

Obedience
Acts 5:29

Introduction

We come to one of the most vital and practical subjects for a Christian congregation. It is a subject which many are afraid to think about, and others are in too much of a hurry to ever consider the implications. The fact that it is not taken seriously shows the low standard of some Christian living. The subject is obedience. We will look at the importance of it, the costliness of it, and the blessing which follows. We need to examine our daily lives regarding this matter. What do we know about obedience to God's will?

The context of the passage: the apostles were arrested again, put into the public jail, and in the night an angel opened the doors. The apostles were sent out into the Temple courts to **tell the people the full message of this new life** (Acts 5:20). So at daybreak they were found preaching in the Temple courts, and the Apostles were brought, by the officers of the High Priest, before the Sanhedrin. The High Priest reminded them that he had ordered them not to preach about Christ. But they had ignored the prohibition. **You have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood** (Acts 5:28). But though the High Priest had told them not to preach, God had told them to preach, and they were compelled to obey Him. Hence Peter's reply: **We must obey God rather than men** (Acts 5:29).

Priority in obedience

There are two parts of the Christian life – right belief and right behaviour; doctrine and discipleship; creed and conduct. Behaviour, discipleship and conduct can be summed up in obedience. We must obey the will of God in every area and relationship in life – personal life, family life, church life, daily work, society, and nation. God's will covers my conduct, character, career, whether in my capacity as a husband, wife, parent, son, daughter, office-bearer, employer, employee, friend, neighbour or citizen. Whatever my role, I cannot live to please myself and do as I want. **Teach me to do your will for you are my God** (Psalm 143:10). **Doing the will of God from the heart** (Ephesians 6:6).

But supposing there is a clash of loyalties? We are meant to be loyal citizens. **Submit yourselves to the governing authorities because they are established by God** (Romans 13:1). But supposing the state requires something God forbids, or does not allow something God requires? Or in the church: **Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy and not a burden** (Hebrews 13:17). But supposing a church leader takes church members along a path contrary to God's will? What if he expects them to do things God has forbidden or does not permit them to do what God has commanded? Or in work: what if an employer requires a course of action from the employee, which is dishonest, unfair or untruthful? Or in the marriage

relationship: what if one wants to take the other along a path God has forbidden? What are our priorities in these instances?

We must obey God rather than men. **Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. Anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me** (Matthew 10:37). **Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness** (Matthew 6:33). **The Macedonian church gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will** (2 Corinthians 8:5). **You are not your own; you have been bought with a price** (1 Corinthians 6:20).

Why this clear and unchallengeable priority in obedience? Acts 5:30 tells us it is because of what God has done. **The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel.** The gift of the Holy Spirit confirms this. In the light of the exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ to the highest place, and in light of salvation – gifts of repentance, forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit – the supreme place must be given to Christ. He is above the claims of husbands, wives, government, officials, state rulers, church officers, employers, and also and above all above myself, my own interests, ambitions and desires – He must come first.

A British army officer was once at a slave market and saw the way one slave was being badly treated. So he paid the price asked by the slave owner, then told the slave he could do as he liked, for he was now free. The slave fell on his knees and said, "Every drop of blood in my veins thanks you for redeeming me. I want to be your slave for ever." And if we mean that in relationship to Christ, it is the same as saying "We must obey God rather than men."

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven (Matthew 7:21). Empty profession without evidence in the life is quite useless. **"My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work** (John 4:34), and the follower of Christ must be able to say the same.

G.H.C.MacGregor, a Scottish preacher, a great Keswick preacher in the early days of the convention. But when he first attended he was sceptical. He rather sniffed at the idea that Englishmen could teach him, a Scot, theology. But the Holy Spirit got a hold of him, and he wrote a letter to his sister at the end of Keswick week, saying he had been taught three lessons: (1) my own sinfulness, (2) the unsearchable riches of Christ, (3) the absolute necessity of obedience.

The costliness of obedience

Determination to obey God is costly. In the story, obedience cost the Apostles arrest, trial, flogging, unpopularity with the authorities, and soon, in Stephen's case, death. Obedience and true discipleship always costs. At Paul's conversion, Ananias was sent to visit Paul: **This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name** (Acts 9:15,16). And how he suffered – 2 Corinthians 11 lists his stripes, rods, stonings, shipwreck, dangers, weariness, pain, hunger, thirst.

The world is basically anti-God, against His will, Word, Son. Everyone is living for self and under the control of the evil one. When someone is concerned to obey God, he cannot take it lightly. He needs to know how the world treated Jesus. **If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you** (John 15:18,19). **Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted** (2 Timothy 3:12).

This is true even in a professing Christian home. Where Christ is not really the head, there is backbiting, gossiping and ridicule. There are special difficulties for us in the social context. It is difficult to embarrass our friends, colleagues at work, family gathered together at Christmas or a wedding, or in the circles that we move. But we shall embarrass them if we obey God, and we shall not be popular. There will be criticism, sneers, jibes, talk behind our back, and accusation of being hypocrites.

Make sure that you are ridiculed for the right reason. Sometimes a Christian's attitude is discourteous, stupid or nonsense, and then he is rightly criticised. It is only when we are persecuted for righteousness sake that we need the spirit of the martyrs. One of the covenanters executed in Edinburgh was able to say, "I esteem it my glory, garland, crown and royal dignity to fill up a part of his sufferings".

Too often we fear to pay the price, and this is one reason why we do not stand out in the crowd. We would rather court the world's popularity, and so it can be hard at times to tell the difference between the Christian and the unbeliever. Yet there is no need to fear. **The Lord is with me. I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?** (Psalm 118:6).

The blessings of obedience

Now we will look at the positive side. This far outweighs the grim prospects of the other side. Blessings are seen even in the darkness and suffering of this chapter. **The Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him** (Acts 5:32). God still gives His Holy Spirit to those who obey and respond when the Gospel is preached. The work of the indwelling Holy Spirit is more and more evident as we keep on obeying Him. The more we yield to God's will, the more the Holy Spirit manifests His power, guidance and grace. The Holy Spirit fills and controls us when we are yielded to the will of God and walk in His way.

Two Old Testament stories demonstrate that disobedience leads to failure. The defeat of Israel at Ai because of the sin of Achan. The fall of King Saul because he did not carry out God's instructions. **To obey is better than sacrifice. To heed is better than the fat of rams** (1 Samuel 15:22). The result was rejection and ruin.

If the Christian life only involves partial obedience, the Spirit is grieved and quenched. The old nature must not be fostered and given its head. The Spirit must have full control. In R.A.Torry's *The Power of surrendered life* he says, "When God's will is done in, through and by me and regarding me in all things, when self is

entirely at God's disposal, the result is knowledge of the truth, power in prayer and a heart overflowing with joy, filled with the Holy Spirit."

Joy was clearly the experience of the early Christians, even in their persecution: **The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name** (Acts 5:41). When Paul and Silas had their feet in the stocks, **about midnight they were praying and singing hymns to God** (Acts 16:25). **Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven** (Matthew 5:11,12). **Do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering.... Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed** (1 Peter 4:12,13).

Prayerfulness is great and effective. The early church prayed, and things happened. **We receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him** (1 John 3:22). We cannot live for ourselves and go our own way and expect God to listen to us.

Conclusion

Obedience in our lives is vital. Are their things we need to put right, before we can make progress in our Christian lives? There is ambivalence in our lives – we want men to obey God in saving faith, while we want to go on disobeying Him in selfish living.

There is a story about a mother calling her child to come for a meal. "Come, dinner's ready." The child replied "I am coming" – but she did not appear. Again the mother called, and again the child replied the same. After the third time, the mother called "Stop coming, and come."

Some of us have been saying, "I'm coming" for a very long time. And God tells us now to stop coming, and come. How often we say to our children, "When will you learn to do as you are told?"

Terstugen [writing unclear], a writer of many hymns, once wrote a letter to the Lord with blood drawn from his own veins. "From this evening to all eternity, Thy will, not mine, be done. Command and rule and reign in me. I yield up myself without reserve, and I promise, with Thy help and power, rather to give up the last drop of my blood than knowingly or willingly to be untrue or disobedient to Thee."