
Obedience and Freedom

Hope for the *Try-Harder* Christian

Mark S. Witte

As Christians we are called to avoid sin and obey God's commandments. The Bible tells us God is pleased when we do good: "And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased" (Hebrews 13:16). But what about when we fail? Do you feel that God is shaking his head in disapproval at your behavior? Do you make commitments to be self-disciplined and obedient to God, only to find that you can't measure up — even to your own standards? Do you try harder? Have you given up? Do you ask yourself, "Where is the joy and peace I am supposed to experience?"

Several years ago I went through a period in my Christian life when I wrestled with these feelings. For so long I had tried to please God and do the right things; yet I found myself frustrated and slipping into despair. Some who experience this frustration will lower God's standard to accommodate their behavior. Others may think, "I tried Christianity and it didn't work!", totally abandoning their faith. For me, I could not deny the existence of God, but I was not finding the fulfillment I expected from the God I thought I knew. God's law had remained intact, but I was abandoning my effort and my hope. C.S. Lewis said, "Christian religion is, in the long run, a thing of unspeakable comfort. But it does not begin in comfort; it begins in dismay... and it is no use at all trying to go on to that comfort without first going through that dismay."¹ How was I to break free from this failure and dismay? What would it take to move on to that comfort?

Any Christian who wants to grow will wrestle with choices of either pleasing God or giving in to some selfish interest. Proverbs 24:16a says, "For a righteous man falls seven times, and rises again". It does not say that the righteous do not fall. Rather, regardless of how often they fall, they do not become discouraged to the point of giving up. While we can learn perseverance through the cycle of falling and rising again, we could also be inclined to abandon the cycle in a state of dismay. We may therefore ask, "What are some of the factors that contribute to whether we grow, or give up?" I believe a

significant component is related to our expectations and motives.

I will begin by looking at some factors that can influence and shape our motives. From these influences I will consider how we can adopt a motive for obedience that could become debilitating and eventually lead to despair. And finally, I will suggest an appropriate motive that brings honor to God and freedom to the believer. Between the lines of the following text are reflections of my own dismay and the comfort I am discovering on the other side. If you are feeling spiritually frustrated or hopeless, my prayer is that these words will give you encouragement and point you toward that "unspeakable comfort".

Factors that Shape Our Motives

What are some of the factors that can shape our motives for good behavior? Because we are unique individuals with different background experiences and temperaments, we are likely to adopt a variety of motivations. As we follow God, our ideal motivation should be love (see 1 John 4:7-21). Two characteristics of love are *desire* and *commitment*. Our *desire* can move us with such a consuming passion that our selfish interests are passively lost and forgotten. Through *commitment* we can choose to actively lay aside our selfish interests, regardless of our desire. Love is, of course, not the only motivation that will produce obedience; there are other motivations. With *gratitude*, our good behavior is a response to the goodness we have received. When *seeking reward*, we make greater sacrifices in order to attain a greater blessing. In *competition*, we compare ourselves with others and seek to do better than them. In *fear*, we do what is right to avoid being punished. In *guilt*, we try to compensate for the wrong we have done. In *shame*, we avoid situations that could expose us to ridicule. Each of these motivations can produce good behavior on the surface, but perfect compliance is no guarantee that all is well. Obviously, some motives are appropriate while

others would indicate there is a problem.

We can also be influenced by scriptures that speak of our obedience to God. If we are shortsighted in our understanding of these scriptures, they can also contribute to a troubled motivation. Let's look at two themes in scripture that can appear to be incongruent. Later I will describe how I believe they are in harmony. As you read, consider the relationship between you and what is written.

First, God calls us to follow Him in obedience:

“Keep all my decrees and all my laws and follow them. I am the LORD” (Leviticus 19:37).

“But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy'” (1 Peter 1:15,16).

In response to God's call, here are some things we should do:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30).

“You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body” (1 Corinthians 6:19b, 20).

Second, God also tells us we are called to freedom:

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1).

“Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32).

As a result of our freedom, here are some things we should experience:

“This is the love of God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3)

“For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:30)

Do any of these messages cause you to feel alienated from the Christian experience you long for? Do God's commands to obey and the freedom he says we have in Christ leave you feeling like a frustrated child who can't get a round peg to fit into a square hole? A desire for greater obedience or freedom is appropriate, but if feeling defeated describes your Christian experience, it could indicate a misplaced hope or expectation.

Just as we grow in our knowledge of God, we also grow in our obedience to Him. It is a normal process of growing toward maturity. This process can be experienced either as rewarding or as a yoke of slavery. As long as our obedience is governed mostly by compulsion, it is unlikely that we will feel, “...His commandments are not burdensome”. But since we are not our own; we were bought at a price, we must also find a place for our feelings

of being in debt, under obligation, and called to a life of self-discipline and obedience.

There is a sense in which we are free from requirements, debt, and obligation. There is nothing to be paid back; Christ has done it all. In another sense, we can demonstrate through self-discipline and obedience our love for Christ and gratitude for what He has done. Understanding this distinction can be helpful when it comes to experiencing a liberated obedience. We must remember that when we trust in Christ for salvation, we are also confessing that we have nothing to offer that makes us right before God. We are clothed in the righteousness of Christ, not our own righteousness. How we view our behavior after we come to Christ is where things can get confusing. Let's consider how we could become entangled with a degraded motivation for “getting right with God”.

The Source of a *Try-Harder* Motivation

In the Bible, God has given us not only doctrinal and historical truth, but propositional truth — truth that solicits a response from us. For example, “...I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless” (Genesis 17:1b). God has declared to us who He is and has told us what we should do. When we obey, it means that we align our behavior with God's commands. When we identify ourselves as followers of Jesus Christ, we should, at some level, *want* to obey His commandments. Along with our desire we may also feel *constrained*, recognizing that we will be held accountable for those times when we choose not to obey. Sometimes this feeling of constraint can become so predominant that our desire to obey is displaced. If we have an unmet need for acceptance we may focus our energy on good behaviors in order to feel deserving of love. When we fail to measure up, we mistakenly equate being inadequate with being unlovable and to compensate for it we try harder. This condition could move one person to overachievement and someone else to withdrawal. But a common theme may be difficulty in receiving unconditional love. When there is a breakdown in our ability to give or receive love, obedience can become an attempt to medicate our feelings of not being good enough.

The condition I have just described is a symptom of shame. Shame can have a powerful influence on how we relate both to people and to God. In order to clarify what I mean by shame, consider how it could be differentiated from guilt. We feel guilt for what we do; we feel shame for who we are. Guilt says, “What I did was bad”. Shame says, “I am bad”. Guilt says, “I am in debt for the wrong I've done and I need to be forgiven”. Shame says, “even if I am forgiven, I cannot be accepted”. The remedy for

guilt is to take responsibility for the wrong I've done and through repentance receive the forgiveness God offers through Christ. The remedy for shame requires a process of growth and healing found in experiencing the love of God. As God draws us into his light, our failures are exposed, yet without punishment or rejection. Christ has taken the punishment for us and "...there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

Sometimes the internal dynamic that predisposes a person to feel shame can be reinforced within a religious environment. In a church setting, a speaker may carelessly or intentionally resort to shame-producing statements in order to convict and prod a congregation into obedience. Using shame, guilt, or fear in this way may be expedient, but its results can be superficial and short-lived. To repeatedly use shame as a motivator to produce obedience can be abusive. It could even be heretical if the implied message is that your behavior generates your acceptance before God rather than, or in addition to, the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We may rightfully set up a standard or goal for what we want to achieve, but if the intent is to make a person feel shamed for not measuring up to that standard, then we are not being true to the gospel.

This is not to say that feeling shame is always bad. Shame or fear may be a legitimate motivator induced by the Holy Spirit to bring an individual to repentance. While this may be appropriate in our spiritual adolescence, I believe we can aspire to more mature motivations. A religious environment characterized by shaming messages fails to encourage moving beyond spiritual adolescence. Also, when shaming messages are used indiscriminately on a congregation, those who are already burdened with shame will likely feel the greatest impact, yet with negative results. For those who already feel condemned, telling them they are not doing enough can erode their motivation rather than building it up. Obedience can be far more enduring if we are drawn by the love of God, than if we are pushed into conformity by our shame for not measuring up.

The Results of a *Try-Harder* Motivation

What are the results of what might be called a shame-based or performance-based behavior? If I am trying to fill an empty place in my soul with behavior-generated feelings of significance and value, rather than acting upon the truth that I have already been accepted in Christ, then adhering to that code of behavior can become a yoke of slavery. The work of Christ to procure my acceptance before God has been nullified and my *Behavior* is enthroned as my judge and my savior.

It will only be a matter of time until I recognize this judge to be merciless, and this savior, impotent.

Appraising my acceptability before God by looking to my behavior can lead down a path of frustration and potential despair. What was once experienced as a hunger to measure up could become distasteful. This is when I could be inclined to abandon the cycle of trying harder. I may reach a point on my journey when I refuse to go back to seemingly futile attempts at obedience, but I may also be too fearful to move forward. Moving forward requires the courage to tolerate the presence of my inadequacy. When self-sufficiency fails to produce the results I desire, and the path of trying harder has reached a dead end, I may grieve and feel a loss of hope. As disturbing as this feels, it is actually an appropriate response because the object of that hope was myself rather than Christ. Giving up on myself can feel like I'm abandoning God, but this position of surrender may be right where God wants me to be. It is in the break down of an inappropriate reliance on behavior that I open the door to exercising faith. As believers, is this not where we started? "...Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (Galatians 3:3b NASB). As we welcome our neediness we will have a greater capacity to receive the love of God. It's been said, "If you are willing to bear serenely the trial of being displeasing to yourself, then you will be for Jesus a pleasant place of shelter."² If we refuse to own our inadequacy, our relationship with God may stagnate. Our propped-up behavior may remain established as the barometer for our acceptance, and while we enslave and condemn ourselves, we potentially crush our desire to follow God. To the degree that we feel coerced into obedience, our sacrifices for God can feel burdensome. Given enough time this can fester into resentment toward God. What we may fail to recognize is that it is not God we resent, but our behavior from which we are drawing our identity. We have enmeshed ourselves in a system where freedom is absent and obedience is demanded. Obedience without freedom is slavery.

When longing to get out from under our struggle with sin, we may adopt an expectation that through spiritual maturity we can escape the struggle. This is a fantasy. While God can enable us to gain victory over habitual sins, we will always have to wrestle with sin in this life. Ecclesiastes 7:20 says, "There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins". While we could easily accept the idea that nobody is without sin, we may cringe at the thought that sin would have a role in the life of someone who is righteous and mature. C.S. Lewis said, "When a man is getting better, he understands more and more clearly the evil that is still left in him. When a

man is getting worse, he understands his own badness less and less. A moderately bad man knows he is not very good; a thoroughly bad man thinks he is all right... Good people know about both good and evil; bad people do not know about either.”³ As with many examples in scripture, the more we become aware of God's holiness, the more we will become aware of our sin (see Isaiah 6:5 and Luke 5:8).

Sin is more pervasive than committing some obvious moral transgression; there are less obvious sins of omission. When God makes us aware of an opportunity in which we can model the character of Christ, and we decline, we have sinned. Sin is refusing to participate in God's plan for our growth. “Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins” (James 4:17). Since there will always be room for us to grow, maturing in Christ is more about gaining freedom from the bondage of sin than eliminating the presence of sin. If we expect to maintain a state of sinlessness, we will wear ourselves out trying to grasp what is always out of reach. Galatians 5:4 says, “You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.” Eventually sin is going to happen and the lingering poison of guilt and shame can sometimes be more destructive than the sin itself. We might do well to view this *presence of sin*, not as an enemy to be defeated, but as an indicator that we are in need of God's forgiveness and grace. Freedom from specific sinful patterns on the other hand, is something we *should* pursue and *can* achieve. The path to this freedom is found not in the law that constrains us but in the grace that frees us. Paul tells us, “sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace” (Romans 6:14 NASB). Understanding that you are under grace rather than under the law is crucial in gaining freedom from sin's bondage. When we adhere to the law to assure ourselves we are worthy, what we find is condemnation. Under grace we can take responsibility for our failures, without condemnation, and accept that God's love for us has not diminished. Out of this grace relationship comes a new motivation capable of releasing us from sin's bondage in spite of sin's presence.

Self-discipline and the Role of Desire

In what I have presented so far, it may appear that I am taking a low view of sin and minimizing our need to obey. I am not suggesting that we abandon good behavior in our pursuit of freedom. The goal is not freedom from rules, but obedience through love. The challenge is to elevate desire in our practice of obedience. Until our obedience includes desire, we will fall short of the fulfillment God wants us to experience in our devotion to

him. If spiritual disciplines such as Bible study, prayer, evangelism and ministry have become an unfulfilling end-in-themselves, then the essential element of desire may have been lost. You may ask, “Shouldn't we engage in these spiritual disciplines regardless of how we feel?” Yes, because an appropriate characteristic of love is to act out of commitment regardless of desire. However, our commitment may not endure if desire remains absent. At this point the question becomes, “How can I cultivate desire in a way that sustains my commitment?” I believe when commitment and desire are united in the context of self-discipline, we can find a motivation that empowers us to persevere rather than give up.

While self-discipline includes personal sacrifice based on commitment, it also includes an element of personal gain based on desire. In fact, without a practical awareness of how we benefit, self-discipline could eventually break down and our sacrifices would become meaningless. The energizing element of enduring self-discipline is the anticipation of personal gain. This is not selfish. The key is that our desire needs to be in alignment with what God appraises as valuable. John Piper said, “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him”⁴. Our minds need to be transformed so that what we desire and pursue are those things which God identifies as *true* gain. As we study God's word and pray, we learn how God is sufficient to meet our needs. To the extent that God's goodness becomes part of our experience our desire for him grows. As a result, our minds can become transformed as well as our desires. Continuing to seek fulfillment from those things which are insignificant will leave our desires unsatisfied. A desire for righteousness can grow when we discover that our longings are *truly* met when we do things God's way.

Sometimes our desires can lose their focus by becoming more concerned with the opinions of others than with achieving our goal. Even in the context of self-discipline we can fall into a trap of covertly seeking recognition or validation from others. If we become frustrated or angry when there is a lack of validation, it is a good indicator that our motive was to leverage someone's approval. This is manipulation, and once again a performance oriented obedience. When self-discipline is tainted with pretense, fulfillment becomes diluted. There is a place for desiring affirmation, but we could get into trouble if we allow it to become a primary motivator for self-discipline. A self-discipline that is focused on my goal should not be shaken or unnerved by a lack of recognition from others.

When we integrate living in obedience to God with an awareness of how we personally benefit, a dominant motive of doing what I *ought* to do, can be counterbalanced

with doing what I *want* to do. We become motivated less by guilt and more from desire; a response of love and gratitude toward God. Self-discipline can become less oppressive because I have a motive that extends beyond what I ought to do. Keep in mind, however, that doing what I want to do does not mean there is no burden to be endured. I sacrifice and discipline myself not as an end in itself, but because I want to taste the greater good on the other side of the sacrifice. Jesus himself is our example “...who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2b). George MacDonald said, “the Son of God... suffered unto the death, not that men might not suffer, but that their suffering might be like his.”⁵ Our suffering and self-discipline has a purpose that does not end with conforming to a code of behavior to gain approval. As we endure the hardship and reap the benefits of self-discipline, we can discover that God’s goodness has made our sacrifice worthwhile. As we begin to taste the blessing of doing what God wants us to do, our sacrifice can feel less like it is costing us something. An act that was initiated primarily out of commitment can become propelled by desire. This is not a one time transformation that happens in our lives; it is an incremental process that continually reaches into those corners of our experience that have not yet tasted God’s goodness. God, in his faithfulness, will continually draw us with new challenges where we are called to pay a price. To the degree that we have the courage to respond to God’s invitations, our journey can become a rewarding adventure. When Jesus tells us that “[His] yoke is easy and [His] burden is light” (Mt. 11:30), it may be because, in the areas where we have tasted his goodness, aligning our behavior with God’s commands will not be difficult. In fact, it can become our primary desire.

Conclusion

Jesus said, “...I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6a). It is a characteristic of human depravity to look for life in something other than Christ. While the non-Christian wants to make life work apart from God, the Christian may want God to make life work on their own terms. We have our own ideas of how to medicate the voids in our lives where God has been left out. It may be substance abuse or sensual perversion, and it may be selfish ambition or legalistic religion. In our spiritual adolescence, we naturally pursue relief from our emptiness, sometimes with a misguided hope that leads to frustration and despair. Fulfillment in life will be found only in Christ and healthy pursuits should lead us to a liberating experience of knowing and following Him.

The Bible tells us, “Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart” (Psalms 37:4). As long as we pursue short-lived pleasures, we deny Christ the opportunity to fulfill those deeper desires.

My point with obedience and freedom is this: they are not in conflict; they are complementary. Obedience adds purpose to freedom and freedom adds intimacy to obedience. If we pursue obedience without freedom we lose love for the one whom we obey. If we pursue freedom without obedience we become aimless and lose purpose. Two of our most basic spiritual needs are for love and purpose. In our need for love we seek a relationship characterized by security and acceptance. In our need for purpose we seek a calling that provides significance and meaning. These needs can be met more fully when obedience and freedom have their proper expression in our lives. Then, we can taste of the “unspeakable comfort” (as C.S. Lewis calls it) that only God can supply.

As God is changing my heart, I am growing in my experience of this balance; in both a new found freedom and a new desire to do God’s will. This was preceded by some hard lessons on what a relationship with Christ is not. As Lewis said, one does not go on to that comfort without first going through the dismay. There may always be a degree of healthy tension between where we are and where we want to be. While we are in this gap we are to “work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12). An important balance to this process is having faith that “...he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion...” (Philippians 1:6b). While we work out our salvation, God is also actively working to transform our hearts. What is troubling to us is that in transforming our hearts God often uses our failures, not our victories. We are too quick to interpret failure as God’s absence in our lives. When we fail, we can be sure God’s hand is near. If we withdraw, our hearts will not be changed. If we turn to him, we can be transformed by a love that does not fluctuate with our failure.

Jesus says, “Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me” (John 14:21a). I understand this, not as a requirement to prove our love, but rather as an identifying characteristic of love. Sometimes we tend to make obedience the goal in order to define our boundaries and determine whether or not we are doing okay. I believe that as God teaches us how to love, we discover a freedom where obedience is inclined to take care of itself. “Love therefore *is* the fulfillment of the Law” (Romans 13:10b NASB).

My Own Story

Through the early part of my journey I thought I had an adequate understanding of how to live the Christian life. I could be involved in ministry, do my best to learn about God, and as a result I should be generally happy and fulfilled. However, I also wanted to be self-sufficient and keep the anxiety I associated with relationships at a safe distance. I had tried for years to make my system work but there was just one problem; my Creator had built into me an inescapable need for relationships. I spent some time with a counselor friend who carefully peeled away my delusions and revealed the futility of my pursuit. As we talked, I was confronted with the fact that the life I had been chasing for so long could never be grasped. The realization that I could never attain what I thought would make me happy left me in despair. I had reached the end of my pursuit empty-handed and without hope. That was several years ago. Reflecting on my journey I thought I would summarize my life in the form of a dream:

In my dream, I saw a beautiful field coming to life in the warmth of the first weeks of spring. In the middle of the field was a little boy. He was lying on his back and gazing at the high clouds as they drifted by. Suddenly, he was snapped out of a daydream by an object that passed in the corner of his eye. The sun was glistening on a big red balloon carried by the breeze. In a flash of excitement, he ran across the field after it. As it was driven along it would sometimes drop to be nearly within reach, but then—as if it were teasing him—it would be carried upwards. I watched his frustrated pursuit as he stumbled over rocks and got tangled among the weeds. This seemed to go on for a long time until eventually the balloon floated into the branches of a tree. Now he grew more frustrated; for the balloon was hopelessly out of reach. The child who began his pursuit in laughter was now in despair and beginning to cry. Just then, he noticed a man approaching. As the man had been watching from a distance, his heart had grown heavy with compassion. He recalled a time many

years ago in his own life when he had an experience much like the one unfolding before him. Shaking his head, he gave the boy a long, sad look. But then, his eyes showed a twinkle of kindness. Timidly the boy asked, “Please sir, please, would you help me get that balloon?” The man knew that what he was about to do would cause the boy to feel devastated, but he also knew of something the boy had not seen. The man stretched his arm upwards and carefully pierced the balloon. I watched in horror as a small, dark, lifeless shred fell to the ground at my feet. It was only then that I realized *I* was the boy and this was *my* story. I knelt down and held the shredded balloon in my hands. Somehow, I had gotten what I asked for, but not what I hoped for. What had for so long been the object of my pursuit was now stripped of its transient appeal. Looking back at the man, he seemed to share my grief, and I was puzzled to see that although he had tears in his eyes, he was smiling. He looked first at me and then over my shoulder. I turned around and standing above me was Jesus who had been following after me through the field. He doesn’t give me a balloon, but He offers me His hand. As He lifts me to my feet, I have tears in my eyes... but I’m smiling.

Until our false hopes are exposed, we are not likely to discard them. Only when we empty our hands of cheap substitutes can we fully appreciate “...the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus” (Titus 2:13b NASB). If you have come to the end of your hollow dreams and they lie crushed at your feet, I can assure you that Christ is closer than you think. If you can kneel in your brokenness, and have the courage to let go of that which you know in your heart to be a false hope, I believe you will find His arms stretching out to embrace you.

“But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code” (Romans 7:6). □

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Endnotes:

1. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1996), p.39
2. St. Therese de Lisieux, *source unknown*
3. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1996), p.88
4. John Piper, *Future Grace* (Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 1995), p.9
5. George McDonald, *Unspoken Sermons-First Series*, (Eureka: Sunrise Books, 1988), p.41