

My Problem with “Obedience”

By Gordon Dalbey

The smiling young man shook my hand after a conference—and then startled me. “Thank you,” he said, “for your obedience in writing your books!”

Confused, I drew back. Yes, I write books and yes, it’s hard work. But I’ve never thought of my writing as an act of obedience.

“Actually,” I offered, “I don’t write books because I’m obedient, but because I’m a writer. It’s just who I am. When I do it, I feel like me--like this is what I was made to do.”

That’s true. It’s not like the Father has commanded me to write and so I do it out of duty or indeed, fear of punishment. An idea just takes hold somehow in my mind. The more I think about it, other ideas come along, and soon I have to write it down or I don’t sleep well that night.

I’m increasingly dismayed by this elevation of “obedience” as a primary virtue among Christians.

When my son was 10, he was fascinated by wolves, so I took him on the Mt. Denali bus tour in Alaska. There, we prayed to see a wolf in the wild. When by the last hour we had seen no animals at all, I got into a prayer slugfest with the Father, begging Him to send a wolf for my son's sake. But none appeared. We were about to fall asleep, when the bus lurched to a stop as the driver pointed to a grey wolf standing nearby, majestic before a patch of white snow. It was a day my son and I will never forget.

"Isn't it wonderful how God honored your obedience!" one man declared when I shared the story.

"It's really not about my obedience," I urged. "It's about my desperation--and the Father who hears my cry!"

Again, I often tell stories about mistakes I've made or tough situations I've faced, and how the Father has overcome my shortcomings to bring something good out of it all. Always someone rises to say how much he appreciates my "obedience" in the midst of crisis.

I don't get it. It's like I've built this marvelous house in my own strength, and at last it's burning down. I'm stranded on the rooftop. Below, Jesus stands with arms open, crying out, "Jump!"

But hey, I figure the house is not completely destroyed yet, and it's still strong enough to support me. So I keep standing. When eventually the flames start biting my backside, finally I jump.

That doesn't seem like "obedience" to me. At least, not of any righteous variety that merits a Thank you.

True, God often commands obedience in the Old Testament, and later, Jesus exhorts His disciples to obey. What, then, is my problem with obedience? Is it just my sinful nature balking? Or could God's Word on this be more than a Father's saying, "I command it, so you do it—or else!"?

For men, obedience to God is often confused by a boy's relationship with his earthly father. Most boys learn to obey Dad because he punishes you if you don't. Boys rarely associate obedience with a loving father who directs in order to protect his child. As men, therefore, we can't hear Father God's heart urging, "Please don't do that--it'll hurt you terribly and sabotage your destiny." Often, we either cave in as wimps, or lash back as rebels.

Under New Covenant grace, however, as evangelist Juan Carlos Ortiz put it, "the commandments become promises." When the power of Father God's own Spirit is in you, He no longer says, "You shall not steal or I'll kill you," but rather, "Surrender to me, give my Spirit room to work, and I promise—you shall not steal."

This New Covenant, sealed by Jesus on the cross, is about trusting your father—a terrifying prospect for men abandoned as boys.

"I will give you a new heart and a new mind," Father God therefore promises. "I will take away your stubborn heart of stone and give you an obedient heart. I will put my Spirit in you and will see to it that you follow my laws and keep all the commandments I have given you" (Ezek. 36:26,27). Under the New Covenant, that is, as we do the surrendering, God's Holy Spirit does the work. He judges us not for our sinful nature--any more than a cat for chasing a bird--but precisely for proudly refusing to let Him overcome it.

“God gave the Law through Moses,” as John put it, “but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). Most boys grow up without a father who can impart grace as well as enforce truth. Grace means blessing on top of forgiveness. It’s the winsome avenue that allows truth to enter a boy’s heart--so he can recognize its value and not resist it out of shame. Without a father’s grace, the boy’s natural longing for approval from Dad mis-focuses on obedience as the most clearly defined way to get it. Eventually, this can lead him to idolize surrogate authority figures, from gang leader to pastor, from cult guru to corporate boss.

In manhood, as this dynamic projects onto a God called Father, faith becomes a cash-and-carry deal. I’m in control. It’s about what I do. If I do what the Father says and “align with His principles,” I get the goodies, in prosperity and righteousness. If I don’t, that’s my choice, and I accept the punishment, in misfortune and shame.

Significantly, this charade is predicated on the absence of trusting relationship—which is precisely what the Father of us all has sent Jesus to restore. Surrendered to Jesus, our sin nature is covered by His blood, pre-empted by His Spirit. Forgiven, knowing that our true Father wants to bless us, we can run into the throne room and cry out our deepest needs to the King of kings.

. “For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear,” as Paul declared, “but you received the spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, “*Abba!* Father!” (Rom. 8:15NIV). An unfathered child lives in the spirit of slavery: Obey your Father or He’ll punish you! Christians live in the spirit of son/daughtership: I’m not capable of doing what my Father has said is best for me, but as I surrender and trust Him, His Spirit directs and empowers me to do it.

Our sinful nature, meanwhile, either doesn't want to avoid the bad things—many of which can feel pretty good for awhile—or fancies that our own natural strength is sufficient to resist them. “I know that good does not live in me, that is, in my human nature,” the Apostle Paul countered, “for even though the desire to do good is in me, I am not able to do it” (Rom. 7:18).

.Does God command us to obey Him? Absolutely.

Are we capable of obeying Him? Not according to Paul--nor according to my own experience.

Must we obey God? Certainly not. At least, no more than you must obey the surgeon who says, “Come in for surgery--your arteries are 100% clogged!”

Are there consequences for not obeying God? Indeed, serious consequences--unto death itself. To disobey God is to disregard His safety regulations and expose yourself to destructive powers. “Be alert, be on watch!” as Peter exhorted the early Believers. “Your enemy, the Devil, roams around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8).

If you're real, God can make you right. But if you're right, the enemy of God will make you real. Lovingly, respectfully—if painfully—God waits until the consequences of our pride become painful and destructive enough to bring us to our knees and cry out at last for His healing and deliverance.

So is there any provision for those real enough to confess they can't do what God commands? You bet. In fact, there's good company here with the Apostle Paul, who continued,

What an unhappy man I am! Who will rescue me from this body taking me to death? Thanks be to God, who does this through our Lord Jesus Christ! (Rom. 7:18,24,25).

As a young man, obeying God seemed so hard. Today, at 65, I no longer have energy either to run from the truth or to accomplish its goal. As aging strips me from all pretense of strength, my problem with obedience becomes clear:

Obedience is not hard.

It's impossible.

If we human beings were capable of obeying God, why did Jesus have to die on the cross? The threats of Moses would have been enough to keep us in line. Any atheist with a big enough whip can make someone obey. But only a father's love can earn a child's trust.

Many Christians focus on obedience to help them avoid destructive behaviors. I respect that as a primary commitment. But even as the Old Covenant Temple had to fall, sooner or later we all burn out trying to save ourselves, until at last, we dare to experience the truth: Only Jesus can save you from your sinful nature, and only Holy Spirit can empower you to recognize what Father God created you to do--and do it. Not because you're obedient, but because it's who you are as His son/daughter.

Here, then, is the essential distinction:

Obedience is about what you do; trust is about what your Father does.

Knowingly, God has commanded us to obedience even as He has made us incapable of it. Not because He's a sadistic tyrant who enjoys watching us suffer the consequences of disobedience, but because He's a loving Father who wants the best for His children, and knows that we can't receive that until we cry out to Him desperately enough to appreciate it.

If you want to show appreciation for my ministry, therefore, thank me for beating on the gates of Heaven after the Father's saving power—and trusting Him to do what I can't. That way, we can both thank Him together for hearing me.

(For a further discussion of this theme, see *The REST of Your Life*, by Mary Dalbey and my book *Fight like a Man*, at <http://store.abbafather.com/SearchResults.asp?Cat=1>