

The Scriptures and

O BEDIENCE

“Behold, to obey is better than
sacrifice, and to hearken than the
fat of rams.”—*1 Samuel 15:22*

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THE SCRIPTURES AND OBEDIENCE

Honouring Christ in the World

All professing Christians are agreed, in theory at least, that it is the bounden duty of those who bear His name to honour and glorify Christ in this world. But as to how this is to be done, as to what He requires from us to this end, there is wide difference of opinion. Many suppose that honouring Christ simply means to join some “church,” to take part in and support its various activities. Others think that honouring Christ means to speak of Him to others and be diligently engaged in “personal work.” Others seem to imagine that honouring Christ signifies little more than making liberal financial contributions to His cause. Few indeed realize that Christ is honoured only as we live holily unto Him, and that by walking in subjection to His revealed will. Few indeed really believe that word, “Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams” (1Sa 15:22).

We are not Christians at all unless we have fully surrendered to and “received Christ Jesus the Lord” (Col 2:6). Oh, dear reader, we would plead with you to ponder that statement diligently. Satan is deceiving so many today by leading them to suppose that they are savingly trusting in “the finished work” of Christ while their hearts remain unchanged and self still rules their lives. Listen to God’s Word: “Salvation is far from the wicked; for they seek not thy statutes” (Psa 119:115). Do you really seek His “statutes?” Do you diligently search His Word to discover what He has commanded? “He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (1Jo 2:4). What could be plainer than that?

Dangers of Disobedience

“And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?” (Luk 6:46). Reality in life, not glowing words from the lips, is what Christ requires. What a searching and solemn word is that in James 1:22. “Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves!” There are many “hearers” of the Word, regular hearers, reverent hearers, interested hearers; but alas, what they hear is not incorporated into the life: it does

not regulate their way. And God says that they who are not doers of the Word are deceiving their own selves!

Alas, how many such there are in Christendom today. They are not down-right hypocrites, but deluded. They suppose that because they are so clear upon salvation by grace alone they are saved. They suppose that because they sit under the ministry of a man who has “made the Bible a new book” to them, they have grown in grace. They suppose that because their store of biblical knowledge has increased they are more spiritual. They suppose that the mere listening to a servant of God or reading his writings is feeding on the Word. Not so! We “feed” on the Word only when we personally appropriate, masticate,¹ and assimilate into our lives what we hear or read. Where there is not an increasing conformity of heart and life to God’s Word, then increased knowledge will only bring increased condemnation! “And that servant, which knew his Lord’s will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes” (Luk 12:47).

“Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2Ti 3:7). This is one of the prominent characteristics of the “perilous times” in which we are now living. People hear one preacher after another, attend this conference and that conference, read book after book on biblical subjects, and yet never attain unto a vital and practical acquaintance with the Truth, so as to have an impression of its power and efficacy on the soul. There is such a thing as spiritual dropsy,² and multitudes are suffering from it. The more they hear, the more they want to: they drink in sermons and addresses with avidity³ but their lives are unchanged. They are puffed up with their knowledge, not humbled into the dust before God. The faith of God’s elect is “the acknowledging [in the life] of the truth which is after godliness” (Ti 1:1), but to this the vast majority are total strangers.

God has given us His Word not only with the design of instructing us, but for the purpose of directing us: to make known what He requires us to do. The first thing we need is a clear and distinct knowledge of our duty; and the first thing God demands of us is a conscientious practice of it, corresponding to our knowledge. “What doeth the Lord require of thee, but to

¹ **masticate** – to chew up completely.

² **dropsy** – accumulation of fluid in the body, causing swelling.

³ **avidity** – greedy and intense desire, craving.

do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” (Mic 6:8). “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man” (Ecc 12:13). The Lord Jesus affirmed the same thing when He said, “Ye are my friends, if you do whatsoever I command you” (Joh 15:14).

1. God’s Demands upon Man

A man profits from the Word as he discovers *God’s demands upon him*: His undeviating demand, for He changes not. It is a great and grievous mistake to suppose that in this present dispensation God has lowered His demands, for that would necessarily imply that His previous demand was a harsh and unrighteous one. Not so. “The law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good” (Rom 7:12). The sum of God’s Law is, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might” (Deu 6:5); and the Lord Jesus repeated it in Matthew 22:37. The apostle Paul enforced the same when he wrote, “If any man love not the Lord Jesus, let him be Anathema”⁴ (1Co 16:22).

2. Man’s Failure to Meet God’s Demands

A man profits from the Word when he discovers *how entirely and how sinfully he has failed to meet God’s demands*. And let us point out for the benefit of any who may take issue with the last paragraph that no man can see what a sinner he is, how infinitely short he has fallen of measuring up to God’s standards, until he has a clear sight of the exalted demands of God upon him! Just in proportion as preachers lower God’s standard of what He requires from every human being, to that extent will their hearers obtain an inadequate and faulty conception of their sinfulness, and so the less will they perceive their need of an almighty Saviour! But once a soul really perceives what are God’s demands upon him, and how completely and constantly he has failed to render Him His due, then does he recognize what a desperate situation he is in. The Law must be preached before any are ready for the gospel.

⁴ **anathema** – a person accursed or damned.

3. God's Provision for Meeting His Demands

A man profits from the Word when he is taught therefrom that *God, in His infinite grace, has fully provided for His people's meeting His own demands*. At this point, too, practically all present-day preaching is seriously defective. There is being given forth what may loosely be termed a “half gospel,” but which in reality is virtually a denial of the true gospel. Christ is brought in, yet only as a sort of make-weight.⁵ That Christ has vicariously met every demand of God upon all who believe upon Him is blessedly true, yet it is only a part of the truth. The Lord Jesus has not only vicariously satisfied for His people the requirements of God's righteousness, but He has also secured that they shall personally satisfy them too. Christ has procured the Holy Spirit to make good in them what the Redeemer wrought for them.

The grand and glorious miracle of salvation is that the saved are regenerated. A transforming work is wrought within them: their understandings are illuminated, their hearts are changed, their wills are renewed. They are made “new creatures in Christ Jesus” (2Co 5:17). God refers to this miracle of grace thus: “I will put my laws into their mind and write them in their hearts” (Heb 8:10). The heart is now inclined to God's law; a disposition has been communicated to it which answers to its demands; there is a sincere desire to perform it. And thus the quickened soul is able to say, “When thou saidst, Seek ye my face; my heart said unto thee, thy face, Lord, will I seek” (Psa 27:8).

Christ not only rendered a perfect obedience unto the Law for the justification of His believing people, but He also merited for them those supplies of His Spirit which were essential unto their sanctification, and which alone could transform carnal creatures and enable them to render acceptable obedience unto God. Though Christ died for the “ungodly” (Rom 5:6), though He finds them ungodly (Rom 4:5) when He justifies them, yet He leaves them not in that abominable state. On the contrary, He effectually teaches them by His Spirit to deny ungodliness and worldly lust (Ti 2:12). Just as weight cannot be separated from a stone, or heat from fire, so cannot justification and sanctification.

⁵ **make-weight** – something added to a scale to complete the required weight.

When God really pardons a sinner in the court of his conscience, under the sense of that amazing grace the heart is purified, the life is rectified, and the whole man is sanctified. Christ “gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, [not “careless about” but] zealous of good works” (Ti 2:19). Just as a substance and its properties, causes and their necessary effects are inseparably connected, so are a saving faith and conscientious obedience unto God. Hence we read of “the obedience of faith” (Rom 16:26).

Said the Lord Jesus, “He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me” (Joh 14:21). Not in the Old Testament, the gospels, or the epistles does God own anyone as a lover of Him save he who keeps His commandments. Love is something more than sentiment or emotion: it is a principle of action, and it expresses itself in something more than honeyed expressions, namely by deeds which please the object loved. “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments” (1Jo 5:3). Oh, my reader, you are deceiving yourself if you think you love God and yet have no deep desire and make no real effort to walk obediently before Him.

But what is obedience to God? It is far more than a mechanical performance of certain duties. I may have been brought up by Christian parents, and under them acquire certain moral habits, and yet my abstaining from taking the Lord’s name in vain, and being guiltless of stealing, may be disobedience to the third and eighth commandments. Again, obedience to God is far more than conforming to the conduct of His people. I may board in a home where the Sabbath is strictly observed, and out of respect for them, or because I think it is good and wise course to rest one day in seven, I may refrain from all unnecessary labour on that day, and yet not keep the fourth commandment at all! Obedience is not only subjection to an external law, but it is the surrendering of my will to the authority of another. Thus, obedience to God is the heart’s recognition of His lordship: of His right to command, and my duty to comply. It is the complete subjection of the soul to the blessed yoke of Christ.

That obedience which God requires can proceed only from a heart which loves Him. “Whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord” (Col 3:23). That obedience which springs from a dread of punishment is servile. That obedience which is performed in order to procure favours from God is selfish and carnal. But spiritual and acceptable obedience is cheerfully given: it is the

heart's free response to and gratitude for the unmerited regard and love of God for us.

4. Loving God's Commandments

We profit from the Word when we not only see it is our bounden duty to obey God, but *when there is wrought in us a love for His commandments*. The "blessed" man is the one whose "delight is in the law of the Lord" (Psa 1:2). And again we read, "Blessed is the man that feareth the Lord, that delighteth greatly in his commandments" (Psa 112:1). It affords a real test for our hearts to face honestly the questions. Do I really value His "commandments" as much as I do His promises? Ought I not to do so? Assuredly, for the one proceed as truly from His love as do the other. The heart's compliance with the voice of Christ is the foundation of all practical holiness.

Here again we would earnestly and lovingly beg the reader to attend closely to this detail. Any man who supposes that he is saved and yet has no genuine love of God's commandment is deceiving himself. Said the psalmist, "O how love I thy law!" (Psa 119:97). And again, "Therefore I love thy commandments above gold; yea, above fine gold" (Psa 119:127). Should someone object that that was under the Old Testament, we ask, Do you intimate that the Holy Spirit produces less a change in the hearts of those whom He now regenerates than He did of old? But a New Testament saint also placed on record, "I delight in the law of God after the inward man" (Rom 7:22). And, my reader, unless your heart delights in the "law of God" there is something radically wrong with you: yea, it is greatly to be feared that you are spiritually dead.

5. Yielding to God's Commandments

A man profits from the Word when his heart and will are yielded to *all* God's commandments. Partial obedience is no obedience at all. A holy mind declines whatsoever God forbids, and chooses to practice all He requires, without any exception. If our minds submit not unto God in all His commandments, we submit not to His authority in anything He enjoins. If we do not approve of our duty in its full extent, we are greatly mistaken if we imagine that we have any liking unto any part of it. A person who has no principle of holiness in him may yet be disinclined to many vices and be pleased to practice many virtues, as he perceives the former are unfit actions and the latter are, in themselves, comely actions, but his disapproba-

tion⁶ of vice and approbation of virtue arise not from any disposition to submit to the will of God.

True spiritual obedience is impartial. A renewed heart does not pick and choose from God's commandments: the man who does so is not performing God's will, but his own! Make no mistake upon this point; if we do not sincerely desire to please God in all things, then we do not truly wish to do so in anything. Self must be denied; not merely some of the things which may be craved, but self itself! A willful allowance of any known sin breaks the whole law (Jam 2:10-11). "Then shall I not be ashamed, when I have respect unto all thy commandments" (Psa 119:6). Said the Lord Jesus, "Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you" (Joh 15:14). If I am not His friend, then I must be His enemy, for there is no other alternative (see Luke 19:27).

6. Praying for Enabling Grace

We profit from the Word when the soul is moved to *pray earnestly for enabling grace*. In regeneration the Holy Spirit communicates a nature which is fitted for obedience according to the Word. The heart has been won by God. There is now a deep and sincere desire to please Him. But the new nature possesses no inherent power, and the old nature or "flesh" strives against it, and the Devil opposes. Thus, the Christian exclaims, "For to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not" (Rom 7:18). This does not mean that he is the slave of sin, as he was before conversion; but it means that he finds not how fully to realize his spiritual aspirations. Therefore does he pray, "Make me to go in the path of thy commandments; for therein do I delight" (Psa 119:35). And again, "Order my steps in thy Word and let not any iniquity have dominion over me" (Psa 119:133).

Here we would reply to a question which the above paragraphs have probably raised in many minds: Are you affirming that God requires perfect obedience from us in this life? We answer, Yes, God will not set any lower standard before us than that (1Pe 1:15). Then does the real Christian measure up to that standard? Yes and no. Yes, in his heart and it is at that which God looks (1Sa 16:7). In his heart every regenerated person has a real love for God's commandments, and genuinely desires to keep all of them com-

⁶ **disapprobation** – disapproval.

pletely. It is in this sense, and this alone, that the Christian is experimentally “perfect.” The word “perfect,” both in the Old Testament (Job 1:1; Psa 37:37) and in the New Testament (Phi 3:15), means upright, sincere, in contrast with hypocritical.

“Lord, thou hast heard the desire of the humble” (Psa 10:17). The “desires” of the saint are the language of his soul, and the promise is “He will fulfill the desire of them that fear him” (Psa 145:19). The Christian’s desire is to obey God in all things, to be completely conformed to the image of Christ. But this will only be realized in the resurrection. Meanwhile, God for Christ’s sake graciously accepts the will for the deed (1Pe 3:5). He knows our hearts and sees in His child a genuine love for and a sincere desire to keep all His commandments, and accepts the fervent longing and cordial endeavour in lieu of an exact performance (2Co 8:12). But let none who are living in willful disobedience draw false peace and pervert to their own destruction what has just been said for the comfort of those who are heartily desirous of seeking to please God in all the details of their lives.

If any ask, How am I to know that my “desires” are really those of a regenerate soul? We answer, Saving grace is the communication to the heart of an habitual disposition unto holy acts. The “desires” of the reader are to be tested thus: Are they constant and continuous, or only by fits and starts? Are they earnest and serious, so that you really “hunger and thirst after righteousness” (Mat 5:6) and pant “after God” (Psa 42:1)? Are they operative and efficacious? Many desire to escape from hell, yet their desires are not sufficiently strong to bring them to hate and turn from that which must inevitably bring them to hell, namely willfully sinning against God. Many desire to go to heaven, but not so that they enter upon and follow that “narrow way” which alone leads thereto. True spiritual “desires” use the means of grace and spare no pains to realize them, and continue prayerfully pressing forward unto the mark set before them.

7. Enjoying Obedience

We profit from the Word when we are, even now, *enjoying the reward of obedience*. “Godliness is profitable unto all things” (1Ti 4:8). By obedience we purify our souls (1Pe 1:22). By obedience we obtain the ear of God (1Jo 3:22), as disobedience is a barrier to our prayers (Isa 59:2; Jer 5:25). By obedience we obtain precious and intimate manifestations of Christ unto the

soul (Joh 14:21). As we tread the path of wisdom (complete subjection to God), we discover that “her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace” (Pro 3:17). “His commandments are not grievous” (1Jo 5:3), and “in keeping of them there is great reward” (Psa 19:11).

