



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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COMMANDMENTS

We tend to think of commandments as burdensome: "Now what do I have to do?" When the boss at work tells us we have to stay late we might well resent it, especially if he makes the weight of his authority felt. Commands seem an imposition on our freedom, and all too often on our fun. Part of us, at least, thinks that we should always be able to do what we want -- to be free from commands. We think this is the ideal state for a human being.

This attitude is, however, incompatible with our profession as Christians. We believe in a God who has revealed our nature to us as well as His own. He has told us how to act if we are to live in harmony with Him. If we acknowledge Him as our Creator and Lord, we have thereby committed ourselves to obedience. If He is who we believe Him to be (God), then He is always right, and we must live our lives in obedience to Him. His authority cannot reasonably be questioned, and there is no chance that He is wrong about what we are to do, or that His wishes are inapplicable to us. We cannot claim to believe in God's revelation, and at the same time ignore it. We cannot go off and live as if we knew nothing about Him. If He commands (which He does because He loves us), we disobey at our peril.

Sometimes when we think of Christian obedience we think only of the limits of obedience -- the hard cases, as when God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. Should we, for example, obey a command to do something which seems to be irrational? More, should we obey a command to do something immoral? The Fathers of the Church differ on these questions. In fact we need not worry about them too much, for such situations rarely arise for most of us. They are of speculative interest, perhaps, but not of practical importance.

More to the point is to see obedience to commandments within the larger question of revelation. All that God has told us He has told us for our good. And it is meant to trans-

form our lives. He has given us the essential information we need to know God, and knowing Him to love Him. His motivation for this revelation is our salvation. He loves us so much that He wants to save us, and restore us to His blessed Presence. We must use our free will to accept the salvation which He offers us, so He tells us what we must do -- thus commandments are an integral part of the revelation of God's saving works. Generally, what we must do to receive His blessings is to obey.

Think of the original command to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Eve cannot have fully understood the consequences of the act God prohibited. Of their own experience they knew only good and not evil. They did not know from their own experience what would happen if they ate. They had only God's word for it. They had to trust in God that what He said was true and to be obeyed.

The command not to eat this fruit was based on the nature of Creation as God had made it. It was for man's good that he obey -- otherwise he would die. This means that God was not a tyrant in making the commandment. When Satan tempts Eve to disobedience he suggests that God commands out of jealousy -- that He has only His selfish interest at heart in protecting His divine prerogatives from human assault, and not the good of the humans. If we are ever to get used to obedience, we must rid ourselves of the idea that God is like an earthly tyrant, gratified by the arbitrary use of power. He requires nothing of us but what is for our good. In fact, His love is such that in all His dealings with us, it is our well-being that governs His actions. This we see in the cross of Christ, where He wills to redeem us even at the cost of His only Son.

The other side of the coin is our idea of freedom. We are tempted to think that freedom is freedom from the commandments of anyone else: freedom to do as we please. This is not so. We discover this when we try to live completely "freely", as we might do sometimes on vacation. When we live according to our immediate whims, we may find some immediate gratifications, but the overall result is most dissatisfying. We find that we are unhappy even though we have been doing everything that we wanted to do. The solution to this paradox is: we are not in fact made happy by doing everything we wish to do. To give us the sense of wholeness which we crave, our freedom must be exercised within the authority of God, not apart from it. It must be used to obey. Our freedom is not freedom from authority but within authority.

The authority of God does not really limit our true freedom, because it tells us what is best for us. It is therefore to our benefit to obey. The Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17) state the basis of the Covenant that God establishes with His chosen people Israel.

They tell us first about God: He reveals Himself. They also tell us what is required of us if we are to abide in the Covenant. Moral life is required as well as certain duties to God. These are the very things which we must do to fulfill our nature. There is nothing arbitrary about them.

The Great Commandment, given us by Jesus, is "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind and with all thy strength. ... The second ... Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." This is a statement of our nature. We are meant to live not for ourselves alone but for God and for other people. Therein lies our true happiness. As long as we live for self, we will live contrary to our nature and so remain fundamentally unsatisfied. The commandment is as much a statement of who we are as of what we must do. At the same time, apart from God's revelation, we would be hard pressed to discover that our happiness lies not in the freedom to gratify ourselves but in obedience to this commandment to love and serve.

Our commandments are rooted in revelation. In our fallen state, it is not obvious what we must do to fulfill our being, and so we need God's revelation -- the statement of His commands in Scripture. Thus the Covenant of the Old Testament set apart God's people, Israel, from the rest of humanity. Knowing and obeying the Great Commandment sets Christians apart from all others.

Obedience is thus inherent in our religion. We live in an age which rejects and fears obedience. The world around us tells us that the one who obeys is less than a man, and the happy man is the one who never has to obey the command of another. As Christians we know better. But we are bound to be infected to some extent with the secular notion.

More seriously, the "old man" within us bristles at obedience, for the original sin was one of disobedience. As then so now: obedience is an imposition and a burden which we should throw off whenever we can, so that we can stand on our own -- so says the old man. The problem is that when we stand on our own we are separated from God.

Obedience, even to obviously good commands, is not easy. We would rather do things our way. There are some practical things we can do to make obedience easier. The first is to learn that the commands God lays upon us are for our own good. We learn this by studying Scripture. Again and again, we see people who disobey and are hurt by it -- Adam and Eve, Cain, the rebellious Israelites in the desert, idol worshippers during the Judges, the untrusting and unrighteous at the fall of Jerusalem, on down to Judas who betrayed Jesus. As God reveals Himself fully in Jesus, we are admitted to the secrets of our nature, and given the key to God's commands. We are

made in His image, and His nature is to love selflessly. That is our nature also.

The other way we learn that obedience is really for our own good is by remembering our past. How often we have failed to do what we know was commanded because we thought it was just too hard for us. And how often have we rued the day of our disobedience! For it turns out that it would have been easier to do right in the first place than to try to pick up the pieces later on. Conversely, we remember that when we have succeeded in doing right, difficult though it was, it turned out so much better than we ever expected.

So we must cultivate the habit of thinking of the commandments as being for our good. This will help see us through when the conflict comes between a commandment and our desire to do something else. That is always a tough time for a Christian, for the world tells us that nothing is more important than what we want. We know otherwise, and need all our resources to live in accordance with our knowledge.

Practically, it will also help if we practice willing obedience in those earthly situations where we receive others' commands. This means first that we must do what we are told to do (assuming, of course, that the authority and the command are legitimate). But even more, we must strive to obey from the heart: willingly and not grudgingly. This is especially hard when we disagree with the judgment that led to the command. When, at work, a particular course contrary to the one we sought is decided upon, we can either do our part half-heartedly, hoping that it will fail. Or we can give ourselves to it, trying to make it work even though it is not our choice. The second course has benefits for our Christian lives, since it requires that we put aside our selfish positions in favor of obedience.

This sort of obedience must be our standard -- and often our aspiration. It is the sort of obedience we wish to give to our Lord, conforming our wills to His. We want our hearts to so burn with love for Him that we will obey instantly and completely. For just as self-interest leads us to disobey, so love for our Saviour leads us to obedience. Obedience is finally a matter of love. The Great Commandment is to love (just as God loves us). In loving we obey. And in obeying we fulfill the image in which we are made.

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