

First Peter No. 7 “The Obedience of the Gospel”

1 Peter 1:22-25

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Text Comment

- v.22 Notice the emphasis. Not simply a *sincere* love for one another, but an *earnest* love from a pure heart. That word translated “earnest” is used of the Lord’s agonized prayer in Gethsemane. [Clowney, 74] Every Christian knows that he or she is duty bound to love his brothers and sisters in Christ. But every honest Christian also knows the difference between what we often call love and a *sincere, earnest love from a pure heart!* What would such love be? Well it wouldn’t be words only. It wouldn’t be love that didn’t require action, often sacrificial action on our part. It wouldn’t be love that was easily turned aside. It wouldn’t be love that demanded something in return. It would be love that was demonstrative, faithful, loyal, and practical. Finally, it would not be love that was easily defeated by jealousy or petty disagreement or differences in temperament, background, race, socio-economic background, or any such things that typically divide human beings from one another. *That* was and is the Lord’s love for us and, as he said, “As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”
- v.24 The *new birth* is familiar to us from John 3. Here, interestingly, the instrument of the new birth is the Word of God, not the Holy Spirit as in John 3. There is no conflict between the ideas, of course, for as the Lord made a point of saying in his discourse in the Upper Room the night of his betrayal, it would be the ministry of the Holy Spirit to impress the Word of God upon the hearts of people. But the simple point here is that a Christian’s transformation, his or her new life, comes to pass by believing the Word of God. The Word is life-giving when and because it is wielded by the Holy Spirit. Not everybody who reads the Bible believes the Bible.
- v.25 To illustrate the life-transforming power of the Word of God Peter quotes Isaiah 40 and the statement that the Word of God, unlike everything in this world, is eternal and changeless. It partakes of the character as God himself because it comes from God who is eternal, changeless, and truth itself.

Alexander Whyte writes somewhere [*Samuel Rutherford and Some of His Correspondents*, 21], “There is no book in all the world that demands such a combination of mental gifts and spiritual graces to understand it aright as the Bible.” Well that is so and we have an example of why it is so in our text this evening. If we read the passage through with little thought, it sounds familiar and simple enough. But if we stop to ponder, we are immediately faced with a problem. Peter speaks to these Christians in this way:

“Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another from a pure heart...”

That seems a strange thing for Peter to say, does it not? How are we to reconcile that statement with Paul's emphatic "not of works lest anyone should boast." We are justified, we are forgiven, we are saved *not by our works of obedience* to God's law, but by faith in Jesus Christ and the works he performed on our behalf. Would you say to someone who is contemplating the Christian gospel, "we purify our souls by obeying the truth of God"? I doubt it. You'd not want to confuse the person by suggesting that our salvation is in any sense our own doing. Yet here is Peter saying, "Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth..." Peter is saying that the Christians to whom he is writing his letter came into the state of purity by their obedience to the truth or to the Gospel. As he says at the end, "This is the Good News that was preached to you." That's the truth he is talking about. Is Peter here contradicting the Apostle Paul who teaches that we are justified by faith and not by our obedience?

Well we know there is no contradiction between Peter and Paul and that for several reasons. Perhaps the easiest way to demonstrate that there is no contradiction here is to remind you that *Paul himself*, the champion of justification by faith alone, *says the same thing*. In Romans 1:5 we read this from the great Apostle to the Gentiles:

"...we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the *obedience of faith* for the sake of [Christ's] name among the nations..."

The NIV offered a different translation of that phrase. It reads:

"...we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience *that comes from faith*."

No doubt the NIV translators were concerned with precisely this problem. Making obedience rather than faith the life-transforming response of the human heart would seem to contradict the message of justification by faith alone, which is the very message Paul teaches so clearly in Romans. So they translated "obedience *that comes from faith*." Faith produces obedience; obedience follows faith. That's right, of course, and such an order poses no problem for justification by faith, even justification by faith *alone*. That is simply saying that the believer, *after he is justified and because she is justified*, will also follow the Lord and obey his commandments. Or, as it is famously put, we are justified by faith *alone* but not by a faith that is alone. True faith *works*, it produces a new life of loyalty to Jesus Christ. That fits together neatly with the rest of Paul's argument and poses no problems. In that case Paul would not be saying at all that our justification, our forgiveness comes through our obedience.

But, the problem is *that is not what Paul wrote*. The NIV's "the obedience that comes from faith" is an interpretation not a translation and not a very likely interpretation either. Virtually no major commentator on Romans accepts that Paul meant what the NIV says he meant. What Paul wrote was that he had been called to summon the Gentiles to "the obedience of faith." John Murray writes of this statement in Rom. 1:5: "Faith is regarded as an act of obedience." And C.E.B. Cranfield in his great commentary says the same thing: "...the decision of faith is an act of obedience towards God."

That should not surprise us, actually, for Paul says the very same thing elsewhere. In 2 Thess. 1:8 we read that on the Great Day, the Lord “will take vengeance on those who do not know God and *do not obey* the gospel of our Lord Jesus.” Other biblical writers speak similarly. In Hebrews 5:9 we read, “Christ is the source of eternal salvation for all who *obey* him...” So, however we may puzzle over Peter’s manner of speaking here in 1 Peter 1:22, the fact is other champions of justification by faith in the NT speak the same way. Faith and obedience are not entirely different things. There is a sense in which faith itself is an act of obedience. John Rogers, a Puritan, put it bluntly: “faith is one of the commandments of the gospel” [cited in Packer, *Quest for Godliness*, 173].

We also know there is no contradiction between Peter’s statement here and so many others in the New Testament that teach that we are saved by God’s grace and not our own works because Peter artlessly goes on to speak of our being born again by the Word of God. That metaphor of the new birth, that brilliant way of speaking of the original spiritual transformation of a sinner’s life, of the new beginning that is essential to salvation, essential, as Jesus put it, if one is ever to see the kingdom of God, serves as a powerful reminder that salvation is beyond our means and requires the direct, personal, and supremely powerful intervention and creative work of God. No one can birth his own life! *That, of course, is precisely the burden of the NT teaching of justification by faith.* The doctrine means that we are put right with God not by what we do but by what Christ did for us. We receive the forgiveness of sins as a gift, not as our just deserts.

It is a fact, however, that the Bible does not betray our concern for theological tidiness. It often says things that we would not say or says them in ways we would not say them. Peter may have said to the assembly on Pentecost Sunday “Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins,” but we would leave the baptism part out! And, as I said earlier, we would probably never say, in giving our testimony, that we “purified our souls by obedience to the truth!” We have in our Reformed tradition a familiar way of thinking and speaking about the so-called *ordo salutis* – the steps of salvation – that, while based firmly on the teaching of the Bible, imposes a scheme or schedule or pattern that is more explicit than anything actually found in the Bible. You have such an *ordo*, for example, in Romans 8:29-30. There the order is God’s foreknowledge (or electing love), predestination to conformity to Christ, calling (think of the new birth as a feature of calling), justification, and glorification. But rarely, if ever elsewhere in the Bible, do we find an order that complete or that precise, and we never find an order that is as complete as the *ordo salutis* in Reformed theology. In fact, there are so many steps in the Reformed *ordo salutis* that theologians have argued now for centuries about precisely how to put them into their proper order. The Bible doesn’t much trade in technical theological terms and never sets out the way of salvation as schematically as it is done in Christian theology. It sometimes changes the order in which the steps of salvation are listed, sometimes uses different terms, sometimes concerns itself with only one step or leaves out some of the important steps, and, as here, sometimes collapses what seem to be somewhat separate things into one thing or, at least, doesn’t carefully explain how, for example, the new birth and the obedience of faith are related to one another or how the purification of our souls is related to our obedience.

It is perfectly in keeping with the Bible’s teaching for us to insist that we are made right with the

holy God, our Judge, not by our own works of obedience – which would, in any case, be forever impossible – but by the perfect obedience of Jesus Christ and by faith in him. By trusting ourselves to him, we can be, before God, judged to be as obedient as Christ was obedient for us. God will see us and judge us in our substitute, the Lord Jesus Christ, the only perfectly obedient man who ever lived. As Paul put it, “By the obedience of the one, shall the many be made righteous” (Rom. 5:19). We have cut our teeth on justification – by which we mean the forgiveness of our sins and our acceptance with God – a justification that is by faith and not by works of obedience. And that is certainly and unequivocally the teaching of the Bible.

But we are also familiar with the Bible’s emphasis on the obedience of the Christian life, that only those *who do* the will of God will inherit the kingdom of God, a teaching as emphatically given in the Bible as the teaching of justification by faith. And, truth be told, in our own experience the two things are not separate and distinct but a harmony. From time to time the biblical writers will distinguish them for the purpose of theological clarity, but most of the time they are a unity. Think of Paul’s remark in Galatians 5:6:

“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only *faith working through love.*”

In the midst of his mighty polemic against works righteousness and for justification by faith in Galatians we might have expected Paul simply to say, “but only faith,” but he says, “but only *faith working through love.*” But it is faith’s nature to work and true Christian works, the works of love, must be the works of real faith in Jesus Christ.

And think of yourself and your own inner life. If you are anything like I am, you don’t think to yourself, day by day and hour by hour, “Now I must believe in Jesus and after that I must obey him” or “this is an act of faith but this other thing is a piece of obedience.” Faith and obedience may be distinguished perhaps, though I suspect that usually the mixture is too profound, but in ordinary life we are trusting the Lord, believing his Word, counting on his promises *and* seeking to serve him and do his will at the same time with nary a thought as to what is faith and what is obedience. And, in fact, the more we think about our faith the more obvious it is that it is a *working faith* and the more we think about our obedience the more obvious it is that it is a *believing obedience*.

But, however we understand this, it is obviously a teaching of the Bible that we are *commanded* to believe in Christ and be saved. *Faith is an act of obedience.* “Look unto me, all the ends of earth, and be saved, for I am God and there is no other.” “Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins.” These are not simply invitations, they are imperatives, a summons to be answered. And, as a result, *unbelief is not merely a misfortune, it is an act of disobedience.* As John Duncan, the famous Rabbi Duncan, put it, “The Gospel does not say, ‘There is a Saviour, if you wish to be saved;’ but, ‘Sir, you have no right to go to hell – you can’t go there without trampling on the Son of God.’” [cited in I. Murray, *Spurgeon v. Hyper-Calvinism*, 97]

And that is what we find to be the case in actual fact, the more unbelievers we talk to and the more unbelievers we observe. Unbelief *is* an act of disobedience! People first encounter Christianity in

this way: as a demand that they humble themselves before God, that they surrender their lives, place their destinies in Christ's hands, and that they confess Jesus Christ as Lord. But they do not want to do this! They won't do this. They rarely put it in those terms, of course – they don't believe the Christian faith is true or they have problems with some aspects of its teachings, etc. – but, the fact is, *they do not want to do what Christ summons them to do* in the Gospel.

The late Richard Rorty, the guru of the postmodernists, was perhaps being flip in saying that he rejected Christianity because it demanded a humility “of which I am apparently incapable.” But, no doubt unintentionally, he described the situation precisely. [Cited in P. Johnson, *Reason in the Balance*, 119] You don't have to read very far in his writings to accept the truth of that self-revelation. And, in any case, it is what the Bible also says. Why do people not believe in Jesus Christ? Is it really because the evidence is insufficient? Hardly. People do not believe because they love themselves, because they do not wish to submit themselves to God or his law, because they love the sins God requires them to forsake, and because they cannot bear to accept the Scripture's judgment that they are hopeless sinners, deeply evil, deserving of God's wrath and that they cannot save themselves. Their unbelief is their “No, I will not!” to God.

Figures like Ernest Hemingway and Bertrand Russell, who made no bones about the fact that Christian ethics, particularly Christian sexual ethics disgusted them, who proudly said that they had no intention of living the chaste lives Christianity required of them, I say people like that speak for many people who would never be so bold as to say aloud what Hemingway and Russell said. Multitudes are not Christians – or perhaps are merely nominal Christians – precisely because they do not want to live by the Christian code. Like the rich young ruler who came to Jesus, they may want salvation – in the sense that they would like to know that things will go well for them when they die – they may even be attracted in some ways to the Christian life, *but they are unwilling to give up either their pleasures or their view of themselves in order to obtain it.*

And because they think of the gospel in precisely this way – a summons they do not wish to obey – they never discover what all true Christians discover: that there is more pleasure and satisfaction and fulfillment in the surrender of one's will to God, in obedience to God's commands, than any unbeliever *ever finds* in the pleasures and satisfactions of this world, whether they be the pleasures of mind or body.

Take his easy yoke and wear it;
Love will make obedience sweet.

And that is true already in this world and this life. How much more in the world to come where one who chooses to disobey God finds what the true issue of that disobedience finally is. As Bunyan so solemnly reminds us, one hour in hell will burn out all the pleasure that the disobedient ever got from their sin in this world.

So, no wonder that “obedience” is an important word for Peter. He has already used it twice before we get to 1:22: once in v.2, where he says that it is the end that God has in view – that we may be obedient to Jesus Christ – and again in v. 14, where he describes faithful Christians as obedient children of their Father in heaven. He then classifies unbelievers as in 3:1 as those who “do not

obey the word.” The same idea appears again in 4:17 where unbelievers are defined, as Paul defined them in 2 Thess. 1:8, as those who “do not obey the gospel of God.” Peter wants us to see the Christian life, from beginning to end, as a matter of obedience to God and to his Word, to Christ and to his Gospel. He wants us to see the difference between Christians and non-Christians in terms of this obedience or disobedience.

This past week I read one of the finest biographies I have read in recent years, the most inspiring and instructive perhaps since Eric Metaxas’ *Bonhoeffer*. The book was sent to me by a friend. I hadn’t known of its existence. But once I began to read I devoured the book. In fact, the other day I finished the book while sitting at my desk. The tears were running down my cheeks and I was hoping desperately that no one would choose that moment to walk into my office. The title is *For the Glory: Eric Liddell’s Journey from Olympic Champion to Modern Martyr*. It is written by the award-winning British sports journalist, Duncan Hamilton. Now those of us who have seen the movie *Chariots of Fire* know the story of Eric Liddell, the Scot who won gold in the 400 meters at the Paris Olympics in 1924. He might perhaps have won the 100 meter gold as well, but withdrew from that race, months before the Olympics, when he learned that its qualifying heats were to be run on a Sunday. He was subjected to mountains of abuse for that principled stand and was given little chance in the 400, not least because he had hardly ever run that race beforehand and was not his specialty. He had always concentrated on the short sprints. He not only won the race, he broke the world record in doing so.

The fact that a major biography of Eric Liddell should have been written now surprised me, all the more that it should have been written by a sports journalist. *Chariots of Fire* was a sensation when it was released – won the Oscar for the Best Picture of the year – but that was in 1981, closing in on 40 years ago! I would have thought that Eric Liddell had been largely forgotten and, even if not, what more was there to say about the man? It was all the more surprising because, so far as I can tell, Duncan Hamilton is not a Christian. He certainly did not write the book explicitly for a Christian audience. He is certainly impressed by Liddell’s Christian faith and what it made of his life and he does a creditable job of explaining his Christian *life* – though he concentrates almost exclusively on Liddell’s behavior; there is almost nothing in the book about its foundation, the gospel itself – Christ on the cross, the resurrection, the forgiveness of sins, the promise of eternal life – in any case, nowhere in the book does the reader get the impression that Hamilton shares the explicitly evangelical or biblical convictions that motivated Eric Liddell. So why a major biography of Liddell now?

Of course, you expect a sports journalist to concentrate on Liddell’s racing career and Hamilton tells that story with a wealth of fascinating detail. In fact, he does as good a job of making the account of one of Liddell’s short sprints or his 400 meter race as riveting as Daniel Brown made riveting the University of Washington’s crew races in the 1930s in his book *Boys in the Boat*. Indeed, there is much more to Liddell’s athletic career than one gets in the movie. But, to my surprise, one is only slightly more than a quarter of the way through the book when Liddell was crowned Olympic champion. His triumphs as an athlete made Liddell a celebrity, but Hamilton makes no bones of the fact that it was Liddell’s life – and especially his life thereafter – that made him a hero and deserving of another account of his life, the first full biography of Eric Liddell ever written.

The problem with the movie and with the shorter Christian biographies of Eric Liddell, one of which was written after the movie became an international success, is that one is left thinking that their description of Liddell's character is simply too good to be true. Hamilton addresses that problem at the outset, precisely because, as the author he knows what is coming, what he will write about the man, and he knows people are going to think that he has created a porcelain doll out of the man Eric Liddell.

“Skeptical questions are always going to be asked when someone is portrayed without apparent faults and also as the possessor of standards that appear so idealized and far-fetched to the rest of us. Liddell can sound too virtuous and too honorable to be true, as if those who knew him were either misremembering or consciously mythologizing. Not so. The evidence is too overwhelming to be dismissed as easily as that. Amid the myriad moral dilemmas in Weih sien [the internment camp where Liddell and several thousand others were held in captivity by the Japanese during the Second World War and where Liddell died of a brain tumor], Liddell's forbearance was remarkable. No one could ever recall a single act of envy, pettiness, hubris, or self-aggrandizement from him. He bad-mouthed nobody. He didn't bicker. He lived daily by the most unselfish credo, which was to help others practically and emotionally.

Liddell became the camp's conscience without ever being pious, sanctimonious, or judgmental. ... One internee spoke about Liddell as though Chaucer's selfless and chivalrous 'Verray Parfit Gentil Knight' had been made flesh. 'You knew you were in the presence of someone so thoroughly pure,' he explained. A second put it better, saying simply, as if Liddell were only a step or two from beatification, 'It is rare indeed when a person has the good fortune to meet a saint. He came as close to it as anyone I have ever known.'" [8-9]

He was a fierce competitor on the track, but was, at the same time, a cheerleader for his competitors, genuinely rejoicing in their successes. He achieved great fame, but it never turned his head. Once in China as a missionary – a decision to go to China when he was a world celebrity and had the world and all manner of financial prospects at his feet was itself news – his devotion to the peasants to whom he ministered became a legend. That was all the more the case because it meant painful sacrifice for him; not only the poor food and the cold and the danger from both brigands and the Japanese but supremely the long absences from his young wife for whom he was head over heels in love, and then his young daughters, remaining behind for safety's sake in a coastal town built by Europeans and Americans for Europeans and Americans. And then, for the gospel's sake and for honor's sake he remained in China as the Japanese tightened their grip on the coastal areas, after sending his pregnant wife and two young daughters home to Canada. Unbeknownst to them all, though fearing the possibility, they were never to see one another again.

Then came internment in mid-March 1943 with nearly 2,000 other displaced foreigners in what had been an “immaculately spick-and-span” American Presbyterian mission but was now a looted, vandalized, wrecked and squalid ruin, without working plumbing or heating. Some 1,800 internees were housed in a space 150 yards long and 200 yards wide. [252-255] Christians and non-

Christians, missionaries, bankers, household servants, prostitutes, drug addicts, architects, accountants, tailors, cooks, and doctors. Liddell was one of almost 200 missionaries: Roman Catholics, Trappist monks and nuns, members of the Salvation Army, and Protestants like Liddell, a Scottish Congregationalist. [258-259]

And among them all this one man stood out; *to everyone he stood out*. Langdon Gilkey, later a well-known theologian, who would himself write a memoir of his time in the camp, described Liddell as “surely the most modest man who ever breathed,” which he went on to say was “one of the secrets of his amazing life.” [257] He was unfailingly kind; constantly cheerful, seeking to help others endure their confinement cheerfully as well. He was looked on to mediate every dispute, and there were many disputes. He preached sermons that everyone found encouraging, “a dose of goodness,” one intern recalled. He always did more than his share of work. He had an eye out for the lost ones in the camp, those who were shunned or neglected. He put up a row of shelves for one of the prostitutes who said afterward that he was the only man there who came into her room without demanding favors. [263] People remember his helping them deal with their homesickness, their loneliness, their depression, their resentments of others and their fear.

What is more, he made it a point to be as kind to the Japanese guards as he was to everyone else. The Sermon on the Mount was Liddell’s manifesto and he sought to obey its every provision, including the Lord’s instruction to love our enemies, to do good to those who spitefully use us, and to turn the other cheek and go the extra mile. He rose early to pray and received from that time with the Lord the indefatigable spirit that saw him through each day. One internee recalled, “I once saw him unloading supplies from the back of cart; I said to myself: Why is he doing it? That’s someone else’s responsibility. Later I realized that he did *everything*. It’s said he was worth ten men. I can believe it.” [265] Even when he was dying – though no one knew it at the time – he took little care for himself but spent what little energy he had to help others. *That was love, sincere and earnest if ever there were such love!*

And I could go on and on. Reading Hamilton’s account of Liddell’s life both rebuked and inspired me. His was the life I know only too well I should have lived but have not. But that there is such a life and that it was born in Christian faith is a tremendous comfort and inspiration to me. Here was a man who purified his soul by obedience to the truth and whose life, therefore, was marked by a sincere brotherly love, an earnest love from a pure heart. Love that everyone noticed; *had to notice!*

How we explain precisely how faith and obedience are related to one another in a Christian’s life is not nearly so important as that our faith in Christ is working through love, sincerely and earnestly. Why did Duncan Hamilton write a full-scale biography of Eric Liddell after all these years and so many years after the movie when most people have forgotten *Chariots of Fire*? I’ve talked to young people who have never seen it. One has only to read the book to know the answer to that question. Liddell’s life amazed him, inspired him, and moved him. One hopes that he knows or soon will where such a life, and only where such a life comes from.

Do you remember the famous words of Simone Weil, the French Marxist and later Christian convert?

“Nothing is so beautiful, nothing is so continually fresh and surprising, so full of sweet and perpetual ecstasy, as the good; no desert is so dreary, monotonous and boring as evil. But with fantasy it's the other way round. Fictional good is boring and flat, while fictional evil is varied, intriguing, attractive and full of charm.”

It is a life of love, sincere and earnest love, that is the proof of her point. Liddell's was a beautiful life, an intriguing life, a charming life, a life that draws human attention to it even after all these years because his devotion to Christ made him a lover of others. Obedience to the gospel and to the Word of God doesn't lead you to dreariness. It leads you – it inevitably leads you – to all that you truly desire as a human being: to the fulfillment of life and to genuine joy. Liddell found for himself and showed to others the joy of love. He is remembered today, not for his Olympic gold, but for his love. And you and I will be too, if only we love as we ought to love, as we have been loved ourselves. Our savior said that we ought to love others as he loved us.