

The Obedience of Faith | Romans 1:5

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“By whom we have received grace and apostleship, for obedience to the faith among all nations, for his name” (Rom. 1:5).

This verse is of course dependent on that which has preceded, and the antecedent of the pronouns “whom,” and “his,” is the Son of God, Jesus Christ our Lord.” The apostle’s statement is, that by Jesus Christ he has received the grace to be an apostle, for obedience to the faith among all nations. The grace, which he says, he has received, is more than the ordinary grace, which is invoked upon all the saints, in the apostolic benediction. It is special grace for special work. In Eph. 3:7, 8, he expresses it thus: —

“Whereof [that is, the gospel] I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power. Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.”

Grace was given to Paul in large measure, simply because he was called to a great work. God gives to every man strength according to his day. So far as grace to overcome sin is concerned, Paul had no more of it than any man may have. Heaven has no special favorites; “God is no respecter of persons” (Acts 10:34). The patriarchs, prophets, and apostles were men of like passions with us, and had no more aid in overcoming any habit than we may have in overcoming the same. Enoch “walked with God;” but that is nothing more than God requires of every man. “He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” (Micah 6:8).

But the special point of the verse under consideration is the expression, “obedience to the faith.” Notice that the margin has it, “the obedience of faith;” and this is the exact rendering of the original. The same expression occurs in Rom. 16:26, where Paul says that the mystery of God, namely, the gospel, “is made manifest, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the obedience of faith.”

A somewhat similar expression comes in Acts 6:7, where it is said that “a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.” By some, these expressions are supposed to refer to a system of faith; but we cannot so generalize. Faith is a personal matter. Obedience to a system would be simply a performance of the rites of that system; but that would amount to nothing without the exercise of personal faith. When Paul said, “I have kept the faith,” he meant that he had kept in his heart that faith which enabled him to fight the good fight, even the good fight of faith. With this view in mind, we shall see that **it matters little whether we say “obedience to the faith,” or “the obedience of faith.”**

The great characteristic of faith is, that it works. We do not mean that works are attached to it, but works come from it. "As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (James 2:26). Faith "works by love," says Paul. There may be that which is called faith, but if no works come from it, it is not faith.

Obedience implies action; it is well doing when it is rendered to God. But what we wish to emphasize is, that there is no well doing except that which springs, not from the individual, but from his faith. A few texts of Scripture will serve to show this. Read first, Hab. 2:4. "Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him; but the just shall live by His faith."

A just man is one who acts in harmony with the law of God. Therefore a just man is an obedient man. So we may understand the text as saying that an obedient man shall live (a life of obedience) by his faith. The obedience springs from his faith, and therefore there is no chance for him to be lifted up, since the act of obedience is not his personal action, but is the action of his faith, and credited to him as his own. The man whose soul is lifted up in him, is the man who thinks that he can of himself do all that is required, and who as a consequence does nothing. Thus, "pride goes before destruction."

In his letter to the Philippians, the apostle Paul said that his great desire was to win Christ, "And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith" (Phil. 3:9). Faith itself brings righteousness, even the imputed righteousness of God through Christ, in the remission of sins. It is that righteousness which is "without the law, unto all and upon all them that believe" (Rom. 3:21, 22). It is that righteousness which Abraham received, when he "believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness" (Rom. 4:3). This righteousness is "imputed without works" (Rom. 4:6); it is bestowed as an act of God's free grace.

This imputed righteousness is simply "the remission of sins that are past," and may be called passive righteousness. The man is counted as though he had always been obedient, although he has never been obedient. The justice of this will be considered at another time. But following this there must be active righteousness through the remainder of life; for it is only to those who patiently continue in well doing (righteousness) that God will render eternal life. Now this active righteousness is just as much the work of faith as is the other. This is shown by Philippians 3:9, already quoted, in which Paul says that he wants to be found not having his own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is by faith of Jesus Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.

The same is shown also by Paul's prayer, that the Philippians might be "filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:11). This is the righteousness, or the obedience, of faith. From these texts we are justified in saying that a man does good works, not in order that he may be righteous, but because he is righteous. His works will never bring righteousness, for the righteousness of God is only by the faith of Jesus Christ; and when he has once experienced that blessedness, he works because he cannot help it, unless he renounces his faith and his past experience.

He works because the love of Christ constrains him. From this standpoint we can harmonize the obedience to the faith, with the obedience of faith.

This is not a mere theory; it is a practical truth. Because of a failure to comprehend it, thousands of professed Christians live most unsatisfactory lives. Like the ancient Jews, they follow after righteousness, yet they do not attain to it, because they work it not by faith, but as it were by the works of the law. Not realizing that no righteousness whatever can come except through faith, they seek to get themselves “into a place where the Lord can bless” them. But God’s blessing is manifested, through Christ, in turning men away from their iniquities. (Acts 3:36). “By the fear of the LORD men depart from evil” (Prov. 16:6).

Paul was not commissioned to preach a gospel of self-righteousness, but the obedience of faith. Such righteousness does not commend itself to the mass of mankind, because it involves pain, shame, and humiliation. It involves a rating of self at the true value, which is nothing; an acknowledgment that we are so altogether sinful that we cannot even think that which is right; that if any good shall appear in us, it will be just as much the work of the Lord as were the steps taken by the impotent man, who was healed through the instrumentality of Peter. If men could buy righteousness and eternal life, or could earn it by hard labor, or even by undergoing torture, few would be without it; but because they can get it only by complete dependence on another, to whom all the honor must be given, their pride will not let them accept it.

Yet this obedience of faith, which is by Jesus Christ, is the only obedience, which will gain for us an entrance through the gates into the eternal city of God. For in that day when a King, even the King of righteousness, shall reign and prosper, “and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth, in His days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely, and this is His name whereby He shall be called, “THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS” (Jer. 23:5, 6).