

The Obedience of Faith

by Daniel Steele

The obedience of faith is the act of consecration in obedience to Christ's summary of man's whole duty, which is to love God with all one's heart, soul, and mind, and one's neighbor as oneself.

Scripture: John 7:38, John 14:15, Acts 26:20, Romans 1:5, Galatians 2:20, Ephesians 3:16, 1 Thessalonians 5:23, Hebrews 5:9, James 2:26, 1 John 5:3

Topics: "Faith And Obedience", "Sanctification By Spirit"

Description

Daniel Steele preaches on the importance of obedience of faith in the Epistle to the Romans, emphasizing that true obedience springs from faith in Jesus Christ. He explains that repentance toward God must precede faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, leading to sanctification before death and preservation in a state of holiness in this life. Steele highlights the distinction between justification by atoning blood and sanctification by the Holy Spirit, stressing the need for believers to maintain consecration and faith in God's promises for fullness of love and victory over sin.

Transcript

IN the epistle to the Romans St. Paul uses this expression twice in the Greek. It indicates more than justification by faith, the great doctrine which is set forth and defended in that epistle. It shows that true obedience springs from faith in Jesus Christ, and receives all its vitality from that root. There is but one command which the sinner is called upon to perform before evangelical faith. This is repentance. In fact, it is a part of faith, as the introduction is a part of the book. There is a divine philosophy in the order of these two precepts, "Repent and believe." Repentance toward God must precede faith in the Lord Jesus Christ -- such repentance as leads the wicked man to "forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts," before he can effectually turn unto God, "who will abundantly pardon." By this assertion we do not deny that the soul has a clearer view of his sins, and a stronger abhorrence of his depravity, after he is born of the Spirit than before that great and glorious work. Now the important question arises: "How can this depravity, this proclivity towards sin, be eradicated from the regenerate soul, so that it may hereafter gravitate upward, and not downward?" This is the real want of thousands of God-fearing people:

"Grovelers below, yet wanting will to rise:

Tired of the world, unfitted for the skies."

Many have been told that they must wait till death -- the greater redeemer than the Son of God, and the mightier sanctifier than the Holy Spirit -- shall come to their relief. It is true that Jesus does not propose to present us unto Himself faultless in the presence of His glory, freed from infirmities, those scars of sin, till we have crossed the river of death. But He has a balm for the medication and perfect cure of the wounds of sin in this life. Hence St. Paul exhorts the Corinthians to cleanse themselves "from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God." And he prays for the Thessalonians, first that they may be sanctified "wholly," and secondly, that their "whole spirit, and soul, and body, be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." This certainly means sanctification before death, and preservation in a state of holiness in this life.

Many Christians do not attain this state because they fail to discriminate between the expiatory work of Christ, which has as its object the removal of guilt, and the office of the Holy Spirit, which is the purification of the soul. Justification by atoning blood is the work of the second person in the Trinity: sanctification is that of the third. Where this distinction is lost, and the unity of God is the only doctrine preached, as in the Mohammedan mosque, the Jewish synagogue, and the Unitarian Church, we look in vain for the spiritual transformation of the worshippers. It would be like looking for fruitful orange groves in Labrador. Justification is promoted in proportion as the guilt of sin and its only remedy, the blood of Christ, are emphasized. Entire sanctification is promoted in proportion to the faithful portrayal of sin in believers and its great antidote, the fullness of the Holy Spirit purify their hearts by faith."

Now, the important practical question remains to be answered "What must a justified soul do to obtain this state of holiness, the extinction of depravity within?" The words, "obedience of faith," contain the answer, What am I to obey? The sum of the law is epitomized by Jesus: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself." Can I do this in my own strength? No; but I can bring my powers and capacities as empty vessels unto the Holy Spirit, and He will fill them by shedding abroad the love of God in my heart. He does this by revealing to me the fact of God's great love to me, which awakens my soul to respond to His great love with all the capacity of my being. This bringing my empty heart to God is the act of consecration in obedience to Christ's summary of man's whole duty. When this is done, and unwavering faith in the divine promise accompanies the act, the soul realizes the cleansing power and the fullness of God. But when the faith is inadequate the cleansing may take place, but not the fullness of love. From this state the believer either very soon falls back into the old mixed life of sin and repentance, or goes forward to the experience of "all the fullness of God."

To abide in this state of perfect victory and full trust we are to walk by the same rule of "the obedience of faith," and mind the same things that we did when we entered this state, by daily maintenance of our consecration, and a renewed grasp of the promises. The power of God must be relied upon as much for our abiding in, as for our entering, this state. We are to be "kept by the power of God through faith." When we shall find a stream steadily flowing without a supplying fountain we may expect to find a soul living in holiness without the enabling efficiency of the Holy Spirit. The figure of a "well of water springing up into everlasting life" (John iv. 19) is explained subsequently by John as the fullness of the Spirit in the heart. "He that believeth on Me as the Scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. (But this spake He of the Spirit, which they that believe on Him should receive; for the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified)" (John vii. 38, 39).

The intimate connection between obedience and faith is expressed by Christ, when He says: "If any man will do (or wills to do) His will, he shall know of the doctrine."

A beautiful illustration of this occurs in "Cecil's Remains." His little daughter was one day playing with some beads which she seemed to prize very highly. Her father very abruptly commanded her to throw them into the fire. "The tears started in her eyes. She looked very earnestly at me," he says, "as though she ought to have a reason for such a cruel sacrifice. 'Well, my dear, do as you please; but you know I never told you to do anything which I did not think would be good for you.' She looked at me a few moments longer, and then, summoning up all her fortitude, her breast heaving with the effort, she dashed them into the fire. 'Well,' said I, 'let them lie; you shall hear more about them another time; but say no more about them now. Some days after I bought her a box full of larger beads and toys of the same kind. When I returned home I opened the treasure and set it before her. She burst into tears with ecstasy. 'Those, my child,' said I, 'are yours because you believed me when I told you it would be better for you to throw those two or three paltry beads into the fire. Now, that has brought you this treasure. But now, my dear, remember as long as you live what faith is.' " Here faith and obedience are beautifully interlaced, like golden and silver threads intertwined, for the adorning of the character.

The fact that genuine faith always includes obedience is a sufficient answer to the sceptic's objection that salvation is made to hinge upon a bare intellectual act, without reference to the character of the agent. It is just the opposite. It is an act of submission to the highest authority in the universe -- an act which tends to conserve its moral order, by enthroning the moral law in universal supremacy. A singular confirmation of the truth of these remarks is found in the Greek Testament, where 'apeitheia', unbelief, is frequently used to signify disobedience and obstinacy. The unbelief for which men are to be everlastingly condemned lies in the rebellious attitude of the will toward Jesus Christ, and not in any supposed innocent intellectual inability to believe the truth of God's word.

The practical bearing of all this upon those who are seeking to be lifted into the higher regions of Christian experience is, that the faith which is the required condition of such a spiritual uplift is possible only to a soul whose obedience has reached the point of entire surrender to the will of God, where there is a willingness to walk to Calvary with the fainting Christ, and to be crucified with Him. Then, and then only, will the Christ-life take the place of the old self-life, enabling the believer to adopt St. Paul's words: "I have been crucified with Christ; alive no longer am I, but alive is Christ within me." [Meyer] Let no one accuse Luther of boasting, when through "the obedience of faith" he reached that deadness to sin, and that conscious fullness of the divine life, which enabled him to say: "If any man knocks at the door of my breast, and says, Who lives here? my answer is, Jesus Christ lives here, not Martin Luther." The great reformer did not stumble into this Christian experience. To reach it he was often closeted with God three hours a day, studying the divine promises, and wrestling with the Lord, as Jacob with the angel. Says Spurgeon: "There is a point in grace as much above the ordinary Christian as the ordinary Christian is above the worldling." Of such he says: "Their place is with the eagle in his eyrie, high aloft. They are rejoicing Christians, holy and devout men, doing service for the Master all over the world, and everywhere conquerors through Him that loved them." The mountain-top is a position men do not slide into but climb up to. Thus these mountain-top saints climbed up the ascent by the stairway of the gospel promises, with the sunlit summit in full view as a definite aim.

Their faith made their obedience spontaneous, free, and gladsome; while their conscious obedience reacted on their faith, making it strong and tenacious of the promise of Jesus: "If ye love Me, KEEP MY COMMANDMENTS, and I will pray the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter, that He may abide with you forever."

"The perfect way is hard to flesh;

It is not hard to love;
If thou wert sick for want of God,
How swiftly wouldst thou move!
"Then keep thy conscience sensitive;
No inward token miss:
And go where grace entices thee: --
PERFECTION LIES IN THIS."

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