

Command of God the Obedience of Faith

by John Piper

The obedience of faith is the manifestation of our faith in Jesus Christ, which leads to visible obedience and brings glory to God.

Duration: 44:00

Scripture: Romans 1:5, Romans 5:1, Romans 5:17-19, James 2:17

Topics: "Justifying Faith", "Obedience To God"

Description

This sermon delves into the importance of understanding the obedience of faith in relation to our justification. It emphasizes that our obedience is not the basis of our justification, but rather the fruit of genuine faith in Christ. The message highlights the transformative power of justifying faith, which leads to a changed life marked by obedience and conformity to Christ.

Transcript

Let's pray together. Father, we love Your Word. We want to continually lay it up in our heart as well as understand it with our minds and believe it in our hearts.

Embrace it with all our affections. So would You come and help me to understand it and help me to speak it with accuracy and guard me from error and grant me a special anointing so that my words are heard as Your words where they conform with the Scriptures? And would You not let Your Word come back empty? What would You cause it to perform? Saving work and strengthening work and purifying work and reconciling work and emboldening work and humbling work and encouraging work and healing work and more than I can even ask or dream. This is Your Word, and we're thankful for it.

We reverence it because we reverence You more. In Jesus' name I pray, amen. My focus in this message now on Paul's closing doxology is on one phrase and its relationship to how we are justified.

The phrase is the obedience of faith. You see it there at the end of verse 26. To bring about the obedience of faith.

So we want to think about it in its immediate context first and then step back and make it the occasion of reviewing something enormously important in the book of Romans, namely the relationship between our obedience and our justification. Look carefully with me now at these verses and this phrase, the obedience of faith at the end of verse 26. Paul begins the doxology, we saw this, by saying that one of the reasons

we glorify God is that He is able to strengthen us.

That's right there at the beginning of verse 25. Now unto Him who is able to strengthen you, then he finishes the doxology in verse 27, to that one, the one who can strengthen you be glory forevermore, amen. And between that opening declaration that He can strengthen us and the closing acclamation that He's glorious, He does one main thing.

He unpacks the Gospel because He says in verse 25 that this strengthening happens according to my Gospel. See that in verse 25? And now unto Him who is able to strengthen you according to my Gospel. I think that means not merely that the Gospel says He can do this, but that the Gospel is the means by which He does it.

So what's happening between the beginning of verse 25 and the completion of the doxology, this declaration, I can strengthen you, and this acclamation, all glory belongs to God, is an unpacking of this Gospel. So let's follow it thinking what role does the obedience of faith, that's the focus, the obedience of faith have to do with all of this. So phrase by phrase, here we go, follow with me.

Verse 25, according to my Gospel, just take the word Gospel, everybody knows what that means, Gospel means good news. So He wants us to think first, God strengthens us with good news. Good news from a far country is strengthening.

Mark that first. Second, it's called the preaching of Jesus Christ, which means that when you herald this good news, its content is Jesus. Who He was, what He did, what He achieved, what He promises, He doesn't open that very much because He spent eight chapters doing it in the first part of the letter.

He's just mentioning these mighty phrases that after 16 chapters should be filled up with meaning for those who've been reading and listening. Then next He says this is the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages. I think probably more literally eternal ages.

So what's He doing there? Why does He say that? This is a mystery kept secret, silent, for eternal ages. One of the effects that should have on us, I think, and He designs for it to have, is that the Gospel is rooted in eternity. It is not an afterthought.

He didn't make the world with Adam and Eve saying, I sure hope this goes well. Ooh, it didn't go well. Now what am I gonna do? I'll have to send my son.

That is not the way to think about the Gospel. The Gospel has its roots in an eternal plan. The mind of God was not taken off guard by the fall, and therefore the Gospel, which is the solution to the fall, was in His mind before He created the world.

So for long ages this secret was there. I think one of the confirmations of that is to drop down into the middle of verse 26 and notice the phrase, it's being revealed by the command of the eternal God. Why does He use that word eternal? It's the same word that's translated long ages.

And there's a link. He would expect them to hear that. It's been kept secret for eternal ages, and now it's being revealed by the command of the eternal God.

So He's linking up the command that's being issued. Now's the time. To go public.

With what I've been planning for all eternity, the eternal God, with an eternal secret, goes public with the good news of Jesus Christ. And then you read, verse 26, through the prophetic writings. So this command, go public, become revealed, eternal secret, is first being hinted at through the Old Testament with prefigurations of Christ, predictions, but it wasn't as clear as it is now when life and immortality have been brought to light through the Gospel.

And so this secret didn't come fully clear until Paul and the apostles unpacked the meaning of the cross for us. And so I think the reference to the prophetic writings is meant to tell us that not only did this mystery and this Gospel of Christ have roots in eternity, it had roots all along the way in the Old Testament. All these prophetic writings were both a prefiguration of what was coming so that when the apostles begin to unfold the meaning of the cross, they can reach back and just pull prophetic writings from all over the place, saying, don't you see what that was about now? Don't you see what that meant? And the prophetic writings become the instrument of revelation of the mystery, even though they were helping it be secret for several thousand years.

And then finally, two phrases. It has been made known, in verse 26, to all the nations... skip a few words... to bring about the obedience of faith. Take those two phrases now.

Get them clear. This mystery that was rooted in eternity and began to be revealed slightly with prefigurations in the Old Testament has now been revealed for all nations, not just Jewish people. That's a tremendous burden for the Apostle Paul, who is the apostle to the Gentiles, the nations.

And the upshot of it all among the nations is the obedience of faith at the end of verse 26. So now step back. Notice, the first thing he says is that God is able to strengthen you and He strengthens you, that is, He strengthens your faith, as we saw last time, through the Gospel.

That's the way he starts. Now, you come down to the end, and what does he end on? Obedience of faith. Strong faith.

And the stronger the faith, the better the obedience. So he's beginning by saying the Gospel produces strong faith. And he ends by saying faith produces obedience.

And then he simply breaks in to the completion of the doxology. To Him, the only wise God, be glory forever and ever. Because obedience, conformity to Christ, is the display of the glory of God in the lives of Christians.

Faith is invisible. Nobody can tell if you have faith. Faith is in here.

You can't see it. God can see it. He likes what He sees.

He glorifies Him when He sees it. But you can't see it. Nobody can see your faith.

All they can see is what it causes you to do. How it causes you to talk. How it causes your attitudes to change.

How it causes your behavior to change. How it causes the use of your money to change. Your sex.

Your leisure. Your house. Your car.

Your relationships. That people can see. And that's why he says, among all the nations, it's to be the obedience coming out of faith which leads right into the doxology.

Now God will get glory. May God get glory by strengthening faith which produces the manifest beauty of Christ as we conform more to Him. So that's the structure of this doxology.

And here's an interesting thing. More than interesting. It's powerful.

He's ending the book on the same note and with the same structure that He began. And this is good to see because you might think, well, yeah, maybe it's really flowing from gospel to faith to obedience to glory, but maybe that's not the way Paul's thinking. That's just the way you're laying it out.

Look at chapter 1, verse 5. We have received grace. Chapter 1, verse 5. We have received grace. This is Paul and the apostles.

Grace and apostleship. To bring about the obedience of faith. Same phrase, and he only uses it twice.

Once at the beginning. Once at the end. To bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of His name among all the nations.

Now, there are three parallels between that and verse 26 at the end of the book. Chapter 16, verse 26. Parallel number one.

The aim of Paul and God and ministry and apostleship and Bible and Bethlehem and you, I hope, is the obedience of faith. Second parallel. For all the nations.

This is not a clique. Jesus is not a tribal god. This is not a white thing or black thing or yellow or red.

This is all the nations. It's a huge burden in the Bible. That's why missions exist.

That's why racial harmony exists. Number three. For the sake of His name.

Now, the parallel there that's verse 5. The parallel there is the break-off into the doxology. For the sake of the name. So, in verse 5, you've got all three components.

Obedience of faith for the nations for the sake of the name, Jesus. And in chapter 16, verse 26 and 27, now, you have obedience of faith for all the nations, now unto Him, the only wise God, be glory forever and ever. And so the end point of this book is not obedience.

That's the penultimate point of this book. The end of this book and the point of this book is all glory to God. For the sake of the name.

The brackets around the book are I exist, the Bible exists, the Gospel exists, God exists for the glory of God, for the glory of Christ's name. So I will begin by saying that's what I'm about and I'm going to end now. To the only wise God, be glory forevermore.

Amen. But, just beneath that magnificent, all-embracing purpose of the universe, there is this phrase, the obedience. And it is the penultimate goal.

And therefore, it is huge. Gospel strengthens faith, which brings about visible obedience, conformity to Christ, which yields the world to say, He is great. He is great.

That's the way life is. That's the structure of the book of Romans. If you ask, what's this obedience look like that is so central and so powerful here that among the nations it will bring glory to Christ? He left us with absolutely no doubt about that.

It just happened to be about three years ago we read it. Maybe chapter 12. Let me just read you the picture.

The picture of what obedience of faith would look like. Just a few verses. This is chapter 12, verse 9. Let love be genuine.

Abhor what is evil. Hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection.

Outdo one another with showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal. Be fervent in spirit.

Serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope. Be patient in tribulation.

Be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints. Seek to show hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you. Bless them, don't curse them. Do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good.

That's right in the middle of this letter and that's the obedience of faith. That's conformity to Jesus. That's the way Jesus was on earth and wants us to be on earth today.

Christianity is not about prospering. It's about not cursing those who curse you. It's about blessing them.

It's not about getting rich. I've got to say this, the world does not give God glory because Christians drive expensive cars. They do not.

They do not give God glory because they live in \$10 million homes. They do not give God glory because they fly in big jets. They do not give God glory because they wear \$1,000 suits.

Nobody glorifies God because Christians act like that. They only glorify stuff. I'll be a Christian if you get that.

And then you think you're going to church. That wasn't in the manuscript. It's just on my heart big time these days as I feel so bad for the bride of Christ.

So I said we're going to focus on that little phrase and make it an occasion to review a very important and enormously significant issue in the book of Romans, namely, OK, you've just made a very big deal out of our obedience of faith. How does that relate to justification, which is a huge doctrine in this book, chapters 1 to 8? That's the closing question now. So I want to think comprehensively by way of review about that.

It is a very, very important issue today. For example, I just read in the last couple of days in the book by Richard Gaffin called *By Faith, Not Sight*, published in March of this year, this sentence. Disaster will surely result from denying or obscuring faith as the alone instrument of justification, both present and future, close quote.

Now a handful of you will know the full meaning of that. Others of you will feel a huge meaning of that. I believe that's a true sentence.

Disaster. Might take 50 years for the disaster to happen. But if we start obscuring faith as the alone instrument of justification, now and at the end, disaster is coming in the church.

So, would you go with me to chapter 5? Romans chapter 5. I just want to try to summarize and put as much ground under my summary as I can in the few minutes we have left. Chapter 5, magnificent verse 1. Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. So there you have the precious phrase, central phrase, justified by faith.

We all stand before God in a courtroom and He either justifies us or condemns us. If He justifies us, it means He's found in our favor in this courtroom. He declares us to be just.

That's what justify means. He declares us to be just. Now, what is the indictment that we brought into this courtroom? What's the indictment against us? The answer is, from Romans 3.10, none is righteous.

None is just. Nobody in this room is righteous. No, not one.

None does good. That's the indictment we bring into this courtroom and we are being assessed by an omniscient judge. You can't fool him.

He knows absolutely everything about my sin. This omniscient judge considers all the factors that are relevant to my case. And he declares this sinner not guilty.

Or to put it even more starkly, he declares this unrighteous man righteous. You're visiting tonight and you're not a Christian. This is the center of Christianity.

Listen, please listen very carefully. This is the center. This is different from all Islam, all Shintoism, all Buddhism, all Hinduism, all secularism, all animism.

Nobody, no religion has this. A son of God and something called justification by faith alone. So here we are in this courtroom, guilty sinners, all of us, and the judge renders the verdict righteous.

Now how can that be? That's what Romans is about. How can that be? Let me put it in three steps. The ground underneath this outrageous verdict.

Let me put the ground in three steps. Step number one, we trust Jesus alone as the ground and the basis of our justification. Not anything we do, not anything we are, and not anything God helps us to do.

We trust Jesus Christ alone as the ground and basis of that verdict. Second, that's number one. Second, this faith, as I look totally away from John Piper and all that he is by nature and all that he is by grace, I look totally away from John Piper, to Jesus alone as my ground of justification and my basis of justification, and in that faith and through that faith I am united to Christ.

A union with Christ happens. The way to see this is to put Romans 5-1 beside Romans 8-1. You can remember that.

Put Romans 5-1 beside Romans 8-1. Romans 5-1 says, Therefore having been justified by faith. Romans 8-1 says, There is therefore now no condemnation, the negative way of saying justification, no condemnation in Christ Jesus.

Now if you put those on top of each other, let the template fall, the in Christ Jesus corresponds to by faith. That's why I'm saying that when you trust Him, in and through that a union is established, so that you're now in Him. You're in Him.

That's step two. Step three, in Him, His righteousness, His obedience. Or you could say, God's righteousness in Him.

I won't be picky about how we say it. I think all these are right ways of saying it. In Him, His righteousness is, the word that's used in the ESV is, counted as ours.

The more historical word is, imputed to us. Those are the three steps that provide the ground underneath this courtroom so that God's declaration of me as righteous finds some basis in reality. No, it is one thing to be forgiven when you are unrighteous.

It is a glorious thing. Let us never minimize the preciousness that God forgives sins because of the work of Christ on the cross. Forgiveness too would be an outrage were it not for the cross.

But I cannot escape the exceeding wonder that not only does God look upon a guilty person in the courtroom and exercise clemency and forgive him and say, You're guilty. I forgive you. Go and sin no more.

But He also, beyond all imagination, looks upon this guilty sinner and does not just say, You're guilty. I forgive you. He says, You're not guilty.

I mean, forgiveness is understandable. Just a little bit understandable. We kind of have some way to get our hands around forgiveness.

You let it go. You don't hold it against them. But this, look me right in the face, John Piper right in the face, sinner though I am, and say, righteous, not guilty as charged.

And the charge was, not righteous. You're not not righteous. You're righteous.

That's inexplicable unless there's some basis under it. And the basis under it is Christ. Now I said I was going to try to give you just a little bit of argument for that, so drop down to verse 17 and we'll try to move toward an end by looking at three verses quickly.

We're in chapter 5 of Romans. I believe what's happening in chapter 5 is that Paul, coming to the end of his main argument, knows what he has to do. He has to give an account for how, chapter 4 verse 6, chapter 4 verse 11, sinners who do not work, sinners who sin with lawless deeds, can be counted righteous.

He's got to solve that problem. It sounds outrageous. A judge cannot call a guilty defendant not guilty if he knows everything.

And God does. So what's the solution? And that's where he's going. Read with me verse 17, Romans 5. If because of one man's trespass, Adam's, that's Adam's, death reigned through that one man, then much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness, that's a very important phrase, the free gift of righteousness, reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

So, Paul says, God's grace reigns to secure us and get us to eternal life, and he does it through the free gift of righteousness. Now what does that mean? Whose is that? Verse 19, For as by one man's disobedience, that's Adam's again, the many were made, or I think more carefully, appointed, the many were appointed sinners, so by the one man's obedience, that's Christ's, the one man's obedience, Christ's, the many will be appointed or made righteous. I believe what he means is that the free gift of righteousness in verse 17 is what comes to us by imputation from Christ's obedience.

Now there's an interesting confirmation of this I commend to you, that Christ alone and His obedience is the only ground and basis of my justification. And it's found in the relationship between verse 21 and the beginning of chapter 6. Verse 21 picks up the themes of verse 17 and 19 and 20 and goes like this. So that as sin reigned in death, grace also, you can hear verse 17 here, grace also might reign through righteousness.

That's the gift of righteousness back in verse 17 and I believe the one man's obedience in verse 19. So that as sin reigned in death, grace might reign through righteousness unto eternal life through Jesus Christ. Now here's the question.

What does it mean that God's grace is triumphantly securing us for eternal life through righteousness? Structurally, many people believe that our obedience of faith is referred to here. Not all, by any means, but just some are thinking that way. That the way God secures my justification now and then is through my righteousness, which He produces.

It's the obedience of faith. Is that what is meant here? Or is the righteousness in verse 21, the obedience of verse 19, and the gift of righteousness, which I'm taking to mean God's in Christ in verse 17. And I think the answer to this is certified for us by the question with which chapter 6 begins.

Remember it? He's finished his argument. He's concluded with verse 21 in chapter 5. Verse 21 said that grace is reigning through righteousness unto eternal life. And Paul composes a question which has some plausibility and is dead wrong.

It goes like this. Oh, shall we continue in sin then that grace may abound since you just said grace is reigning through righteousness unto eternal life? That question would never arise if you believed that verse 21 meant grace was enabling me to be obedient as the means by which my eternity is secured. That question would never arise.

You wouldn't say grace is triumphantly transforming my life into obedience. You wouldn't say, well, shall I then continue in sin? That would make zero plausibility sense. You would see the answer to verse 1 in verse 21.

You wouldn't even think of asking a question like that. There's one reason why you would ask this question. Paul's whole doctrine of justification looks like you mean I stand accepted by God on the basis of Christ's righteousness alone? Then I can do anything I want.

That's what makes sense out of verse 1. And that's why I take verse 21 the way I do. Paul does mean that. Namely, Christ's righteousness, Christ's obedience, God's righteousness in Christ counted as mine is the alone basis and the alone ground of my justification.

Now, verse 1 of chapter 6 is dead wrong about saying my obedience doesn't count. Dead wrong. Which is why Paul had to write chapters 6, 7, and 8. You read it that way? What's he doing in chapter 6? He's

showing this.

This is my closing summary of how our obedience, the obedience of faith which is right under the glory of God as the goal of the universe relates to justification. Our obedience, the obedience of faith is not the ground or the basis of our justification. Nor is it any part of the instrument or means by which we are united to Christ who alone is the ground or the basis of our justification.

Faith alone unites us to Christ and Christ alone is the ground of our justification. Our obedience is the fruit of that faith. Faith that justifies is the kind of faith that changes people.

Here's the radical statement. If your faith in Christ for justification leaves you unchanged, you are not saved. That obedience that's not happening is not the ground of your justification.

Christ is. That obedience that's not happening is not the instrument by which you're united to Christ. Faith is.

But that obedience is the necessary and inevitable fruit of this kind of faith. Justifying faith changes people. Or it isn't justifying faith.

Here's the way James said it. James 2.17 So also, faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. So also, faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

And dead faith does not justify. Paul begins and ends his book with the obedience of faith. We're talking about the greatest book, the greatest letter that was ever written.

It begins, obedience of faith, for the sake of the name, among all the nations. And it ends, for all the nations, the obedience of faith, to God be the glory. We are very close to the heart of the Bible here.

We are very close to the heart of Christianity here. We are justified by faith apart from works of the law. That's chapters 1-5.

And then, out of that faith, out of that peace, out of that assurance, comes boldness, and a new mind, and a new man. Newness of life flows from it. It's the fruit that shows that the faith is alive and real, as it trusts in Christ alone for justification.

So, I close with this expression of longing and prayer for all of you, and for me. I pray that you will trust in Christ alone as the ground and the basis of your justification, your right standing with God. And I pray that you will make that the ground, make Christ the ground, now and as you contemplate the future.

And I pray that your faith will be of such a nature, wrought by the Holy Spirit, that it will change you. Not perfect you in this life. That's not going to happen.

But, mind changes, affection changes, behavior changes, and the will to make war on your sin are the marks of true faith. Let's pray. Gracious Father in heaven, I don't want to see devastation come upon Bethlehem or the church by turning away from justification on the ground of Christ alone, or the surrender of faith alone as the instrument by which we are united to Him.

So I ask that you would grant us understanding, and with understanding, a deep, deep resting in this. Where it seems confusing to people, I ask for light. I know that I have sat in restaurants with people who've said to me, after my best effort to explain this, it makes no sense at all.

And all I could conclude was the God of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ. And so I pray that tonight, today, blinders would be lifted, scales would fall from eyes, and everyone in this room and on every campus would be granted to see and embrace Christ as the ground and basis of their justification. I ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen.

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