

Growing in Obedience

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning everybody. I brought the sun with me, you'll be so pleased to know. Right, the reading is from Philippians. Philippians 2, 1 to 11. You can probably all quote this with me as I read it, but we'll read it anyway. If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. If he did or did that, what a wonderful world it would be. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing. Taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross. Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth. And every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

So I think this is the last in a series of growing in Christ, and this one's growing in Christ's obedience. Now I'm not sure whether you are an obedient people or not. I'm sure some of you will say, of course, I'm obedient. But some will say it depends on who you're obeying and the circumstances in which you're being asked to obey. Now I've been mostly obedient in my life. But there are a couple of occasions when I was at school, when I was disobedient, and both times was when I spoke out of turn, which you probably won't be surprised about. One was at junior school at Bessemer. And because I spoke out of turn, I was in the in queues in those days to go off to your class, and I was speaking. I was a bit of a speaker then.

And for that, I got the sipper. It shows you how long ago it was. And then in secondary school, I was speaking in assembly. And I got the cane for that.

So things have changed. We don't beat children now, because they speak out of turn. And I'm very thankful that that's the case. We shouldn't beat children. That's not right. I'm not quite sure it did me any good. But certainly, I didn't speak in assembly again. So perhaps, it had that effect.

So obedience does depend of who's asking to obey, and what the circumstances are. And it's not a straightforward question. Now Paul tells us we should obey the authorities. That's in Romans.

[3 : 3 9] But does this apply, or did this apply to the apartheid regime in South Africa? Did it apply to slaves in America, to Russians today, to the Germans in the Nazi area before the war?

Should they have obeyed the authorities? Now P.W. Botha, who was the president during the government's apartheid regime, quoted Romans 13 as evidence that the policy of apartheid should be supported. He said, I'm the authority. Support me, because I'm telling you what to do, because I'm in power. But, as with all scripture, we should read this passage in the light of other scriptures.

Paul, who wrote these words, when he was brought before the Jewish court, the Sanhedrin, said, we must obey God rather than man. The principle here is that we should obey the state up to, and only up to, the point when obeying the state would be disobeying God. We are not people who should disobey God, because we think the authorities are telling us to do something.

Now obedience, for many, is like a military term. And an army is run on the underlying understanding that soldiers should obey those in command, because if they don't, they might lose the war.

But for many, submitting ourselves to anyone is difficult. We want to be in control of ourselves, our destiny. We need to be in charge.

[5 : 15] If we submit to someone or something else, then someone else has control over us. When God chose Israelite to be his people, he said it was not because they were more numerous than other peoples, for they were the fewest of all peoples, but it was because the Lord loved them.

It wasn't because of anything they'd done, any strength they had, any greatness in their leaders. It was because the Lord loved them. And having chosen them, God made it clear that they should obey him.

Later on in Tutorami, he says, See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today, the love of the Lord your God, to walk in his ways and to keep his commands, decrees and laws.

Then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away, and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed.

You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. There is a cost to not obeying God. For the people of Israel, you would not be living long in the land promised to them.

[6 : 37] And Samuel, one of the first prophets of God, made it clear that God doesn't delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices.

That's not what he's concerned about. You know, it's not what we do, what we bring, or even how we worship. What he's interested in is obedience to the voice of the Lord.

So how can we look at this obedience? Well, the greatest role model we have for obedience to God is what we see in the life and death of Jesus.

The obedience of Jesus, let's look at that. So we read those well-known words in Philippians, and they sum up how Jesus was obedient to his Father.

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus, who being in the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage.

[7 : 38] Rather, he made himself nothing by the very nature of a servant, by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness, and being found in appearance as a man.

He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. This is Jesus, who was with God the Father before the creation of the world.

He is the one for whom all things were created, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities. All things have been created through him and for him.

This is the Jesus we're talking about in this Philippians passage. So Jesus, in his very nature, was God and equal to him.

And someone this powerful, this authority, could have used that power to his advantage, but he did not do so. And we see the same attitude when the devil tried to tempt Jesus.

[8 : 40] But we refused all those temptations, saying, after the final one, final one, away from me, Satan, for he's written, worship the Lord your God and serve him only.

So this Jesus, who was all-powerful, made himself nothing, becoming a servant, being born of a woman, being incarnate, a child, helpless and dependent on his parents.

And he just emptied himself of all that he was to become helpless. We read later that he grew in wisdom and stature, but he started off as a babe in arms.

And again, we see this attitude of Jesus, when he had his greatest temptation, when faced with dying on the cross, when in the Garden of Gethsemane he prayed, my father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me, yet not as I will, but as you will.

So Jesus, a low one with his father in heaven, made himself nothing. But why did he do this? So that he could be obedient to death on the cross.

[9 : 56] We saw the disobedience of Israel led to them losing the promised land. But if Jesus had been disobedient to his father, it would have meant he would not have died on the cross.

There would have been no resurrection, and there would be no salvation from sin. So Jesus' obedience led to us being here this morning because of the salvation we find in Jesus Christ.

As Paul put it to the Romans, for just as through the disobedience of the one man, Adam, the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man, the many will be made righteous.

So that's the obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ. What about our obedience? There are different sorts of obedience.

You remember the story of the centurion servant who came to Jesus and said, can you heal my servant? He said, well, should I come with you?

[11 : 04] He said, no, no, don't come with me. I know you have authority to heal because I know about authority because when I say go to someone, they go. When I say come to someone, they come.

But the authority of the centurion was one of fear because the centurion's soldiers knew if they didn't come when he said come or didn't go when he said go, they'd probably be imprisoned or executed.

There's another sort of authority or obedience you actually want to obey. Now, you won't be surprised that somehow I managed to get something in about football, but Beverley beat me to it.

But there we are. But Gareth Southgate will be telling, ordering his players to win. And they will want to win. It's not because they're scared.

I might be scared, but they're not scared they're going to be killed or executed. It's because they are willing. They want to follow this person who has taken them so far.

[12 : 14] So there are different sorts of obedience. And for us, obedience is not always straightforward. As I said before, it's not always our natural inclination to obey.

And this starts from childhood. The first word of a child may well be mummy or daddy, but it could well be no. Because they hear it so often. No, don't do that.

No, stop. Don't talk. No, no. So because children aren't born innately good. Those who have had children will know that.

And sometimes they have to be reprimanded. So no is a word we quite often have to use. But so how do we become obedient to God?

Well, first, we must be humble. It's humility. To be obedient to God, we need to be humble. The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.

- [13 : 15] If we don't submit to God's law, we're not humble enough to admit that he is right, then we can't obey God. And we should recognise that we can only have one Lord and one Master, Jesus Christ.

Our obedience should always be one of obedience to God and his son, Jesus Christ. James tells us, God opposes the proud but shows favour to the humble.

Submit yourself then to God. We must be a people of humility. Proverbs tells us, if you in all your ways submit to him and he will make your paths straight.

And Jesus put it this way, no one can serve two masters. Either you hate the one and love the other, or you'll be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

This is not saying that money is bad, or having it is bad, but it's saying we should not let it become our Master. It shouldn't govern what we do and how we do things.

- [14 : 19] We must be prepared to bow down before God and say with Thomas, when he met the risen Lord, my Lord and my God. Secondly, humility first, then secondly, obeying the word of God.

When Paul was making his defence before King Agrippa, he spoke of the vision he had of Jesus Christ, when he was told by Jesus that he would be the ambassador to the Gentiles. Paul told Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven.

He obeyed what Christ told him to do in that vision. And Paul told the Corinthians, take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. To do this though, we need a deep knowledge of the word of God.

So if wrong thoughts come in, we can, as Jesus dismissed them, with a scripture. Jesus told his disciple he was the true vine and that if we remain in him, he will remain in us.

In the same passage, he also told his disciples, remain in his love. But how is that done? Jesus said, if you keep my commands, you will remain in my love.

- [15 : 30] So following Jesus, obeying him, we remain in his love. This in some ways is a shorter version of the choice God put before his people in Deuteronomy, which we looked at earlier.

It comes back to knowing God's word and remaining in it. The picture here, that Jesus paints of the vine, is an Austin picture, because he compares our obeying his commands and remaining in his love to Jesus obeying his father's commands and remaining in his father's love.

We're in the same position as Jesus to his father. That's amazing. When reading this, the thought struck me that whatever happened at the crucifixion, no matter the cry, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Although there Jesus bore the sin of the world in his body on the tree, despite all that happened to Jesus on the cross, Jesus remained in the love of his father.

Nothing could break that love between the father and Jesus. And nothing can break the love that Jesus has for us. He chose us in love and nothing can break it. John again told his disciples, I mean, Jesus told his disciples, I give them eternal life and they shall never perish.

- [16 : 53] No one can snatch them out of my hand. C.K. Barrett, an old commentator, well, I say old, someone who wrote some time ago, said of this passage about the vine, this union of believers with Christ originated in his initiative, was sealed by his death on their behalf, is completed by the believers' responsive love and obedience.

And this is the essence of Christianity, believing Christ and obeying him. And it's only in Christ can Christians live. Outside of Christ, we can't live as Christians.

Peter said, now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth, so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart, you have been born anew, not of perishable, but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.

So through obedience, and obeying the word of God, we have purified our souls. But also, we are new creations.

In the gospel, the call to obedience is because we are already saved and being created anew. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come, or that person is a new creation.

[18 : 21] Now we are a new creation because we were once slaves. Sin was our master, but we are now obedient to the teaching of the gospel. Excuse me.

But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart of the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. Through the testing of this ministry, you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ.

We must be obedient to what Christ has taught us and to his gospel. What about the outcome of obedience? What happens? What are the results of obedience?

Let us look at what happened when people in the New Testament obeyed Jesus. So we all know the story of the paralyzed man. His friends dug a hole in the roof, lowered him down to Jesus.

and he said, well, is it easier? People said, you can't heal him. What's easier to do? Say your sins are forgiven or heal him and get up and walk.

[19 : 31] And Jesus said to the paralyzed man, I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home. Immediately, he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home, praising God.

Obedience can bring healing. Helen told us a little bit about that. She obeyed God's word to bless others and because she blessed others, her back became better.

Now, we all know the story of Levi, a tax collector up a tree. No, he wasn't up a tree.

That was someone else. Sorry. That was Zacchaeus, who was a very little man. It was Levi. He was sitting at his tax booth. So he was a local tax inspector. But Jesus said to him, follow me.

Levi got up, left everything and followed him. So obeying Christ can make us followers of Christ. In fact, we only be followers of Christ if we obey him.

[20 : 39] And the widow's son at Nain, this very lovely story where this son was dead and Jesus went to the sort of funeral.

He went up and touched the bier that they were carrying him on and the bearer stood still. He said, young man, I say to you, get up. The dead man sat up and began to talk and Jesus gave him back to his mother.

I love that last bit. And Jesus gave him back to his mother. He didn't just say, get up, you're healed. He realised it was his mother who was really mourning so he gave this son back to his mother.

So obedience can bring life where once there was death. We know there was a couple of missionary journeys which Jesus sent his disciples out on.

One of them sent 72 out his disciples to preach and they returned with joy and said, Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name. Jesus replied, I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.

[21 : 54] So obedience and only obedience can bring success in ministry. You can't be successful if you don't obey Jesus. But there is another side. Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

Look, he said, I see heaven opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God. At this they covered their ears and yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragging him out in the city and began to stone him.

The first martyr, Stephen. So obedience can lead to death. Stephen was obedient to Jesus to go and preach the gospel and because he did so, he was stoned to death.

And this is still true in many countries today where if you say your obedience is to Jesus Christ, you can be encrusted and even killed. So obedience to Christ is not an easy option, but it is the right option.

And with Paul we should say obey God rather than man. Peter told his readers, 1 Peter, above all, love each other deeply because love covers over a multitude of sins.

[23 : 28] Now the greatest command of Jesus, which we all obey, comes at the end of the passage on Jesus being the vine and us being the branches. Jesus says, this is my command, love one another.

And if this is the only command we obey today and next week, that we love one another, and we can't go far wrong. Amen.

Amen.