

# To Obey, or Not to Obey

By

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It is written that Jesus “learned obedience by the things which He suffered” (Heb. 5:8). Not all discipline requires suffering, but certainly no one is going to learn obedience without some pain.

The pain-killing industry is big business. Pain is repulsive. We do not like to consider it or to face it and most people simply cannot bear it. There are millions of people who cannot go through a day without some kind of pain-killing drink or drug. There are over six million alcoholics in this country and over five million who are on the verge. There are several million in our nation who cannot live without some kind of pill. Tranquilizers are dispensed as if they were vitamins.

This revulsion to pain is not limited to the physical varieties. We have come to consider pain as anything that forces a person to do what he does not want to do or restrains him from anything he wants to do. If it is difficult for the youth to control themselves where sex is concerned they simply reach for the birth control pills so they will not have to endure the pain of discipline. If it is unpleasant for the slothful to clean up their own yards, to repair their own screen doors and swat their own flies, the Government must step in and do all this work for them.

This generation views anything that is painful as wicked. They reason that surely God would not allow pain; therefore, God must be opposed to all tasks that are difficult and, in fact, to anything that is not to their liking: for to them anything that they dislike is painful and therefore wicked. What they like, they call good. What they dislike, they call evil. Thus the thing God actually demands, which is discipline and obedience even to the point of suffering, they consider evil. Senator Edward Kennedy, on the death of his brother Robert, said that the need of our day could be summed up by the word “love” and that this meant affection. But it was not lack of love that caused his brother’s death; it was lack of discipline. The assassin thought he was avenging his fellow men by killing Senator Kennedy, but there is a law against murder and the assassin knew it. It was this very concept of love without law and obedience — which the liberals preach — that has been the downfall of both Kennedy brothers who have been murdered.

The pseudo-preachers who clasp arm in arm with the rioters, who march down streets with communists and perverts chanting, “We Shall Overcome”, possibly do not know what they are saying. It is the devil whose ambition is to overcome God and law and order and instead of leading the people to repentance before God so that He might discipline them, they are following the precise pattern of Satan, fashioning themselves as angels of light, and inspiring men to abandon the law and the authority of Christ and to carve out a society to their own liking, and hopefully — without pain.

But it isn’t only demonstrators and liberal anarchists who engage in revolt against God. The churches themselves are filled with people who have little respect for God’s commandments, who obey only the ones that do not disturb them nor cause them pain. They approach the Bible as one approaching the cafeteria counter, to pick and choose what suits the appetite. Joe Fletcher suggests that God’s laws ‘apply ordinarily’, but that

one can dispense with them when he feels like it. This outrage against God's commandments is actually rebellion against the King of Kings. It is one thing to fall into sin due to the pressure of temptation, but it is quite another to say that it doesn't matter what God says, that we only obey when we want to.

Jesus said, "Yes, rather, blessed are they that hear the word of God and keep it" (Luke 11:28). Notice two things: first one must hear it, and secondly he must keep it. There are millions of people in the churches today who never hear it. Their preachers read and study current theologians, and their sermons are quotes and stories. In their church schools they read quarterlies and have no idea whether the quarterly is the truth or not, for they will not put forth the (painful) effort to search the scriptures, to learn the truth from Jesus. If churches abandon the old Christ-honoring creeds, the members know it not for they never bothered to learn what the creed said in the first place. Glibly they parrot, "We're all headed for the same place", but they know not what place that is, nor how God instructs them to get there.

To obey God means breaking with the traditions of men, and this can be suffering of the most severe kind. To deliberately reject a lie when friends and family cling to it with rapturous devotion is to bring upon one's head the wrath of all those around him whom he least desires to alienate. It is tough discipline and few there are who will endure it.

What we need is not to be coddled and pampered and indulged. Our prayer should be for iron in our souls. What we need is purging, pruning and cleansing in order that we may bear fruit. We need to learn obedience through suffering. Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." We do not question the love that Jesus had for the Father. This perfect love He demonstrated by being obedient even unto death. He kept the commandment even when it was hard to keep, so he learned obedience through the things He suffered. It is for this reason that the scriptures so often go unheeded. We read the commandment and find that it is contrary to our usual course. It cuts across the pattern of our lives and forces us to make adjustments that are difficult. To apply the commandments is almost like punishing ourselves. The corrective nature of God's commandments inflicts suffering. It is easier to go on in the same way and easier still if we do not even read the commandments. But one doesn't learn that way. It is only by hard lessons that one develops in any field and the field of Godliness is no different. The Scriptures give some difficult instructions — difficult, of course, **only if we do them**. Obviously they are no bother at all to those who say that Christianity is embraced by an affection, by a feeling which is satisfied by taking the easiest route and thus avoiding the commandments. Even when we read the Bible it is easy to slip into the idea that by some form of osmosis our character will be developed whether or not we heed the instructions.

But it is only as we follow instructions, only as we do the commandments that anything is developed in relation to God. The minute we start doing, then the instruction really begins. It is amazing how multitudes can forever read the instructions and never even consider taking them seriously and actually carrying them out. The reason is that this requires discipline, chastening and suffering, and it has already been decided that suffering is bad; therefore, **presto**, the commandments of God become evil.

A great many evangelists and radio preachers are going about the country giving the impression — if not deliberately teaching — that since we are saved by grace we no longer need to concern ourselves with God's commandments. It is easier to get people to

walk down the isle by saying “All you have to do is come down the isle”. Some add the counseling room to this, and some even insist on the commandment to be baptized. But most of the converts will never hear any more about commandments except that they should attend the church and give their tithes.

Someone is bound to be saying, “But we are saved by grace; not by law.” True, indeed. Commandment-keeping does not take away sin nor give us immortality. Only Jesus, in His death and resurrection, can do that. Nor am I talking about ceremonies and laws under the covenant made with Moses and a nation which no longer exists. But Paul wrote that grace does not make void the law, but established it (Rom. 3:31). Obedience and grace are not two exclusive elements which oppose each other. Jesus said, “If you love me you will keep my commandments.” Grace, love and commandments all go together.

Where, then, do we think we can get off by flatly disobeying commandments that He has laid down? “Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? God forbid... Know you not that to whom you present yourselves as servant unto obedience, his servant you are whom you obey; whether of sin unto death or of obedience unto righteousness?” (Rom. 6:1, 16). This was written to Christians, to all of us who are saved by the grace of God through the atoning death of Jesus our Lord. We now are sons of God, and like Jesus, we are to learn obedience — even if it means suffering.

Let a man look into his soul through the eye-glass of Christ’s word and he will see that he has been disobedient all his life. Things that he took for granted will be seen as rash violations of God’s will. Let him begin to obey — and suffering will be the result. Furthermore, it is not like surgery which is all over after the stitches are out and the soreness is gone. Learning obedience is a life-long job. One step only gives clearer insight to the next, and each one might mean an increase in the suffering. That’s the way it was with Jesus, who was obedient, “even unto death”. For most of us, as soon as the suffering starts, the obedience stops!

As the Christians in the world rapidly diminish in proportion to unbelievers, many mistaken leaders and false teachers attempt to make the church more attractive to the world. They are hastily tearing down all doctrine, throwing out all the rules and desperately hoping to recruit members by eliminating the pain of obedience. We hear them say, “It is not **what** you believe, but **Who** you believe”, as if you could believe in Jesus without believing something **about** Him, and without receiving His commandments. This false idea is spreading even among conservative churches and will have none other effect than to corrupt the church and spawn more lawlessness. We do not win men to Christ by reducing “faith” to a mere subjective feeling. If men are won, they must be won on the basis of truth: the truth about Christ, what He did and what He commands. I would be the first to confess that I have not kept all the commandments. Here I must rest upon redeeming grace, in that Jesus died for me. But the commandments are also for me, and I must do my best to keep them, even if obedience means suffering.

Of course, I’m not even suggesting that one must keep the commandments before becoming a Christian. The first requirement, the first commandment, is to repent; to acknowledge that one is a sinner, and come to Christ as a sinner to be forgiven. Until then he won’t even understand what we’re talking about. The unsaved think it is quite enough to get along with their neighbors. They must come to Christ and look at life from His

viewpoint and purpose before they begin to see how far they have missed the commandments.

It's a simple thing: just make up your mind about Christ — repent and be baptized. This is the obedience to the Gospel without which men will be condemned and destroyed (II Thess. 1:8–9). I said it is simple. But it is not easy. It takes courage to cast yourself at the feet of the lowly Nazarene and say, “Be merciful to me, a sinner.” But even after that great step is taken, we only begun. Then we start learning obedience, through suffering. We have taken up the cross, and there's nothing to do but to take it up daily and follow Him, remembering that “though He was a Son, yet he learned obedience by the things which He suffered.”

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