

Children Obey

by Valsan Thampu

The sermon emphasizes the importance of obedience, particularly in the context of family relationships, and highlights the biblical mandate for children to obey their parents.

Scripture: 1 Samuel 3:9, 1 Samuel 15:22, Luke 11:28, John 14:15, John 15:10, Romans 12:1, Ephesians 6:1, Ephesians 6:4, Colossians 3:20, James 1:22

Topics: "Family Obedience", "Parental Authority"

Description

Valsan Thampu preaches on the biblical mandate for children to obey their parents, emphasizing that parental authority is derived from God Himself. Obedience is highlighted as a spiritual merit, with disobedience seen as detrimental to human life, while Jesus exemplifies perfect obedience. The sermon underscores the importance of obedience in relationships, especially in the context of the family, and the significance of obedience as an exercise in enlightened freedom within the Kingdom of God.

Transcript

Children are biblically mandated to obey their parents. It is prescribed as an unconditional requirement, except when such obedience conflicts with the duty to obey God. Children are to obey their parents for no other reason than that they are parents. Parental authority does not have to depend on the merit, distinction, affluence and personality of parents. It depends on the very source of parenthood, which is God himself. The authority that parents are granted over their children is, in other words, an offshoot of God's authority over them.

It is appropriate, at this juncture, to take note of the emphasis -seemingly exaggerated- that is laid in the Bible on the spiritual merit of obedience. Disobedience to the will of God as found in Adam and Eve, for one thing, is seen as the bane of human life. In contrast, Jesus came to exemplify the perfection of obedience. Obedience is more pleasing to God than all the sacrifices and oblations put together. The attitude to obedience that prevails in a society is an accurate pointer to the health or sickness of that society.

The emphasis laid on the value of obedience indicates its importance to relationships. The biblical culture is quintessentially relational. Biblically, spirituality is envisaged in terms of relationships; our relationship with God first and, on account of that, the nature of our relationships with others. This is what the two cardinal Commandments point to (Lk. 10:27). It was to enable human beings, alienated through sin, to return to God that Jesus came into this world. The main invitation that he issued to the world was to enter

into and sustain a relationship with him. "Abide in me, and I in you". It is symptomatic of the disease of our times that 'obedience' is seen largely in negative terms. The culture-driven resentment at the obedience that is enjoined on wives is symptomatic of the malady that pretends to be a remedy.

The alternative to obedience is rebelliousness. Ironically, parents who make a virtue of disobedience are the most resentful of the rebelliousness of their children. Jesus' warning, "with what measure you measure, it will be measured to you" applies necessarily to the context of family as well. The pain and poison of rebelliousness are not confined to parents. Children disable and cripple themselves through disobedience. Rebelliousness infects them with the virus of negativity, and they become incapable of responding positively to anything of value. Ironically, the negativity to what is good implies also a positivity to what is profitless and harmful. So it makes sense that rebellious children get more easily into the traps that others lay for them, whether it be in the form of irresponsible attitude, say, to studies or addiction to alcohol or drugs, or even criminal activities. Freedom in such a situation is almost always assumed to be the freedom to say "No". Consequently, one loses the freedom to say "Yes" to what is good, true and beneficial.

Given the growing rebelliousness of our times, it becomes a spiritual imperative to underscore the heroism of obedience. It is this kind of heroism that we find in Jesus of Nazareth. Its trophies will endure and its glories never dim. In comparison, the attractiveness of rebelliousness is superficial, temporary and deceptive. But it tends to be more seductive in the short-term, given the dispositions of unredeemed human nature, which is instinct with an inward pull towards self-destruction. The Kingdom of God is, among other things, a Kingdom of godly obedience; whereas the kingdom of Satan is a realm of rebelliousness. More accurately, in the Kingdom 'obedience' is an exercise in enlightened and informed freedom. In the kingdom of man, obedience tends to be a function of unfreedom and so lacks spiritual worth. The sanctified logic of the Kingdom legitimizes obedience. In contrast, the plausibility structure of the world validates and valorizes rebelliousness. Contrary to popular belief, true obedience is akin to freedom, whereas disobedience is akin to slavery. Far too many are enslaved by the spirit of our times -this age of rebelliousness- and are not free to obey! It is a basic biblical assumption that human freedom can be perfected only in obedience to God. Rebelliousness narrows the scope of human freedom and eventually abolishes it. That is because the purpose of freedom comes to be abused or misused in rebelliousness and abuse creates the rationale for its annulment.

Obedience does not stand by itself, or function in a vacuum. It involves a triad that includes love and trust. The secret of Jesus' perfect obedience to his Father was his absolute love for, and total trust in, his Father. It should be expected therefore that from a disposition of lovelessness and rebelliousness, obedience would seem to be an anti-value. Applied to the family context, parents who wish their children to be obedient need to create a family culture based on love, mutual trust and humility. Disobedience is often an expression of mistrust. Mistrust, in turn, provokes disobedience. Obedience is an idiom of humility; whereas arrogance announces itself as disobedience.

Obedience is imbued with the spirit of sacrifice. Paul's exhortation to the followers of Christ to offer themselves as a 'living sacrifice' involves a life of daily obedience to the will of God. Jesus' perfect obedience to his Father, as also Mary's adventurous obedience to God, involved self-sacrifice. It is this spirit that is incorporated in the Holy Sacrament. The 'broken body' of Christ symbolically combines obedience with sacrifice. As a matter of fact, no acceptable sacrifice is possible except through obedience. That is because sacrifice needs to be guided by the will of God, rather than the will of man. The reason why there are specific and inviolable instructions pertaining to sacrifice is to ensure that it is approached

and undertaken in obedience. Since the time of Jesus, the only necessary sacrifice is the 'living sacrifice' of our daily walk with Jesus in a spirit of obedience. Such obedience is the farthest from a mere mechanical compliance with a set of rules and prescriptions. It involves the awareness of being part of a total scheme of things over which God alone exercises authority. That being the case, we do not nurture our children in the spirit of obedience if we do not inculcate in them this larger awareness that goes beyond the daily routine of life. What helps most in this process is the enrichment of the worship life of the family.

It is necessary, at this point, to consider the distinction between true, or spiritually wholesome, obedience and mere compliance with authority. Parents should not equate the two. Why should we -children and parents alike- obey God? And why does obeying God result in the enlargement of our freedom? What, indeed, is obedience? Parents have no right to exact from their children slavish obedience. Complying with the whims and fancies of a person, irrespective of their merit, is more akin to slavery than to obedience. If so, what is the difference between the two? The spiritual truth here is that freedom is the defining aspect of obedience. But what does 'freedom' mean? Freedom results from 'liberation'. Liberation involves a relocation: a shift from the part to the whole. A prisoner, for instance, also belongs to a country. But he is 'confined' to a small part of the country. The prisoner too is free; but the scope of his freedom is limited to the confines of the prison in which he is. So confined, the range of prospects and possibilities feasible for him is punitively narrow. This problem applies to living in terms of the parts, which is a universal phenomenon. What we obey or reject, when only our inclinations rule us, is determined by our limitations. No human being is completely free. God, however, is beyond every limitation. God is the Whole; the reason why God's Will is perfect. Obedience to the Will of God liberates us from our personal limitations and enables us to benefit from the totality or completeness presupposed in divine guidance. The horizons of possibilities we access through obedience of this order are incomparably wider than what we can, otherwise, envisage for ourselves. Seen in this light, the scriptural duty enjoined on children to obey their parents has a double-implication. Its obvious part is that children have to obey their parents. The less obvious, but most decisive, part is that parents have to grow from the part to the Whole, in order to enable their children to obey them. They have a duty to ensure prayerfully that, in obeying them, their children are liberated and empowered. This will be possible only if they turn their life into a pilgrimage, through obeying God, from the part to the Whole. Parental authority, minus this redeeming proviso, could become, at its worst, a hierarchical exercise in arbitrariness that forestalls rather than catalyzes liberation. It should not be surprising if the imposition of authority of this kind exasperates children.

The willingness to 'listen' is a pre-condition for obedience. In several languages, listening is synonymous for obedience. To listen is to obey. Often disobedience and the refusal to listen go together. Listening involves the willingness to go beyond the barriers that usually separate human beings. Not surprisingly, Jesus who came to give us the perfect model of obedience also dismantled the walls of division. An approach to life based on these walls of division, or the refusal to listen, is necessarily one of superficiality. It is the bounden duty of parents to train their children in the art of listening; and this has all sorts of far-reaching implications. The merit of Prophet Samuel as a boy was that he was willing to listen. His response to God was, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." (1 Sam. 3: 9). It is difficult to exaggerate the role that the 'gift to listen' plays in the formation of human personality. And it will be a fatal lapse on the part of parents to overlook the importance of cultivating and improving this talent in the personality formation of their children. James says of a double-minded person that he cannot receive anything from the Lord. This is truer of a disobedient and inattentive person.

An obedient disposition, or the willingness to listen with an open mind that it implies, is basic to conversation and communication. It is exasperating in the extreme to have to communicate to a person who can't and won't listen, even while being party to a conversation. You don't get anywhere with such a person, who either overlooks the basic issue or tries to hijack it in a pre-determined fashion. The annoyance of this trait increases exponentially as relationships become more intimate, as in the family context. In a so-called 'near one' it disappoints and exasperates a great deal more than it does in an outsider. It is doubtful if anyone can truly be a 'near one' without the willingness to listen.

Obedience is part of the dynamic of belonging. The body, for example, does not resent obeying the directions of the brain. An automobile must obey the will of its driver; for it safeguards the interests of both. It is the fact that the driver is within the vehicle -that is to say, he has identified himself explicitly with its interests- that redeems the obedience or submission of the vehicle to the driver's will. When the vehicle is in motion, there is a perfect harmony of interests between the vehicle and the driver: the safety of the one is also the safety of the other. This need not be the case if the vehicle is remote-controlled. In that case, even though the vehicle still obeys the will of its distance-driver, simply because it cannot help it, there is no guarantee that this obedience is safe against recklessness and mischief. Obedience that is spiritually valid is the obedience of belonging. Jesus' invitation, 'Follow me' is, thus, situated within the pattern, 'Abide in me, and I in you'. The discipline of a total and reciprocal relationship is the guarantee we need to ensure that obedience is wholesome. Obedience and a sense of belonging reinforce each other. The deeper the sense of belonging, the greater the willingness to obey; and the more one obeys, the more deeply and joyfully one belongs.

Paul's exhortation to children that they obey their parents and his advice to fathers not to exasperate their children are mutually complementary. Fathers who exasperate their children disturb their sense of belonging and disable them from obeying. Children who disobey provoke their parents to exasperate them all the more. Disobedience and exasperation are the two coins of unspiritual parent-child relationship. This degrades the very nature of family as an institution of love, and it needs to be addressed with due seriousness. But, then, this problem cannot be dealt with in isolation from the tensions and traumas that inhere in loveless husband-wife relationships, marred by disobedience and domination. Family is an organic institution and the ill health of one part imperils the wholeness of the rest. The viable solution to these multifarious problems is, therefore, for the family to be centred on the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Blessed is a Christ-centred family; for it nurtures happy and healthy relationships. If this redemptive point of family coherence is missing, not even the most elaborate guidelines may safeguard the health and wholeness of a family.

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