

THE DUTY OF OBEDIENCE

"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 meetings in the territory of the enemies of Christ had certain obvious results.

1. Indignation. Acts 5:17.

"Then the high priest rose up, and all they that were with him, (which is the sect of the Sadducees,) and were filled with 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 were filled with exasperation because of them. But here the opposition was desperate. Drastic action was deemed necessary.

2. Incarceration. Acts 5:18.

"And laid their hands on the apostles, and put them in the common prison" (Acts 5:18). Led by the high priest, the Sadducees laid hold on the entire apostolic group and placed them in the public prison. There they were to be kept securely until the morning when the Sanhedrin would convene for the trial.

From being preachers of the Word in God's great open spaces to being prisoners in a common prison was a far cry. That is exactly what happened, but it did not intimidate them, for from behind prison bars they could still look up to God and talk with Him. The Sadducees hated the apostles because of what they stood for and what they preached.

3. Emancipation. Acts 5:19.

"But the angel of the Lord by night opened the prison doors, and brought them forth" (Acts 5:19). The angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, brought out the apostles and shut the doors without the keepers hearing or seeing what they had done. How vain are all bars and bolts to shut in those whom God would have escape!

The angel of the Lord who opened the doors of the prison and brought forth the apostles said, "Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life" (Acts 5:20). Thus the apostles were commissioned to go back to the same place where they had been preaching and teaching, and to continue in the proclamation of the gospel to the people. It was their duty to tell the way of life to all who would listen to them.

As far as the apostles were concerned, there was no hesitation at all as to what they would do. The record says, "And when they heard that, they entered into the temple early in the morning, and taught" (Acts 5:21). It is not for any child of God to hesitate, to reason or to delay when duty is plain.

The members of the Sanhedrin assembled in all their pomp and glory, and sent to the prison for the culprits. When they were informed of the complete security of the prison and the absence of all the prisoners, they were terribly embarrassed. Then, another messenger rushed in with the report

that the men whom they had put in prison were teaching publicly in the temple. The captain and his officers went and brought the prisoners and placed them in the center of the council for questioning.

The apostles could not be frightened by threats, stripes, prison or death. They took their business seriously. They were convinced that God was with them. Any man is to be reckoned with who is convinced that he is acting under divine impulses. The apostles were convinced that they must obey God rather than men.

The word "ought" is one which sets forth a sense of duty. It is a word which is above time, place or circumstance. It symbolizes duty and obligation. It is derived from the word "to owe," so that what we ought to do is what we owe to do. When Peter and the other apostles said, "We ought to obey God rather than men," they were saying, in effect, that they owed their obedience to God. To obey was nothing less than a categorical imperative.

Our text reveals to us at least four things:

I. The Principle Of Obedience.

"We ought to obey God rather than men." To be faithful to their Lord and Master, Peter and his colleagues could do no other than obey. In other words, to these men obedience was a principle of life. Obedience is an imperative principle because:

1. God demands it.

"Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life" (Acts 5:20). That was a clear command from heaven, and therefore nothing less than obedience was demanded. God had said to His ancient people: "Ye shall walk after the Lord your God, and fear him, and keep his commandments, and obey his voice" (Deuteronomy 13:4).

God has a will respecting our conduct, so we ought to obey Him. We owe Him our obedience on every account, for He is our Creator, our Preserver, our Redeemer, and our Possessor. The only alternative to obedience is disobedience, which is a sin against the Lord.

Since obedience is an imperative principle of life, the believer is obliged to obey, not only because God demands it, but also because:

2. God deserves it.

The apostles have been wonderfully delivered from prison. God had extended to them His grace and favor, so that the least they could do was to obey Him.

God demands obedience, but He also deserves it because of the goodness and mercy that He lavishes upon us through the cross of His dear Son and our Saviour. God says to us what He did to King Saul through the prophet Samuel: "To obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams" (I Samuel 15:22). Christ expressed it another way when He said: "If a man love me, he will keep my words" (John 14:23).

To Peter and the rest of the apostles, the Lord Jesus had become exceedingly precious. He was the One Whom God had exalted at His

right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, and to give repentance and forgiveness of sins. He had not only saved them by His grace and filled them with His Spirit, but had called them to a glorious ministry of world evangelization. Now they were proving the Saviour under the pressure of opposition and persecution. What else could they do but love Him; and the true expression of love was not just the sacrifice of the "fat of rams" but obedience.

So we see that loyalty to God demands obedience, and love to God deserves obedience.

I wonder if your life is governed by the principle of obedience. As you examine yourself in the light of God's Word, can you say that there is no commandment known to you which you have not obeyed?

III. The Practice Of Obedience.

"We ought to obey God rather than men." These servants were not theorizing, nor giving voice to pretty evangelical platitudes, but they were practicing obedience as God demands it and deserves it. So our text shows us that the practice of obedience must have certain characteristics.

1. It must be intelligent.

In saying, "We ought to obey God rather than men," Peter and the apostles knew the will of their Master and were endeavoring to translate it into action. Nothing less than this is the practice of obedience. Writing to the Romans Paul said: "God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you" (Romans 6:17).

2. It must be intentional.

The mere doing of what God commands does not constitute obedience unless we also abstain from what He forbids. Negative precepts are as obligatory as positive precepts. Obedience must be comprehensive and universal. By obedience, God does not mean an accidental conformity to His will, but rather an intelligent and intentional fulfillment of His will. To be acceptable, obedience must be internal as well as external. It must be an expression of inward love and outward loyalty to God.

3. It must be immediate.

Like the Psalmist, Peter and the rest could say: "I made haste, and delayed not to keep thy commandments" (Psalm 119:60). Confronted with a challenge, their instant reply was: "We ought to obey God rather than men." And so it must be with us. We ought to obey God, whatever the circumstances or consequences. There are no exceptions to immediate obedience.

An officer who had received orders from the Duke of Wellington urged the impossibility of executing them. Wellington replied: "I did not ask your opinion. I gave you my orders, and expect them obeyed."

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

Some Sunday School girls were once questioned concerning the clause in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy will be done." "How do the angels in heaven do it?" asked the teacher. "Immediately," said one. "Actively," said another. "Unitedly," replied a third. A pause followed. Then one little girl said, "Without asking any questions!"

III. The Purpose Of Obedience.

1. There is an objective purpose.

"We are his witnesses of these things" (Verse 32). Thus spoke obedient and confident men. To Peter and his brethren, the objective purpose of obedience was to witness to God's saving plan in the world. This is beautifully illustrated in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. As a Son He "learned obedience by the things which he suffered" (Hebrews 5:8), and "became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Philippians 2:8), thereby expressing in time God's wonderful plan of salvation. Similarly, when we obey God, we live redemptively. We express to the world something of God's saving plan and purpose.

2. There is a subjective purpose.

"We are his witnesses and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him" (Verse 32).

~~Just as certainly as the objective purpose was the expression of~~ God's saving plan, then the subjective purpose was the experience of God's sovereign power; for the Holy Spirit was given to them that obey Him.

What was true in the experience of Peter and his colleagues is equally true in Christian experience today. The reason why any Christian does not know the fulness and power of the Holy Spirit in his life is because he is not obedient. This is the solemn truth which each child of God needs to face. The tragedy is that time lived without the fulness of the Holy Spirit is utterly wasted.

IV. The Product Of Obedience.

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

1. Healthy development.

"And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ" (Verse 42).

It is not difficult to see that the more these men obeyed, the greater became their knowledge of their Lord and Master. Growth in grace and spiritual knowledge are ever and always a product of the life of obedience. Christ declared: "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God (John 7:17).

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

The reason why so many are still babes in the Christian life is because they have not obeyed the light which has been given to them. Obedience produces a quality of life within the Christian which is characterized by healthy development.

2. Holy dedication.

"The Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him" (Verse 32).

Peter makes it abundantly clear that the indwelling and infilling of the Holy Spirit is dependent upon obedience. But given obedience, there is a Spirit-controlled life of dedication. Paul taught the same truth when he said: "Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness?" (Romans 6:16). Thus it is evident that a life of dedication and righteousness can only be enjoyed when the Holy Spirit is obeyed unconditionally.

3. Happy discipleship.

"They departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name" (Verse 41).

Needless to say, obedience involves sacrifice. For the early disciples it meant being publicly maligned and beaten. But even though they endured such suffering, we read that they went on their way rejoicing. So it always is.

Christ said: "Blessed (or happy) are they that hear the word of God, and keep it" (Luke 11:28). James reminded us: "Whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed (or made happy) in his deed" (James 1:25).

How true are the words 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 church membership, the problem is not difficult to solve. It is all summed up in one word that punctuates the Holy Scriptures, namely, disobedience. The solution is also in one word, namely, obedience.

Our text certainly calls for our unquestioned submission to the principle, the practice, the purpose and the product of obedience in our lives.

There is nothing more important in the whole range of Christian teaching or experience than the Duty of Obedience. It is much easier to do what God gives us to do, no matter how hard it is, than to face the responsibility of not doing it.

About the time of the fall of Fort Sumpter a naval officer in Washington, D. C., who was a South Carolinian by birth and education, went in great embarrassment to ask advice of Senator Sumner. He said: "What shall I do if my ship is ordered to the South to coerce my own people?" "Read your commission, sir," replied the Senator. "But suppose my ship is ordered to Charleston?" "Read your commission, sir!" "But what if I am ordered to fire on my own father's plantation?" "Read your commission, sir!" thundered the Senator.

Let us, then, desire and determine to "obey God rather than men."