

## ***OBEDIENCE AND LOVE***

Though we believe and try to follow a life of separation to God, we feel obliged to acknowledge that nothing we can physically do, no works of the flesh, will actually make us righteous. Acts of separation are simply acts of love. They are not the basis of eternal salvation. 1 Deut 32:46-47 does tell us they are a form of protection and benefit us by prolonging our days in the land. Yet, following rules of dress, hair, language, technology use, etc. does not endear us to Him or make us any more precious to God. Only the obedient effort to please Him does. The grace and the death of Christ was meant to write the laws of God in our hearts and make the written Law superfluous. Therefore, it is to our shame that basic standards of holiness must, of necessity, be taught over the pulpit by our pastors. While necessary, if not received in the proper spirit, they can become a trap that dates back to the garden of Eden with Adam's attempt to atone for his sin with his own methods.

When we first came into the presence of our Savior, we did not love Him. We did not pray often. We did not read our Bible or care what others thought of us. We gave no tithes or offerings, did not attend services, or belong to a church. Our entire lives were dedicated only to pleasing ourselves. Then we were introduced to Jesus Christ. To a God who would love us regardless of our performance. To a God who loved us just because He made us and hated the fact that we could not fellowship together. To a God who said if we were willing, He would take us as His eternal bride. And we believed that. We took Him at His Word in an act of faith and invited Him into our lives. And HE made us righteous. Just like when Abraham, the recipient of the first covenant, believed God in Gen 15:6, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. We did nothing to deserve salvation. It was given to us only because of our relationship to Christ, made possible by Him alone.

Now, because we love Him, we want to please Him. We pray whenever we want to talk and share with Him. Our favorite book is the one He wrote. It matters to us that what people see in us is how they will judge our Lord. Our income is at His disposal. We enjoy spending time with other saints of like precious faith and joining with them in worship. We do not do these things to gain His love. We do them because we already are loved and want to reciprocate. When we find that doing them no longer thrills us, if we find ourselves rebelling against our pastor's teachings of separation, it is not time to get out the rule book and determine what the minimum acceptable performance levels are. No, it is time to examine our relationship and determine whether we are allowing something or someone else to supplant our love for God or His watchman over our soul.

Total knowledge of the scriptures and their commandments, of itself, can not save us. Obeying every jot and tittle of the rules and guidelines in the scriptures is profitable, but won't make us righteous. In 2 Timothy, we are told that "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness. That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works". The scriptures instruct in, but do not give righteousness. And they only furnish the man of God for good works. They are not the good works. The Pharisees were corrected by Jesus on this point. In John 5:39, He told them to "search the scriptures, for in them ye think ye have eternal life, but they are they which testify of me." There was no eternal life in the scriptures, only in Him. The purpose of scripture was to point them to Christ. It still is. If we measure our lives against the scriptures and find ourselves lacking, the remedy is not to seek to obey the letter of the scriptures. It is to reestablish our relationship with Christ. That is where Life can be found. In 2 Cor 3:6, the letter (of the scriptures) killeth, but the Spirit brings Life.

Sometimes our pastors must chance a real danger that accompanies teaching on what we call the “standards” of the church. They are well aware that only God can create or generate righteousness. Romans 3:10 tells us, “There is none righteous, no, not one.” But we quickly learn as a part of a body of believers, how we need to appear and behave in order to be considered “righteous” by our fellow believers and/or our pastors. It is easy to suppose, especially if sacrifice is involved, that we have thereby achieved a measure of “holiness”. Especially if failing to adhere to church standards is taught to be sin. Then we bring our “righteousness” into the presence of God. Not being the righteousness He imparts, or even coming from Him, it only disgusts Him. We essentially say to God, “Look what I have accomplished. I can make myself righteous. I am just like you!” Which is as close to the original sin as one can get. Will we really try to be like gods? In front of the one, true, and jealous God who commanded us to have no other gods before Him? He likens our righteousness to filthy rags, or menstrual cloths. We are covered in the blood of sacrifice, but our blood has failed in its purpose to bring forth Life. Only His blood can do that.

There are other problems with teaching on what constitutes holiness. One is the creation of loopholes. For example, if it is taught that the only jewelry that should be worn is wedding rings, and ours have become too small, is it all right for us to wear them around our necks on gold chains? If chap stick is all right to use but lipstick is not, can I use the type of chap stick that is tinted and flavored on my lips? Unless the sacrifice of obedience is made from love or respect, no amount of legislation will prevent subtle rebellion. Another problem that causes confusion occurs when someone, especially a newer convert, is asked to abstain from an activity that a pastor realizes is especially troubling to them personally, but the same request is not made of everyone. A final problem, one that is often fatal to new converts, is the problem of “changing” standards. Often, personal convictions are preached, without clarification as being personal, rather than the clear definitions of sin as found in the Word. Pastors respond to situations that are causing problems and causing the saints to stumble. They sound out a warning for the particular situation that is heard and interpreted, rightly or wrongly, as a standard for “holy” living. Then, changing times and situations require an adjustment of the church’s position and what used to be understood as “sin”, is suddenly no longer being taught as such. Some question whether God changed or was the pastor mistaken in the first place? What if two pastors teach two different views on what the response to a particular situation or custom should be? Is one not of them not speaking for God? Could both of them be right?

The simple truth is, that if our lives were truly dedicated to God, our lifestyles would be such an outward expression of love and a desire to please Him, that no pastor anywhere would have to teach principles of separation. They would be free to equip the saints, rather than corralling them. In the interim though, pastors must teach obedience in order to protect us until we mature into a loving relationship with God. We make rules for our children against playing in the streets until they grow old enough to decide the wisdom of such rules for themselves. Perhaps this is why we are told in 2 Cor 5:7 to walk by faith and not by sight. Our children, often to stay alive, must obey us, simply accepting by faith that our rules are based on wisdom, love for them, and concern for their well being. It is not till they are grown, probably with children, that they will “see” the rationale behind them. So too, without real understanding sometimes, we are expected to obey the pastor’s rules and trust that they are based on wisdom, love for us, and concern for our well being. It may be the only thing between us and a loss of Life.

Still, questions arise concerning the teaching of “holiness” and “standards”. It becomes important to look to the scriptures and what they say about holy living. It is especially noteworthy that Paul said in 1 Cor 6:12 that all things were lawful for him, but not all were expedient. Paul’s relationship with God had moved beyond the point where he was governed by obedience to rules. What controlled his life and actions was his desire to please the one he loved. Within the

framework of a life wholly given to his Savior, secure and confident of God's love, he could do anything he wanted. His relationship with Christ had given him a righteousness that surpassed that of the laws of Moses. Yet, there were some things that even for him, were just not a good idea. The unchangeable commandments of God, as found in the scriptures, are beyond question. Like Paul, our relationship with God can lead us to regard the rules of other men with little concern for their impact on our salvation. If what we do through our own efforts for God can not make us righteous, then it is certain that what we do for other people will not. So we do not obey in an effort to gain righteousness. Nor do we even attempt to judge whether they are wise or unwise, beneficial or not. We simply choose to respond to the teachings of the church with love.

We choose to love our pastor. We would not want their job for all the world. We would not want to have to stand before God and give an accounting for anyone else's soul, yet they will. Including ours! We know that they love us, by the fact that they try to chasten us when we need it. We know that they intercede before God on our behalf and worry about us, even when we don't deserve it. We believe they are worthy of our respect, and yes, even our obedience. As long as they follow Christ! While in love with God, it is easy to put ourselves under the authority of the pastor. Unless they teach a doctrine contrary to the scriptures, we will follow them. If they err and lead us down the wrong path, they will answer for our stumbling. What an awesome burden they have taken up for us! For ceaseless vigilance for our souls. For long nights spent praying. For countless hours spent preparing scriptural bread for our consumption, we choose to follow them. We try not to hurt the ones we love, and we figure they do not really need us adding to the grief with which they must deal. While it is not the basis of salvation, nonetheless, it is an act of love that is commanded of us in Heb 13:17.

Likewise, we choose to love our God and jealously guard our relationship with Him. If we can get so close to God that we can enter His presence when we need Him, what can this world tempt us with? We have little desire to leave the holy cleansing presence of pure love and seek the company of carnal companions. If we can focus our gaze on eternal life in the throne room of the King, immersed in the presence of God, surrounded by the wealth and wonders of the ages, things and pleasures of this very brief existence become highly insignificant. Once we have tasted of the fruits of the Spirit, no food here compares. We are citizens of a better world, trapped in decaying earthen vessels. What is it to us what they are clothed in, decorated with, or fed with? It is easy to love His people enough to abstain from actions and decisions with which we personally see no problem, just so they will not become a stumbling block for the weaker members of the church. These actions alone will not save us. It is our relationship with Him, the fact that we love Him, and He knows us that really matters. But when our love for Him is great, we find it easy to lay down our lives for our friend. Or any small aspect of them we are asked to.

### ***STUDY QUESTIONS***

1. Do you feel that modest dress and other standards taught by the church are necessary in and of themselves for salvation? Can adhering to the standards save you? Can they protect you? Read about the "highway of holiness" in Isaiah.
2. Are we righteous because we do the right things or do we do the right things because we are righteous?
3. Have you ever judged someone as being unrighteous because they did not conform to the teachings of the church, even if the teachings were not clearly defined in scripture? Do you feel you were right? Do you feel you had the right?
4. What is our "first love" for Christ described in Revelations? How is it possible to lose it? How is it possible to return to it?
5. Why is obedience better than sacrifice?

6. Realizing that to him that knoweth to do good and doeth it not, to him it is sin, would you rather the pastor taught standards of holiness over the pulpit or not? Explain your answer.
7. In Christianity, what differs between religion and relationship?
8. What are some of the things you have done to please Christ whom you love? Things not necessarily commanded in scripture, but just things that you feel please Him?
9. Real love puts someone else's happiness before your own. How many ways has God shown you His love in such a manner?
10. Could you make a list of what you feel the minimum levels of holiness are to be considered "saved" in your church? Where did this list evolve from? Would your pastor be surprised by its existence or contents? Would God?
11. Have you ever read the scriptures, measured yourself against them, and came out rather poorly? What was your response? How did you attempt to "fix" the problem?
12. What do you think is meant by the letter killing, but the Spirit bringing Life? Can you think of examples? Can you think of any new babes in your church recently killed by someone wielding the letter too zealously? Is that the purpose of the sword? Against whom do we find the Word of God being used as a weapon in scripture?
13. Have you ever compared yourself to others and felt "righteous" compared to them?
14. Have you ever noticed in Genesis that the ultimate temptation offered to Eve by the serpent was that she would be just like God?
15. Can you jump higher than any other person you know? A lot higher? How much closer to the moon can you reach than that same person? Realizing how much holier God is than we are, doesn't comparing our holiness to one another seem a little like comparing attempts to touch the moon? Six inches higher? So what?
16. How many loopholes can you think of that have been used to circumvent any given standard of holy living taught by the pastor? How many have you used?
17. Do you feel it is possible for something to be dangerous to your relationship with God, but not really a concern to someone else's relationship? If your pastor feels that way too, would you rather they warn you or keep quiet to avoid possible offense?
18. Do you feel that new converts, like natural children, often require more "rules" or guidance by the pastor to keep them from harm?
19. What are some things that might change over time or have changed over time in our society that would require an adjustment in the "standards" or warnings sounded by the your pastor?
20. Will we ever be mature enough as Christians to be above Law or rules or authority or a pastor? Will we ever outgrow the need for them? Was the apostle Paul above authority?
21. Is it really necessary to understand in order to obey? How do you respond to guidelines you do not understand or agree with?
22. Do you believe your parents love you? How about your pastor?
23. Are there rules in the scripture that will never change with the times and seasons or that we will never become mature enough to disregard? Name some of these.
24. 1 John says that the Father (God), the Word (Jesus said that the words He spake would testify against them), and the Holy Ghost (which will lead and guide into all truth) would bear record, or testify against us in heaven. Is obedience to any commandments directly given in scripture really an option?
25. Think of someone you truly love. Have you ever thought out what the minimum would be that you could do for them and still keep the relationship intact? That sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? Do we do this with God?
26. Is there protection within a framework of authority? If a soldier obeys a legal, but foolish command, will he be punished or the officer giving the command? If your pastor asks you to do something that doesn't seem sinful, just baffling, and you obey your shepherd, and they are wrong, who will answer to God? What if you disobey?

27. Is your pastor always right? How can you tell? What is the final authority if you feel they are in conflict with scripture?
28. Have you ever tasted chocolate so delicious that the next candy bar you ate tasted cheap? Experienced love so powerful that no other relationship could satisfy? Experienced music so moving, the next song you heard was just noise? Try hanging around with God. Holiness will be something you hunger for, not struggle with.