

THE VOW OF OBEDIENCE

We spend half of our lives trying to get free, trying to outgrow or overcome our enslavement to physical needs, political pressures, the people in authority over us who seem to be controlling our lives. We spend the other half of our lives seeking a meaning, a purpose – trying to find that which is worthy of our effort and devotion and obedience. Sometimes, for instance, we wish to be free from political oppression, and we believe there have been honorable revolutions. On the other hand, we sometimes wish to serve a political structure (“my country”), and we believe there is also such a thing as honorable patriotism. We wish to be free and we wish to serve.

We want to be able to make our own decisions and to do whatever we want to do, and we long to connect with that which is greater than we are and which draws us out of and beyond ourselves. In short, we seek a perfect freedom and we seek a perfect obedience. Nobody should tell us what to do, but we are not happy or fulfilled until we find a love and a purpose that requires our all. It is one of the great paradoxes of life.

We do not divide these two halves into the first half and the second half of life. That would be too easy to handle. Rather we mix them up together in every waking moment. That way the dilemma, the paradox, the tension between the two sides can twist and tear and pull at us all the time. Shall I be free, or will I be obedient to some higher purpose? Will I do my own thing, or will I express my devotion to another? Is this my life and I can do with it as I please, or does my life belong to God and my only true pleasure is to serve God?

Philosophically we may understand that there is no such thing as pure freedom – that freedom is only the chance to choose what or whom we will serve. Philosophically we may understand that obedience, by definition, is freely chosen – that unlike “coercion,” obedience is something we do because we are convinced it will work out best for us too. We may hope it looks noble, but nobody obeys unless they believe it is the best deal available. Sometimes we use the word when we mean compliance under duress or threat of death or severe harm, but that is not a true obedience.

Nevertheless and despite all philosophical theories, we do live our days in the tension and sometimes the strife of this polarity between freedom and obedience, between pleasure and obligation,

between being in control ourselves and living under the authority of another.

We have been looking at some of the classic Christian vows this Lent. Indeed they are not only vows in Christendom, but every religion and every individual on a spiritual path deals with these same basic vows in some way. We have not covered *all* the primary vows. The Vows of Silence, of Fasting, of Strenuousness, of Helpfulness (Almsgiving), and of Hospitality we have not touched. Nevertheless we will close the series today with the “anchorman,” the biggest of the big three, the pivot point of all the vows: the Vow of Obedience.

We do not talk or think a lot today about being good at obedience or getting good at obedience. We may brag about being individualistic or unique. We sometimes feel proud of being rebels, of having minds and wills of our own. If you listen to our conversations carefully, you will hear us telling stories about how we refused to be controlled, how we stuck up for our rights or our opinions, maybe even how we told-off so-and-so. But we do not hear many people bragging about their capacities or skills for obedience. It is seldom mentioned on job applications or in reference letters that “George is a very obedient person.” Not so many years ago that would have been a very favorable comment to include.

One of the profound Scripture passages (Ephesians 5) about Christian marriage contains the phrase, “*Wives obey your husbands ...*” A couple of parishes ago I frequently used the passage in wedding sermonettes. I came across one of them the other day and found the underlying concept beautiful and challenging and full of incredible promise. I wouldn’t dream of using the phrase today. The word “obedience” is charged with such emotional overtones that few people would ever get past their reaction to the word itself to be able hear the meaning of the passage. The traditional vows of the ceremony (from *The Book of Common Prayer*) are almost never used today. “Do you promise to love, honor and obey”? I am simply saying that the word is supercharged in our time, and the reaction to it is fierce and negative.

How would you like to talk to a high school convocation today (or any day) on the theme “Children obey your parents.” It is not a minor concept, and despite its many abuses, it is far superior to the next best alternative. There is no question that it was considered the only workable principle for a family by both the Old and the New

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Testaments. Again, I am merely emphasizing that our society, in our time, has a great abhorrence for this word “obedience” in most of its forms. That is truly fascinating because this very concept of obedience was once so highly honored and indeed praised and rewarded in our past traditions.

Wouldst thou approve thy constancy, approve
First thy obedience; the other who can know?

John Milton (*Paradise Lost*).

Keep ye the Law—be swift in all obedience—
Clear the land of evil, drive the road and bridge the ford.
 Make ye sure to each his own
 That he reap where he hath sown;
By the peace among Our peoples let men know
 we serve the Lord!

Rudyard Kipling (“A Song of the English”). Can you feel that old cadence of Kipling? Can you feel the drums roll, stirring the soul?

As we all know, the pendulum keeps swinging on such things. We can already see signs that the pendulum has been swinging back in the direction of some of the truths we had thought were thrown out forever. Not that long ago, most observers were certain that the conflict in the church was between the traditionalists and the self-fulfillment people. Now we seem to be feeling a new wave of folk who tried all the self-fulfillment trends and found it rather empty. They don’t like the traditional emphasis on structures and committees that seem to obscure the main purpose either, but they do seem to be rediscovering the meaning and magic of some of the old concepts like obedience, commitment, discipline, loyalty, honor, worship, duty. Do you get the uncomfortable feeling that I am almost swearing?

Pendulums or no pendulums, obedience is the central vow of any spiritual path. Muhammad looked at Judaism and Christianity and decided that while each spoke of obedience, neither took it to heart. If that one thing were right, everything else would follow. So he shaped a religion that is totally about obedience. “Islam “*means* submission.

Obedience is the primary vow. It stands over against the chief sin of the Seven Deadly Sins. Pride is the primary sin and the source of all the other sins in Christian tradition. “I am my own master. I am in control of my own life (and with a little planning and luck, I may get

in control of yours too).” Pride is the source of all alienation from God because it is the source of every attitude which believes or pretends that we can make it on our own, do it without God, make our decisions by our own intelligence or desires alone.

The Vow of Obedience is the opposing approach. It is and comes from the conviction that we cannot make it on our own – that we are not wise enough to figure everything out or make the right decisions according to our own intelligence or opinion or desires. The Vow of Obedience places us under the authority of another.

Such obedience assumes an “obedience in trust.” We freely choose this obedience initially; we do not promise to obey God until we are convinced (in faith – trust) that God loves us. We could not mean it (as much as we are able to) apart from such a conviction. But once we enter the Vow of Obedience, we are no longer in charge of editing or evaluating or correcting all the instructions. The Vow of Obedience is therefore fraught with trepidation. Once decided, we obey when we feel like it – and we obey when we do not feel like it. We obey when it seems the most beautiful of possibilities – and we obey when we are sure it will lead to disaster. Moods do not repeal the vow. The Vow of Obedience is a vow to obey: a decision to choose a road and walk it, come what may. If the road says tithe, we tithe. If it says pray, we pray. If it says love your neighbor, we do that. Along the way we may try to understand it all better, try to get good at it, try to get others to join us. But the primary decision to do these things is no longer in question. To obey is to obey. (*“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I tell you?”* (Luke 6:46))

We understand both the terror and the worth of a vow. Freedom to choose is wonderful, but anarchy kills. Most of us learn in time that we do not always take a long enough view of things, and sometimes we simply cannot know the outcome of even our best-intentioned choices. We often discover that our best blessings were just curses with a long fuse. And who of us has not discovered that what we thought was disaster and ruin and tragedy and terrible injustice sometimes turns out to be the great breakthrough – the seed of a blessing beyond price?

In any case, there is little doubt about our tradition or our theology, however much it may have gone out of vogue in recent years. There is no such thing as a Christian who is not under discipline. (“Disciple” means one under discipline.) Christians see themselves as the children of God, but that does not imply permission to be God’s spoiled brats.

The pattern is lifted up in one of Paul's most powerful passages. *"Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped."*

It is an interesting phrase in the light of much of today's popular imagery, where people talk about the "Christ within" and each of us "developing our own Christness" and all the similar phrasings and sentiments. It is interesting and instructive to remember our Founder, who humbled Himself and became obedient (even unto death), *"not counting equality with God a thing to be grasped."*

Clearly the way "in" is through humility and obedience. If even Jesus chose that way, we have no grounds for supposing we can find or live in the Kingdom by confidence in our own judgment, by thinking we can find the answers for ourselves, or by supposing we can do enough good or have such good intentions that we can save each other or ourselves. *"[He] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient"*

The choice between pride and obedience – between staying in control of our own lives and inviting God to be our managers – is fairly clear. It is not easy, we do not always know what God is asking of us, and we keep having lots of questions and quandaries. But the issue is clear. Most of the real problems do not come from the details, but from the basic choice itself: pride, or obedience; humility, or thinking we can do it on our own.

That is something of the general framework. Are you ready for practical application? A specific Vow of Obedience is normally about a secondary obedience that is taken to enhance our primary obedience under God. This is a thing that has been lost to most of Christendom in our time, especially among Protestants. Again, it is impressive that every religious path and spiritual way warns us against trying to walk the pilgrimage alone. Even with all the help of the Holy Spirit, the capacity for rationalization and self-delusion is so great and the influence of Satan, if we make any progress, is so certain that we should not presume to go alone.

So, down through the ages, spiritual pilgrims have sought a spiritual advisor – a Rabbi, a Yogi, a Mentor, a Priest – some trusted person to confide in *and also to obey*. The disciples put themselves

under the discipline of Jesus. They were in training under His instruction. Do we miss that clear and obvious part of their story as we read it in our time? If they did not choose to obey Him, they had to leave – as became quite clear on several occasions.

There are alternatives. Sometimes instead of choosing to obey an individual, a program is chosen. For instance, you might enter a monastic order. You would, in a sense, be under the discipline of another monk more seasoned than yourself, but in fact the discipline is already laid out in the monastic order. In that case your Vow of Obedience is to the Order – to the preset disciplines the Order represents.

Every serious spiritual pilgrim takes a Vow of Obedience to some earthly mentor, discipline, program, or structure. Having no Vow of Obedience is incomprehensible to the pilgrim. It simply means the journey has not yet begun.

Human mentors and even human structures (monastic or whatever) are of course capable of error. That is not terribly significant. A few errors are nothing in comparison to the devastation of staying willful – of not having the benefit of learning obedience. If the mentor or institution repeatedly asks or requires that which seems clearly against God's will, then in time – painfully – the vow is “moved” to some new guide or order. But the vow is not repealed. No spiritual pilgrim can afford to be without a Vow of Obedience.

The purpose always is to train and improve the ability to be obedient to God. It is enhanced by a second opinion, a more objective perspective, the accountability of another human source less likely to be mesmerized by a pattern of rationalization that can get so familiar we no longer notice it in ourselves.

The concept seems strange to many protestants in our time, but it is also exciting. It is a good week for us each to ask ourselves: Who or what do I obey? What vow have I taken to help me with what the saints have agreed is every person's greatest temptation – inner pride? Do I want to be in control of my own life, or is it my purpose to be obedient to the Christ?