.

I do not have the least hesitation in affirming that the reason behind joyful living and effective Christian service is the principle of putting God first and giving to Him unquestioning obedience. Amid all the apparent adversities, our loyalty to Him and His Word will guarantee true success. The Lord followed up His injunction to Joshua to adhere strictly to His Word by saying, "For then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then shalt thou have good success" (Joshua 1:8).

The happy Christian is the obedient Christian. The useful Christian is the one who does what God tells him to do. The apostles were under the authority of the Lord. It was theirs to obey His authoritative commands. They heard the commands of the religious leaders, but they obeyed the commands of their Lord. Peter said, "We ought to obey God rather than men." This word "ought" literally means "must." It means that it is necessary for us to obey God rather than men. "Must" means that one does not have any option in the matter, or that there is no getting out of it. "We must obey God." Woe to the Christian who merits Christ's rebuke, "Why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?" (Luke 6:46). Refusal to obey the Lord is sin.

The Rothschilds were famous financiers. They exacted unqualified obedience from their employees. A story illustrates the fact. They once had an alert young agent in New Orleans. The New York office wired him to sell their cotton holdings on a certain date. The agent believed the price of cotton was going up. He delayed the sale four days. An extra profit resulted. The young agent sent the Rothschilds a check in full and explained what he had done. Back came a check for the extra amount with a cold note that said, "The money you made disobeying our orders is yours, not ours. Take it. Your successor sails for New Orleans today." The man was fired!

The Rothschilds would not have a man on their staff who would disobey a plain order. What about us? Have we thought how serious it is for a Christian to disobey God?

God means for us to do what He commands. We suffer loss for every disobedience. It is right for every Christian to do what the Lord commands and leave all of the consequences with Him. Unsaved friend, there is a divine command which you should obey promptly, namely, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." You may suppose that your own way of salvation is better than the one which the Lord has devised, but it will never get you anywhere. Accept His will and enter upon His way now.