

The Secret of Obedience

¹² Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; ¹³ for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for *His* good pleasure.

(Phil. 2:12-13)

Do you remember the difficulty you had mastering a certain co-ordinated action? Maybe it was riding a bicycle, balancing stability with forward motion, peddling. Maybe it was driving a car, balancing the clutch and the accelerator, and the brake, along with steering and watching. Maybe it was ice-skating or roller-skating, balancing the bent knees and the straightened leg, the push and the glide. Too long ago for any of us to remember, it was walking itself: putting one leg in front of another, transferring your weight. But getting the co-ordination was frustrating.

Have you ever been frustrated with co-ordinating the Christian life? Maybe you have tried to figure out how much you should depend on God and how much you should do yourself. How much do you trust, and how much do you try? How much is active and how much is passive?

And that becomes really practical when we talk about battles.

Have you ever battled to get rid of a bad habit, kill a besetting sin? Or perhaps battled to begin a right habit: daily prayer, or godly speech, or kindness at home, or service of others. Maybe you have had the stop-start experience of most Christians, the push but then crash, or the two-steps forward and the one step back.

If so, then like all Christians, regardless of outward appearance, you are struggling with Christian obedience, how to co-ordinate grace and discipline, trust and effort.

We can take some courage that even Paul found it a struggle. Paul's description of his own struggles is in Romans 7.. Some take this to refer to Paul's life before he was saved, but I take it to refer to Paul as a Christian, facing what we face.

¹⁵ For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. ¹⁶ If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that *it is* good. ¹⁷ But now, *it is* no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. ¹⁸ For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but *how* to perform what is good I do not find. ¹⁹ For the good that I will *to do*, I do not do; but the evil I will not *to do*, that I practice. (Rom. 7:15-19)

All Christians struggle with obedience. Other words we use for obedience are *sanctification*, or *practical holiness*, or *Christlikeness*, or *spiritual growth*, or *maturity*. They really refer to the same thing: living the Christian life, living under the lordship of Jesus, living a new life with God as the focus.

There is a lot against us when we try to obey. There is the world, tempting us to live for self, for the temporal, for the body, for vainglory. There is the flesh, our old sinful nature, tempting us to be independent, autonomous, in control, selfish. There is the devil, tempting us to unbelief and pride, telling us that worldliness and fleshliness is better, and cheaper, and easier. The world, the flesh, and the devil pull us away from obedience.

But on top of that, even when we do obey, we can do it the wrong way. Just like when learning to do a coordinated movement, we usually do something wrong, so when it comes to obedience, we usually begin by doing something wrong. There are three ways we can approach obeying God, and only one is correct. Those three are legalism, license, and liberty.

Legalism is when we try in our own strength, for our own glory to obey a standard either to please others or to earn merit or to look good, or to avoid guilt. We outwardly conform, even if we are inwardly cold or proud or selfish. We might be very active, very disciplined, but it is very self-centred.

License is when we tell ourselves that there is no law and no standard, and we give ourselves permission to do what we want and please ourselves, supposedly in the name of Christian freedom. Sometimes those veering into license also become passive, thinking that God's grace is going to do it all, so whatever He does is what He does, I will just let go and let God.

But both of those end up crashing, either into the ditch of more sin, or into the ditch of pride and coldness.

The third option is liberty: the freedom to please God by faith in His grace. And liberty is not halfway between legalism and license, as if it is a balance of those two. No, those two are completely wrong, liberty is the biblical way to obey.

That solution is found in these precious verses of Philippians 2:12-13. These verses have been the subject of a lot of controversy, because together, they lay before us the mystery of how God's sovereignty works with our free choices, how grace works together with faith, how God can get all the glory for our lives, but we can still be rewarded, how God causes growth, and yet some grow more and faster than others.

Remember, Paul has been telling the Philippians that they need to be an advertisement for the Gospel by their unity and humility with each other. He began this exhortation back in 1:27: ²⁷ Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel, (Phil. 1:27)

Then he launched into one of the most triumphant sections of Scripture, showing us the humility and obedience of Christ, and how He is exalted and glorified because of that.

Now in verse 12, Paul begins with the word *wherefore*. In light of Jesus's obedience, in light of how His humility brought reward, you too must obey in this area of unity and likemindedness.

And though Paul's words apply specifically to the Philippians obeying the commands to be of one mind and to esteem each other better than self, more generally, these verses apply to all obedience. Whether it is being a loving husband, or a submissive wife, or an obedient child, or a faithful member, or someone who prays, reads the Word, who obeys in the area of thought life, or money, or speech, or putting off sins of anger or bitterness, and putting on forgiveness, generosity, these verses explain how we obey. They explain the co-ordinated action of God's grace and our faith.

The passage is easy to divide up into the two secrets of obedience, or perhaps better, the two sides of the secret of obedience. Verse 12 gives us our responsibility, what we must do. Verse 13 tells us what God will do. We can call verse 13 "God's Grace Working In Us" and verse 12, "Our Faith Working Out". Now it might seem odd, but I want us to begin with verse 13. There is a reason for that. You will notice verse 13 begins with the word "for". That shows that verse 13 is giving you the ground, the basis, the foundation for what you and I will do in verse 12. Even though verse 13 comes after verse 12 in Paul's words, the ideas of verse 13 always come first in reality. God's grace always initiates, always starts and finishes. So consider the first side of secret of obedience.

I. God's Grace Working In Us

¹³ for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for *His* good pleasure. (Phil. 2:13)

Here is why you will be able to obey. Not because you are strong in yourself, not because of how hard you grit your teeth, not because of stoic determination. The reason you will be able to work anything out is firstly that God was working in you.

The word for work is the Greek *energon*. It is literally, God is the Great Energizer, the one supplying the working power. God is showing us grace.

When Scripture speaks about God's grace, it is sometimes referring to the act of mercy that saves us. But often enough, it is speaking of power, enablement, strength given to achieve something. That is what is meant here by God's working, God's grace bringing what we could not do on our own.

That power is not simply around you or near you. It is in you. Biblical Christianity is a deep inward work, a work that begins in the deepest reaches of the human heart and soul. Changes are wrought inside, where no one else but God can reach, and from there, the changes emanate out. That's very different from moralism, which is an outward change, trying to modify some external behaviour, hoping it will work its way in. There is a place for changing your behaviour, but unless it is God working on you inwardly, those changes are just putting lipstick on a pig.

Now Paul says you can expect two ways this in-working grace is going to enable your obedience. The first is to will of His good pleasure, and the second is to do of His good pleasure. God works in you to give you the desire, the motive to please Him. God works in you to give you the enablement, the means to please Him. He draws you, and He enables you.

Take the first one. How does God work in you to will or to desire? Well, the day you are born again, a heart change is made so that God's nature comes to live within you. You now have a heart that can love what God loves. It has an interest, an attraction, a delight in the things of God. Before that happens, you have no relish to please God. That doesn't interest you. Yes, you might want less guilt, you might want to escape hell, you might want to be thought of as a moral person. But that is not a heart change. When God forgives your sin and breathes new life in you, He implants His nature in you, and His Spirit dwells within you. Now there is an inward impulse for the beauty of Christ, for the sweetness of His Word, for the advance of His church, for the good of His people, for the joys of Heaven. Truth is warming and bright to your soul. This is a change in nature.

You see, you can't tempt a leopard with salad and a veggie shake. You can't tempt a wildebeest with a steakburger. Their natures shape what they have appetite for.

So when you are truly saved, the Spirit of God can now take the things of God and draw you. He uses the Word of God, through the church, through preaching, through other Christians, through your conscience, and draws you. There is sometimes conviction, calling you away from sin, and just as often there is persuasion, calling you to the beauty of obedience.

Christian obedience is not motivated by guilt. Christian obedience is not motivated by fear of condemnation. Christian obedience is not motivated by fear of man. Christian obedience is not motivated by slavery to a standard or a duty. The law beats you on your back and drives you to Christ to get saved. But once you are there, there is no longer a rod to the back.

Christian obedience is drawn by promises. The saying goes, cattle are driven, but sheep are led. The Shepherd does not drive us, but goes ahead of us, and calls us with promises of delight and joy if we seek Him with our whole hearts.

And if we respond in faith as we'll see in verse 12, the second thing that grace does is that it enables us. He gives us the *means*. God works in us *to do*. It's the same word "energon". Step out in obedient faith, and God will enable you to do it.

⁶ being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete *it* until the day of Jesus Christ; (Phil. 1:6)

Now here we should adjust our expectations of what it feels like when God energises us. There is no promise here that when God enables your obedience, it will feel as easy as pie. There is no promise that if you follow the promise by faith, that all the inertia and reluctance of your flesh magically disappears. If we focus on how we feel, we might get discouraged and think that the power is not flowing because it still feels hard.

But obedience will sometimes feel easier and sometimes harder. Sometimes it will seem effortless, and sometimes very difficult. Some obedience may become habitual, some of it may feel like every step is a grind. Neither is the true indication that God is at work. The promise is this: God will enable you to complete each act of obedience. You will, by God's grace, be able to resist the temptation to give up, and you will persist until you have obeyed.

Now this is God's power and kindness to His children. He gives you desires to obey, and then the power to obey. He is the Author and the Finisher of our faith. This is God's grace working in you. But now we turn to verse 12. We are supposed to do something with this grace. This is the second side of the secret of obedience.

II. Our Faith Working Out Of Us

¹² Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;

Here we have our responsibility, our action, our response. The main verbs here are the words “work out your own salvation”. Those words are parallel in meaning to the first words in the verse, “as you have always obeyed”. In other words, “work out your own salvation” is another way of saying “obey God”.

Why does Paul say it that way? At first it sounds confusing, as if Paul is saying we earn our salvation, we must work to stay saved. But notice, Paul does not say “work for your salvation”. He says “work out your salvation”. In other words, the salvation that you already have, flesh it out, perform it, do it outwardly. Remember, our salvation has three phases. We have been saved from the penalty of sin, we are being saved from the power of sin, and we will be saved from the presence of sin. Our justification is past, our sanctification is present, and our glorification is future. All three are part of our salvation. This is rather like when Peter says ¹⁰ Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, (2 Pet. 1:10)

You are saved, but bring that out in your obedience. Why? Because as James tells us, faith without works is dead. Faith works. Faith moves. Faith runs the race, fights the fight.

And it is important that we see when Paul is thinking of obedience, he is thinking of an act of faith. In other words, an upward-looking, promise-believing, God-trusting act.

Where do we see that? Paul describes obedience here in two ways that correspond with the two ways God's grace works in us. God's grace gives us the motive, and God's grace gives us the means. In the same way, faith-filled obedience focuses on the right motive, and adopts the right method.

Look at the motive of faith, *why* we obey.

as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence

The Philippians obeyed God when Paul was around. Perhaps they were unified, of one mind, living out the J-Curve. But Paul says, they need to obey not just when Paul is around, but when he is not. If they only obey when Paul is watching, then who are they pleasing, and why are they obeying? That means their obedience is a kind of man-pleasing, or a kind of fear of man. It means it is not really a deep, inward desire to please God, but maybe only to fit in, or appear right, or please Paul. That would mean their obedience is not based in faith. It might be based in fear, or in pride, or in fleshly duty, or in something else.

If you obey only when the boss is watching, or your parents are there, or some other Christian is nearby, then your obedience is not unto the Lord. You are not being drawn by beauty, called by the promises of Scripture, following the Shepherd. You are only being driven by fear, or forced by peer pressure, or pushed by social norms. Faith says: God is my audience. Pleasing God is my pleasure.

This is why legalism and license will fail you. Neither of them activate faith. A legalist is keeping laws and discipline in his own strength for his own reasons. A licentious person is ignoring all laws or discipline for his own reasons. But it remains inward.

But when you are responding to God's grace in you working in you to will, then you find yourself looking at Him, at His promises, at His kindness. You are drawn, attracted, and you follow. And that is why faith-filled obedience succeeds where legalism and license fail: And this is the victory that has overcome the world-- our faith. (1 Jn. 5:4)

The second way that we obey by faith has to do with the method, how we obey.

work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;

Fear and trembling is a phrase that Paul borrows from the Old Testament, very likely from Psalm 2:11 Serve the LORD with fear, And rejoice with trembling.

What is the idea? When we obey by faith, we have a God-orientation. That means we do what we do for Him, and as an offering to Him. We do it with reverence and awe. We are obeying God, and so there is humility, and dependence. We don't want to disappoint Him or fail Him. And we also want to do it well and wholeheartedly, with zeal.

²³ And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, (Col. 3:23)

When you are busy with legalism or license, there is no fear or trembling, You are not really doing it for God, so you can do it however you want. You might be bored when you do it, or do it without zeal. You might start and not finish. You might procrastinate.

But if you are acting in faith, then you are obeying God, not self, not duty, not guilty conscience, not peer pressure. And that gives you a sense of the weight of your actions, their eternal consequences, the importance. Once you bring God back into the picture, there is a seriousness, a joyful reverence, a holy zeal.

Now once again, that sounds like a tall order. But remember the promise of verse 13: it is God who works in you to do of His good pleasure. When you try to obey by following God as He calls you to His promises, and you pursue that beauty, when you step out and obey and try to obey wholeheartedly, and zealously, God will enable you.

Again, not necessarily make it easy, or make it comfortable. But He will make it possible, and enable you to finish.

Indeed, obedience by faith is work. It is hard work. It is disciplined work. But it is not bursts of excruciating work. It is instead a faithful plodding of consistent, persistent Godward acts.

Paul tells us this about himself:

¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God *which was with me*. (1 Cor. 15:10)

To this *end* I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily. (Col. 1:29)

That's why obedience by faith or faith-filled obedience is true freedom, true liberty. You are free from sin, self, Satan, flesh, world, Law. You are free from legalism, and free from license. Free to please, free to present its members to God. You respond to grace, and are enabled by grace.

So, how do I know if I'm following true liberty that brings Christlike obedience? First, are you being drawn by promises, not driven by guilt, or dragged down by guilt. Faith follows he endured as seeing Him who is invisible. (Heb. 11:27)

Second, are you fleshing this out before God with reverent zeal, or is there reluctant apathy, boredom, spiritual dullness? Legalism and license have a dulling effect, whereas faith is filled with reverent zeal.

Faith is the victory. Salvation is by grace through faith, at the beginning, in the middle, and to the end.