



Gospel / Life

Toward A Spirituality Of Freedom

New Creation Teaching Ministry: Tuesday Night Studies 2011, Seacliff Anglican Church

Study 5: Free From Sin's Power Into Obedience

Introduction to the power of obedience

A broad river flows across a wide plain. As the river progresses it spreads wider and wider, and as it spreads it becomes more and more sluggish. Finally, it is almost as if it is drifting listlessly across the face of the earth, moving only by the downward tug of gravity. But then, it comes to a place where it meets hills, and it finds its way through a valley. The valley is narrow and tight, and the hills are made of hard granite. The broad course the river took is now narrowed down, and as the waters which had spread widely are gathered into this narrow space, they gather in power and momentum, and they rush through the gully with urgency and power, not drifting but in fact pushing and thrusting ahead, and taking anything they find in the riverbed along with them as they go.

For many people, the words “command”, “obligation”, “duty”, “responsibility”, “obligation” and “obedience” have a very constricting emotional impact. They are not *attractive* words to many people, but in fact are actually quite repellent. They are words that seem to imply the shutting up of possibilities, the narrowing of the scope of life. In fact, the reality of God’s commanding and glad human obeying is the narrow place where life gets its power and dynamic, and we find ourselves moving along in the constraint of obedience with a vitality which is impossible in the unconstrained place of wilful self-determination and “uncommandability”.

A wonderful tetrad

In Jeremiah 31:31-34, the prophet announces the intention of the Lord to establish a new covenant with His people:

“The time is coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. “This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

There are four interlinked promises in this new covenant that the Lord is making:

1. The Lord will write His law into the hearts and minds of His people.
2. The Lord will be their God, and they will be His people.
3. All, from least to greatest, will know the Lord as richly as each other, having no dependency upon another for that relationship with the Lord.
4. The Lord will forgive thoroughly, keeping no remembrance of their sins

Right in the heart of these promises is that the Lord and His people will be in deep relationship—that is the heart of (2) and (3); (1) shows that this deep relationship with the Lord is deeply connected with knowing and loving His will and commands; and (4) shows us that this knowledge and love of God and His commands comes to us through His complete and lasting forgiveness of us. *Spirituality* cannot be separated from the important matter of obedience. For some of us the idea of obedience seems opposite to the idea of freedom. What Jeremiah is telling us is that our freedom in the love of God is found *in* obedience to the Lord which has its origin in the forgiveness which God pours upon us in His love.

Living from below

In Greek, a key word for “obey”—*hypakouo*—has the sense “listen to from underneath.” A key word for “worship” or “serve”—*proskuneo*—has the sense “to adore on one’s knees, to bow down to.” Both indicate that true human life before God is lived from below Him. Worship and obeying are closely linked in the whole New Testament, and the basic idea is that of submitting to, loving and serving Him who is greater than you.

It was Bob Dylan who wisely sang that “You’re gonna have to serve somebody. It may be the devil, or it may be the Lord, but you’re gonna have to serve somebody.”¹ The fact is, human beings will always be obeying *something* or rather *someone*; it is essential to being human. If we refuse the commands of God and think of ourselves as self-determined, we are in fact self-deluded, not recognising that we are dancing to a tune being called for us. Freedom then is found in obeying Him who is true and life-giving, rather than him who is false and death-dealing.

Paul put it this way in Romans 6:15-23:

What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.

I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves. Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness. When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

¹ Bob Dylan, *Gotta Serve Somebody*, on the album, *Slow Train Coming*, Columbia Records, 1979

Sin (Linked with impurity and ever-increasing wickedness) is seen as a power to which we as sinful and unredeemed people offer up our service and obedience. Behind the power of sin lies the power of the devil—and John is very clear that the one who persists in sinning is of the devil (1John 3:8). The person then who seeks to pursue freedom from God’s command, rather than being free to pursue whatever course he or she chooses, is in fact moved and directed and commanded by the evil one. Paul says it this way in Ephesians and Titus:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. (Eph. 2:1-2)

At one time, we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. (Titus 3:3)

In the garden of Eden, at the beginning, when the serpent came to tempt the man and the woman, his word to them was that God was lying in His command concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In fact they would not die, but rather be like God knowing good and evil. The temptation implied that they could achieve superiority to God, through independence. The subtlety of the temptation camouflaged the fact that to take the fruit would be to obey the serpent rather than God, and hence have no independence as a result. It would be true to say that sin is the desire to live *above* God, rather than *below* Him, but that this “upward fall” in fact places us *below* the evil one and *under* the wrath of God, who never relinquishes the throne to us. Even as we seize control we are being handed over by God to the slavery of our sinfulness.

Jesus, the Son of God, living under God for us

Jesus, God’s Son made man for us, was tempted at the start of his ministry by Satan. The three temptations (Matt. 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13) expose the terrible nature of sin and the wonderful nature of obedience. The temptations are an attack on God’s Fatherhood and an attempt to get Jesus to resist and resent that Fatherhood. The first temptation is that he presume upon his Sonship and act independently. The second (the third in Luke) is that, in a kind of passive-aggressive way, he “throw down the gauntlet to the Father”, forcing Him to act in proof of His love. The third (the second in Luke) is that Jesus simply turn from the Father and comes with a promise that Satan will act for him, giving him what in fact the Father has already promised him in effect at Jesus’ baptism. Jesus responded to each of these temptations with the word of God, and specifically with a command from the word of God. The way he fought sin was with obedience. And this was a response that Satan could not answer or defeat. “Then the devil left him...”

Obedience marked the whole of the life of Jesus Christ. He was not simply giving us an example in this. He came in contrast to the failure of Adam and his descendents. He came as a hero and champion, acting on behalf of those who could not act for themselves. He came to save his people from their sins (Matt. 1:21) and to turn the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous (Luke 1:17). He came as the obedient Son of the Father, to do the Father’s will and to serve Him in all things. He did this in order to rescue us from sin’s power, to break the dominion of darkness over us and to liberate us into being the joyfully obedient sons and daughters of God.

Rather than considering himself something, he did not consider equality with God something to be grasped: in contrast to Adam. He emptied himself, rather than trying to fill himself, and became a servant as he took our human likeness. The power of all that he did in his saving work came from the obedience of it. Obedient in his incarnation he then became obedient to the work of the cross, dying there as a sacrifice for sins. He endured the wrath of God as a sacrifice of atonement. He stood under the wrath of God in an obedient act of living in the will of his Father. The obedience of the act was its moral power. And to such a one, the Father can entrust the world. Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name above all name, so that all in all creation will bow down and acknowledge the ruling power of his humble obedience. (See. Philippians 2:5-11.)

Pouring out the Spirit on us

The forgiveness of sins, God's refusing to remember guilt and shame against us because of the grace of our Lord Jesus, breaks in upon us when the Gospel is preached to us and the Holy Spirit is poured up on us and brings it home to the heart. When that happens, a remarkable thing happens. Where once there had only been resentment and repulsion at the thought of God's commanding us, now we are those who love to be taught and commanded by Him. Obedience is not the necessitated and obligated response to the grace of God; rather it is the gift and overflow of that grace in our lives. God is at work in us, both to will and to do His good pleasure (Php. 2:12-13).

Undoubtedly it is true for all Christians that the presence of sin in us has not been eradicated—see Romans 7. It seems to be all-pervading, ready to cajole and bully us into its previous course of life, even at those times when all seems so right for obedience and love towards God our Father. When we want to do good, evil shows up and seeks to mend the break-up between us and to re-establish the relationship.

At this time, the more I meditate on God's commands, the worse it seems to get: sin uses the opportunity of God's "No!" to lead me to entertain a possible "Maybe?" or "Yes!" The commands are not the problem; they are wonderful and righteous, every one. The problem is in me, sin dwelling in my flesh. What is needed at that time is to remember the gift of God in Jesus Christ, the obedient one, my champion, the one who fought the good fight on my behalf. Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ my Lord!