

# Practical Obedience

by A.B. Simpson

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*Practical obedience is the key to a life of faith, and it is the remedy for doubt and the secret of faith.*

**Scripture:** James 1:22

**Topics:** "Faith in Action", "Obedience"

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## Description

A.B. Simpson emphasizes the necessity of practical obedience in the Christian life, arguing that true faith is demonstrated through action. He explains that God's will is the ultimate authority for right and duty, and the Word of God serves as the standard for our conduct. Simpson illustrates how the law of liberty, empowered by love, transforms obedience from a burden into a joyful expression of our faith. He warns against the moral conditions that hinder the Word's effectiveness in our lives and highlights the importance of self-examination and action in experiencing God's blessings. Ultimately, he encourages believers to live out their faith actively, as true fulfillment and joy come from doing God's will.

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## Transcript

"But be ye doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if a man be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: for he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed" (James 1:22-25).

Practical obedience naturally follows the subject of practical faith. Trust and obey are the two wings which maintain the equilibrium of our flight, the two oars which keep us steadily in the channel of our course. This paragraph unfolds some of the profoundest ethical principles of the New Testament.

### I. THE WILL OF GOD AS THE SUPREME AUTHORITY OF RIGHT AND DUTY.

"The Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. Of His own will begat He us with the word of truth." Here our very conversion is referred back to the will of God as its supreme source. And God Himself is recognized as the Sovereign Being who sits enthroned in His eternal, unchangeable and infallible authority and righteousness as the Sovereign of our being and of all being. The figure here involved in the beautiful original phrase is that of the parallax by which the astronomer measures the distance of the remotest stars, The parallax is the angle formed by two points on the earth's surface from which an observation is taken of a distant star according to the angle made. From these two points we

measure the distance of the star by the acuteness of the angle. But with God he says there is no parallax. Looking at Him from every standpoint He is eternally the same and His will is forever the same, and therefore, there is a fixed standard of right and wrong, and duty is not a mere accommodation to circumstances, sentiments, or human opinions, but conformity to the will of God.

## II. THE WORD OF GOD AS THE STANDARD OF RIGHT AND WRONG.

For this supreme Lawgiver has given us a law, and has revealed to us His will concerning our conduct. That law is here called "the perfect law of liberty." It is a perfect law. There is no greater miracle in the Bible than its revelation of righteousness. Even the Decalogue itself, although not nearly so perfect in its primal edition at Sinai as it has become through the teachings of the Son of Man, and as reissued and reenacted by Him through the Sermon on the Mount and His wise and holy teachings, is a marvelous monument of the wisdom and righteousness of God. One of our American Justices, it is said, was converted from infidelity to Christianity by studying the Mosaic Law. Where did Moses get that law? he asked himself after carefully reading and analysing it. There is nothing in the literature of Egypt, Chaldea or Greece from which he could have derived its profound and comprehensive principles of jurisprudence. Everything is there in the most condensed and comprehensive form. Under two great tables he classifies our duty to God and to one another, and covers all ethical questions with sublime simplicity and completeness. He must have got it from heaven. And so he did. And as we read it in its larger edition in the spiritual teachings of the New Testament, it claims the subjection of our conscience, the homage of our will, the obedience of our life, and we are constrained to say of it, as Jehovah said of His ancient commandments, that it is "for our good always."

## III. THE LAW OF LIBERTY.

But it is here described by a new phrase, "the law of liberty." This is the New Testament law, the law of love. As it came to us from Sinai, it was not the law of liberty, but of condemnation. But now its penalty met in the person of Christ, and its motive power supplied by His Holy Spirit and His indwelling life in our heart, it becomes to us not the authority of necessity, but the constraint of love. It is the law in our heart becoming part of our nature so that we keep it not because we have to, but because we love to. As citizens of the State we do not avoid the crime of murder because we fear that we shall be electrocuted if we murder, but because our nature lifts us above it. We do not want to murder. We are under the law of liberty. We make the law ourselves, and so long as we keep it, we are free from it, for "the law is not made for a righteous man, but for transgressors." The obedient are lifted above it, and are free from its condemnation and its bondage.

## IV. THE ENGRAFTED WORD (Jas. 1:21).

A new figure is here introduced. The principle of grafting is very simple and suggestive. On a common root or stock a cultivated bud or branch is fastened, and trained to grow into its new trunk and stem until all its vegetable organism has become connected with the new fountain head. And then it begins to bear, not the fruit of the old stem, which is but a common crab or wild vine, but the cultivated fruit in all its mellowness and delicacy of flavor. It is really drawing upon the life of the old root, but crowning it with new beauty and richest fruitfulness. So upon the stem of our natural life God engrafts His Word, and so infuses and in-works that Word into our very life that it becomes the element of our being and the second nature of all our habits, controlling us without arbitrary constraint and making it our delight to do His will. Thus it becomes to us a law of liberty. We do right because we want to. We serve God because we love Him.

Obedience becomes as natural as sin was before, and the heart is spontaneous and free in all its spiritual affections and actions. Obedience, therefore, is not a matter of outward authority, but inward impulse. Character is not built as you would build a house, by adding plank to plank and timber to timber from the outside, but as God builds a tree, by throwing out life from the inside, and adding each new layer from the heart out.

This is the secret of liberty and power in all the natural and spiritual world. Take the laws of the physical realm and get them incorporated into your industrial art, and what power they exercise! Take the law of electricity and put it in your house as a telephone, and it will carry your messages for hundreds of miles. Put it in your towns and cities as a telegraph system and it will traverse continents and oceans with its messages of fire. Put it in your vehicles and it will carry your trolleys and your automobiles. Put it in your factories and it will become the motive power of all business, transportation and commerce. But let it get beyond your control, disobey it, and it will strike you lifeless with the lightning's awful blaze. So the Word of God must be received, incorporated, engrafted, and assimilated into our spiritual being, and then it becomes the motive power of our being, "the man of our counsel" and the guide of our life.

#### V. THE MORAL CONDITIONS WHICH HINDER THE FREE OPERATION OF THE WORD OF GOD IN OUR LIVES.

"Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls." (Jas. 1:21.) Just as the electric current must be insulated before it can be operated, so the Word of God cannot work freely in a soul that willingly indulges in sin. Two forms of evil are here classified, one the impure, the other the malignant. Filthiness includes all forms of sensual indulgence; naughtiness all forms of bitter and malicious feeling. Either of these will cloud the spiritual vision and interrupt the life of God in the heart. Just as the compass on shipboard can be deflected from its true direction by a counter-attraction through some piece of metal thoughtlessly left on deck, so conscience, though sincere, may be warped and misdirected by the influence of unholy desire or indulgence, and the soul perverted even when flattering itself that it is acting with the deepest sincerity and doing that which it believes to be right. There must, therefore, be a spirit of surrendered self-will and holy meekness, if we would receive the engrafted word. The apostle Peter expresses the same truth in almost identical terms, "Wherefore laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisy, and envies, and all evil speakings, as newborn babes desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby." (1 Pet. 2:1-2.) Therefore it has come to pass that this same Word of God has been used to defend the most bitter persecutions and to justify the most unholy teachings by men whose judgment was biased by a wrong heart, and whose conscience was perverted by an unsanctified spirit.

#### VI. THE SELF-REVEALING POWER OF THE WORD OF GOD.

It is here compared to a mirror, and the ordinary hearer of the Word to a man beholding his natural face in the glass. But the hasty glance passes, and "straight-way [he] forgetteth what manner of man he was." The true hearer is represented by the man who takes a nearer view of himself in the sacred mirror, and becomes not a forgetful hearer of the Word, but a doer. Literally translated, this should read, "Whoso looketh nearer into the perfect law of liberty and maketh his abode there, this man being not a forgetful hearer, but an energetic doer, shall be blessed in his doing." The beginning of all self-improvement is self-knowledge, and the most wholesome knowledge we can have of ourselves is to know our faults. "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Blessed are they that are dissatisfied, for they shall be satisfied, so this has been happily translated. It is thus that the Word of God sanctifies us

by showing us first our need, and then leading us to Christ for the supply. We look into the picture of love first in the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians, and we see how little we have of the love that suffereth long and is kind; and humbled by a sense of our failure, we take Christ for the grace of love. We bring our strifes and quarrels to the teaching of Jesus in the eighteenth and nineteenth chapters of Matthew, and we begin to settle our disputes according to the Word. Thus we "discern ourselves," and by true self-judgment we escape the divine judgment and rise to a higher righteousness, taking Christ as our Sanctification over against our self-condemnation. The willingness to see ourselves in our true light is the very highest proof of a true heart. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," and the best evidence that there is no hidden sin covered up in our heart is our readiness to say, "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

## VII. THE BLESSEDNESS OF DOING.

"This man shall be blessed in his doing." Having seen our fault and also the vision of God's highest will for us, now follows the responsibility of practical obedience. James is a thorough believer in good works. He is no musty ascetic living in pensive cloisters and dreaming his life away in self-centered introspection, but a man of wholesome action carrying his religion into the light of day and the field of human life and helpful duty. It is in the doing that the blessing comes.

1. This is the remedy for doubt and the secret of faith. "If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself." (John 7: 17.) Don't argue with your skeptic. Say to him as Christ used to say, "Come and see." Prove Christianity by testing it. Go to God with even the little faith you have, or if you have nothing but doubt to bring, go with your doubt. Tell Him the worst. If you can only pray, "O God, if there be a God, help me," He will hear that cry. The writer once knew of an intelligent infidel being converted by what might be called an unconscious prayer. His Christian wife had just died, and in the remembrance of her beautiful life and still more beautiful death, his heart was bursting with agony, and before he realized it, he had uttered a sob of prayer to her God for comfort and help. Instantly he remembered that he did not believe in her God, but before he had time to recall his prayer by an act of reasoning, it had reached heaven through an impulse of his heart, and the answer had come back to him in a new consciousness such as he had never felt before, and from that moment he knew there was a God. He had proved Him by the practical test.

2. This is the best way to find salvation. Take it as Christ has freely offered it, and then begin to act as if you had it, and you will be blessed in your doing. The best formula for beginning a Christian life that we have ever heard is the simple resolution of Hendly Vivars the night in which he turned away from a life of ungodliness to follow Christ, "If this be true for me, I will live from this moment as a man that has been cleansed from all sin by the blood of Christ." That decision put him on salvation ground, and from that moment he was a Christian. The most happy and useful Christian the writer has ever known was a gentleman who struggled for months for a religious experience without any result, and then quietly walked into the woods one day and made this resolution, "From this moment I will serve Christ as my Master whether I am lost or saved. My business is to follow Him. The responsibility of my salvation rests with Him." Before twenty-four hours had passed, that man was rejoicing in the experience that he had stopped seeking, and was blessed in his doing.

3. This is the way to realize the experience of Christ's indwelling and the baptism of the Spirit. Simply yield yourself to God and claim the promise of the Spirit. And then begin to act as if you had Him as your

Sanctifier, Keeper and Indwelling Life, and He will answer to your faith, and meet your trust just where you look for Him and recognize Him. If you recognize Him in your heart, you will find Him in your heart. If you recognize Him in some distant heaven, He will meet you there at a distance. If you count upon Him, He will answer to your expectation and meet your faith. If you venture on Him, He will be there every time. It is the doing that brings the blessing.

4. Are you seeking for healing? Christ never healed anybody on his back or his bed. "Stretch forth thy hand," was His prescription to the man with the withered hand. "Get up and walk," was His command to the paralytic. "Go, show yourselves to the priests," He said to the lepers, and "as they went they were healed." "Go thy way, thy son liveth," He told the anxious father, and as he was obeying, the message met him that the healing had come. It was in doing something they all received the blessing. And so still we must show our faith by our works, and find strength in stepping out even in our weakness, and throwing ourselves upon the strength of God for life's duties and demands.

5. Would you find joy and happiness? Again it will meet you in doing the will of God. "Well done, good and faithful servant," is the significant benediction of the Master, "enter thou into the joy of thy Lord." It is duty well done that brings the joy of the Lord. "What is heaven?" said one of our eccentric preachers. "I'll tell you what heaven is. It's out yonder in that little back street where a poor widow is weeping over her roofless children and sitting on her boxes and furniture on the street. Go to her with a basket of groceries, a load of coal and a good-sized bank note for her unpaid rent, and you will soon find what heaven is." And the hard-fisted hearer came next day to tell Mr. Jones that he had been in heaven the last twenty-four hours, ever since he had found that poor widow and helped her out of her distress.

The writer remembers a New Year long ago in his own experience when he dedicated a whole month, beginning with the week of prayer, to wait in his musty old study for a fuller baptism of the Spirit. He had received the Spirit, but he was straining after something more. Day after day he prayed, and left his duties largely undone. Thicker grew the murky air, and darker the visions of his troubled brain. More intense became his sensations and temptations, and more terrible the struggle with his feelings and his spiritual foes. But still he persevered, expecting surely some mighty blessing. At last one day when his brain was almost bursting with the strain, he turned to his Bible with a cry for direction and help. Before him in letters of light he read, "He is not here, He is risen. He goeth before you into Galilee. There shall ye see Him. Go ye and teach all nations," etc. In a moment the message was plain. Not dreaming, but doing. And as he went forth from that cloister to the bedsides of the sick and the pressing duties of a sad world, lo, the light returned, the sky cleared, the Master was revealed, the Lord drew nigh, and a blessing came which has never ceased through all these years to meet him still, as he goes forth in self-forgetting love to bless others, to pray for others and to find the fellowship of the Master in doing His perfect will.

6. Finally, in the work of the Lord and the ministry of our Christian service we shall find that what we do and what we are count for more than what we say. Missionary Richards preached for many years with little effect to the savages of the Congo, until one day he began to live the Sermon on the Mount in their midst, and told them he was going to act according to all its precepts. Before the day was over they had taken him at his word, and the last stick of his furniture was gone. But before the next sun went down they had felt that they, too, must live according to the Sermon, and they brought back his furniture with compound interest. Before many months were passed hundreds of them were saved, and today the largest congregation on the Congo stands there at Banza Manteke as the monument, not of saying, but of doing the Word of God.

In the last months of the Civil War there was a soldier in Andersonville prison named Frank Smith. The day came for the exchange of prisoners. Six Northern soldiers were to be released for six Confederates, and Frank Smith heard with delight his name read. But a poor fellow with a wife and children came and pleaded so hard that Frank gave up his ticket of release, and let the other be his substitute and go home to the little family that needed him more. The months rolled round, and again there was a release of prisoners, and once more Frank Smith heard his name called and dreamed of home and liberty. But he remembered an infidel whom he had often talked to in the prison, and he said, "I cannot go till I make one more appeal to him to accept Christ." But the infidel laughed him to scorn, and told him that talk was cheap. Then Frank breathed a prayer and made a great resolution. Taking his little ticket of release from his pocket he said, "Take this, and in my place tomorrow walk out into freedom." The infidel started and looked hard at him. "What made you do this?" he said. "The love of Christ," he said, "the Christ that you will not receive." Then the proud heart broke; sobbing and kneeling beside him, he asked forgiveness for his hard heart, and gave himself to the Savior whose love could make such sacrifice possible. "It was not what you said that convinced me," he explained, "but it was what you did." Once again there came a day when a little company walked forth from that awful dungeon into liberty, and for the third time Frank Smith's name was on the roll. He went to bid goodbye to a lad who was dying of consumption. The poor fellow wept bitterly and said: "Oh, Frank, I had hoped that you could be with me to the last. I have nobody else to pray with me or point me to the Savior. How shall I ever die alone?" Again Frank closed his eyes, lifted his heart to God, and formed another big resolution. He gave his ticket of liberty for the third time to some one else, and he went back, and, throwing his arms around the dying boy, he said, "I'll not leave you till He comes to take you." And he held the hand of the sinking lad until the gates of light opened, and with blessings on his lips a ransomed soul passed in.

Then on the dark storm clouds of war burst the rainbow of peace. The gates of Andersonville prison swung open forever, and this Christian hero went forth to well earned liberty with a record of Christian heroism and blessed doing mightier than libraries of books or sermons.

So may we be blessed in our doing.

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