

Love and Obedience

How do I get consistent obedience in my life? It seems if we could answer this question, we would solve so many problems. Half the time we don't want to obey, and find ourselves dragging our feet, or not doing what's right at all, other times we do have a desire to obey but don't seem to follow through. Paul's familiar experience of not doing the things he should, and doing the things he should not in Romans 7 is familiar to all Christians. How do I solve perhaps one of the fundamental questions of the Christian life: how do I please God consistently?

I think we can find some answers in a frequently overlooked passage in Exodus 21. In this Scripture we have a simple law on a Hebrew slave. Nevertheless, there is in this passage typology, a picture of Christ and the believer, seen in the Master and the Servant. You can always judge if typology is being forced into a passage or if it is truly there by asking if what the type is supposed to represent is actually ever compared to that. For example – is the Passover Lamb a type of Christ? Yes, the Bible calls Christ the Lamb of God, Paul speaks of Christ our Passover.

So can a passage on a master and a slave be a type of Christ and the believer? Yes, the Bible calls the believer a slave of righteousness in Romans 6:17-18, Paul calls himself a slave of Christ.

So here we can learn two very important things in our lives as Christians. You could see these things as essentials to obeying God. These are two pillars in obeying God, in pleasing Him, and you cannot please God with only one of the pillars.

From this account, we can see the two foundations of obedience are – the **Duty** to Obey, and the **Desire** to Obey.

Duty and Desire. Christians usually find themselves failing because of a failure of one of them. Some Christians have only Duty. They obey God because of many reasons, but overwhelmingly, they obey because they feel under compulsion. Often they are actually reluctant to obey, but they feel they must. Their service often degenerates into ritual, habit, tradition, formalism, legalism an eventually hypocrisy.

Some Christians major on Desire. They correctly see the need to serve with love.

Sometimes though, they find themselves led only by what they feel, too dependent on emotion as the barometer of correctness. Their desire can often become simply experiential, impractical, and eventually mystical.

The truth is, God expects both, at all times – duty and desire.

Let's look at the first one

The Duty to Obey

In verse 2, we are told a Hebrew slave would serve for six years, and the seventh he would be set free. Where we see the Duty to Obey is in the nature of a slave. The nature of a slave is like the Position of the Believer. We are called servants of God in the New Testament – literally – bond-slaves. Now bond-slaves were individuals who were owned by their Master. Everything they were belonged to their owner. They were not hired labourers, or even workers at the bottom of the salary scale – they were people whose very lives now belonged to another. They owned no possessions – not a thing in the world. The very clothes on their back were given to them by their masters. Some slaves were given no clothes, indeed in Roman times, many slaves served naked. They owned

no property, they slept in the Master's house, in beds owned by the Master. They had no time of their own – their own will was consumed by the will of their master. This was the position of a slave. Hebrew servants were a little better off, but it generally depended on who the master was.

How did one end up as a slave?

- 1) As a prisoner of war. This applied to the heathen around Israel, not to their kinsmen, but it was nevertheless the source of some slaves in Israel. (Number 31:7-9)
- 2) Someone who had gotten so seriously into debt, that they could no longer pay. They were completely bankrupt. They would then, having no other option, offer themselves as a slave for another to buy. The person buying the slave would essentially be making a trade. They would be really taking the debt upon themselves, but at the same time were taking over the life of another.
- 3) Abandoned children and babies were collected by slave-traders and raised as slaves in Roman times.

Now, does that not sound remarkably like us before we were saved? We were enemies of God – warring against His lordship, and it was His power and love that conquered us, and led us away as His slaves. Likewise, our sin had incurred such a debt over our heads, we could never have paid it. And so, like these people of old, there we stood in the slave market of sin, on a pedestal, ashamed, hoping that someone or something could rescue us out of the destruction our sin had brought us- and God did just that. That is the root meaning of redemption – God buying us out of sin through the blood of His Son. Likewise we were born as slaves to sin – raised as slaves to our own evil – till God bought us out of that slave-market of sin.

On all counts – it is just like us – we were defeated by God, and bought by God. Bought, very importantly, to be His slaves. “But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness.” Rom 6:17-18.

Now, consider – was it a slave's duty to obey his master? Of course it was. He had no other option. He had not bargained with his master, or entered into a contract with him, he had given up all rights the day he was bought by his master. This person had forfeited their rights by their huge debts, they now belonged to their master. They could not get up one day, and say, “Well, I don't feel like serving my master today!” No, this was not a democratic choice. Either through war or debt, they no longer had their independence. If they decided not to serve the master, they would in fact be rebellious slaves, runaways.

Just like those slaves, we must understand that in our Christian lives, one of the two fundamentals of obedience is our duty to obey God. We must obey God. We are His slaves, obedience is our obligation.

Now today, the minute you start speaking about obedience as an obligation, immediately there are cries of ‘Oh no! That's legalism!’ or – ‘We're not under the law, we're under grace!’ Since this is very important, let's tackle those ideas. Firstly, to obey God out of a sense of duty is not necessarily legalism.

It's important to understand the Bible's use of duty or obligation. When the Bible speaks of believers obeying out of duty, it never means obeying reluctantly. We tend to think of

duty as something that is the opposite of desire, but the Bible never sees it that way. It regards dutiful obedience as simply – the correct response to God. Rom 12:1: ‘I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, *which is* your reasonable service.’ Presenting your bodies as a living sacrifice – is seen as one’s *reasonable* – logical service. When God says to the Christian – you must obey – He is not pleased with a half-hearted obedience of one whose heart is elsewhere. Duty responds to God. But it nevertheless feels compulsion, obligation and necessity.

Consider: a man loves his wife and children. However, on a particular day, he comes home from work feeling tired, frustrated, and pretty upset. He does not feel kindly affectionate and enthusiastic love. Does that remove his obligation to provide for them? Could he really turn around and say, “No, I didn’t buy food today because I didn’t feel like it in my heart, and to do so without that love would have been legalism”. His hungry children will stare at him confused. His supposed high motives won’t calm their grumbling stomachs. Or how about if he said to his wife, “You know, I didn’t feel love for you on my way home so I didn’t buy the necessary groceries. That’s because I’m not under the law in this house – I’m under grace” She’d tell him to graciously go out buy the stuff regardless of how he feels.

Now, before you condemn that man – realize he is onto something. He correctly realizes that the act without the heart is meaningless. He is in a sense expressing the truth of I Corinthians 13. But his conclusion and reaction is wrong. A lack of desire is sinful, but that does not remove the obligation. If a lack of desire made disobedience acceptable, then the idea of a commandment becomes meaningless. God is no longer a Master who owns His slaves, He is like a cheerleader who offers suggestions.

Now, as we will see, when the desire fades, we must immediately address that, like an injury to our very soul. But we must keep doing what we must, while we seek to revive our flagging desire.

People say that is legalism. No, let’s define legalism. Legalism is, strictly speaking, adding works to salvation. It is saying, Jesus Christ plus some deed of mine that will secure salvation. It is to mix the grace of God with human effort. In the Christian’s life, legalism is similar. It is to depend on my own works or obedience to secure favour with God, apart from Him. It tears the heart out of the experience, externalizes it, allows it to become purely ritualistic and habitual. Legalism believes it can produce righteousness by adherence to its own standards. Legalism merely has a religious theme in its ritual, but obedience is one person responding to another Person.

In our case, true obedience is a Christian responding to God. And even when he obeys out of duty, he is nonetheless responding to His Master. He is saying – God is great, I must obey Him! God bought me, I must obey Him. God owns me, I must obey Him. God has the power to destroy me, I must obey Him. God is holy, I must obey Him. God is God, and must be glorified, I must obey Him. God is not mocked, I must obey.

Now, are any of those responses legalism? No, they are perfectly appropriate and necessary. See, even if your desire for God is low, that does not mean obeying Him in those times is legalism. So long as you are responding to God, and relying on God – you are obeying biblically. Legalism, on the other hand, is simply a ritualistic behaviour responding to your own desire to please yourself.

Another favourite line of people who object to obeying God out of duty is, “We’re not under the law, we’re under grace!” Now, this statement, taken from Romans 6:14 is one of those spiritual clichés that people bounce around, not really knowing what it means, knowing only what they’d like it to mean. Often, what they’d like it to mean is that there are no longer rules for us New Testament believers. There are supposedly no longer dos and don’ts, laws, and the command to obey. It’s all some sort of happy voluntary thing – where if you don’t want to do something commanded in the Bible – don’t do it, because you’re under grace. Now that is completely false.

What did Paul mean when he said we are no longer under the law? Two things

1) He meant we are no longer obliged to keep the ceremonial aspect of the law. Most of Israel’s feasts, dietary restrictions and many of their other laws were not what we’d call moral laws. They were there to point people to the Messiah – to explain Him and His work through types. However, the moral truth of law still stands. We are still commanded to not kill, steal, commit adultery and so on. Paul wrote – the law is holy, and just and good.

2) Paul also meant that salvation was not through the law. Not that it had ever been. Salvation was always by grace through faith – see even Genesis 15:6. However, as Paul points out – the one who is trying to earn his salvation through the law is under the law’s curse. The one who insists on the law as being his means of salvation is truly under the law. The one who renounces his own works, and embraces Christ, is under grace. Paul points out that works and grace do not mix so you are either relying on one or the other for salvation, it cannot be both.

That is what Paul means when he says we are not under the law, but under grace. He does not by any means mean that there are no longer rules for Christians, or that Christians do not have an obligation to obey God. Just as there was grace during the period of the law, so there is now law during the period of grace. The two are not enemies.

So it is perfectly acceptable to obey God because you know you must. So long as you are responding to Him, and relying on Him – your obedience is not fleshly or legalistic.

I think we can probably sum it up with the phrase – the fear of the Lord. Though very seldom spoken about today – the fear of the Lord is that understanding of who God is – His great character, His awesomeness, His holiness, His omnipresence. The fear of the Lord is that deep reverence that a servant has for His powerful master. It is the respect and awe that a creature gives to his Creator. And the fear of the Lord drives us to obey, even when we may not feel like it. The fear of the Lord comes about as we study the Scriptures according to Proverbs 2:1-5. As we see His wonderful mercy and His terrifying anger, His mountain-melting power with His incredible gentleness, His mighty love and His unquenchable hatred of sin, His matchless grace and His fiery holiness – we grow in the fear of the Lord.

However, our duty to obey is only the one pillar of our obedience. The second one we find in verse 5-6 “And if the servant shall plainly say, I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free: ⁶Then his master shall bring him unto the judges; he shall also bring him to the door, or unto the door post; and his master shall bore his ear through with an aul; and he shall serve him for ever”

This is the second thing we need, and that is **The Desire to Obey**

I think our problems today are more with a lack of desire than a lack of duty.

Here the slave has a remarkable choice. At the end of his six years, if it is so that he has come to love his master – he says plainly – “I love my master, I will not go free”.

Whereas his previous slavery he had brought upon himself because of debt, this one he brings upon himself because of love. The slave has come to know his master over the six years, and such has been the kindness of the master’s heart, that the person willingly chooses a life of slavery to him, than his own independence.

Well, this is exactly what happens to the believer as well. We too are bought by God when we are saved. Unlike the Hebrew slave, there is not a date when we are set free, so to speak, but like the Hebrew slave, we grow in our love for God. Our appreciation of Him, His tenderness and goodness in our lives, His mercy causes us to say, “I love my master” This is the desire to obey. Yes, this is the love for God that grows in our hearts. What is key here is that the slave has spent time with the Master, and so grown to love him. So it must be with us. The longer we spend with God, the more we will love Him. He truly is altogether lovely, and only long periods of meditation on Him, a sense of obeying Him at all times, even in the mundane details of our lives will bring home to us how sweet He is. So our desire for God – our desire to please Him and be with Him grows. And then, as Jesus said, “If ye love me, keep My commandments”. The duty is underpinned by a desire. See, the two are not mutually exclusive. It’s not that you can’t have the two together. You must have both – I must obey *and* I want to obey.

Let’s take our man buying food again. If he says, “Well, I didn’t feel love, so I didn’t do it”- he has sinned. He has neglected his duty, though he correctly realized he needed desire to complete the act. But let us assume that he decides to go ahead and keep providing. He fulfills his duty. But then, sadly, he makes no effort to revive his desire to do so. He accepts as normal the deadness of his heart, and even begins to pride himself on his dutiful behaviour in spite of his absence of love. He thinks of his duty without desire as somehow noble. But in truth, he has now failed on the opposite end. Sure, needs are being met, but it is only a slightly lesser evil – because if I give all and have not charity – it profits nothing. In the first case, he regarded his lack of love as a reason not to obey. In the second, he regarded his lack of love as inconsequential to his obeying. Both are wrong, both are sin, both offend God.

The tragedy of the evangelical church is that we have glamourised duty with no desire. We have reacted to the sentimentalism in some churches and now parade our cold hearts as symbols of strength, “I obey even when I don’t feel like it!” “We come to church, even though we hate it!” Is God glorified? Does God say, “I am glorified by the fact that you read your Bible, but you really don’t want to. This honours Me. It proves how worthy I am of your affections. You come to church, but you’d rather be elsewhere – this glorifies Me. It shows how special I am, and how much you want to be in My presence. You pray, but you don’t like to – that glorifies Me, because who wouldn’t be glorified by people that actually don’t want to talk to you.”

No. God is glorified by a people who are desirous of Him. The more satisfied we are in God, the more glorified He is in us. Because nothing lifts God up more than for observers to see how He has completely fulfilled you. The more clearly desirable the object of your pursuit – the more it is glorified.

Rather than commending duty with no desire – God condemns it. He speaks of his disgust with Israel’s continued ritual with no accompanying desire in Isaiah 1. In 29:13 He says, “Forasmuch as this people draw near *me* with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men:” Joel 2:13: “And rend your heart, and not your garments,” Jesus says to the dutiful church of Ephesus in Rev 2:2-4 “I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: ³And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name’s sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted. ⁴Nevertheless I have *somewhat* against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.”

Duty without desire won’t do! It is barren. It does not glorify God. Some say, well, it gets the job done. In truth it doesn’t – because the ultimate job is glorifying God, and God is not glorified, He is not esteemed, He is not valued, if our obedience does not contain a desire to do so. The two must go together – “If you love me” (there’s desire), “keep my commandments” (there’s duty). The Apostle John holds duty and desire as such Siamese twins that it is impossible to separate them in His writings – love and obedience are part of the same system. To borrow from James as he explained faith and works – desire is like the spirit, duty is like the body. Duty without desire is a body without a spirit – dead. Desire without duty is like a spirit without a body – aimless and drifting, no direction.

Just as spending time in the Word is necessary to understand the fear of the lord, so it is with the love of the Lord. You cannot love someone who is unfamiliar to you. You cannot love someone merely from what others have told you about Him. You must taste and see that the Lord is good. You must walk with God. Consider that even the slave who obeyed out of duty would in his everyday activities begin to learn more and more of the master, and thus love him more. Conversely, if the slave refused to obey, he would not interact with the master, and have no opportunity to truly get to know him.

Please notice something though from verse 6 “Then his master shall bring him unto the judges; he shall also bring him to the door, or unto the door post; and his master shall bore his ear through with an aul; and he shall serve him for ever” As the slave declared his desire to give up his freedom and serve his master forever – a ceremony would take place. The master would publicly bring him before the judges and pierce his ear on a door post, and his pierced ear would be a sign of his lifelong, voluntary slavery to another. What does this teach us? Well, there’ll be some pain in obeying. I’m curious as to why the Pain comes now. I mean isn’t desire positive, and duty negative? Shouldn’t we associate the pain with the duty? No, when you think about it, duty doesn’t really cost you. Duty is simply doing what you must. It’s desire that hurts. It’s following God with all your heart that costs you.

True loving obedience to God will normally have to involve the death of some selfishness in you. You will have to bring the cross to your desires, thinking, actions, speech, attitudes, so that you can obey and imitate the life of Christ. Choosing God over self hurts. It hurts self. Self suffers. It struggles like a suffocating animal. It is used to getting its own way all the time, and when you choose God over self, self will fight and struggle – and there will be pain.

That pain is not a once off thing – it is an every day thing. Oh, some areas will perhaps eventually be ridded of self entirely, but until you physically die, you will always battle with the selfishness of your own heart, and its unwillingness to be denied, as Jesus commanded us to do. Didn't Jesus tell us that the fundamental in following Him would be to deny ourselves, take up our cross daily and follow Him? That suggests pain, self-crucifixion.

However, the benefits are wonderful. We serve in a clean conscience a great Master. He takes care of us, provides for us, protects us. Our relationship with Him grows.

Our love for Him is clear to others. Just like that Hebrew slave would testify to all who saw him with his pierced ear – that his master must be a good one for someone to give up their independence, so our lives of obedience testify – our Master is good, and we love Him. He is worthy to be served, and obeyed. We say plainly to the unsaved, I love my Master, I will not go out free. I will not do my own thing, my will is consumed by the will of another. Yes, He owns me, but I love Him for who He is so much that but even if He didn't, I would serve Him gladly.

See, what would glorify a Master more, slaves that were there by necessity, or slaves with their ear pierced who were there by desire? *Clearly the Master who had an army of ageing, ear-pierced servants caused people to say – “He must be a good master!” It glorified him. Desirous slaves glorify far more than dutiful ones.*

John Piper uses the example of a man who brings his wife flowers. She begins to embrace him, and he says, “Wait. I did this because I promised at our wedding day to honour you. It was my duty, and I am fulfilling my obligation!” Her smile will fade, because clearly his duty lacks desire, and that tears the heart out of it. If he says, “Honey, nothing pleases me more than to give you these, because I can't get enough of you” – that glorifies her, doesn't it? His very desire for her esteems her as desirable – it glorifies her. His duty does not.

See, God does not need my worship. Acts 17 says He is not worshipped with hands as though He needed anything. Loving God does not mean that I must meet His need of love. It does not mean that I must comfort Him, or try to fulfill Him. He is complete. Love Him with my whole heart, soul and mind, means – make Him my chief desire. He must be the centre of my pursuit, the source of my joy. I must want Him, more than anything. Do you realize that if you come to your quiet time or prayer with a sense of benevolent duty, and no desire, you are exalting yourself above God? You are saying, God, you need this more than I do, so I am reluctantly offering it to You, because I am so self-sacrificial and so noble. God doesn't need your fellowship! He wants your heart to feast on Him – be so satisfied, that you walk away saying – The Lord is Good. It's when you walk away satisfied, filled, happy in God – that you reflect God's glory. You glorify God by Your clearly fulfilled life. It's the highest statement of God's glory in a human is His power to completely satisfy the human heart.

There is an amazing harmony between duty and desire. In fact, if you want to simplify it, you could put it this way – your duty *is* to desire. What did Jesus say the first, or most important commandment was? Or to put it another way, what is my most pressing obligation? – Love the Lord Your God..” It is my duty to desire God Himself. If I say, “Well, I didn't feel desire, and I still performed the duty” – it won't do, because you are

commanded to desire. When you are obeying with no heart – we need to repent. The desire is not an optional extra, a side-benefit, take it or leave it, add-on. When we are obeying with no heart, we must shiver at the coldness of our hearts, and cry to God to stoke the fires of our heart. We must beat on heaven's door for revival – for a deeper thirst and hunger for God. And when it comes, we must follow through by drinking deep at the lake of God's Word. Sadly, many Christians have spiritual frostbite – their hearts have gotten so used to cold obedience, that they no longer feel its pain – there's no sadness, no hollowness, no discomfort with obeying with no heart. The spiritual receptors that warned them of their chilly hearts, have now lost all feeling, and they continue – no desire, no love.

Duty with no desire *is legalism*. By duty there I mean reluctant service. Service with no heart in it will degenerate into merely an outward set of deeds. It must, necessarily become simply a habit, simply a tradition if you have no inner desire to do it. Eventually though, since God stresses the heart being involved, if you continue to obey with no desire, you become a hypocrite – pretending to enjoy God when you don't. Performing deed without love, making you a charlatan, one who does things for a motive other than what he states it is.

So to truly exalt God, you must exult in God. You need desire and duty.

Only desire will be whimsical. Our life will be governed only by what we feel, with no concrete thoughts pinning down how to express that desire. Desire must be sanctified. A sense of duty channels and directs desire. Without duty your desire can become self-deceit, it worshipping in Spirit, but not in truth.

But duty without desire is heartless. If you find yourself without desire – don't stop obeying, but see your obedience without desire as barren, naked, desperately needing desire to clothe it and give it life and warmth. Keep obeying, but go after God in the Bible with all Your heart, and beg Him to reveal Himself to you there. Beg Him to show Himself in the Word, and as You behold Him, you fill with desire again.

So we have two pillars to our obedience – the duty to obey and the desire to obey. Both are grown by learning who He is in the Word and learning to respond to Him at all times.

And though one pillar may be leaning on a particular day, the other can suffice. You may not be feeling like you love the lord with a deep affection, you can still fear Him and obey because you must. You can stir your heart in prayer to get it back where it should be – and you are not satisfied with obedience with no love. Other days, you will be caught up with His love, and desire and delight to obey Him as a glad child seeks to please her Father. There's a duty to obey, and there's a desire to obey. Both will cost you and cause some pain to self. But at the end of the day, we really have no choice. We are obligated to obey God, and obeying God will bring the deepest love and understanding of who He is possible. "But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him." (I John 2:5)