

Sermon 49: Romans 6:17-19: The Nature of True Obedience

OUTLINE

Heart obedience
Patterned obedience
Dedicated obedience
Total obedience
Effective obedience

INTRODUCTION

I want you to tell me the difference between two different types of obedience and good deeds. On the one hand you have an unbeliever, let's make them both mothers. The unbeliever loves her children, sacrifices for them and serves her family her whole life through. Then on the other hand you have a believing wife and mother, she too loves her family sacrificially. I have deliberately used the best of what we will find in an unbeliever in order to help us get to the bottom of the difference. If we examine the love of the unbelieving woman and compare it with the love from the believing woman what is the difference? They appear to be the same and in some ways they are. They are both human acts of love that flow from the God-given instinct of motherhood that God has made to dwell in both through creation. Given the fact that they are both fallen sinners, none of them will produce a flawless love but it will be full of flaws. Outwardly, there may be little to distinguish them. However, as we penetrate beneath the surface to the heart we find massive differences.

First, there is the issue of motive, why are they doing it? The believer is doing it out of a love for God and a desire to glorify Him, the unbeliever will not and cannot have this motive driving their love.

The believer will be serving not to save themselves but because they have been saved and a joyful gratitude for salvation is an attitude that the unbeliever cannot function from. The unbeliever may function from guilt, trying to earn one's salvation, approval, fear, habit, man pleasing, etc.

We would also expect to find in the believer's love one that is defined by the Scriptures, a love that is just and disciplines, a love that is selfless in imitation of Christ. The believer has a more light in the area of knowing what love is and a concrete example to follow.

At a deeper level the love that a Christian produces is one that is empowered by the Holy Spirit, we have His aid in conviction, teaching, and producing a heavenly harvest of love in dry ground. We draw on the resources of Christ's heavenly life mediated to us by the Spirit, but the unbeliever only has the barren resources of their own hearts, and flesh gives birth to flesh, but Spirit gives birth to Spirit.

Added to this we have the ability to overcome bad habits that creep into our love, things that we learnt from our parents, and are enabled to not merely change our outward behaviour but are enabled to produce Christlike characters.

The believer will give God the credit for any good outcomes recognizing that all the good of our lives is one that is given to us, but the unbeliever will credit themselves and their techniques, genes, choices, their sacrifices for any positive outcomes.

The believer will be free from making a god out of their children or husband. C. S. Lewis describes the situation of those who make the object of one's affections one's idol. Love made a god becomes a demon. And so you will find in the lives of those unbelievers who have lived long for others an expectation of repayment. They have not known grace as the source of all they are, have and have given and so they expect repayment. Children are grudgingly allowed to leave home, or marry; the expectation is they have to live in a perpetual debt to one who has given so much. But the believer knows that our children are a stewardship of God's children; this changes the way we view the empty nest, the loss of a child or husband, and inculcates no-debt mentality.

It is this wonderful new obedience that can only manifest itself in a believer's life that Paul describes in v17-19. Paul is showing us why Christians cannot live in sin. He has shown us that we have been united to Christ and have died to its power, having been set free from its control to pursue holiness with an expectation of progress. In v15-23 he is laying out his second argument why a Christian cannot continue to live like an unbeliever. He firstly, lays out a general principle that we are all slaves either of sin or righteousness, and now in the section before us he tells us that having been set free from one power, sin; we are now saved to live by another power, righteousness. In other words, as sin exerted a control over our lives to which we willingly bent and served; we are saved to a new power which enables a new disposition so that we will willingly bend and serve God. A new power with a new willingness opposed to the old power and the old willingness.

In these verses Paul gives us five characteristics of this new enabled obedience.

Heart obedience

The first thing Paul tells us is that our obedience is a heart obedience, 'But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin *have become obedient from the heart* to the standard of teaching to which you were committed,' (v17). Before we are able to investigate our new heart obedience we must first marvel at its source, 'But thanks be to God.' God is the one who came to us when we were dead in sin, He was the one who drew us to Himself, He is the one who resurrected us with Christ uniting us to Christ's death and resurrection, it was God that opened our eyes and gave us new hearts with which we then gladly believed on Christ for justification and turned from our sins in repentance. It was the work of the new heart by God that we are now able to have this new heart obedience.

This new heart that obeys is the heart that is promised in the OT in Ezek 36:25-27, 'I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. 26 And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.' The unbelieving mother does not and cannot have this heart that

underlies all her actions, only the Christian has the new God enabling impulse for holiness. God Himself causes us to walk in His ways just as sin once caused us to walk in its ways. Granted God does not compel us the way sin tyrannized us but we must not miss the new implanted willingness by God and that He is the source author of a new willingness.

So what does Paul mean by 'obedient from the heart?' It is quite simple, our obedience to God, as it flows from this new heart that He has given us is not a perfunctory fighting against sins we love, and a servile enslavement to a God who inwardly we wish we could be rid of. No, we have a genuine hate for the sins we are killing and putting off, and a genuine love for holiness. We agree with God that sin is a terrible thing, not merely because we want to stop self-destructive habits or anti-social behaviour, but because we view sin for what it really is; anti-God and we are now all for God. And holiness is not a form of punishment that we do in order to make up for the bad things that we have done, no rather, we truly love holiness and value it.

Patterned obedience

Next Paul speaks about a patterned obedience, in other words, an obedience that is not according to a law we have made up ourselves but one that we received from God through His apostles. V17, 'But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed.' Once again Paul emphasizes that it is God who has worked upon us for salvation not we who have worked. This comes through in the words, 'to which you were committed.' Paul is speaking passively meaning that God is the one who committed/delivered us to the teaching not that we committed ourselves. This does not mean that we did not make some sort of commitment when we were converted, we certainly did; we repented and took Christ as Lord. However, Paul is wording this verse very carefully in order to make a specific point. He is telling us that it is impossible for us to continue in sin, not because we are so committed and the strength of our original commitment is what makes all the difference. No, instead he is telling us that the reason why we go on into holiness is because God has effectively handed us over to the truth so that we want to do it on account of His work in us. This is the reality that Paul speaks about in v18, 'and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.' This is the indicative that Paul grounds the imperative in. God provides where He commands.

We have noted the work of God in handing us over to the teaching, but now we want to know what Paul means by 'the standard of teaching.' The new willingness that God has put into our hearts flows naturally in the channel of the teaching of God. This is most important. You will find versions of the gospel that are what we call, easy believism. This is a version of the Gospel that tells people that they can get their fire insurance from hell by simply confessing Jesus as saviour. The message is preached in such a fashion that there is no mention of sin or the need for a true conversion to include repentance. There is no talk of the cost of discipleship or of carrying ones cross, or life as a Christian being a difficult one as we war now against the world, the flesh and the devil. Instead we are given free forgiveness and coaxed into believing with the many benefits like healing, happiness and

wealth. This message produces many false converts who have never known the true Gospel. They call themselves Christians but their lives are totally unchanged. Worse they have been inoculated from real Gospel preaching, every time they hear the true Gospel which mentions leaving sin behind, they filter it through their own experience of easy believism and it simply runs like water off a duck's back.

Paul has just divided the world into two camps, slaves of sin and righteousness, I don't doubt that there would have been some self-deprecating people in the Roman church who would automatically think the worst of themselves because they are naturally self-attacking. But here we see Paul encouraging them, he tells them that He thanks God in their case that they have proven themselves to be true converts whose salvation is a work of grace because it shows in their living holy lives according to the true Gospel which calls people to faith in Christ, but also to repentance from sin and a life of discipleship. Would Paul thank God as he looks at us? Would he say, 'Yes, I see that God has worked a new heart of obedience in you because you are pursuing holiness as the Gospel commands'?

Dedicated obedience

Paul continues in v19, 'I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.' Paul is aware that using the institution of slavery to illustrate the wonderful new freedom of obedience that we have been brought into could give the wrong impression so he explains why he has used this picture to highlight spiritual truths. He tells us that our 'natural inclinations' slow us down. This does not mean that they were all dim witted but rather that spiritual truths, like the truth that we are freed from the power of sin and fully fitted for obedience is not natural to our hearts and we need it concretely communicated in order to grasp it. Paul moves from explanation to exhortation, from the imperatives to the indicatives and he tells us, 'For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.' It is the words 'just as,' that really make this statement a very powerful and penetrating one. Paul is saying this. 'I want you to serve God with as much sweat, sacrifice, time, ingenuity, patience, sleeplessness, pain, inconvenience, monetary investment and forethought as you once offered service to self and sin.

We know our way around our devices and phones better than we know our way around the Bible. We are better at gossip than prayer. We know the ins and outs of the lives of Hollywood stars but we don't know the lives of the Judges or the Kings in the Bible. We would know the details of the lives of the all blacks more than the details of the lives of those in our church. We will stay up late or get up early to watch a big game but wouldn't dream of going to the prayer meeting. Think for a moment about your old lives in sin. If you have grown up in a Christian home then think on the actions of those who aren't Christians who have exhibited this behaviour. How much commitment have we given to partying hard? How hard did we pursue drink and force ourselves to smoke when we didn't

enjoy it? How many foolish things did we do to pretend to be adults and be accepted by our peers growing up? How many standards did we compromise in order to be liked by a certain boy or girl? I remember hitchhiking across the country travelling 600 kilometres and arriving at 5 in the morning without sleeping just to go and see a girlfriend. How much more should I be doing for God. He is the King of the Universe, the Creator and Sustainer of my life. He is the one who has bought me at the price of His precious Son, who has loved me before I was conceived, not relenting in His love towards me. He pursued me when I was running from Him. He persisted when I rejected Him. He made me alive and enabled my faith and has put a new heart for holiness within me. Can I give it now to another? Should I not be more loyal to God than I was to sin? Should I not be greater in my exertions for Him than I was for myself?

Paul's exhortation for us to give ourselves to God is not unreasonable but our reasonable service. It is the least we can do for the God of love who has saved us.

Total obedience

You will notice that Paul uses the word 'members' twice in v19 indicating by these words our whole lives. I would like to paint for us the 7 different types of Christians that you get looking at the three main parts of who we are. We have minds, hearts and actions. I would like you to imagine a line up and somewhere in one of these 7 people you are described. Up first we have Mr Dead Head, he has a very large head, but a withered body and arms and legs. He is all head knowledge but no love, and no action. His theology would be all in order but he has no emotional life and no activity that flows from that knowledge. You will often find him in good books and theological discussion groups.

Next to him we have Mr Enlarged Heart, he has a little pin head on a massive chest, but tiny arms and legs. He is very emotional but does not think or do very much. He loves to be in the middle of an emotionally charged worship experience, or watching a tear jerking movie. Third in line is Mr Robot, he has a little chicken head on a wiry little body, but has the arms and legs of a titan. He does not think or feel much but is very busy in various causes.

Some may be suspect but he is a pragmatist.

Fourth we have Mr Paralysed, He has a well formed head and chest, but his arms and legs are worthless. He loves to sit under good preaching. And partake in good worship services and the Lord's Supper, but from Monday to Saturday he is passive for God taken up in only his selfish pursuits.

Fifth we have Mr Heartless. He has a well formed head, as well as great arms and legs, but he has a sunken chest. He has good theory and forces himself to do the good that he knows that he should, but he is heartless in all that he does having no joy and no compassion.

Sixthly, we have Mr Headless Chicken. This man has a giant heart, will gargantuan arms and legs but a little pin head. He rushes about responding to every emotionally pulling need with little discernment, just like a headless chicken. There is a lot of activity and flapping but no thought about the truth.

Seventhly, we have Mr Healthy Christian. He has a well formed head because his mind is filled with God's truth, and is set on things that are good clean and pure. He is wise,

discerning and cool headed and has perspective in a trial. He has a well formed chest because he is full of the joy of his salvation, love for God and neighbour, and is compassionate and merciful towards the needy. And he has well-formed arms and legs as his knowledge and emotion materialize in servanthood and good deeds.

Which one are you? In presenting yourself to God you will have various natural strengths depending on your personalities, but otherwise you will have to compensate for those things that are less natural.

Effective obedience

We want to look at Paul's final description of our obedience from the closing words of v19, 'righteousness leading to sanctification.' We started off this message talking about two different women. One was not a Christian, was not born again and did not have the gift of a new heart for holiness. We saw that all of her activity was an act of flesh giving birth to flesh with minor adjustments in behaviour but being unable to bear the fruit of the Spirit. However, we have on the other hand the Christian woman who has been, as Paul puts it, 'made obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which she was committed/delivered.' She having been set free from sin has pursued righteousness, and what is the result? The result Paul tells us in these closing words is sanctification.

Sanctification simply means 'set apart,' and in the NT more specifically it means being conformed to the image of Christ. Our righteousness is not what we offer to God so that we can buy our way into heaven. Only Christ's death on the cross can do that for us. No, we pursue righteousness in order that we might become perfectly human in the perfect image of Christ's humanity. The good news is this. Because we are grafted into the resurrection life of Christ on account of our being united to Him. Because we have died to the power of sin and have been made by God to be slaves of righteousness through the new impulse that He has put within us through regeneration. Because of these things, we now co-operate with the Spirit in putting sin to death and nurturing graces in our lives. And you know what the result is that God grows a garden in the barren soil of our lives, fruit fed from His own supply. Our clumsy, childish and faulty ways are blessed superabundantly and God grows the fruits of Christ's own character in us. They may be growing alongside some weeds; they may be growing very slowly; but Paul tells us here that they are growing. When our lives are finally tested by fire we will see that this fruit will not be burnt up but will endure. It will be the beginning of the work that God will perfect in us the moment that we die or are glorified with new bodies.

So in answer to the question is it possible for Christians to live like unbelievers the answer is no, fruit for righteousness is the inevitable work of grace.