

Gospel Obedience

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Date: 24 January 2021

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[0 : 0 0] Now, I'm going to read to you something. Bear with me. It's short. Good morning. Yes, I did. Sorry for not responding sooner. It really knows trouble. I'm just sorry you had to go through the hassle. Thanks for giving it a go. I hope you are able to rest some.

God bless, John. Now, I've just read you an email that I've sent. I pulled it out of my Gmail sent folder yesterday. Do you understand at all? Can you figure out what's going on from what I read to you? Well, you know, if you just grab one email, you're listening in and part of a two-way conversation, but you're only getting half. So, you know, you can learn some things about the situation that's going on, but not everything. So you can learn, for instance, it's clear that I'm apologizing for something in this email and that I'm responding to someone who apologized for something.

Someone obviously tried to do something for me and it didn't work out. I said, thanks for giving it a go. But it's not clear what the full situation is. We don't know. Well, I know, but you don't know how close am I to the person who's getting this email? Family, coworkers, close friends.

You don't know what's being apologized for. You don't know how long I waited before replying to his email, etc. Now, reading the epistles in the New Testament is actually a lot like that.

They're letters. This is a letter from Paul to Philemon from 2,000 years ago, and it's half of a two-way conversation. And it can actually take a whole lot of work to piece back together the full situation so that we can understand the letter in its proper context. But that's what makes Philemon so special. That's one of the things. Philemon is just a short little letter, but in it, Paul is so clear about the situation that we can actually piece together a really clear picture of what's going on. So here are a few things that we can understand pretty clearly from Philemon. Paul is writing to a house church. He says right at the beginning, to the church that meets in your house. And he's specifically writing to one person in the larger community who's probably a leader in that church named Philemon. We know Paul is writing from prison and that he calls himself an old man and that he's probably near the end of his life. We can discern that Paul is writing because

[2 : 4 1] Philemon has a relationship with somebody named Onesimus, who apparently has left Philemon. Now, we know through other circumstances this is a slave. Onesimus is a runaway slave.

And we know that somehow this runaway, Onesimus, found Paul by God's grace. He found Paul and he was converted and he became a Christian. He became a Jesus worshiper, a Christ follower. And now we know that Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon. But instead of sending him back as a slave, he's sending him back as a brother. Now, the whole point of the letter is really that last part that we said.

Paul is sending Onesimus back. That's the occasion. It's why Paul's writing in the first place. It's why he picked up the pen, so to speak. So the whole focal point of the letter is in verse 17. Look at it with me, if you will. Paul says to Philemon, welcome him as you would welcome me. Paul is making a gospel-shaped request or command, and he's asking for gospel-driven obedience. So we're going to think about obedience in the gospel tonight. We're going to think about the relationship of those things from Philemon. Three points. One, Jesus is building a family that the world can't explain.

Number two, family obedience isn't optional. And number three, Jesus is more committed to your obedience than you are. So number one, welcome him as you would welcome me. That makes no sense.

Without the gospel. What could possibly form a community where a slave and a thief, it sounds like he stole something, perhaps, is received with the same honor and dignity as an apostle of the risen Christ. But that's what Paul says. Welcome him exactly as if you were welcoming me. The world cannot explain that. Without Christ, our and the world's sinful bent is toward social hierarchy. It's to honor the rich and powerful and shame the poor and the weak. You know, Darwin's natural selection and survival of the fittest is really just the posture of each of our hearts toward everyone else without Christ.

[5 : 27] It's survival of the fittest. It's survival of the fittest. But Jesus is building a family completely countercultural to our cutthroat survival of the fittest worldly culture.

together. The gospel is the good news that Jesus died for our sins in our place so that we can live life with God forever together. Together. It's not an individualist gospel. It's good news for all peoples everywhere because we're in this together. Because we've all sinned and we're only brought back to slavery from slavery to sin by the blood of Jesus. There is no room in the church for classism and racism and favoritism and I'm better than you-ism because the blood of Christ is the great equalizer of humanity. He leveled the playing field at Calvary. That's why in Galatians, Paul could say there is neither Jew nor Greek. There is neither slave nor free. There is no male or female for you are all one in Christ Jesus. He just decimates their social hierarchy.

Through the gospel, Jesus is building a family the world can't explain. A family marked by showing each other honor. A family marked by lifting up our brothers and sisters by dignifying them, treating them, as children of the king of the universe. In Philemon verse 16, Paul tells Philemon to welcome him back, quote, no longer as a slave but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you both as a fellow man and as a brother, excuse me, as a brother in the Lord.

Paul is saying this family tie, this brotherhood does not just extend to the privileged, the noble, the rich, it's to the weak, the unprivileged, the oppressed, the poor, the weary.

In Christ, those are your brothers and sisters. All of us. The unimpressive of us. Through the gospel, Jesus is building a family the world just can't explain.

[8 : 02] Oh, you might say, hold on, I haven't seen Paul talk about the gospel. Thanks for asking. Look at verse three with me, please. Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Most emails that I get in the last year have started with something like, you know, hi John, hope that this finds you well in these unprecedented times. A courtesy greeting. That's not what Paul's doing here.

This is not Paul, you know, ticking off a box of his normal greeting just because. This is the gospel. It's all there. Let's unpack it just for a moment.

Grace to you. Grace to you from God. God himself loves you and gave you the gift of salvation. The gift, the grace of salvation by sending his own son to pay the price for your sins.

That's what grace to you from God means. What do we get from that gift, from that grace? We get peace. We get the very peace of God because Jesus reconciled us sinners to the holy God.

[9 : 17] We can finally have peace with God. And because of the great equalizer of humanity that is the blood of Christ, we can also have peace with each other. Grace to you and peace from God, our father.

Because no longer is he merely that deity who we have offended. Jesus brought us into the family of God. Father. That's our new title for him.

We've been given the spirit of adoption and it's by that Holy Spirit purchased for us. We get to call God, Abba, Father.

And so grace and peace to you from God, our father and the Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ. So we don't just get a big brother in Jesus. We get a king.

A Lord. That is the gospel. Paul opens up this letter with a remarkable greeting because it's actually the basis for everything that he says.

[10 : 21] Everything he says in his whole letter flows out of grace and peace to you from God, our father and the Lord Jesus Christ. That's why he's an apostle of Christ. He's a messenger.

That's how messengers from Christ open their letters. Now, just like this church, St. Columba's, and just like your church, Bon Accord, this church meeting in this house so long ago, it only existed because of the gospel.

There's no other starting point for this church and your church and any church but the gospel. Grace and peace from God, our father and the Lord Jesus Christ is the means of Jesus building a family that the world cannot explain.

Number two, family obedience is not optional. Now, when it comes to Christian obedience, we can all tend toward, you know, either end of two extremes, either end of a spectrum here.

So we can say on the one hand, well, here's, you know, here's my duty. I'll just do the right thing because I have to, even though I don't want to. I'll just do it because it's the right thing to do. Okay.

[11 : 36] Or we might say, you know, real love is from the heart and I'll do the right thing when my heart's really in it, but I need my heart to kind of get there first.

Now, most of us don't actually think in those words, but we tend to operate. We actually function in somewhere on that spectrum. Think about reading your Bible.

We all know it's the right thing to do. Sometimes you do it as a duty. You don't feel like reading your Bible. You just tick a box and your heart's not in it. Sometimes you just don't read your Bible.

Sometimes I don't read my Bible because I don't want to. And I don't want to just tick a box. I want it to actually come from my heart. I want it to matter. That's a real struggle for most of us.

It's a real struggle for me. But both ends of that spectrum are sub-Christian. There's a gospel third way. Thomas Chalmers called it the expulsive power of a greater affection.

[12 : 38] When the gospel comes to us and we are overwhelmed by the grace and peace of God and our Lord Jesus Christ, we do our duty because the Lord commands it and because we love our Lord.

And we just want to please him. We actually want to. Paul talks about this tension in Romans 7 when he says, you know, I do the things that I don't want to do and I don't do the things that I want to do.

Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death? He actually, he says, I actually want to do the right thing in my heart of hearts. I want to obey the law, but another part of me doesn't.

So we know that tension, but the gospel transforms us, overcomes us with the love of Christ. The old language, you know, perhaps the Puritan language would be apprehending the love of Christ, getting your hands around it.

Paul acknowledges this reality in verse 14. He says, I prefer to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion, but of your own accord.

[13 : 50] It's from the ESV. Paul's actually using all this persuasive skill to compel Philemon's obedience of his own accord. Do you see that?

He wants Philemon to obey from the heart, but actually to obey, not to wait until his heart's in it to do the right thing, but not to do the right thing without his heart being in it.

Do you see that? If we're going to have our cake and eat it too, we need the gospel to transform our hearts through the power of the spirit. But in the gospel, Jesus says to us, I require obedience of you and giving you a love for God so strong that you'll delight in obedience.

Paul could say in verse 17, welcome him as you would welcome me because in Christ, the father welcomed us as if we were Christ.

Imagine Jesus on that cross saying to the father and pointing at you, welcome him, welcome her as you would welcome me.

[15 : 02] Paul could say in verse 18, if he owes you anything, charge it to my account, I will pay it. Because Christ first said to the father, if he, if she owes you anything, charge it to my account, I have paid it.

Gospel doctrine always leads to gospel culture. Our knowing leads to doing. Gospel doctrine to gospel culture.

The truth of Jesus dying in our place for our sins forms and shapes us into the kind of people who can extend that kind of grace to others.

So what I want us to see is that the gospel does require obedience from us. Paul is ultimately, sorry, but what Paul's not saying though, is obey me.

Paul's not saying please obey Paul because Paul's an important person to obey. Ultimately, Paul's saying obey the gospel. Live like the gospel is true.

[16 : 12] Let the gospel doctrine lead to gospel culture. Excuse me. Look with me at verses eight and nine. Therefore, although in Christ, I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do.

Yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. Paul's such a good communicator. He's being very persuasive. But there's one little word that I want us to pay attention to, and it's the word ought.

Because Jesus is building a family the world can't explain, there are things that we ought to do. The gospel requires something of us.

Gospel doctrine must lead to gospel culture. We must live as though it's true. If the family that Jesus is building is to be inexplicable to the world, then we have to actually act in an inexplicable gospel-shaped way, don't we?

We see this in Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant. Remember, the servant owed his master a great debt, and the master forgave the debt. And then the servant went to someone who owed him just a little debt, and he starts choking the guy and says, pay what you owe, right?

[17 : 36] Do you remember what the master says to that unforgiving servant? He says, you wicked servant, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.

And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you?
Gospel doctrine, gospel culture. It must.

We forgive because we are forgiven. We humble ourselves for others because the Lord of heaven humbled himself for us. We honor and dignify others because the most glorious person in the universe honors and dignifies us.

Now, the relationship between what Jesus has done for us and what we do is not merely that of an example. It's not like saying, I demonstrated how to ice skate, so now you go and ice skate.

That's not what we're doing. It's more like an internal combustion engine. The engine in your car. Unless you drive a hybrid, I don't know how those work. Imagine you don't.

[18 : 43] The car moves forward down the road, not because it sees other cars doing it and knows how to, right? The car moves forward because in its heart, if you will, inside, under the bonnet, there's combustion.

The petrol is ignited and it drives the engine forward. We don't just need Jesus as an example. We need him to light a fire under the hood in our hearts.

We need internal combustion. We need transformation. That's what we mean when we say gospel transformation. We hear the gospel. The Holy Spirit lights a fire and it compels us forward into new obedience.

The gospel requires our obedience, but he also compels our obedience. Paul, in the book of Philippians, chapter 2, I think, says it this way.

He says, work out your own salvation. Work. Go do. Work out your salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God who works in you, both at the level of your willing and at the level of your working.

[19 : 53] God is in our obedience. Amazing. Now, we need to say before we move on, we are not saved because of our obedience.

We are saved because of Christ's obedience. So when I say the gospel requires our obedience, I do not mean that you have to obey to get saved. I mean we obey because we have been saved.

Obedience follows from salvation, from knowing what Christ has done for us. All right. Now, at this point, it's possible that some of you are internally squirming just a little bit.

And I can guess that because internally I'm squirming just a little bit. Facing into the reality that the gospel demands a response of obedience means also facing into the reality of how disobedient to the gospel I can be.

If you're feeling unworthy today, if you're hyper aware of your own disobedience, or if you're feeling discouraged because you want to obey the gospel, you want to grow in holiness, but you just can't seem to get it together, then this is really important.

[21 : 10] Point number three. Jesus is more committed to your obedience than you are. Jesus is more committed to your growth in holiness than you are.

Jesus is more committed to your sanctification, to your conforming to the image of Christ, than you are. Isn't that good news?

How can I say that? Well, look at verse 20. Paul makes his request or command, if you will, to Philemon. And he says this. I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord.

Refresh my heart in Christ. Do you see the preposition? A tiny word used twice. It's really important. It's the little word in.

Benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart. In Christ. In Christ. Christians are located in Christ.

[22 : 17] We are so united to Christ by the Spirit that it's as if we've had an address change. So I'm not just John on Blackford Avenue in Edinburgh. I'm John in Christ.

That's my new, true, real location. Christ is the head and we are the body. That's how in Christ we are.

That's how united to Christ we are. Our obedience is in Christ because we're united to Christ.

We're so united to Christ that when the Father looks at us, he sees his Son. He sees Jesus. We're so united to Christ that his obedience, his obedience is counted to you as your obedience.

So our obedience is counted to the glory of Christ then as his righteousness is working in us. It's an amazing exchange. We come out ahead, guys.

[23 : 23] So we're so united to Christ that his good is our good. And our good is his good. In other words, Jesus is more committed to your obedience than you are because he's more committed to your good than you are.

We are self-destructive. We are. We do things that are physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually harmful to ourselves.

We do it every day. But obedience to God is good for you. I saw somebody tweet this out earlier today. It was a quote from John Piper. He said, doing the right thing will never ruin your life.

It's so true. Obedience to God is good for you. And Jesus is way more committed to your good than you are. And he died to prove it. So if you're discouraged about your lack of growth, about your disobedience to the gospel, about your lack of maturity, take it seriously.

But hear this. Jesus is determined to see you in heaven. And he will get you there. Let that compel your obedience to the gospel.

[24 : 50] Well, let me just wrap up with this thought. As I was studying and writing in Philemon, I kept thinking, what happened to these guys?

What happened to Philemon? What happened to Onesimus? Did Philemon obey? Did he free Onesimus? Did he obey the gospel? Well, we can't know for certain. But in 115 AD, which is about 75 years after this letter was written, the church father Ignatius of Antioch said that Onesimus was freed.

And in fact, Ignatius said that Onesimus, that freed thieving slave born again into the family of Christ, succeeded Timothy as the bishop and pastor of the Ephesian church.

That's amazing. Now, I hope that's true. Some early church fathers even said that it was Onesimus who gathered Paul's letters into a collection, preserving them for, ultimately for us, for future generations.

And that he made sure to include the letter to Philemon, the story of his own freedom. Man, I hope that's true. But either way, this is an amazing little letter, which declares to us, which declares to you, the story of your freedom in Christ and his marvelous family-building, community-shaping love for us.

[26 : 23] Let's pray. Holy Father, Lord, we're very thankful for your gospel. I asked in prayer before we began that you would open our eyes to see marvelous things in your word.

And I, Father, I pray now that we see Christ, that we see the beauty of the gospel of Jesus. And I ask that you would light that fire in our hearts and compel us into new obedience.

Not to earn your favor, not to earn your smile, but because we have your smile. Thank you, God. We ask it for Jesus' glory. Amen.

Amen.