

A COMMENT ON OBEYING FROM A SENSE OF DUTY

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One sometimes gets the impression in Christian circles that obeying God from a sense of duty or obligation – doing what he wants when part of you does not feel like it – is not merely suboptimal but is worthless in God's eyes. Such "grudging" obedience, as it is sometimes called, may even be characterized as hypocritical or legalistic. The implication is that one might as well disobey as obey with any degree of reluctance because neither is acceptable; they are just different forms of disobedience. After all, God is interested in the heart, right? I think this is a misunderstanding and is a prescription for despair. It is rooted in over-realized eschatology, viewing our present state too much in terms of what still awaits the end.

We long for the day when our sanctification, our transformation into the image of Jesus (2 Cor. 3:18), will be complete, so that our hearts will be fully aligned with God's will in all aspects of our lives. But until then, we struggle with the flesh, the self-centered and self-indulgent aspect of our regenerated but not yet fully transformed nature. Thus, Christians are told by Peter "to abstain from fleshly desires that war against the soul" (1 Pet. 2:11). Paul says, "For the flesh desires [things] contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit [desires things] contrary to the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, so that you may not do whatever you want" (Gal. 5:17).

Rather than do what our flesh wants to do, we are, by the Spirit's power, to subject the desires of the flesh to the control of the Spirit. Those desires are present but must be subdued and overcome. We are to drag our fleshly selves, so to speak, to do what we know is right. We are not to allow sinful inclinations to reign in our mortal body so that we obey those passions, but we are to control our bodies that we may offer them to God as weapons of righteousness (Rom. 6:12-13). If we live according to the flesh, if we let the flesh have its way with us, we will "die" in the full sense; we will experience judgment death. But if by the Spirit we put to death the misdeeds of the body, we will "live" in the full sense; we will experience the resurrection of life (Rom. 8:12-13).

Jesus calls us to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect (Mat. 5:48). As such, we are to live radically righteous lives, lives of self-denial (Mat. 16:24-25; Mk. 8:34-35; Lk. 9:23-24), a goal that clashes with the desires of the flesh. When we are tempted to indulge the flesh but say "No" to it and "Yes" to the Spirit by doing what God would have us do despite the contrary pull, that is a God-given and God-honoring victory not a cause for shame. That one had to overcome fleshly impulses to obey does not taint that obedience because those impulses are part of life on this side of the eschaton. There inevitably are times when one either obeys against an inner reluctance or does not obey at all. The notion that God does not care which we choose is a slander of God and bait for the unwary.

It is true, of course, that in Christ we are to renew our minds and hearts as well as our conduct (Rom. 2:29, 12:2; Eph. 4:22-23; Jas. 4:8), and to the extent we have matured to obey

God's will in any area with alacrity, he is pleased and glorified. But where such growth has not yet occurred so that there remains a pull against doing what God would have us do, we dare not convert that into an excuse for not doing his will by implying that such conflicted obedience is of no value in his sight.

The Christian husband who serves as a caregiver for his elderly wife, even when he does not feel like doing so, because he is convinced that is what it means to love her as Christ loves the church, should be honored and encouraged not made to feel guilty because he is not yet sanctified to the point that he invariably serves her with joyful eagerness. The same goes for the sister in Christ who labors to prepare meals for others, even when part of her just wants to rest, because she believes that is what God would have her do. And it goes for all who take the time and make the effort to assemble with the saints, even when part of them wants to use that time in some other way, because they are convinced it is God's will that they do so. All of this, and the countless other examples that could be given, reflects a love for God that supersedes fleshly impulses, a devotion that trumps all competing desires. Such conduct is good and noble, even if not yet perfect, and it should be acknowledged as such.