

Obeying Beyond Obligation and Ability

When I was in school, and the teachers were going through the work, sometimes a student would ask, ‘Do we have to know this for the exam? Is it going to be in the exam?’ And what they usually meant was, if it isn’t crucial to passing we are going to skip it out. They wanted to do the absolute basic minimum to pass, and that meant finding out what they could ignore, or leave out, to scrape through.

Sometimes, Christians live like this. They have an ‘Is this for the exam’ kind of mentality. They do the things which the world does; they live selfishly and they say, ‘We are not under the law, we are under grace.’ In other words, ‘This doesn’t count, God won’t fail me.’

They are involved in things which even the world regards as worldly or questionable, but their defence is, ‘You can’t show me a Scripture to forbid this. There is nothing in the Bible which commands me to do this or that. I won’t fail if I do this or don’t do that.’

That is what I call *minimalist obedience*. It is the Christian who insists on doing the absolute minimum to get by in their walk with God. This is how minimal obedience thinks: ‘What is the least amount of effort I can put into my Christian life and still be OK? How can I do as much as I want to do, and as little as God wants me to do without God getting upset with me and making things go bad for me?’

Minimalist obedience thinks, ‘What is the absolute minimum I can pray, and be OK?’ And some apparently answer, ‘At mealtimes and at church.’ ‘What is the absolute minimum I can read my Bible and be OK?’ And they seem to answer, ‘A chapter lazily skimmed over once or twice a week?’ And so it goes through the Christian life, ‘What is the minimum I can give to God before the angels burst out laughing at my offering? What is the least amount of effort I can put into spiritual growth? What is the least amount of effort I should put into conforming my life to God’s Word without there being negative consequences?’

And the person who thinks this way also thinks the other way: ‘What is the maximum amount of time I can spend in front of the TV before it starts to look like I am a couch potato? What is the closest I can get to my unbelieving friends without the church or other Christians noticing my double life? What is the most time I can spend on my vacations and entertainment and leisure before it starts to look like I don’t take life or eternity or God very seriously at all? What is the closest I can be to the world while still claiming to follow Christ?’

When you live like this – you have missed the heart of what it means to be a follower of Christ. When Christ saves you, He saves you not to be a person doing the absolute minimum for Him, and the absolute maximum for yourself. He saves you to do the reverse. To love Him to the absolute maximum, denying yourself, knowing He will care for you.

Matthew 17:14-27

And when they had come to the multitude, a man came to Him, kneeling down to Him and saying, ¹⁵“Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is an epileptic and suffers severely; for he often falls into the fire and often into the water. ¹⁶So I brought him to Your disciples, but they could not cure him.”¹⁷ Then Jesus answered and said, “O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you? Bring him here to Me.”¹⁸ And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him; and the child was cured from that very hour.¹⁹ Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, “Why could we not cast it out?”²⁰ So Jesus said to them, “Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will

move; and nothing will be impossible for you. ²¹ However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.”²² Now while they were staying in Galilee, Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is about to be betrayed into the hands of men, ²³ and they will kill Him, and the third day He will be raised up.” And they were exceedingly sorrowful.²⁴ When they had come to Capernaum those who received the temple tax came to Peter and said, “Does your Teacher not pay the temple tax?”²⁵ He said, “Yes.” And when he had come into the house, Jesus anticipated him, saying, “What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth take customs or taxes, from their sons or from strangers?”²⁶ Peter said to Him, “From strangers.” Jesus said to him, “Then the sons are free. ²⁷ Nevertheless, lest we offend them, go to the sea, cast in a hook, and take the fish that comes up first. And when you have opened its mouth, you will find a piece of money, take that and give it to them for Me and you.”

And in this miracle, the Lord Jesus demonstrates that, through His attitude toward the temple tax. Our Lord’s example in obedience is not an ‘Is it on the exam’ kind of obedience. Jesus’ example is going to teach us two things about truly obeying God.

Right after the miracle of casting out the demon from the boy, Jesus and His disciples arrive back in Capernaum. And along come some tax collectors. Now they were not tax collectors for Rome. These were Jewish tax collectors. And the tax they were collecting was a tax called for in Exodus 30, where every male over the age of 20 had to give a half-shekel. That was about the equivalent of two days wages. The Greek equivalent was two drachmas – so this was called the two drachma tax. The tax would be used for the upkeep of the Temple, buying some of the animals, keeping up the materials, refurnishing where necessary.

It was usually paid at Passover, but you could still pay it later, at Pentecost, or even later at the feast of Tabernacles. It was much later than Passover here, so the temple-tax collectors came knocking. They may well have been looking for more evidence to accuse Jesus; after all, He seemed to overthrow so many of their traditions.

They ask Peter, ‘Your teacher does not pay the temple tax, does He?’ Peter, without asking or thinking, simply said, ‘Yes, yes, He does.’ We have reason to believe Jesus must have paid it in previous years, so perhaps Peter was simply thinking about that.

But when Peter enters the house where Jesus is, Jesus anticipates Peter. He knows what has gone on, and what Peter has thought. So He gently teaches Peter some truths about His identity as Lord, and about obedience.

He asks Peter, ‘From whom do the Kings of the world get their tax money, from their own children or strangers?’ In those days, the royal families were tax exempt. And Peter says, ‘From strangers.’ Jesus says, ‘Well then, the children are free – the children are exempt from the tax. They do not have to pay it. They are not under obligation.’

Who does the Temple belong to? As it were, who is the King of the Temple? God is. Would you tax God to maintain His temple? No. Who is God’s Son? Jesus. Do you tax the Prince to maintain His temple? No. Jesus is exempt. Jesus does not have to pay the Temple tax, because of His identity. His status as God’s Son means He does not have to obey the Law in Exodus 30. So Jesus is also gently correcting Peter’s impulsive answer. Peter isn’t completely wrong – for Jesus does pay, but not for the reasons others pay.

But, says Jesus, ‘Lest we should offend them – go and fish, and the first fish you catch will have money for your tax and mine, and go and pay them.’ So here you see the first principle of truly obeying God.

Obedying God Goes Beyond Mere Obligation or Prescription

Now understand, Jesus is saying that He is going to obey this law, not because He has to, but because He wants to. He does not want to offend them, and they were not false teachers like the Pharisees, they were simply fulfilling the Law. And Jesus, in love for them, in respect for them, and to keep His ministry blameless says, 'But I will still obey it.'

If you had to take this to a judge, Jesus would win. Jesus doesn't have to do this. And if Jesus was a minimalist in His obedience, He would say, 'I don't have to pay this tax, so I won't. I am not guilty if I don't pay, and that's good enough for me.'

But Jesus our Lord showed us the heart of obedience. Jesus did things which no law compelled Him to do, but He did it out of love for His Father, and love for man. He was driven not merely by must, but by love.

Now there are things you have to do. But maturity goes beyond trying to do the minimum and wants to do the maximum.

Christian, your life cannot be dominated merely by obligation. If you live your Christian life trying to do the absolute minimum that you think you have to do, you will usually do even less than that.

There are many things to which you could say, 'I don't have to do that':

- [Church attendance more than once a week.
- [Giving to the Lord.
- [Memorising the Word of God.
- ['Who said I can't listen to this music?'
- ['Who said I can't watch this film?'
- ['I have never found a clear command saying this kind of place is unwholesome and a child of God shouldn't be there.'
- ['I have never found a command saying this activity is not fitting for a child of God.'
- [Putting off the old man more, and putting on the new man more.

And perhaps, if we took it to a judge, you would be right. But you are missing the heart of being a follower of Christ. A follower of Christ is not trying to defend apathy and indifference and laziness. A follower of Christ is not trying to only get by with what is clearly mandated. A follower of Christ does not try to see how close to the world he or she can get without crossing the line.

It is not about whether or not it is compulsory. It is about what is most pleasing to God, and edifying to man.

It must grieve the heart of God to have children that are looking to just eek by, to do as little as they can for Him and still get a 'pass mark'.

Think of it like a husband and wife saying to each other, 'Must I kiss you goodnight?'

If you are being controlled by merely a sense of some things you must do to tick off your list, you are not experiencing the joy of the Christian life.

The life of a believer is one of being free to do all that you can out of love for God. This is what it means to be under grace vs. being under the Law. Being under grace is not freedom from responsibility. When we free someone, we not only free someone *from* something, we free them *to* something.

This is what it means to be under the Law: when all that controls you is the thought of obligation to keep certain rules. You obey a list, not a Person. You serve your conscience, not Christ. Exodus 21 gives a list of things the people had to obey under the Law.

There is a superstitious streak in minimalistic obedience. It acts like God is waiting to punish or harm us if we do not do a basic minimum of spiritual stuff. So it figures, 'Let me do my stuff, so I will have less trouble in my life, and have more good fortune.'

But that does not honour God, and it is not a walk of faith. The heart of our Lord was not, 'I don't have to; therefore I won't.' It was, 'I don't have to, but I should, and I will.'

Imagine what would happen to our families and our church if our attitude toward the Lord was like this – not 'What can I get away with', but rather, 'What is the most I can do? How much time can I spend in the Word before I will end up being late for work? How many encouraging phone calls can I make before my phone bill gets out of hand? How much time can I devote to my local church, what more can I do there, what ministries can I begin in my church? How many people do I know who I can still share the Gospel with?'

Obedience to God Goes Beyond Ability

Here is the interesting thing about this miracle. It apparently shows how poor Jesus was financially speaking. It appears He did not have, on hand, the money to pay this tax for Himself and Peter.

This wouldn't surprise us - after all, the Bible tells us that Jesus Himself said, '*Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head*'.

2 Corinthians 8:9 says, '*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor...*'

So, from one point of view, you could say that Jesus did not have the resources on hand to meet his obligation. And Peter, being under Christ's authority, could argue the same thing. 'We are not able, because we do not have.' And they could feel very justified. 'Not only do I not have to, but I am not able to.' What more needs to be said, 'I don't have to meet this command, because I don't have the resources to do so.'

But once again, the response of Jesus teaches us that when you want to please God, and love man, God will supply the means to do it. Jesus and Peter don't have to pay, and they don't have the money. But Jesus loves God and man, and wants to please His Father and care for these men, so He seeks to obey this command – and it comes true.

Now think for a moment about the kind of power necessary to make this miracle happen. The sovereignty of God would have had to have someone be on a boat with money. And the money couldn't be just any money; it had to be exactly four drachmas, the exact amount for Jesus and Peter. And the person had to do something to cause the coin to drop into the water. And then one fish in hundreds of thousands would have to be there at that precise moment, and as the coin fell through the water – it swallowed it.

And then Peter would come probably days, weeks or even months after that event, and throw in a hook. He did not use a net, and then have to cut open twenty fish, but a hook, and the very first fish he pulled out, would be that very same fish.

Now the kind of power that is behind that miracle is behind obeying Him. Peter learnt, when we obey beyond obligation, and beyond ability, Christ supplies us with all we need.

In 1835, George Mueller had a burning desire to take care of the orphans of England. He wrote: "I was struck in reading the Scriptures with these words, '*Open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it.*' I was led to apply this scripture to the orphan house, and ask the Lord for premises, one thousand pounds and suitable individuals to take care of the children". Mueller never made any public appeals for money, and never went into debt. In reviewing that year's work, he found that God had given him his first orphanage house on Wilson Street, and seven months after the opening of the first house, he obtained another one located at No. 1 Wilson Street. A review of his financial returns showed gifts for the orphanages of seven hundred and seventy pounds, and he himself had received for his personal needs two hundred and thirty-two pounds – coming to one thousand and two pounds.

Minimalist obedience does only what it thinks it can manage. It makes the whole thing very measurable, very controllable – and basically, very human.

If your obedience is limited to what you think you can do, what you think you can afford, what you think you are capable of doing, you will always remain on the periphery of serving God. Obeying God is not about doing what you can in your strength, for your benefit. It is often doing what you otherwise could not do, in the power of God for His glory. It is about seeing what would please God – beyond the letter, and stepping out in faith to please God and seeing what He will do in response.

What have you done lately that was impossible without the Spirit of God? What have you done this week that could not be done without the Lord? What act of obedience so scared you that you shook your head and said, 'I can't'. When you go beyond obligation, you will find it. You will see God calling you to do more than greet your neighbour, but witness to them. You will see God calling you to do more than attend a church, but to serve in it. You will see God calling you to do more than bring your family to church, but to sometimes inconvenience your family. You will see God calling on you to give up something which is dear to you, to start doing something which is new and strange to you. You will see God calling on you to read the Word and pray in a way that you don't have the strength for – but He does. You will see God calling on you to so live that it will affect your work and job and home and entire life.

This is why faith and obedience are so tied together. True obedience comes from faith because it is seeking to please a Person, not a set of impersonal rules. True obedience comes from faith because, to please God, you must do more than you are capable of doing, and so you have to rely on Him?

Without faith, it is impossible to please Him. Living on mere obligation and personal capability is what the Pharisees did.

Is this what is governing your Christian life? Merely what I *have* to do and what you are *capable* of doing. Then God will seem far away, because your obedience is devoid of faith.

The obedience of Jesus is our example. We obey the way He did, beyond obligation, and beyond ability – by faith. That's what it means to be under grace. I don't *have to*, but I *want*

to. If I *have to*, I'm *glad to*. Even when I *have to* – what *more can I do* – by grace? May this mind be in us, which was also in Christ Jesus our Lord.