

How does the gospel create a motivation for obedience?

Lesson 10

Paul tells us in the opening statement of letter to the Romans that “the gospel...is the power of God.” It is the way God’s power is continually released into our lives. Paul does not say that the Gospel brings God’s power, but that it is God’s power. The Gospel is the way God’s power comes to us in the world. It is God’s power in verbal form.

The ramifications of this are vast. It means that God’s power is not infused into us in any way detached from our understanding and appropriation of the gospel. It is only as we grasp the gospel more and more in all its truth that the power of God is released to bear fruit in and through us.

Therefore, the gospel is not simply the way for entering the kingdom and acquiring salvation. It is also the way to all spiritual growth, the dynamic of grateful joy behind all truly Christian obedience. These tremendous results only happen as we more and more profoundly believe and use the gospel.

In this lesson we explore the power of the gospel in producing genuine, heart-felt obedience born out of gratitude. The gospel brings to us a whole new motive for obedience. It releases us into a joyous experience of freedom. Come join the throng of happy, obedient disciples.

Studying

Read Galatians 5:1-15

Take a separate piece of paper and write out your answer to the questions:

1. Read verses 1-4 carefully. What’s at stake here? What does Paul mean by “do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery?” What was this yoke of slavery?
 2. Explain what Paul means in verse 6, “neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value”? Since rule keeping is not the way to God, what is (vs. 6)? Explain.
 3. What is Paul’s tone in verses 7-12? Think about some reasons for his attitude.
 4. In verses 13-14 Paul says (a) we are not under the law anymore, and (b) we are to fulfill it. What is the difference between (a) and (b)?
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Reading

Read and study the following article writing your annotations in the margin.

Obedience

A New Motivation

By Paul Thompson

There are two ways to bend or straighten a steel rod. You can put the rod in a vice, exert force and bend it. When a rod is forced, thousands of little fibers are broken and it becomes weaker. If you continue to bend it, the rod will snap and break in two. Another method is to apply heat until the rod glows white hot. Under heat the rod becomes pliable and you can shape it as you like and it will also become stronger than it ever was before.

Have you been “bent” in your Christian experience or have you been “melted”? Is the change the gospel brings external? Is it reformation (bending)? Or is the change the gospel brings internal. Is it transformation (melting)? I suspect most evangelical Christians would say it’s a balance of both. Certainly, the gospel brings a change from within, but that change needs to be shaped and molded by reformation. Is the Christian life then transformation plus reformation?

The Gospel truly preached raises a huge question in people’s minds. The Gospel of grace teaches that “there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus”; that your sins can never separate you from God; that your acceptance with God is absolutely, completely apart from anything you have done; that salvation is wholly and totally on Christ’s merits, not based on performance no matter how good. If that is true, how does the gospel create a holy life?

Human nature is always inclined towards finding an easy way out. If we teach that acceptance with God is based on faith alone, that it doesn’t have to do with commitment, performance or obedience, then human nature, being what it is, will take advantage of that and say, “if that’s Christianity I’ll take it, live as I like and get a free ride to heaven.”

How then does grace create any motivation for obedience? What is commonly taught is that we need both, a little “melting” from time to time and a lot of “bending.” You can preach grace, most certainly and especially to the unsaved, but once you become a Christian you must preach obedience. Otherwise you will have lawless Christians. Wise counsel, then, maintains a balance between transformation and reform. Is this the way to holiness? Let’s look at this teaching a little deeper, especially in the light of Galatians chapter 5.

Paul writes in verse one, “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” Note the gospel produces freedom, but a freedom that nonetheless can be lost. What is this freedom of which Paul speaks? It has both a negative and a positive aspect.

Christian freedom does not mean we are free to disobey the law or disregard it. The law, the moral law summarized in the Ten Commandments, is God’s perfect will for man. The law is the expression of the very character of God and since it is an expression of God’s character, it can never be abrogated. Grace does not annul the law. The law is very much God’s standard today as it has always been.

St. Paul may have been the apostle of grace, but he never downplayed obedience. Paul’s letters are laced with commands against lying, coveting, adultery and stealing as well as the more subtle

sins of the spirit like pride and selfishness. So freedom in Christ never means freedom to disobey God's commands. The Christian is never free to disobey.

Christian freedom means that the Christian is no longer "under the law"—he is released from the penalty of the law. The law has no power to accuse and punish him because it was fulfilled in Christ. Christian freedom, then, is an objective freedom from the penalty of sin and from having to obey the law to be saved. Paul's argument here is that when that truth dawns upon us, there comes a new subjective freedom, which consists of a whole new motivation and reason for doing everything. Most people would define freedom as being able to do what they most want to do. Paul is saying that in the gospel, and only in the gospel, pleasing and obeying God finally becomes what we most want to do. This is true freedom!

The gospel, then, is not a question of obedience versus license. It asks the deeper question of motive. Why do we obey? Why do we get up at 6 AM to have our quiet time? Why do we keep ourselves sexually pure? Why do we try to lead a holy life? Paul's whole argument in the book of Galatians is based on the question why? Why did Gentile Christians have to be circumcised? Was Paul against circumcision? Why, then, did he have Timothy circumcised?

Listen to what Paul says to Titus: "The gospel of salvation has appeared and it teaches us to say no to unrighteousness" (Titus 2:13). It's the gospel that teaches us to say no. What is getting you to say no to unrighteousness? Is it fear? Do you obey to get on the good side of God, to put him at debt? Before the gospel, we obeyed out of fear of punishment and rejection. As a result our relationship with God was impersonal doing grudgingly what was required to hold God's displeasure at bay. If we obey God to bribe Him or to get on His good side, then our relationship with Him will be conditional. When God doesn't come through for us, we cease to obey. The gospel changes all this. Now our obedience is highly personal. The old motivation moved us to obedience through fear of rejection. It said, "If I don't obey I will be punished." It was a motivation of avoidance, of keeping your distance from God for fear of being caught. The new motivation draws God near. In the gospel we grow by adoring Him for who He is and what He has done. In addition, our obedience is unconditional. Since Gospel promises us everything possible in Christ, we obey God not to get anything, but simply to please Him out of delight for who He is in Himself, to give him pleasure and joy. People who give up on God are in it for something besides God. To the degree the gospel energizes us; to that degree our obedience will be joyous and limitless regardless of circumstances.

It is important to see the effect of fear on our obedience. People who object to grace by saying, "If I believed I was totally accepted despite my failures, then I would have no incentive to live a good life," are being motivated by fear. And fear motivation is always selfish.

Take the example of a woman who is urging her husband to change his selfish, cruel ways. When finally she announces she is leaving him, he responds by offering to go for counseling. He listens to all her complaints and quickly makes all the changes she asks for. Over the next few months, however, he reverts back to his old behavior. What has happened? First, he was motivated primarily by fear. He did not want the pain and humiliation and complications of a divorce. So his change of conduct was for his own sake, not for hers. He did not truly change because he was sorry for what he had done, but only for the consequences to himself. As a result there was no real internal change, no real leaving behind the behavior. How could that change have been permanent? If he had filled his mind not with what he deserved but with what she deserved for all her love and faithfulness to him and if he had filled his mind not with the punishment she was going to give but with the joy of a rich, deeply loving marriage, then his motives toward her

would have changed. It's the same with the gospel. Until we understand the gospel and lose our selfish fear, we will only be capable of impersonal, fitful, conditional obedience to God.

According to Paul, the only biblical motivation is "faith expressing itself in love" (Gal. 5:6). This is such a richly pregnant statement that we need to stop and meditate on its meaning. All of us want to be loved for who we are in ourselves. We don't want to be used or manipulated. We want people to see a beauty in us just as we are and be attracted by that beauty. We despise people who befriend us for what we have or what we can do. We want our friends to consider us simply on the basis of our inward attractiveness.

If in your relationship to God you are not sure you are accepted unless you lead a good life, then everything you do for God, you actually are doing for yourself. Every time you help somebody or do a kind deed you do not really love that person in himself, you are doing it ultimately to win favor with God. You can do nothing for God out of any pure motive until you know you can do nothing for God. Once you understand that you can do nothing to win God's favor, that in the gospel God has given you all things, then you can begin to love God out of pure motives. You no longer have to worry about favor—you already have it.

Why did Jesus go to the cross? The author of Hebrews says it was for the joy set before Him. Jesus needed nothing. Certainly, he gets nothing out of us. Jesus went to the cross because he loved us for ourselves. He saw beauty in us and wanted to redeem it. When we begin to see that our hearts are melted and transformed. And in turn we begin to see in him a beauty. We are not obeying God to get something because we already have everything. We are obeying him for the joy of who He is in himself.

Since the obedience we offer God is not based on what we get from Him, it becomes deeply relational. I am obeying a loving Father, not a boss. It's obedience energized by love, not fear. Someone has said, and this is a powerful truth, that at the core of every heart there is an object of greatest beauty. All of us are driven by something we consider ultimately beautiful. We worship it and give our energies to it, whether it be money, fame or pleasure.

It's impossible to remove that object because a heart cannot live without it. You can replace this object with something of greater beauty but you cannot remove it. That is what happens when we come to understand the gospel. It's all about falling in love with Jesus Christ. When we see His beauty, all other attachments fall away of their own accord. His arms are the only the only arms—His beauty is the only beauty. It is "Faith working through love."

Reflecting

In your small group, discuss the result of your study of the scripture lesson, your reading, and interact with the following questions.

1. Get into the text of Galatians 5.1-15 by discussing together the questions asked above.
2. What spiritual yardstick does your church use to see who measures up? How does it compare to verse 6?
3. How have you seen Christian freedom abused? How are verses 13-14 an antidote to those who

think their freedom in Christ gives them license to do anything they wish?

4. Discuss the role of fear in Christian obedience? What happens when the gospel removes the motive of fear?

5. Consider the following paragraph taken from the article: “Someone has said, and this is a powerful truth, that at the core of every heart there is an object of greatest beauty. All of us are driven by something we consider ultimate beauty. We worship it and give it our allegiance be it money, or fame, or pleasure. It’s impossible to remove that object because a heart cannot live without it. You can replace this object with something of greater beauty but you cannot remove it.”

- What is that object in your life?
- How can the gospel begin to replace that object?
- Have you seen that happening as you’ve progressed through these studies?

Applying

Optional – to do this project will entail an extra week

A new affection project

Project No. 10

1. This week: meditate on the article referred to in the above article. Read it during the week at least three times or until its truth begins to penetrate your heart.

“The Expulsive Power of a New Affection,” from The Works of Thomas Chalmers, New York,: Robert Carter, 1830) vol. II.

The object of the gospel is both to pacify the sinner’s conscience and to purify the heart and it is of importance to observe that what mars one of these objects mars the other also. *The best way of casting out an impure affection is to admit a pure one.* Thus it is that the freer the Gospel, the more sanctifying the Gospel, the more it is received as a doctrine of grace, the more it will be felt as a doctrine leading to godliness.

On the tenure of “do this and you will live,” a spirit of fearfulness is sure to enter, and the jealousies of a legal bargain chase away all confidence of intimacy between God and man; and the creature striving to be square and even with his Creator is, in fact, pursuing all the while his own selfishness instead of God’s glory. With all the conformities which he labors to accomplish, the soul of obedience is not there, the mind is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed under such an economy can it ever be. It is only when acceptance is bestowed as a present, without money and price, that the security which man feels in God is placed beyond the reach of disturbance. Only then can he repose in Him as one friend reposes in another—the one party rejoicing over the other to do him good, in the impulse of a gratitude—by which is he is awakened to the charms of a new moral existence.

Salvation by grace, salvation by free grace, salvation not by works but according to the mercy of God is indispensable to godliness. Retain a single shred or fragment of legality with the Gospel and you take away the power of the Gospel to melt and conciliate. For this purpose, the freer it is, the better it is. That very peculiarity, which so many dread as the germ of Antinomianism (lawlessness), is in fact, the germ of a new spirit and a new inclination against it.

Along with the light of a free Gospel there enters the love of the Gospel, which in proportion as you impair its freeness, you are sure to chase it away. And never does the sinner find within himself so mighty a moral transformation, as when under the belief that he is saved by grace, he feels constrained thereby to offer his heart to a devoted thing and to deny ungodliness.

Why is this grateful love so important? It is seldom that any of our bad habits or flaws disappear by a mere process of natural extinction. At least, it is very seldom that this is done through the instrumentality of reasoning or by the force of mental determination. But what cannot be destroyed may be dispossessed—and one taste may be made to give way to another and to lose its power entirely as the reigning affection in the mind.

It is thus that the boy ceases at length to be a slave of his appetite, but it is because a more mature taste has brought it into subordination. The youth ceases to idolize sensual pleasure, but it is because the idol of wealth has ascended. Even the love of money can cease to have mastery over the heart because it is drawn into the whirl of [ideology and politics] and he is now lorded over by a love of power and moral superiority. But there is not one of these transformations in which the heart is left without an object. Its desire for one particular object is conquered—but its desire to have some object is unconquerable.

The only way to dispossess the heart of an old affection is by the expulsive power of a new one. It is only when admitted into the number of God's children, through faith in Jesus Christ that the spirit of adoption is poured out on us. It is then that the heart, brought under the mastery of one great and predominant affection, is delivered from the tyranny of its former desires. This is the only way that deliverance is possible.

Thus, it is not enough to hold out to the world the mirror of its own imperfections. It is not enough to come forth with a demonstration of the evanescent character of your enjoyments, to speak to the conscience of its follies. Rather, try every legitimate method of finding access to your hearts for the love of Him who is greater than the world."

2. What methods or ideas could you give for "finding access to your hearts for the love of Him who is greater than the world?" In other words, how can you develop a deeper, flaming, vigorous LOVE for God that will motivate your obedience?
3. What is "beauty" for you right now? Discuss the sentence: "The only way to dispossess the heart of an old affection is by the expulsive power of a new one." Develop ideas on how to make the love of Christ greater in our hearts.