

The School of Obedience

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7. The School of Obedience

A Basket of Fragments

'Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost.' - John 6:12.

In this closing chapter I wish to gather up some points not yet touched upon, or not expressed with sufficient clearness, in the hope that they may help some one who has indeed enrolled himself in CHRIST's school of obedience.

I. ON LEARNING OBEDIENCE

First, let me warn against a misunderstanding of the expression - 'learning obedience.'

We are apt to think that absolute obedience as a principle - obedience unto death - is a thing that can only be gradually learned in CHRIST's school. This is a great and most hurtful mistake. What we have to learn, and do learn gradually, is the practice of obedience, in new and more difficult commands. But as to the principle, CHRIST wants us from the very entrance into His school to make the vow of entire obedience.

A little child of five can be as implicitly obedient as a youth of eighteen. The difference between the two lies not in the principle, but in the nature of the work demanded.

Though externally CHRIST's obedience unto death came at the end of His life, the spirit of His obedience was the same from the beginning. Whole-hearted obedience is not the end, but the beginning of our school life. The end is fitness for GOD's service, when obedience has placed us fully at GOD's disposal. A heart yielded to GOD in unreserved obedience is the one condition of progress in CHRIST's school, and of growth in the spiritual knowledge of GOD's will.

Young Christian! do get this matter settled at once. Remember GOD's rule: all for all. Give Him all: He will give you all. Consecration avails nothing unless it means presenting yourself as a living sacrifice to do nothing but the will of GOD. The vow of entire obedience is the entrance fee for him who would be enrolled by no assistant teacher, but by CHRIST Himself, in the school of obedience.

II. OF LEARNING TO KNOW GOD'S WILL

This unreserved surrender to obey, as it is the first condition of entering CHRIST's school, is the only fitness for receiving instruction as to the will of GOD for us.

There is a general will of GOD for all His children, which we can, in some measure, learn out of the Bible. But there is a special individual application of these commands - GOD's will concerning each of us personally, which only the HOLY SPIRIT can teach. And He will not teach it, except to those who have taken the vow of obedience.

This is the reason why there are so many unanswered prayers for GOD to make known His will. JESUS said, *'If any man will do His Will, he shall know of the doctrine (teaching), whether it be of God.'* If a man's will is really set on doing GOD's will, that is, if his heart is given up to do, and he as a consequence does it as far as he knows it, he shall know what GOD has further to teach him.

It is simply what is true of every scholar with the art he studies, of every apprentice with his trade, of every man in business doing is the one condition of truly knowing. And so obedience, the doing of GOD's will as far as we know, and the will and the vow to do it all as He reveals it, is the spiritual organ, the capacity for receiving the true knowledge of what is GOD's will for each of us.

In connection with this let me press upon you three things.

1. Seek to have a deep sense of your very great ignorance of GOD's will, and of your impotence by any effort to know it aright.

The consciousness of ignorance lies at the root of true teachableness. 'The meek will He guide in... His way' - those who humbly confess their need of teaching. Head-knowledge only gives human thoughts without power. GOD by His Spirit gives a living knowledge that enters the love of the heart, and works effectually.

2. Cultivate a strong faith that GOD will make you know wisdom in the hidden part, in the heart.

You may have known so little of this in your Christian life hitherto that the thought appears strange. Learn that GOD's working, the place where He gives His life and light, is in the heart, deeper than all our thoughts. Any uncertainty about GOD's will makes a joyful obedience impossible. Believe most confidently that the Father is willing to make known what He wants you to do. Count upon Him for this. Expect it certainly.

3. In view of the darkness and deceitfulness of the flesh and fleshly mind, ask GOD very earnestly for the searching and convincing light of the HOLY SPIRIT.

There may be many things which you have been accustomed to think lawful or allowable, which your Father wants different. To consider it settled that they are the will of GOD because others and you think so, may effectually shut you out from knowing GOD's will in other things.

Bring everything, without reserve, to the judgment of the Word, explained and applied by the HOLY SPIRIT. Wait on GOD to lead you to know that everything you are and do is pleasing in His sight.

III. ON OBEDIENCE UNTO DEATH

There is one of the deeper and more spiritual aspects of this truth to which I have not alluded. It is something that as a rule does not come up in the early stages of the Christian life, and yet it is needful that every believer know what the privileges are that await him. There is an experience into which whole-hearted obedience will bring the believer, in which he will know that, as surely as with his Lord, obedience leads to death.

Let us see what this means. During our Lord's life, His resistance to sin and the world was perfect and complete. And yet His final deliverance from their temptations and His victory over their power, His obedience, was not complete until He had died to the earthly life and to sin. In that death He gave up His life in perfect helplessness into the Father's hands, waiting for Him to raise Him up. It was through death that He received the fullness of His life and glory. Through death alone, the giving up of the life He had, could obedience lead Him into the glory of GOD.

The believer shares with CHRIST in this death to sin. In regeneration he is baptized by the HOLY SPIRIT into it. Owing to ignorance and unbelief he may know little experimentally of this entire death to sin. When the HOLY SPIRIT reveals to him what he possesses in CHRIST, and he appropriates it in faith, the Spirit works in him the very same disposition which animated CHRIST in His death.

With CHRIST it was an entire ceasing from His own life, a helpless committal of His spirit into the Father's hands. This was the complete fulfillment of the Father's command: Lay down Thy life in My hands. Out of the perfect self-oblivion of the grave He entered the glory of the Father.

It is into the fellowship of this a believer is brought. He finds that in the most unreserved obedience for which GOD's Spirit fits him, there is still a secret element of self and self-will. He longs to be delivered from it. He is taught in GOD's Word that this can only be by death. The Spirit helps him to claim more fully that he is indeed dead to sin in CHRIST, and that the power of that death can work mightily in him. He is made willing to be obedient unto death, this entire death to self, which makes him truly nothing. In this he finds a full entrance into the life of CHRIST.

To see the need of this entire death to self, to be made willing for it, to be led into the entire self-emptying and humility of our Lord JESUS, - this is the highest lesson that our obedience has to learn - this is, indeed, the Christlike obedience unto death.

There is no room here to enlarge on this. I thought it well to say this much on a lesson which GOD Himself will, in due time, teach those who are entirely faithful.

IV. OF THE VOICE OF CONSCIENCE

In regard to the knowledge of GOD's will, we must see and give conscience its place, and submit to its authority.

There are a thousand little things in which the law of nature or education teaches us what is right

and good, and in regard to which even earnest Christians do not hold themselves bound to obey. Now, remember, if you are unfaithful in that which is least, who will entrust you with the greater? Not GOD. If the voice of conscience tells you of some course of action that is the nobler or the better, and you choose another because it is easier or pleasing to self, you unfit yourself for the teaching of the Spirit, by disobeying the voice of GOD in nature.

A strong will always to do the right, to do the very best, as conscience points it out, is a will to do GOD's will.

Paul writes, *'I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost.'* The HOLY GHOST speaks through conscience: if you disobey and hurt conscience, you make it impossible for GOD to speak to you.

Obedience to GOD's will shows itself in tender regard for the voice of conscience. This holds good with regard to eating and drinking, sleeping and resting, spending money and seeking pleasure, - let everything be brought into subjection to the will of GOD.

This leads to another thing of great importance in this connection.

If you would live the life of true obedience, see that you maintain a good conscience before GOD, and never knowingly indulge in anything which is contrary to His mind. George Muller attributed all his happiness during seventy years to this, along with his love of GOD's Word. He had maintained a good conscience in all things, not going on in a course he knew to be contrary to the will of GOD. Conscience is the guardian or monitor GOD has given you, to give warning when anything goes wrong.

Up to the light you have, give heed to conscience. Ask GOD, by the teaching of His will, to give it more light. Seek the witness of conscience that you are acting up to that light. Conscience will become your encouragement and your helper, and give you the confidence, both that your obedience is accepted, and that your prayer for ever-increasing, knowledge of the will is heard.

V. OF LEGAL AND EVANGELICAL OBEDIENCE

Even when the vow of unreserved obedience has been taken, there may still be two sorts of obedience - that of the law, and that of the gospel. Just as there are two Testaments, an Old and a New, so there are two styles of religion, two ways of serving GOD.

This is what Paul speaks of in Romans, when he says, *'Sin shall not have dominion over you, for ye are not under the law, but under grace'* (6:14), and further speaks of our being *'free from the law,'* so *'that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter'* (7:6); and then again reminds us, *'Ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption'* (8:15).

The threefold contrast points very evidently to a danger existing among those Christians of still acting as if they were under the law, serving in the boldness of the letter and in the spirit of bondage. One great cause of the feebleness of so much Christian living is because it is more under law than under grace.

Let us see what the difference is.

What the law demands from us, grace promises and performs for us.

The law deals with what we ought to do, whether we can or not, and by the appeal to motives of fear and love stirs us to do our utmost. But it gives no real strength, and so only leads to failure and condemnation. Grace points to what we cannot do, and offers to do it for us and in us.

The law comes with commands on stone or in a book. Grace comes in a living, gracious Person, who gives His presence and His power.

The law promises life, if we obey. Grace gives life, even the HOLY SPIRIT with the assurance that we can obey.

Human nature is ever prone to slip back out of grace into the law, and secretly to trust to trying and doing its utmost. The promises of grace are so divine, the gift of the HOLY SPIRIT to do all in us is so wonderful, that few believe it. This is the reason they never dare take the vow of obedience, or, having taken it, turn back again.

I beseech you, study well what gospel obedience is. The gospel is good tidings. Its obedience is part of that good tidings - that grace, by the HOLY SPIRIT, will do all in you. Believe that, and let every undertaking to obey be in the joyous hopefulness that comes from faith in the exceeding abundance of grace, in the mighty indwelling of the HOLY SPIRIT, in the blessed love of JESUS whose abiding presence makes obedience possible and certain.

VI. OF THE OBEDIENCE OF LOVE

This is one of the special and most beautiful aspects of gospel obedience. The grace which promises to work all through the HOLY SPIRIT is the gift of eternal love. The Lord JESUS (who takes charge of our obedience, teaches it, and by His presence secures it to us) is He who loved us unto the death, who loves us with a love that passeth knowledge.

Nothing can receive or know love but a loving heart. And it is this loving heart that enables us to obey. Obedience is the loving response to the divine love resting on us, and the only access to a fuller enjoyment of that love.

How our Lord insisted upon that in His farewell discourse! Thrice He repeats it in John 14 - **'If ye love Me, keep My commandments.'** **'He that hath My commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth Me.'** **'If a man love Me, he will keep My words.'**

Is it not clear that love alone can give the obedience JESUS asks, and receive the blessing JESUS gives to obedience? The gift of the Spirit, the Father's love and His own, with the manifestation of Himself; the Father's love and His own making their abode with us: into these, loving obedience gives the assured access.

In the next chapter He puts it from the other side, and shows how obedience leads to the

enjoyment of GOD's love - He kept His Father's commandments, and abides in His love. If we keep His commandments, we shall abide in His love. He proved His love by giving His life for us; we are His friends, we shall enjoy His love, if we do what He commands us. Between His first love and our love in response to it, between our love and His fuller love in response to ours, obedience is the one indispensable link. True and full obedience is impossible, except as we live and love. *'This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments.'*

Do beware of a legal obedience, striving after a life of true obedience under a sense of duty. Ask GOD to show you the *'newness of life'* which is needed for a new and full obedience. Claim the promise, *'the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart... to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart... and thou shalt... obey the voice of the Lord.'* Believe in the love of GOD and the grace of our Lord JESUS. Believe in the Spirit given in you, enabling you to love, and so causing you to walk in GOD's statutes.

In the strength of this faith, in the assurance of sufficient grace, made perfect in weakness, enter into GOD's love, and the life of living obedience it works. For it is nothing but the continual presence of JESUS in His love can fit you for continual obedience.

VII. IS OBEDIENCE POSSIBLE?

I close with once again, and most urgently, pressing home this question. It lies at the very root of our life. The secret, half-unconscious thought that to live always well-pleasing to GOD is beyond our reach, eats away the very root of our strength. I beseech you to give a definite answer to the question.

If in the light of GOD's provision for obedience, of His promise of working all His good pleasure in you, of His giving you a new heart, with the indwelling of His Son and Spirit, you still fear obedience is not possible, do ask GOD to open your eyes truly to know His will. [I once again refer to a new book, *The Two Covenants and the Second Blessing*, for further exposition of the sufficiency of the grace of the New Covenant to fit us for entire obedience.]

If your judgment be convinced, and you assent to the truth theoretically, and yet fear to give up yourself to such a life, I say to you too, Do ask GOD to open your eyes and bring you to know His will for yourself. Do beware lest the secret fear of having to give up too much, of having to become too peculiar and entirely devoted to GOD, keep you back. Beware of seeking just religion enough to give ease to the conscience, and then not desiring to do and be and give GOD all He is worthy of.

And beware, above all, of 'limiting' GOD, of making Him a liar, by refusing to believe what He has said He can and will do.

If our study in the school of obedience is to be of any profit, rest not till you have written it down - Daily obedience to all that GOD wills of me is possible, is possible to me. In His strength I yield myself to Him for it.

But, remember, only on one condition. Not in the strength of your resolve or effort, but that the unceasing presence of CHRIST, and the unceasing teaching of the Spirit of all grace and power

be your portion. CHRIST, the obedient One, living in you, will secure your obedience.
Obedience will be to you a life of love and joy in His fellowship.

~ end of chapter 7 ~
