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What It Means to Obey

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Series: The Mind of Christ

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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

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Little Bobby came in screaming at the top of his lungs, and had he looked in the mirror, he would have screamed even louder. Something sticky and green covered his hands and his face. He looked a bit like someone a space ship might have dropped off to frighten the local population. His hair was all stuck together as though he had encountered a misunderstanding with a can of hair spray, his fingers seemed to not be working properly, and his face looked like a cross between a four-year old and a diseased tree.

Green blotches covered what was once a handsome little face and one side of his mouth seemed to be opening only partially. His mom, as was often the case, was engaged in a marathon telephone conversation with her best friend, Lucy. “Yes, Lucy, I saw what Marian had on at church yesterday. I agree. She looked a little like a cross between a clothes horse and a refugee. If she would just learn to dress like her mother used to. I’ll never forget what her mother wore that Easter. Just a minute, Lucy, I think Bobby’s calling.” Mrs. Roberts, her mind still on Marian’s fashion weaknesses, turned to glance towards her screaming son, wondering what kind of bug he had in his grasp this time.

Bobby’s screams were nothing compared to the sounds that came from his petrified mother. Lucy was so frightened on the other end of the phone that she fainted. Only grace kept Mrs. Roberts from doing the same. Her precious little boy had suddenly appeared in the hallway looking like he had some kind of incurable disease that resulted in green, glued skin.

It was green. And it was glue. That was the whole story. Little Bobby, you see, had been listening to his mom’s conversation with Lucy, and when she said “I tell you Lucy, this whole world is coming unglued,” he simply decided to do something about it. He knew where Dad kept the super glue. And he knew that he had just bought a whole case of it to fix the box of somewhat fragmented dishes that had resulted from Bobby’s effort to help

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set the table the week before. So wanting to surprise his mom, he did that, he took the case of glue and went out in the back yard, trying to find just where it was that the world was coming apart. Finding a spot where the grass didn't seem to be doing its best, he got face down on the ground and began to put the world back together. As the glue got on his hands, then on the grass, then on his face, his complexion began to change, and so did his ability to move the parts of his body that had contact with the contact cement.

You see, Bobby was just trying to please his mother. He wanted to obey her every word. And if she thought the world was coming unglued, the least he could do was fix it for her. Laugh if you will, but its not much different than the way some of us try to obey God. Instead of listening carefully to exactly what He says to do, we put two and two together and marvel that it comes up to seven; but since it does, we assume that God simply wants us to fix it for Him. The end result is often the same as little Bobby's. God is grieved at the messes we get ourselves in; but so often, had we waited for instructions, and just followed them exactly, things would have turned out differently.

Obedience, you may recall, is "the act of hearkening submissively". It is a spirit that is sensitive to authority, and thus listens meekly, then responds completely to the commands of God or the ones God has placed in our lives.

It is much more than the act of doing what we are told. It is a heart attitude that governs how intently we listen and how joyfully we respond. We are in the early stages of a look at just what obedience is. That look is the final leg of our journey through Philippians, chapter two, and the unfolding of the mind of Christ. Jesus, we learn from Paul, was obedient unto death. This mind is to be in us. It would be wise, then, for us to find out just what it means to obey as He did. He did "always those things that pleased His Father." Not only in deed, but in spirit.

In our last study, we looked at what we are saying to God when we disobey. We are saying, "God, I don't like you. Your character is not acceptable to me." The reason we are saying that is that God's commandments are not based on His desire to control us, but rather on His desire to impart Himself to us. His nature is to be resident in us as it was in Christ for those thirty-three wonderful years. To impart that nature, He has

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articulated commandments that reflect His nature. When we obey those commands, we are letting His mind be in us. We do not lie, not because God hates lying. God hates lying because He is truth. Truth cannot lie. So when we lie, we are refuting the character of God, and honoring the character of Satan who is the father of lies.

Every act of obedience, then, is an affirmation of the nature of God. Every act of disobedience is an act of honoring the nature of Satan. Obedience, then, becomes a response of love, not of duty. It is an expression of joyful surrender to the process of becoming godly (God-like) by letting God's character flow through us "in ever-increasing splendor from one degree of glory to another"¹.

Obedience, then, is not some legalistic stranglehold God has on His children to make their lives miserable. Obedience is the glorious opportunity man has to express His gratitude to God for giving His life to him and releasing His power through him. Every act of obeying is an act of love for the Christian. That is what I John 5:3 means when it says,

This is love for God; to obey His commands. And His commands are not burdensome. (NIV)

And in II John we read,

And this is love: that we walk in obedience to His commands... (II John 1:6 NIV)

John wasn't being sentimental. He was defining a Biblical absolute. It is this: Our degree of obedience to God is a direct reflection of our love for God. It is that simple. We would make it more complicated, but then that is man's way. God would make it that simple.

If you love Me, keep My commandments. (John 14:15 NKJV)

He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself [make Myself known] to him. (John 14:21 NKJV)

Sounds clear, doesn't it? It should. It is an absolute. Absolutes are statements made by God that because they reflect His nature, like His nature, can never change. God is love. That

¹ II Corinthians 3:18 (Amplified Bible)

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cannot change. So His definition of how that love is reflected through His children cannot change, either.

That, then, is the underlying principle behind obedience. God's nature, which is constant, reflects itself in outward instructions: ways the believer can exhibit God's character. To the degree that we do that, we are demonstrating our love for Him. To the degree that we fail to do that, we are rejecting His nature. John 14:24 goes on,

He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent Me. (John 14:24 NIV)

And so we see that the process of obedience involves much more than the militaristic process of finding a rule and grudgingly, if need be, complying with it. Obedience is the way we demonstrate that Christ's character is controlling us.

In today's study, we are going to proceed up the first rung of the ladder of obedience. We are going to ask the question: What does it mean to obey? and we will break that down in this study and the ones to follow with these questions:

- 1- What should we obey?
- 2- Who should obey?
- 3- When do we obey?
- 4- How do we obey?

Future studies ought to look at:

- 1- What happens when we obey?
 - a- the blessings of obedience
 - b- the results of disobedience
 - c- the relationship of faith to obedience
 - d- the fruits of incomplete obedience
- 2- Spiritual warfare and obedience

For now, however, we will content ourselves to pore through the Scriptures, seeking answers to the question of questions: "What does it mean to obey?"

Little Bobby had a good heart. He really wanted to please his mom. He wasn't being mischievous (though he often was), and he wasn't being rebellious (though he sometimes was). He

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was trying to obey, by taking what he thought she wanted and interpreting it through the grid of his experience, taking it on himself to rescue her. Bad move. Good intentions, but bad move.

Now, had she told him to go glue the yard together with super-glue, he would have been in line. But she hadn't. He was imagining in his heart what she wanted him to do, based on what it seemed to him she might be saying. Now we get into serious trouble as Christians the same way. Instead of listening intently to exactly what the Scripture says, and just trusting God for the grace to obey it, we take fragments of God's conversations and interpret them through our own experience, and miss the mark desperately.

We do live in a world that is coming unglued. But God has a better answer than super-glue. We must listen submissively, if we are to obey. There are, I believe, three specific things Christians are to obey. If we do not stray from those three things, we will learn to become obedient Christians. Let's begin by looking at the first one. The first issue is:

WE MUST OBEY THE ABSOLUTES OF SCRIPTURE.

In Deuteronomy, chapter 30, Moses was giving the children of Israel a clear understanding of the simplicity of pleasing God. It reads like this,

if obey the LORD your God and keep his commands and decrees that are written in this Book of the Law and turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach.

It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?"

Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?"

No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

See, I set before you today life and prosperity, [or] death and destruction.

For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to

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walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.
(Deuteronomy 30:10-16 NIV)

In the verses preceding this passage, Moses was explaining to God's people the benefits of repenting and returning to a state of obedience and trust. God, he said, would make them abound and be blessed in the work of their hands, and the Lord would rejoice over them as He had rejoiced over their fathers. But there was an "if" in the promise. In other words, this was a conditional promise from God to His people. We love the promises; we often overlook the conditions. The condition was repentance and obedience. The promise, based on that condition, was that the blessings of God would again come upon them, and the fellowship with God, whom they had so scorned, would be restored.

And it wouldn't be all that hard to accomplish. Obedience wasn't some mystical formula that the children of Israel had to interpret for themselves. It wasn't to be difficult, said Moses, and it wasn't to be beyond their reach. It would be simple and it would be accessible. They would try to make it complicated or unreachable. They would say, "That's spiritual stuff, I have to enter the heavenlies to understand it. No wonder I fail." But God was saying, "No, it's not up in Heaven so you'll have to first accomplish some spiritual miracle to understand it." And it wouldn't be so far away that you would have to work to find it. "It isn't across the sea so that we have to send someone to get it and interpret it for us."

God was saying, "What you have to obey is in your heart. It is My Word. It is right there. Life is a choice: life and prosperity or death and destruction." All day long you make those choices. The way you know which choice to make is by calling on the truth that has been laid up in your heart. "It is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it." Joshua said the same thing. He said:

This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.
(Joshua 1:8 NKJV)

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The absolutes of God, recorded on the tape deck of the heart, are your assurance of knowing what to obey. God never directs contrary to His Word. Never. Jesus said this:

“If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed.

And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

(John 8:31b,32 NKJV)

Freedom isn't what Satan makes it out to be. He told Eve that she could be free from bondage by choosing whether or not to obey God's Word. He lied. She chose to disobey, fell into real bondage, and all mankind has been in bondage to Satan ever since. No, freedom is the exhilaration that comes from making decisions that never contradict or question the Word of God. Then you know the truth, and the truth sets you free. Don't buy the lie. Obedience is directly related to the absolutes of Scripture.

What, then does that mean? It means three things:

1- You must know the truth.

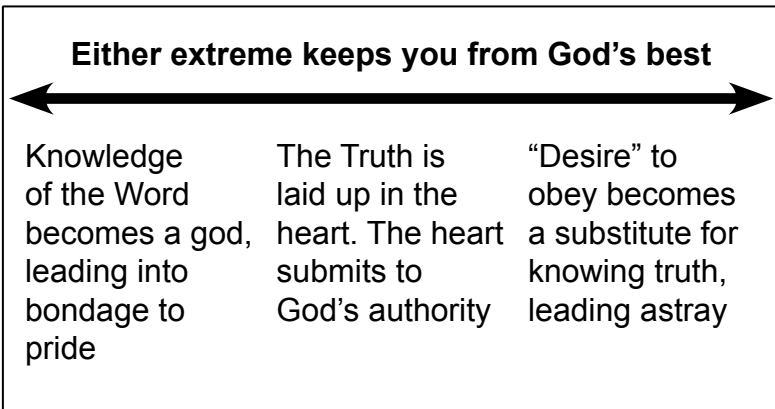
If you don't invest your life in reading, studying, memorizing and meditating on the Word of God, you can't really become obedient. Obedience is an attitude. But the right attitude isn't enough. That attitude has to be attached to truth or obedience will become an emotional roller coaster that tries to interpret what God wants by how it feels or with fragmented information like the little boy in the opening illustration. He tried to obey his mother because he wanted to please her, but he didn't have a clue what she meant or what she wanted. The balance is easily broken. There is the “AINIK” approach. “AINIK” stands for “All I Need is Knowledge”. This produces churches, organizations, seminaries and seminars that so major on receiving the truth into the mind that truth becomes a god and we actually become in bondage to the very thing that sets us free. At the other extreme are those who “love God” so much that they think they have a direct line to God's will that bypasses the need to store up His Word. Their love is genuine, but, like Bobby, they do not know the truth. It's not uncommon in counseling to come across people whose lives are all messed up because they are trying to interpret God's will incorrectly, and the biggest abuse of all is people who think they have a “word from God”, when in reality that word from God violates Scripture, so it isn't from God; and if it isn't from God, you know where it comes from.

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“I’m leaving my children and my husband,” said one woman, “God told me to.” “I lied about that deal, but it’s okay. I had a word from God”, is another one. No, no, no! You will never have a word from God that violates the Word of God. God’s Spirit does not ever direct you contrary to God’s Word. What was His Spirit to do? “When He, the Spirit of truth, is come, He will guide you into all truth; for He shall not speak of Himself.”² Be careful when you think you have “a word from God”. First take it to the Scripture. If it doesn’t line up with God’s absolutes, it didn’t come from God. Period.

The balance involves knowledge of the Word, laid up in a heart that is submissive and sensitive to God’s authority. This was Jesus as He walked this earth. And this is the mind which is to be in us.

Diagrammed, it looks like this:



2- The book of the law must not depart out of your mouth.

The second prerequisite is that the Word must be in your heart and in your mouth. It must be stored on a permanent hard disk and backed up regularly. Going to a Sunday School class or a church service and sitting and listening to someone talk about the Word is not the same as memorizing and meditating on the Word. It takes hours a week. It takes years of your life. And probably 90% of us don’t follow through consistently. Probably half of those who do, begin to glory in what they’ve done, and thus lose the humility necessary for the Word to do its

² John 16:13

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work. Those aren't the percentages God intended, however. The spiritual giants of history are those who achieved that balance.

Try memorizing topically. That's how your mind works. Then, when a need arises, you have a filing system arranged in your heart that threads itself directly to the area where Satan is attacking and God is testing. It's like a table of contents in the book of your life. And begin where you hurt the most. A doctor doesn't just give you medicine at random, hoping to find something that might help. He diagnoses the problem and prescribes accordingly. If you have a problem with anger, set up threads of verses on anger and memorize them; then review them day and night that you may observe to do according to all that is written therein.

Satan has lied to the modern church and told us that memorization and meditation are legalistic and unnecessary. If so, Moses and Joshua both lied to us. No, they are not legalistic. Glorifying in them can be. But that's another problem. Why not stop for a moment and make a commitment to God that beginning today you will embark on a program of Scripture memory and meditation that will last until God calls you home. It will be a turning point in your spiritual pilgrimage.

How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word.

Your word I have hidden in my heart, That I might not sin against You
(Psalm 119:9,11 NKJV)

3- Learn what an absolute is.

a) An absolute is anything that God has written in His Word that is not subject to negotiation or application. Learn the difference between an absolute and a principle. Here are some clues:

b) An absolute cannot vary from person to person or situation to situation or generation to generation. It is a direct order from God to anyone who belongs to God, and will never change. Never.

c) Many absolutes can be found as laws in the Old Testament which are confirmed by Jesus in the New Testament. Some Old Testament laws are translated into principles in the New Testament. Watch for the difference.

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d) All absolutes are direct reflections of some aspect of the nature of God.

e) A principle, on the other hand, is a guideline given in Scripture that is based on an absolute, but which must be applied to your specific situation by the Holy Spirit. How you apply it is important, but it is equally important that you do not apply it to others as law.

True legalism through the ages has usually evolved as men took principles and by affirming them through their own experience, turned them into absolutes, when they were not intended by God to be that. Most denominational traditions began as correct applications of Biblical principles. Those who benefited by them, however, began to imply that they were absolutes: that all of the body of Christ had to agree with them on the way to apply the principles. Some involve how to worship, how to pray, how to witness. Scripture is quoted out of context, and before long what God meant to be a principle has become law. The Pharisees were masters at it.

In our generation, however, that is not the greatest danger we face. The great danger is that we will ignore many of the thousands of absolutes in an effort to “not become legalistic”. Watch that. It is dangerous. If God said, for instance, “Be anxious for nothing”, that is an absolute. It was not written only to certain personality types, or to those who have great faith. It was a simple statement based on the sovereignty of God, and demanded of every Christian by faith. To the degree that we obey that absolute, we have peace. Most absolutes, incidentally, have both a positive and negative in Scripture. This one does. It says:

(negative)

Be anxious for nothing, (Philippians 4:6a NKJV)

(positive)

but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God;
(Philippians 4:6b NKJV)

Most absolutes also carry promises with them. This one does. Then if you do this, it adds,

and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.
(Philippians 4:7 NKJV)

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If you don't have peace, then, the problem is much simpler than we like to think. It may not require a great deal of counseling or therapy. It may just require obedience. This is an absolute. It has no escape clauses. It doesn't exclude those whose children are sick or whose husbands are inconsiderate or who have just lost their jobs. It is for everybody. So watch for the negative, positive, and promise aspects of absolutes, and then remember to look for the aspect of God's nature being reflected through that absolute so you can worship Him for who He is, freeing Him to give you the promise you are claiming.

4- Remember, humility before God is the key to releasing the power of God.

Obedience is a heart attitude. It involves confidence in the authority of God, and is therefore humble and open to whatever God does in your life as you apply the absolute. You do not obey to get what you want. You obey to honor God, and whatever He does in your life as you obey is His business and is ultimately best for you. If you cannot assume that posture, don't expect to see the results of obedience. Obedience isn't just what you do, it's what you do as you submit graciously to the sovereignty of God. If you are in a difficult situation tomorrow, and anxiety begins to grip you, you need to obey the absolute of Philippians 4:6,7. You must choose to stop worrying, and, instead, you must choose to pray about it, thanking God in advance for the answer. Now what did He promise? To take away the problem? No, He promised to give you peace in the midst of the problem. He will keep His Word. You must simply continue to obey. His not changing the circumstances does not merit returning to worrying. He did not promise that. He allowed the circumstance to give you peace. Satan sent it to give you anxiety and fear. Learn to humble yourself before God and accept His sovereignty. "Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven"³ is to be your perspective. Then, as you pray, God will keep His promise. He will give you peace.

5- One final thing as you claim an absolute and learn to obey, don't forget to read it in context for clues as to how God will verify that absolute in life.

In this case, you need to go on to verse 8 which says:

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever

³ Matthew 6:10

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things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.

(Philippians 4:8 NKJV)

A clue to maintaining the peace promised in the absolute is given in the principle of a positive perspective. They are coupled together in Scripture for a reason. Include them in your memorization.

So the first step in knowing what to obey (and the most important step) is to understand and obey the absolutes of Scripture. Learn how to discern what God is saying *that cannot change*, humble yourself and ask for the strength to obey, and then *act as though the power was there, because it is*. The problem is, however, unless you have the Word in your mouth and in your heart; unless you have memorized and meditated on it in such a way that it is easily recalled to mind, you are asking God to shoot the enemy, while you refused to load the gun.

In our next study, we will look at the principles of Scripture and the leading of the Spirit as tools to determine what to obey. Then, God willing, we will proceed to look at who should obey, when they should, and how they should.

We serve a God whose very nature has been given to us as a gift. His desire is that we literally become expressions of His character in a human body. All He asks us to do to set Him free to do that, is to simply be in a state of humble readiness to obey. That obedience will become natural, if we understand that His nature is revealed in His absolutes and His absolutes are revealed in His Word.

The Psalmist wrote,

You have laid down precepts that are to be fully obeyed.

Oh, that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees!

Then I would not be put to shame when I consider all your commands.

(Psalm 119:4-6 NIV)

I open my mouth and pant, longing for your commands.

(Psalm 119:131 NIV)

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OH, OPEN MY HEART, LORD JESUS

Oh, open my heart, Lord Jesus,
Open to truth, my eyes,
Grant me a holy hunger
That only Your Word satisfies.

Engrave on my lips, Lord Jesus,
Your every sweet command,
May my heart respond in love
May I possess the land.

The land wherein your nature
Through my spirit flows,
The land wherein your very love
In every action shows.

Oh, open my heart, Lord Jesus,
Open my heart today,
And teach me through thy blessed word
Simply to...obey!

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