

# Truth for Today

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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**Broadcast Date:** 30 September 2012

**No.** T0748

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## Actions speak louder than words: Obedience

Whenever I think about the subject of obedience, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself immediately comes to mind for He said: "I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me ... for I always do the things that are pleasing to him", John 8:28-29 (English Standard Version). The 'always' included Him "being obedient all the way up to death - even to death on a cross" as Philippians 2:8 asserts! Later on in John's Gospel, Jesus described Himself as the Good Shepherd, who laid down His life for His sheep, action which gave fresh reason for His Father to love Him. He said this had been commanded by His Father, who also gave Him the authority to take His life again, see John 10:18. At the end of His public ministry, Jesus re-emphasised that He'd completely obeyed the Father: "Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me ... For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment - what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me", John 12:44-45, 49-50.

What did Jesus mean by the statement "the Father's commandment is eternal life"? (John 12:50) He meant that, because He eternally enjoys His Father's love, He always wants to do whatever the Father requires of Him. So within the Godhead obedience is a characteristic of eternal life. It's 'love-in-action', or as we've entitled this series, 'actions speak louder than words' - to men that is, for Jesus cannot but obey His Father! At the end of the Upper Room discourse, He said to His disciples that the Father had commanded Him to die on the cross and that this obedient action would prove to the world His love for the Father. Romans 5:19 contrasts Christ's obedience with Adam's disobedience, Romans 5:12 teaches that it was through Adam that sin entered into the world and so the reign of disobedience began.

The obedience of Christians arises out of their love for their Lord. Having been born of God, they're partakers of the divine nature, which, as I've said, is love. He said: "If you love me you will keep my commandments", John 14:15. John tells us in his first letter, in 1 John 5:3, that His commandments aren't burdensome, that is, they're neither difficult to understand nor to do. In John 14:23, Jesus said: "If anyone loves me He will keep my word", and concludes with the promise: "and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him". But the Lord also gave a new commandment that His followers "should love one another in the same way as He loved them" (John 13:34). We discover what love really is from the fact that He laid down His life for us. When we have such practical love for other believers, then our actions *do* speak louder than anything we say and this causes people know that we're Christ's disciples, see John 13:34-35.

As His disciples, Christian believers must follow in His footsteps of total obedience to God. This means they must think, say and do as He Himself would have done. But do you realise that obedience started when you believed the Gospel in the first place? Perhaps you've never thought about it in this way but, according Romans 1:5 and Romans 16:25-26, the Gospel is preached throughout the whole world to bring about the obedience of faith. Through God's call in the Gospel He offers you the gift of faith - so that you'll obey Him by believing on the Lord Jesus Christ and thus be saved.

If you're not a believer, let me tell you that at this very moment God commands you to repent of your sins and to believe in Jesus as your Saviour and Lord. He leaves you in no doubt about these issues and gives you assurance of the truth of them in the resurrection of Christ from the dead, see Acts 16:30-31 and Acts 17:30-31.

And it's active faith, not mere empty words, which is required. Jesus said: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On [the judgment] day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness'", Matthew 7:21-23.

Since Christian life commences with the obedience of faith, it continues according to that same obedience. In fact, Paul credits obedience to believers in Romans 6:17-18, "you who were once the slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness". In other words, your acceptance of the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour included an

acknowledgement of Him as your Lord. The 'standard of teaching' to which you committed yourself is the doctrine and practise of Christianity. And this must be a real commitment because Jesus admonishes: "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you? Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and *does* them, I will show you what he is like: he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when a flood arose, the stream broke against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and *does not do* them is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the stream broke against it, immediately it fell, and the ruin of that house was great", Luke 6:46-49. So throughout this series of talks entitled 'Actions speak louder than words', we'll address some important issues of obedience: 'Obedience' itself today, then 'Baptism', 'Marriage' and 'Head covering'.

But obedience covers every aspect of Christian life, each one being as important as any other. A good scriptural motto to have with respect to obedience to the Lord Jesus is: "Do whatever He tells you", John 2:5. A good example of obedience is in John 4, where the nobleman's son is healed. Jesus told him to return to Capernaum from Cana and that his son would live. "The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way", John 4:50. Also, the blind man in John 9 obeyed the Lord's instruction: "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam. So he went and washed and came back seeing", John 9:7.

It's of the utmost importance for believers to acknowledge that the New Testament Scriptures are indeed the commandments of the Lord, see 1 Corinthians 14:37. A pertinent exhortation is: "do not be foolish but understand what the will of the Lord is", Ephesians 5:15. Usually it isn't ignorance which is the problem. Rather, it's the straightforward obedience we find difficult! There's a salutary warning about this problem from the history of the children of Israel at Sinai. Remember that in their fear of Jehovah, they said to Moses: "All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do", Exodus 24:4. Yet they soon forgot the fear of the LORD and, despite their wonderful wilderness experiences of His steadfast love, they often disobeyed God. In fact, it started when ten of the twelve spies sent to assess Canaan reported back that the task of conquering the land was impossible (see Numbers 13). God said the reaction of the people demonstrated that they hadn't obeyed His voice, see Numbers 14:22.

At the end of the wilderness journey, and just before he died, Moses repeated the whole law to them and admonished them in Deuteronomy 30:16: "If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it". But their subsequent history proved they continued to be a disobedient and rebellious people.

The martyr Stephen explained it was the uncircumcision of their hearts which was the cause of their inherent problem of disobedience (Acts 7:51). Their propensity to disobey was from their sinful nature. Whenever the law said "Thou shalt not...", the flesh (that is, the Adamic nature within them) answered "that sounds too good to resist" and they repeatedly disobeyed. The New Testament consistently teaches that the law could never effect obedience from Israel due this weakness of man's flesh. Their religious practices were outward when they should have been from out of the heart. What was true of God's chosen people was also true of all mankind.

How good to know that the Gospel produces an inward change of heart for Christians both to believe with the heart and then to obey God from the heart. They have new life in Christ Jesus: "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit", Romans 8:2-4. Hence Christians serve or obey, not under the old written code, but in the new life of the Spirit, see Romans 7:6.

And so we've reached an important point with respect to Christian obedience - it's that believers have the Holy Spirit resident in their hearts. He causes them to truly love God and gives them the desires, and the power, to obey. However, this isn't automatic. Christians aren't just robots powered by the Spirit of God to obey God. Sin is still present within us and the pull of sinful flesh to disobey remains as demanding as ever.

### **How can I overcome the flesh and live in obedience to God?**

The question therefore arises: 'How can I overcome the flesh and live in obedience to God?' Paul gives the answer in Romans 6, and says that the victory is gained through the process of practical sanctification.

- He starts by advising us of things we must appreciate (come to know) about the death of the Lord Jesus Christ:

1. That Christian baptism is an acknowledgement of being baptised into Christ's death: "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life", Romans 6:4.
  2. That our sinful manner of life was judged by God in Jesus' cross: "We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin," Romans 6:6.
  3. That Christ's resurrection means that He fully, once forever, answered the problem of sin: "We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God", Romans 6:9-10.
- Secondly, Paul states that we must take on board this teaching and work out how it applies to each of us: "So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus", Romans 6:11.
  - Finally, we must make conscious decisions and take decisive actions:
    1. We must not to allow sin to dominate our lives: "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions", Romans 6:12.
    2. We must turn from sin and yield our lives to God: "Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness", Romans 6:13.
    3. We must continue to obey God by, each day, yielding to His will: "For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness (that is, disobedience or self-will) leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification", Romans 6:19.

The whole teaching about obedience in Romans 6 is so vital to successful Christian living that I will read the concluding part of the chapter, Romans 6:16-23: "Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord".

A final point about the teaching on obedience in Romans 7 records Paul's own personal experience of implementing the process of practical sanctification. It's an experience which believers readily identify with. It's the conflict we experience: when we want to do good, we find that sin is present and we disobey so that we do wrong, which isn't what we wanted to do, see Romans 7:19-20. I don't have the time to go into any detail, but it's sufficient to stress that such experiences are necessary to bring us to the conclusion that there's deliverance from this dilemma only through the risen Lord, see Romans 7:24-25. This conclusion is more properly stated in Romans 8:2: "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death" (New King James Version).

### **What kind of obedience is required of Christian believers?**

You'll no doubt by now be asking the question: 'What kind of obedience is required of Christian believers?' The answer is found in 1 Peter 1:2. God the Father has chosen every believer "unto the obedience of Jesus Christ" (JN Darby translation). God's objective is that each believer obeys Him in the same manner that His Son, Jesus Christ, obeyed Him. Yes, we must obey to the same extent that He obeyed, that is, we must live every moment of our lives exactly the way God wants us to live! Obedience means total compliance with God's will, which is found throughout the practical sections of New Testament teaching. Here are some:

- 1 Thessalonians 4:3-7 state that God wants us to keep our bodies in holiness and honour, not in the passion of lust like we see happening in the world around us. Specifically, each believer must abstain from sexual immorality, because the holy God has called us in holiness. Practical purity is called sanctification.

- Philippians 4:6 and Ephesians 5:20 but specifically 1 Thessalonians 5:18 say it's God's will that we always give Him thanks for, and in, every circumstance of life, whether we experience things that are good or things that are bad.
- In Ephesians 1:9-10, we're let into the secret of God's will for Christ. The big picture is that by the counsel of His will, He's working out His "plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth", Because Christians share in Christ's inheritance, Ephesians 4-6 flesh out God's will with details of how believers' lives must fit into God's overall plan:
  1. Our lifestyle is to be completely different from the corrupt world in which we live, Ephesians 4:17-32.
  2. Our church life, our Christian fellowship, is to be based on walking in love - in a manner worthy of our heavenly calling, Ephesians 4:1-16 and Ephesians 5:1-21.
  3. Our family life is to be maintained in healthy relationships, based on Christ's love for His Church and the knowledge that we're God's beloved children, Ephesians 5:1-2 and Ephesians 5:22-6:4.
  4. Our work life, either as employers or employees, is to be the opportunity to do the will of God from the heart by remembering that we're really serving the Lord and not men, Ephesians 6:5-9.

### **What about God's specific will for my life?**

But what about God's specific will for my life? How do I know what the Lord wants me to do every second of every hour of every day so that I can obey Him, as Christ obeyed? I find this when I decide to not to follow the way of the world but to give myself entirely over to God and set myself apart for Him. Having done this, I'll be able to discern by testing or proving what is His will, what is good and acceptable and perfect, see Romans 12:1-2,. This is the intended outcome of the process of personal, practical sanctification from Romans 6-8.

### **Conclusion**

I'll finish this talk by referring to two Scriptural examples in which 'actions speak louder than words' on the subject of obedience.

The first is in 1 Samuel 15. When Saul was instructed by Samuel to completely obliterate the Amalekites and all their possessions (1 Samuel 15:3), he didn't and he spared king Agag, and all the good livestock (1 Samuel 15:9). But he later boasted to Samuel that he had performed the LORD's commandment, (1 Samuel 15:13). When he was confronted, he tried to talk his way out of trouble by saying that the animals had been saved to sacrifice to the LORD God at Gilgal (1 Samuel 15:20-21). Samuel tersely responded that obedience was better than sacrifice and to carefully listen to what the word of the LORD actually required was better than the fat, which was the best part of the sacrifice, 1 Samuel 15:22-23. The first lesson is salutary - it's necessary to do no less than the exact commands of God because God takes greater pleasure in our obedience than in our worship!

The second Scriptural example is a story told by the Lord Jesus Himself when His authority was challenged by the Jewish rulers (Matthew 21:23-27). He spoke about a father who told his two sons to go and work in his vineyard (Matthew 21:28-32). The first son said he would not but afterwards changed his mind and went (Matthew 21:28-29). The other son said he would but did not go (Matthew 21:30). Jesus asked the Jews which son actually did the will of his father (Matthew 21:31), the answer obviously being the first son (Matthew 21:31). Which son are we like in our commitment to the Lord? Do our actions really match our words?!

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