

PRAYER AND OBEDIENCE

"An obedience discovered itself in Fletcher of Madeley, which I wish I could describe or imitate. It produced in him a ready mind to embrace every cross with alacrity and pleasure. He had a singular love for the lambs of the flock, and applied himself with the greatest diligence to their instruction, for which he had a peculiar gift. . . . All his intercourse with me was so mingled with prayer and praise, that every employment, and every meal was, as it were, perfumed therewith." -- JOHN WESLEY.

UNDER the Mosaic law, obedience was looked upon as being "better than sacrifice, and to harken, than the fat of lambs." In Deuteronomy 5:29, Moses represents Almighty God declaring Himself as to this very quality in a manner which left no doubt as to the importance He laid upon its exercise. Referring to the waywardness of His people He cries:

"O that there were such a heart in them, that they would fear Me, and keep all My commandments always, that it might be well with them, and with their children after them."

Unquestionably obedience is a high virtue, a soldier quality. To obey belongs, preeminently, to the soldier. It is his first and last lesson, and he must learn how to practice it all the time, without question, uncomplainingly. Obedience, moreover, is faith in action, and is the outflow as it is the very test of love. "He that hath My commandments and keepeth them, he it is that loveth Me."

Furthermore: obedience is the conserver and the life of love.

"If ye keep My commandments," says Jesus, "ye shall abide in My love, even as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love."

What a marvellous statement of the relationship created and maintained by obedience! The Son of God is held in the bosom of the Father's love, by virtue of His obedience! And the factor which enables the Son of God to ever abide in His Father's love is revealed in His own statement, "For I do, always, those things that please Him."

The gift of the Holy Spirit in full measure and in richer experience, depends upon loving obedience:

"If ye love Me, keep My commandments," is the Master's word. "And I will pray the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter, that He may abide with you for ever."

Obedience to God is a condition of spiritual thrift, inward satisfaction, stability of heart. "If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the fruit of the land." Obedience opens the gates of the Holy City, and gives access to the tree of life.

"Blessed are they that do His commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates, into the city."

What is obedience? It is doing God's will: it is keeping His commandments. How many of the commandments constitute obedience? To keep half of them, and to break the other half -- is that real obedience? To keep all the commandments but one -- is that obedience? On this point, James the Apostle is most explicit: "Whosoever shall

keep the whole law," he declares, "and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all."

The spirit which prompts a man to break one commandment is the spirit which may move him to break them all. God's commandments are a unit, and to break one strikes at the principle which underlies and runs through the whole. He who hesitates not to break a single commandment, would -- it is more than probable -- under the same stress, and surrounded by the same circumstances, break them all.

Universal obedience of the race is demanded. Nothing short of implicit obedience will satisfy God, and the keeping of all His commandments is the demonstration of it that God requires. But can we keep all of God's commandments? Can a man receive moral ability such as enables him to obey every one of them? Certainly he can. By every token, man can, through prayer, obtain ability to do this very thing.

Does God give commandments which men cannot obey? Is He so arbitrary, so severe, so unloving, as to issue commandments which cannot be obeyed? The answer is that in all the annals of Holy Scripture, not a single instance is recorded of God having commanded any man to do a thing, which was beyond his power. Is God so unjust and so inconsiderate as to require of man that which he is unable to render? Surely not. To infer it, is to slander the character of God.

Let us ponder this thought, a moment: Do earthly parents require of their children duties which they cannot perform? Where is the father who would think, even, of being so unjust, and so tyrannical? Is God less kind and just than faulty, earthly parents? Are they better and more just than a perfect God? How utterly foolish and untenable a thought!

In principle, obedience to God is the same quality as obedience to earthly parents. It implies, in general effect, the giving up of one's own way, and following that of another; the surrendering of the will to the will of another; the submission of oneself to the authority and requirements of a parent. Commands, either from our heavenly Father or from our earthly father, are love-directing, and all such commands are in the best interests of those who are commanded. God's commands are issued neither in severity nor tyranny. They are always issued in love and in our interests, and so it behooves us to heed and obey them. In other words, and appraised at its lowest value -- God having issued His commands to us, in order to promote our good, it pays, therefore, to be obedient. Obedience brings its own reward. God has ordained it so, and since He has, even human reason can realize that He would never demand that which is out of our power to render.

Obedience is love, fulfilling every command, love expressing itself. Obedience, therefore, is not a hard demand made upon us, any more than is the service a husband renders his wife, or a wife renders her husband. Love delights to obey, and please whom it loves. There are no hardships in love. There may be exactations, but no irk. There are no impossible tasks for love.

With what simplicity and in what a matter-of-fact way does the Apostle John say: "And whatsoever we ask, we receive of Him, because we keep His commandments, and do those things which are pleasing in His sight."

This is obedience, running ahead of all and every command. It is love,

obeying by anticipation. They greatly err, and even sin, who declare that men are bound to commit iniquity, either because of environment, or heredity, or tendency. God's commands are not grievous. Their ways are ways of pleasantness, and their paths peace. The task which falls to obedience is not a hard one. "For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light."

Far be it from our heavenly Father, to demand impossibilities of His children. It is possible to please Him in all things, for He is not hard to please. He is neither a hard master, nor an austere lord, "taking up that which he lays not down, and reaping that which he did not sow." Thank God, it is possible for every child of God, to please his heavenly Father! It is really much easier to please Him than to please men. Moreover, we may know when we please Him. This is the witness of the Spirit -- the inward Divine assurance, given to all the children of God that they are doing their Father's will, and that their ways are well-pleasing in His sight.

God's commandments are righteous and founded in justice and wisdom. "Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good." "Just and true are Thy ways, Thou King of saints." God's commandments, then, can be obeyed by all who seek supplies of grace which enable them to obey. These commandments must be obeyed. God's government is at stake. God's children are under obligation to obey Him; disobedience cannot be permitted. The spirit of rebellion is the very essence of sin. It is repudiation of God's authority, which God cannot tolerate. He never has done so, and a declaration of His attitude was part of the reason the Son of the Highest was made manifest among men:

"For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit."

If any should complain that humanity, under the fall, is too weak and helpless to obey these high commands of God, the reply is in order that, through the atonement of Christ, man is enabled to obey. The Atonement is God's Enabling Act. That which God works in us, in regeneration and through the agency of the Holy Spirit, bestows enabling grace sufficient for all that is required of us, under the Atonement. This grace is furnished without measure, in answer to prayer. So that, while God commands, He, at the same time, stands pledged to give us all necessary strength of will and grace of soul to meet His demands. This being true, man is without excuse for his disobedience and eminently censurable for refusing, or failing, to secure requisite grace, whereby he may serve the Lord with reverence, and with godly fear.

There is one important consideration those who declare it to be impossible to keep God's commandments strangely overlook, and that is the vital truth, which declares that through prayer and faith, man's nature is changed, and made partaker of the Divine nature; that there is taken out of him all reluctance to obey God, and that his natural inability to keep God's commandments, growing out of his fallen and helpless state, is gloriously removed. By this radical change which is wrought in his moral nature, a man receives power to obey God in every way, and to yield full and glad allegiance. Then he can say, "I delight to do Thy will, O my God." Not only is the rebellion incident to the

natural man removed, but a heart which gladly obeys God's Word, blessedly received.

If it be claimed, that the unrenewed man, with all the disabilities of the Fall upon him, cannot obey God, there will be no denial. But to declare that, after one is renewed by the Holy Spirit, has received a new nature, and become a child of the King, he cannot obey God, is to assume a ridiculous attitude, and to display, moreover, a lamentable ignorance of the work and implications of the Atonement.

Implicit and perfect obedience is the state to which the man of prayer is called. "Lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting," is the condition of obedient praying. Here inward fidelity and love, together with outward cleanness are put down as concomitants of acceptable praying.

John gives the reason for answered prayer in the passage previously quoted: "And whatsoever we ask we receive of Him because we keep His commandments and do those things which are pleasing in His sight."

Seeing that the keeping of God's commandments is here set forth as the reason why He answers prayer, it is to be reasonably assumed that we can keep God's commandments, can do those things which are pleasing to Him. Would God make the keeping of His commandments a condition of effectual prayer, think you, if He knew we could not keep His statutes? Surely, surely not!

Obedience can ask with boldness at the Throne of grace, and those who exercise it are the only ones who can ask, after that fashion. The disobedient folk are timid in their approach and hesitant in their supplication. They are halted by reason of their wrong-doing. The requesting yet obedient child comes into the presence of his father with confidence and boldness. His very consciousness of obedience gives him courage and frees him from the dread born of disobedience.

To do God's will without demur, is the joy as it is the privilege of the successful praying-man. It is he who has clean hands and a pure heart, that can pray with confidence. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said:

"Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of My Father which is in heaven."

To this great deliverance may be added another:

"If ye keep My commandments ye shall abide in My love, even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in His love."

"The Christian's trade," says Luther, "is prayer." But the Christian has another trade to learn, before he proceeds to learn the secrets of the trade of prayer. He must learn well the trade of perfect obedience to the Father's will. Obedience follows love, and prayer follows obedience. The business of real observance of God's commandments inseparably accompanies the business of real praying.

One who has been disobedient may pray. He may pray for pardoning mercy and the peace of his soul. He may come to God's footstool with tears, with confession, with penitent heart, and God will hear him and answer

his prayer. But this kind of praying does not belong to the child of God, but to the penitent sinner, who has no other way by which to approach God. It is the possession of the unjustified soul, not of him who has been saved and reconciled to God.

An obedient life helps prayer. It speeds prayer to the throne. God cannot help hearing the prayer of an obedient child. He always has heard His obedient children when they have prayed. Unquestioning obedience counts much in the sight of God, at the throne of heavenly grace. It acts like the confluent tides of many rivers, and gives volume and fulness of flow as well as power to the prayer chamber. An obedient life is not simply a reformed life. It is not the old life primed and painted anew nor a church-going life, nor a good veneering of activities. Neither is it an external conformation to the dictates of public morality. Far more than all this is combined in a truly obedient Christian, God-fearing life.

A life of full obedience; a life settled on the most intimate terms with God; where the will is in full conformity to God's will; where the outward life shows the fruit of righteousness -- such a life offers no bar to the inner chamber but rather, like Aaron and Hur, it lifts up and sustains the hands of prayer.

If you have an earnest desire to pray well, you must learn how to obey well. If you have a desire to learn to pray, then you must have an earnest desire to learn how to do God's will. If you desire to pray to God, you must first have a consuming desire to obey Him. If you would have free access to God in prayer, then every obstacle in the nature of sin or disobedience, must be removed. God delights in the prayers of obedient children. Requests coming from the lips of those who delight to do His will, reach His ears with great celerity, and incline Him to answer them with promptitude and abundance. In themselves, tears are not meritorious. Yet they have their uses in prayer. Tears should baptize our place of supplication. He who has never wept concerning his sins, has never really prayed over his sins. Tears, sometimes, is a penitent's only plea. But tears are for the past, for the sin and the wrongdoing. There is another step and stage, waiting to be taken. It is that of unquestioning obedience, and until it is taken, prayer for blessing and continued sustenance, will be of no avail.

Everywhere in Holy Scripture God is represented as disapproving of disobedience and condemning sin, and this is as true in the lives of His elect as it is in the lives of sinners. Nowhere does He countenance sin, or excuse disobedience. Always, God puts the emphasis upon obedience to His commands. Obedience to them brings blessing, disobedience meets with disaster. This is true, in the Word of God, from its beginning to its close. It is because of this, that the men of prayer, in Holy Writ, had such influence with God. Obedient men, always, have been the closest to God. These are they who have prayed well and have received great things from God, who have brought great things to pass.

Obedience to God counts tremendously in the realm of prayer. This fact cannot be emphasized too much or too often. To plead for a religious faith which tolerates sinning, is to cut the ground from under the feet of effectual praying. To excuse sinning by the plea that obedience to God is not possible to unregenerate men, is to discount the character of the new birth, and to place men where effective praying is not possible. At one time Jesus broke out with a very pertinent and

personal question, striking right to the core of disobedience, when He said: "Why call ye Me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things I say?"

He who would pray, must obey. He who would get anything out of his prayers, must be in perfect harmony with God. Prayer puts into those who sincerely pray a spirit of obedience, for the spirit of disobedience is not of God and belongs not to God's praying hosts.

An obedient life is a great help to prayer. In fact, an obedient life is a necessity to prayer, to the sort which accomplishes things. The absence of an obedient life makes prayer an empty performance, a mere misnomer. A penitent sinner seeks pardon and salvation and has an answer to his prayers even with a life stained and debauched with sin. But God's royal intercessors come before Him with royal lives. Holy living promotes holy praying. God's intercessors "lift up holy hands," the symbols of righteous, obedient lives.

"Many exemplary men have I known, holy in heart and life, within my four score years. But one equal to John Fletcher -- one so inwardly and outwardly obedient and devoted to God -- I have not known." -- JOHN WESLEY.

IT is worthy of note that the praying to which such transcendent position is given and from which great results are attributable, is not simply the saying of prayers, but holy praying. It is the "prayers of the saints," the prayers of the holy men of God. Behind such praying, giving to it energy and flame are the men and women who are wholly devoted to God, who are entirely separated from sin, and fully separated unto God. These are they who always give energy, force and strength to praying.

Our Lord Jesus Christ was preeminent in praying, because He was preeminent in saintliness. An entire dedication to God, a full surrender, which carries with it the whole being, in a flame of holy consecration -- all this gives wings to faith and energy to prayer. It opens the door to the throne of grace, and brings strong influence to bear on Almighty God.

The "lifting up of holy hands" is essential to Christly praying. It is not, however, a holiness which only dedicates a closet to God, which sets apart merely an hour to Him, but a consecration which takes hold of the entire man, which dedicates the whole life to God.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, "holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners," had full liberty of approach and ready access to God in prayer. And He had this free and full access because of His unquestioning obedience to His Father. Right through His earthly life His supreme care and desire was to do the will of His Father. And this fact, coupled with another -- the consciousness of having so ordered His life -- gave Him confidence and assurance, which enabled Him to draw near to the throne of grace with unbounded confidence, born of obedience, and promising acceptance, audience, and answer.

Loving obedience puts us where we can "ask anything in His name," with the assurance, that "He will do it." Loving obedience brings us into the prayer realm, and makes us beneficiaries of the wealth of Christ, and of the riches of His grace, through the coming of the Holy Spirit who will abide with us, and be in us. Cheerful obedience to God, qualifies us to pray effectually.

This obedience which not only qualifies but fore-runs prayer, must be loving, constant, always doing the Father's will, and cheerfully following the path of God's commands.

In the instance of King Hezekiah, it was a potent plea which changed God's decree that he should die and not live. The stricken ruler called upon God to remember how that he had walked before Him in truth, and with a perfect heart. With God, this counted. He hearkened to the petition, and, as a result, death found his approach to Hezekiah barred for fifteen years.

Jesus learned obedience in the school of suffering, and, at the same time, He learned prayer in the school of obedience. Just as it is the prayer of a righteous man which availeth much, so it is righteousness which is obedience to God. A righteous man is an obedient man, and he it is, who can pray effectually, who can accomplish great things when he betakes himself to his knees.

True praying, be it remembered, is not mere sentiment, nor poetry, nor eloquent utterance. Nor does it consist of saying in honeyed cadences, "Lord, Lord." Prayer is not a mere form of words; it is not just calling upon a Name. Prayer is obedience. It is founded on the adamantine rock of obedience to God. Only those who obey have the right to pray. Behind the praying must be the doing; and it is the constant doing of God's will in daily life which gives prayer its potency, as our Lord plainly taught:

"Not every one which saith unto Me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of My Father which is in heaven. Many will say unto Me in that day, Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy Name, and in Thy Name have cast out devils? And in Thy Name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you; depart from Me, ye that worketh iniquity."

No name, however precious and powerful, can protect and give efficiency to prayer which is unaccompanied by the doing of God's will. Neither can the doing, without the praying, protect from Divine disapproval. If the will of God does not master the life, the praying will be nothing but sickly sentiment. If prayer do not inspire, sanctify and direct our work, then self-will enters, to ruin both work and worker.

How great and manifold are the misconceptions of the true elements and functionings of prayer! There are many who earnestly desire to obtain an answer to their prayers but who go unrewarded and unblest. They fix their minds on some promise of God and then endeavour by dint of dogged perseverance, to summon faith sufficient to lay hold upon, and claim it. This fixing of the mind on some great promise may avail in strengthening faith, but, to this holding on to the promise must be added the persistent and importunate prayer that expects, and waits till faith grows exceedingly. And who is there that is able and competent to do such praying save the man who readily, cheerfully and continually, obeys God?

Faith, in its highest form, is the attitude as well as the act of a soul surrendered to God, in whom His Word and His Spirit dwells. It is true that faith must exist in some form, or another, in order to prompt praying; but in its strongest form, and in its largest results, faith is the fruit of prayer. That faith increases the ability and the

efficiency of prayer is true; but it is likewise true that prayer increases the ability and efficiency of faith. Prayer and faith, work, act and react, one upon the other.

Obedience to God helps faith as no other attribute possibly can. When obedience -- implicit recognition of the validity, the paramountcy of the Divine commands -- faith ceases to be an almost superhuman task. It requires no straining to exercise it. Obedience to God makes it easy to believe and trust God. Where the spirit of obedience fully impregnates the soul; where the will is perfectly surrendered to God; where there is a fixed, unalterable purpose to obey God, faith almost believes itself. Faith then becomes almost involuntary. After obedience it is, naturally, the next step, and it is easily and readily taken. The difficulty in prayer is not with faith, but with obedience, which is faith's foundation.

We must look well to our obedience, to the secret springs of action, to the loyalty of our heart to God, if we would pray well, and desire to get the most out of our praying. Obedience is the groundwork of effectual praying; this it is, which brings us nigh to God.

The lack of obedience in our lives breaks down our praying. Quite often, the life is in revolt and this places us where praying is almost impossible, except it be for pardoning mercy. Disobedient living produces mighty poor praying. Disobedience shuts the door of the inner chamber, and bars the way to the Holy of holies. No man can pray -- really pray -- who does not obey.

The will must be surrendered to God as a primary condition of all successful praying. Everything about us gets its colouring from our inmost character. The secret will makes character and controls conduct. The will, therefore, plays an important part in all successful praying. There can be no praying in its richest implication and truest sense, where the will is not wholly and fully surrendered to God. This unswerving loyalty to God is an utterly indispensable condition of the best, the truest, the most effectual praying. We have "simply got to trust and obey; there's no other way, to be happy in Jesus -- but to trust, and obey!"