

## MAN OF OBEDIENCE

Our society talks a lot about leadership. We make lists of the qualities and abilities that define leadership, hoping, I suppose, that knowledge of leadership will produce leaders. We send kids to school for sixteen to twenty years, where sometimes the last vestige of creative instinct has been muted or eradicated, then we put them into a living situation and say, “Now lead!” And they say, “Yes, of course. Where would you like us to lead you?”

But what leads the leaders? Is there some force, some power, some intelligence beyond us – higher than we are? Our culture has never been able to agree about this. And even if there is, we continue to make it very obvious that a significant percentage of us are unwilling to follow any power higher than ourselves. So as a society and as a nation, we are stuck trying to believe that humans are wise enough and well-meaning enough to lead themselves. If enough of us can agree on something, it will turn out to be right, good, and true. A great man once called it “the blind leading the blind.” (Matthew 15:14)

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Jesus stood out; Jesus was unique; Jesus has affected more people than any other person who has ever lived, and in all the ways we have been mentioning in recent weeks. Despite His peculiar style and strange direction, it is still obviously true that Jesus was one of the greatest leaders of all time. This is not a religious statement; it is just a historical fact. Only, His story reveals that Jesus was a great leader precisely because He was the world’s best follower. He was a man of obedience. He had chosen, and He did know the One He had chosen to obey. Therein lies the secret of His “leadership.”

We have searched through the centuries for one word, one concept that would summarize and epitomize the life and significance of Jesus of Nazareth. Most often we have come up with the word “love.” It is a great word, and it needs to be used when we come to the heart of what Jesus proclaimed about God. But we use and overuse the word with such fuzziness and such imprecision that it does not really help us to understand Jesus. Far more than being a man of love, Jesus was a man of obedience.

By the way, if it does not go over our heads: Being a man of love would make being *loving* the top priority, which would leave *us* in charge of defining and expressing what love really is. That is what has happened to the liberal church in our time. And Satan is gleeful about it.

Among the myriad illustrations from Jesus' own life, I have chosen only one. The disciples had come a long way. They still had hardly a glimmer of where Jesus was really leading them, but they *had* come a long way. Peter's confession makes it plain that they had been wrestling with who Jesus really was. Some of us wrestle with this same question, and hopefully many of us are coming at least as far in our confessions as Peter did in his.

Jesus is joyful. He had waited for His followers to come to their own conclusions. And now that it was out in the open between them, a whole new dimension to their relationship could open up. And so, at this point, Jesus begins trying to share with them the true significance of what they have concluded. "*He must go to Jerusalem and suffer ... and be killed ....*"

But that was not at all *their* idea of the significance of their affirmation. No indeed! They were not inspired or enthralled by the thought of following any "suffering servant" kind of Christ – one who would be wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities. They had discerned some of the truth about who Jesus was: the Messiah of God. But the full implication of this role in our kind of world was still many dimensions beyond them.

They supposed that being followers and disciples of Jesus meant pretty much what most of us start out hoping it will mean: They would become famous and successful. They had chosen the fabled leader whom none could defeat, and now they were prepared to ride His coattails into fame and glory – and immediately, if not sooner.

This hope on their part is confirmed by Peter's response: "*God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you.*" Does it escape our notice that Peter at this moment is the "man of love" here? Peter does love Jesus, and he does not want anything bad to happen to Him. Peter loves Jesus in the way most humans love, and it was a serious shock to Peter to think of Jesus going on to suffer and die. It is not merely that their own dreams of fame and prominence have come crashing down; they cannot absorb or accept the image of a future for Jesus so bleak and terrible.

Poor Peter, and poor you, and poor me. The boat is pulling away from the dock – only, it is not going to a golden castle on the horizon. It is going over a terrible waterfall, and we cannot keep one foot in the boat and one foot on dry land much longer.

After this incident, Jesus would try to bring the subject up again several times. The disciples simply could not face it with Him. Jesus tried to prepare them, but they could not listen. Peter finally got the message when he heard the cock crowing – on the darkest night in history. Yet by then, it was very nearly too late. By everything humans know or think, it *was* too late.

But this incident is supposed to illustrate for us the obedience of Jesus. And it does! Clear as crystal. Jesus *leads* because He knows how to follow. Jesus withstands temptations because He stands for another. Jesus see clearly by forsaking His own wisdom for the wisdom of another. Jesus is strong because He belongs to another.

*“Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men.”* Devastating. Not a smile anywhere around. And this is not what Jesus says to an enemy. He says it to one of His very best friends. I am stunned – because Peter has said what I want to say too.

Peter, the rock, gets shattered. Only a moment before, Jesus had complimented and praised Peter as highly as anyone in the physical story ever gets praised. I suppose Peter had decided – like most of us do from time to time – that he had a license to walk in and take over: we will control everything and everyone; we will not let anything bad happen. But Peter walks face-first into God’s sledgehammer. Pride goeth before getting our ears pinned back – hard. Peter thought he was capable of evaluating and understanding the situation by his own best light. Therefore he should be able to call the shots on his own authority.

And by every possible human perspective, Peter was right. So just as Peter is symbol of the rock on which the church is founded (the awareness and confession of Jesus’ real identity), he is also the symbol of the church at its worst: the endless times and ways that the church turns away from its Master to take matters into its own hands and live off of human wisdom and authority.

But why did Jesus get so angry? I suspect it was because Peter really did tempt Him. Peter connected with Jesus’ greatest potential for weakness (and yes, with our own). Peter therefore walked into

Jesus' greatest defenses – and anger is usually the tip-off. This is precisely where the Devil had been hurting Jesus the most since the days of the wilderness temptations. Jesus must have felt it like a sword thrust.

Let's apply our own human wisdom and authority. Peter was obviously right. Jesus could accomplish far more by staying alive than by uselessly throwing His life away in some grand gesture that would prove futile and soon be forgotten. Moreover, Peter's remark was full of caring and sympathy and love. It was the remark of a dear friend for a friend, and its concern was clearly for the best interests of his friend. But Jesus nearly bit his head off: "Hail, Columbia" with both barrels blazing. Jesus had no intention of living for His own best interests, as defined by us or discerned by human wisdom.

Jesus was concerned with obeying Almighty God, and when Peter tried to walk in front of that obedience, the sparks flew. Jesus had enough problems with His *own* inner temptations, without His closest friends pecking away from the outside.

I think that reveals a minor detail of immense importance. Jesus did not *enjoy* being tempted. Only those who secretly hope they will one day fall enjoy being tempted. The reaction of Jesus is the reaction of a man who knows His weakness – and that, in turn, is the mark of a man who truly intends to remain faithful. Jesus was heading toward Jerusalem and death. He did not want to go. But He went because He was a man of obedience. Closer scrutiny reveals that most everything He ever did bears that same mark of the higher leader behind the leader.

Jesus said, "Follow me." We can live in the Kingdom by following Jesus, who followed God. That is a very low-grade summary of about eighty percent of Christian theology, and it reveals the particular prejudice of us Christians. It is a very irritating prejudice to many people who believe that they can follow God without any need to follow Jesus. "Why not just follow God?" they ask.

With sincere and due respect for anyone who sincerely attempts to follow God, Christians would simply add that their own attempts to follow God without following Jesus have turned out mostly to be futile mind games – mental theories. To be a Christian is to confess that by myself, I know so little of God that I cannot fully *believe in* him – never mind *follow* him. God revealing himself in Jesus of Nazareth is not just a parlor game; it is an essential link between us and forgiveness, grace, mercy, and the love of God. And even with the illustration and

example of Jesus' life before us, it is still not nearly enough. Much more is needed. But we have not yet come to that part of the story; we are only four weeks into Lent. Holy Week is still before us.

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While we are on the subject of obedience, we might mention two enormous pitfalls that are always present for those who seek to become obedient.

I. Obedience can turn quickly into a grudging legalism. There is a type of obedience, motivated by fear and pride, that is not at all what we see in Jesus. The difference between an obedience chosen in trust and an obedience motivated by fear of consequences is huge indeed. There is no way we can conclude that Jesus was obedient because He was afraid of the consequences. His obedience led Him *into* consequences as severe as anything we can imagine.

The man who wrote first and with great clarity about these two ways of obedience was a Pharisee-turned-Christian: the Apostle Paul. He called it the difference between "Law" and "Gospel." He had significant experience with both ways. He ended up claiming that the first kind of obedience was "rubbish" – "garbage" – in comparison to knowing and following Jesus.

In any case, despite the temptations, the doubts, the forbidding future, and the weaknesses He felt in His human nature, Jesus' obedience was marked by a joyful abandon. Despite all the negatives that life could throw at Him, when the score sheet was added up Jesus earnestly *wanted* to obey God – and far more than He wanted anything or everything else on earth. His obedience was freely chosen.

That makes all the difference. His was "obedience in trust" (Brunner's phrase): obedience in trust of the God of love. He could conceive of no higher value than relationship with God. Therefore His choice was authentic through and through. Therefore His temptations, however severe, could be managed. The higher the value, the easier to be true to it – if we see it clearly. The highest value knows no rival. (*"You shall have no other gods before me."*)

II. Some of you can catch up on your sleep now, but a few of you need to get really wide awake.

The beauty of the Kingdom is love between God and humans. But there is no God apart from obedience. Obedience is the track on which love runs – the factor that makes it operational. That is the mystery which has robbed Christendom of its power. We have church members all across the land who are not really serious when it comes to obedience.

Jesus is not called the Christ because He was so loving. *Because He was obedient to God*, the full love of God was revealed in Him and flowed through Him. *Therefore* He is called the Christ.

We cannot follow Jesus by going out and being loving. Life is too complicated and love is too vast to be owned or understood by us. Have we no humility left? Only God can steer the course of love when it is out of the realm of theory and into the realm of real life. The magnificence of Jesus' life was not that He was big enough to love, but that He was big enough to realize that His *only hope* was to obey God. The strangest, the best, and the most offensive part of the Gospel is just here: that a person no longer tries to decide for himself or herself what is good or right or reasonable or advantageous. Life is tuned and focused on obedience to God. It is only because God is God that obedience will end up an expression of love.

Let me try again: Jesus is not the source of love. *God* is the source of love. It is Jesus' obedience that makes it possible for God's love to be revealed in Him.

The church in our time is acting and talking like we are the source of love and are able to be loving if only we decide to be. "Oh, I'm going to be so loving now that everybody will be amazed, and everybody around me will benefit so greatly."

We even quote the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians with no understanding. "*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.*" But we still think that this is a call for *us* to be more loving? That we have the capacity and the authority to be more loving if we just want to be – if we just make up our minds to be?

Paul is not talking about *our* love. He is talking about *God's* love. If we speak in the tongues of men or of angels and have not yet become obedient enough for God's love to flow in and through us, it will avail us nothing. I am feeling and participating in God's love for my friends, my wife, my enemies ... or I am a noisy gong. On my own hook, by my own best light, I am merely messing around in their lives and mine – trying to control them, trying to correct them, trying to make them be better or live better. Everywhere around us, people mistake that for the Christian Way.

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Of all the things that impress me about Jesus, I suppose what impresses me most is His obedience to God: unswerving; specific; if it pleases Him; if it does not please Him. It is a staggering thing to notice, to become aware of, to watch.

Prayer and brilliance and strategy and conflict with earthly authorities play throughout what we know of Jesus' life. But in and through it all – clear through Maundy Thursday and into Good Friday – Jesus is the quintessential illustration of obedience to God. And we do have to add that last piece: It is obedience *to God*. There is zero obedience to anyone or anything else.

My only hope for that sort of obedience, as far as I know, is if I become obedient to His Holy Spirit ... which He lived and died to make available to me – and to you.