

# The Spiritual Disciplines

## *Modeling Jesus' Life (Obedience)*

*To Consider: "Go therefore and make disciples...teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." Jesus*

Since we have trusted God with our eternal life, does it not make sense that we can trust him with our earthly life? Why is obedience, aligning our wills with God's will, so difficult? After all, isn't obedience really just the tangible expression of our trust in God? Why do we find ourselves yielding to the cries of culture to "Be Yourself," "Realize Your Potential" or "Be All You Can Be?" Of course when we succumb we end up moving further away from who we really are in Christ. Genuine spiritual formation occurs when our life conforms to Jesus' life. As born-again image bearers of God, we're called to look like Jesus, not just know about him.

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### *The Presupposition of Obedience*

The first command Jesus issued to his disciples is "Follow me" (**Mt 4:19; Mk 1:17**). Note that the command to follow Jesus precedes the task they were called to. *Who we are* (followers of Jesus) *defines what it is that we do* (proclaim the Good News) and never vice versa. We don't become followers of Jesus by obeying but show that we are followers of Jesus by our obedience. Just as marriage is a genuine expression of love and commitment, so too is obedience a genuine expression of discipleship.

The word "disciple" in the Greek is *μαθητής*. As a verb it means "to learn and conform to." Therefore, a disciple was one who adheres to someone's teaching or instruction. In fact, it was a common first-century designation given to students. We find that there were disciples of John the Baptist (**Mt 11:2**), disciples of the Pharisees (**Lk 5:33**), and disciples of Moses (**Jn 9:28**). Being Jesus' disciple is not merely gaining knowledge about him but integrating what is learned into our lives. We want not only to be informed of our Master's life, but transformed by his life as well. Jesus says that a "disciple [*μαθητής*] is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher." (**Lk 6:40**).

Interestingly, the first command is surely a prerequisite to fulfilling the last command Jesus issues (**Mt 28:18-20**). We must first be followers of Jesus before we can make disciples for Jesus. If our disciple making is not fruitful could it be we are failing in following Jesus?

*To Consider: Control is a deadly enemy to spiritual formation and disobedience is merely an attempt to gain or maintain control over our lives rather than live our lives in accordance with Jesus' commands.*

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### *Our Incentive for Obedience*

Read **Heb 5:8**. Exactly how did Christ learn obedience "through what he suffered?" It's more often true for us that we learn to be obedient because of unpleasant consequences that follow our disobedience. But Christ, being sinless or morally perfect (**2 Cor 5:21; Heb 4:15**), did not share our sinful human condition.

Sometimes the consequences for living righteously are unpleasant because an unrighteous world opposes the godly (**2 Tim 3:12**). Therefore, disobedience can be enticing. When we place ourselves unreservedly at God's disposal we can expect harsh treatment from those who oppose God. Though the fruit of obedient living may be suffering, we learn the value of obedience by hearing the whisper of God "Well done, good and faithful servant ... Enter into

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the joy of your master." It is for the pleasure and happiness of God that we long to live for him. And, our incentive is the Lord Jesus himself who not only showed the way but set the example.

Read **Philippians 2:8**. Obedience can be costly. What if Jesus was not willing to obey and go to the cross? What price would be paid? The price for disobedience is far greater than the cost of obedient living. No difficulty can befall us that Christ has not already known and prepared us to endure.

*To Consider: Does obedience come in degrees? Can you be "more or less obedient?" If your employer says to finish work on your project by noon tomorrow and you finish 80%, whereas another co-worker finishes 60%, were you more obedient?*

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### *The Logic of Love and Law*

Jesus explicitly insists upon a relationship between love and obedience. Read **Jn 14:15, 21, 23**. Jesus is not saying "If you obey me, then you will love me." Rather, he says "If you love me, you will obey me." Obedience is a sign of love; it is the tangible, visible expression of love. All who love Jesus obey him, but not all who obey Jesus love him. It is unfortunate that many confuse the relationship between the love of God and the laws of God.

The biblical history of Israel repeatedly annotates this confusion between love for God and obedience to God (cf. **Ps 51:16-19; Mt 23:23-24**). The Apostle Paul makes it abundantly clear that the law was never to be seen as a means of establishing a relationship with God; a relationship that can only be established by faith in God (cf. **Gal 2:16; 3:15-28**). Instead, God's law is a means of maintaining a relationship that is already established by God (**Rom 8:3-4; 1 Jn 4:19**).

Also, Jesus promised that his burden would be light (**Mt 11:28-30**). Believers are not under the yoke of duty but bound by the law of love (**Rom 13:8-10; Gal 5:14; Jm 2:8**).

Love is to obedience as motivation is to action. Obedience without love is mere duty, while love without obedience is mere sentimentalism. The former depersonalizes relationships, and the latter demoralizes them. We obey God *because* we love him and not vice versa.

#### *Excursus: The Relationship of Justification to Sanctification*

1. Whereas justification is God's legal declaration of our right standing before him, sanctification is God's work of conforming us to Christ's image through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Justification has to do with our legal standing; sanctification with our ethical living.
2. Whereas justification is instantaneous, sanctification is a lifelong process. Justification makes us holy in principle; sanctification makes us holy in practice.
3. Although distinct, justification and sanctification must be held together like two sides of one coin. Keeping them together helps us avoid two extremes:
  - a. *Antinomianism* (a.k.a. "cheap grace") - the idea that upon a profession of faith in Christ one can live however they choose and still be saved; God's Law has no rule or regard in their lives.
  - b. *Legalism* - the idea that one must obey God's Law in order to become saved, remain saved, or be "spiritual." Any notion of earning God's acceptance or approval by autonomous human effort.
4. By holding sanctification together with justification we avoid the error of cheap grace or antinomianism. And, by distinguishing between justification and sanctification we avoid all charges of a works-based righteousness.

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God never demands more than he enables (**1 Cor 10:13**). If God demands our obedience, then he provides the moral strength and willingness to carry it out. Although the way of obedience is no easy road, we are promised God's encouragement and comfort in the midst of our trials and difficulties (**2 Cor 1:3-4; 12:8-10**).

Read **1 Jn 2:3-6**. Living obediently is an expression of our affection for God. Conversely, living disobediently is an expression of contempt toward God. Therefore, when I am living disobediently it is often my love for God that has weakened and in need of repair.

Read **Mt 22:37-40**. Do you find it somewhat ironic that we're "commanded" to love God? Can love be commanded? With how much of our heart, soul, and mind are we to love God? With one command, viz., "love," Jesus did away once and for all with sterile observance of laws and rules apart from wholehearted commitment. In one way or another all of God's laws and rules are expressions of a Father's love for his children.

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### *Reflection/Direction/Decision*

- Have you confused the relationship between love and law?
- What area(s) of your life do you need to improve in the way of obedience? What steps will you take to ensure victory?
- When you're faced with a choice to disobey God do you think that it could rob him of joy? What greater motivation is there than to know that God will be pleased with us?
- Meditate on **Heb 12:1-3** and ask God to give you special strength to identify and overcome spiritual or moral weaknesses in your life.
- When was the last time obedience "cost" you something?
- How might Jesus' life motivate you in obedience?