

NORMAL CHRISTIAN LIFE 4

Obedience

“When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, ‘Who then can be saved?’ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.’” – Matthew 19:25-26

“Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, ‘Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?’ Why do you ask me about what is good,’ Jesus replied. ‘There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments.’ ‘Which ones?’ the man

*inquired. Jesus replied, ‘Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself.’ ‘All these I have kept,’ the young man said. ‘What do I still lack?’ Jesus answered, ‘If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’ When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.”
- Matthew 19:16-22*

When we read the story of the rich young ruler, we often think, ‘Well, I am not rich. Thank goodness this story does not apply to me. I can move past it with ease.’ But this thinking misses the larger application of the passage entirely. We are called to ask Christ the same question as the rich young ruler: “What do I still lack?” And, when faced with the Lord’s response, we cannot help but realize that the commands of God require a level of faith and act of perfection that is beyond our capabilities. In his own strength the rich young ruler was able to “keep” the ten commandments of the Pentateuch. But when he was asked to sell his riches to the poor and follow Christ, he could not obey, and his own will and desires proved too strong.

In order to be obedient and live a holy life, we must first ask God, ‘What do I lack?’ Often what Christ reveals and then requests seems unimaginable to attain, and rightly so, for Christianity is a call to perfection. “...The Lord wants those who follow him to follow him perfectly, not lacking in anything. People cannot follow God if they have solved 99 of their problems but have yet one problem unsolved. To follow God demands the whole being. It must be all or not at all.”¹ Jesus Christ was perfect because He listened to His Father and obeyed His commands – and he asks no less of us. We might say, ‘That is impossible,’ and we would not be alone in our assumption. The disciples felt this same weight of impossibility when they heard what Christ asked. But He comforted them, “With man, this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26).

We cannot be perfect like Christ, or achieve perfection, without something greater than our own willpower at work in us. The obedience and holy living that God requires can only be accomplished by God Himself, who speaks to us and lives within us, empowering us by His Spirit every step of the way. This is one of the greatest joys of Christianity. It is not a religion of works to be done in our own strength. It is a living relationship of total

Pre-Article Questions:

1. What feelings, thoughts, or emotions are stirred when you think of the word obedience?
2. Describe a time in your life where your obedience to a rule, law or mandate was life-saving. What about disobedience became life-threatening?

dependence on God who will do the works through us as we surrender and follow Him.

While sometimes the issue is knowing that we cannot obey in our own strength, more often than not the real issue is whether or not we want to obey. "Many people begin coming to God once they stop being religious, because there is only one master of the human heart – Jesus Christ, not religion. But 'woe is me' if after seeing Him I still will not obey."² In light of immediate gratification, it can be difficult to remember – or heed – the Lord's warnings that the cost of sin always outweighs the benefits. In God's kingdom, rewards are often delayed until eternity and our faith in what is unseen is greatly challenged when faced with tangible and in-the-moment temptations. But Jesus told His disciples that by choosing to forsake the world they would not only receive eternal life, but also gain back hundredfold of all they left to follow Him. We must always remember that our life is a breath and we are like vapors, here and then gone. The best life is one lived for the next.

Our obedience in choosing to follow Christ and do what He asks of us has eternal significance and consequences. Dietrich Bonhoeffer states, "When he (the rich young ruler) was challenged by Jesus to accept a life of voluntary poverty, the rich young man knew he was faced with a simple alternative of obedience or disobedience... Only one thing was required...to rely on Christ's word and cling to it as offering greater security than all the securities in the world."³ Obeying God offers a life of peace and security that is not of this world. As we follow Christ by obeying Him, we grow closer to Him and continually grow in our assurance of eternal salvation. Such a reward provides comfort and can never be taken away.

God not only gives us His Spirit, making it possible to obey, but as we obey, we also inherit His peace and joy. In John 14:27, Jesus promises to give us His peace and in John 15:11, he promises us His joy. Theologian D.A Carson states, "Lest the constraints of the unqualified obedience mandated by verses 9-10 seem grey and joyless, Jesus insists that His own obedience to the Father is the ground of His joy; and He promises that those who obey Him will share the same joy – indeed, that His very purpose in laying down such demands is that their joy may be complete."⁴

Scripture Questions:

1. Why is it so difficult to obey God?
2. Read and discuss any observations you make about Matthew 19:16-30.
3. Read John 15:9-11. How do we remain in God's love according to this scripture? Why is it important to remain in the love of God? What are the promises in these verses that can help change our attitude and encourage us to obey?
4. Read 1 Peter 2:9-12. As God's special possession, how does holy living and obedience glorify Him?

Application Questions:

1. Little acts of obedience make a big difference in our lives. What are some small ways we can choose righteousness instead of apathy that will strengthen our walk with God? (For example – the things we watch on television.)

2. Chambers, Oswald. My Utmost for His Highest, Updated Edition. Michigan: Discovery House Publishers, 1995. July 18-19.

3. Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. The Cost of Discipleship. New York: Touchstone Rockefeller Center, 1959. 79.

4. Carson, D.A. The Gospel According to John. Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991. 520.

Application Questions:

2. Is there currently an area of your life that requires an act of obedience that feels overwhelming or discouraging? How can the small group help encourage or pray for you in this area?

Prayer:

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for the perfect example we have in Christ of what it means to honor and obey you. Thank you for the unwavering obedience of Christ – even unto death on the cross. Thank you for giving us your Spirit who guides us, counsels us, and helps us make godly choices. Forgive us for our casual attitude towards obedience, living with one foot in the world and one foot by the cross. Forgive us for esteeming short-term pleasures over your eternal rewards. Give us wisdom to understand that living a life of obedience is not a burden but blessing. Thank you that your promise of a life filled with joy and peace makes it worth living in submission to you and your word. Perfect me in holiness and strengthen and change me by the power of your Holy Spirit.

Prayer Partner Assignment:

Memory Verse:

John 15:9-11, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”

Meet with your prayer partner from this week for a meal and look up the additional verses on obedience to discuss together. Pray for one another before you leave.

Additional Scripture:

Matthew 7:24-27

Matthew 19:16-30

John 14:21

Romans 6:17-19

1 John 2:3-6