

11.

The Lord God's Covenant is To Be Obeyed by Faith

We have observed thus far that the Lord's gracious covenant with His people consists of both promises to be believed and commands to be obeyed. What we have also seen is that obedience is dependent upon faith, and faith's purpose is to enable obedience or faithfulness. The one is not to exist without the other. Faith is never to stand alone, because its very purpose is to make us obedient. To have faith standing alone is to deny the purpose for faith within the covenant. True obedience cannot exist without faith. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer has said, "Only those who obey can believe, and only those who believe can obey."¹¹

We will never be able to do the kinds of things the Lord commands us to do without believing the promises He has given us. It would simply be impossible. Let me give you an example from the Lord's command for us to "love our enemies." Jesus has explained, in Scripture, that the person who loves those who love them is nothing unique, the whole world behaves in this way and recognizes the obligation to love those who love us. We have popular sayings that reflect this, such as "one good turn deserves another" and "you scratch my back and I will scratch yours." In other words, "you do good to me and I will do good to you." These are popular sayings because it is what everyone recognizes as being fair and just.

But Jesus commands us, as His covenantal people, to do something that is unnatural, to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." This is love of the most *uncommon* kind and proves that the Lord's covenant is not just "common sense," but goes beyond mere human reasoning (Rom. 5:6-8). We see the unity of the Scriptures when His apostle Paul commands the same thing in Romans

¹¹ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 76.

12:14, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.”

But how are we to “bless them”? Jesus has already given us one way to love them: He instructs us to pray for them. Paul gives us other ways, quoting Proverb 25:21, 22. He says to “feed him if he is hungry” and to “give him something to drink if he is thirsty.” In other words, we are to act toward enemies *as if* they are our friends. They are to experience the love of friendship even though no true friendship exists. This is not so simple! When someone is making our lives difficult and actively pursuing our ruin, everything within us cries out to retaliate. After all, they would only be getting what they deserve, right? There is nothing more difficult for a Christian to do than what Jesus and Paul mandate. We are to give people what they do not deserve. How are we to do it?¹² How are we to love those who curse us by their words and actions? We are to do it by faith.

Here again we see the covenant at work. Jesus has given us a life-giving promise that we are to hold on to with all our might. Right after he calls us to uncommon love for enemies, he motivates us by saying, “that you may be sons of your Father in heaven” (Mt. 5:45). The Father promises that we *will be* His sons. We will be received and welcomed as His children. But in order to receive this promise, we must obey the command to be like our Father. For the Father loves those who hate him everyday, as He causes the sun to shine, and the rain to fall on the earth, causing the earth to bring forth its abundance for the good of all people. In the same way, we must love those who hate us. So we take Jesus at His Word and because we want to be sons of the Father, we obey His command. By faith in the promise for the future we are to obey the Father in the present. Our very sonship is at stake, and this is the most powerful motivation to perform what has been commanded.

Paul motivates us to love our enemies as well. He does so by promising God’s future vengeance upon the evil and spiteful people of the world. “‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord” (Rom. 12:19). This is God’s covenantal promise. Justice will fall and no one who is found guilty of wrong-doing will escape. Therefore, “Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath” (Rom. 12:19). We bless and not curse because it is God’s job to do the cursing, and He will do it perfectly. We are to trust the Word of the Lord for justice, and by trusting God’s promise, we are to do good to *all* people. In fact, Paul makes clear through Proverbs 25:21, 22, that our doing

¹² See footnote 9.

good to our enemies will turn out to be greater warrant for God's punishment of them. The ignored love that we show to our enemies will serve to increase their judgment in the day of God's promised wrath. This is the reasoning behind Paul's statement, "In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head" (Rom. 12:20). For Paul and Jesus, we are to obey these uncommon commands by faith in our Lord's Word of promise for the future. Without faith, this kind of obedience will be impossible, and without obedience, we become the evil and vindictive ones who are subject to what our enemies deserve. I, with my enemies, become an enemy of God. So Paul commands the church in Rome, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:21).

So as we can see, the covenant holds faith and obedience together as an organic unity. This is reflected by passages in both the New Testament and the Old Testament, and it is equally true of both covenants. Note the unity of faith and obedience reflected in the following passages:

"Then they would put their *trust* in God and would not forget his deeds, but would *keep his commands*" (Ps. 78:7).

"Good will come to him who is *generous* and *lends freely*, who *conducts his affairs with justice*... He will have no fear of bad news; his heart is steadfast, *trusting* in the Lord" (Ps. 112:5,7).

"Who among you fears the Lord and *obeys* the word of his servant? Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light, *trust* in the name of the Lord and rely on his God" (Is. 50:10).

"Whoever *believes* in the Son has eternal life, but whoever *disobeys* the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him" (Jn. 3:36).

"Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert? And to whom did God swear that they would not enter his rest if not those who *disobeyed*? So we see that they were not able to enter because of their *unbelief*" (Heb. 3:16 -19).

These passages reflect the reality of the Lord's covenant with His people. It is true, we can certainly think about "faith" in isolation from obedience. We can take the experience of faith and put it under a

microscope and analyze it as it stands alone. We can take a theoretical look at “faith alone,” and we can do the same with obedience, or with works. But we cannot understand faith alone, or works alone, and understand either one as being sufficient to keep God’s covenant. The Lord’s covenant hold the two together to the point where our relationship with God depends on the two co-existing, each giving life to the other. As we have seen, Jesus promises we will be justified in being called sons of the Father *if* we obey by loving our enemies.

This is why James, the brother of Jesus, taught the way he did in his letter, rejecting the idea that faith alone will justify anybody as God’s son. Faith is never to be held in isolation, particularly when we are talking about justification, or being covenantally right with the Lord. It is an ironic tragedy that evangelicalism is built on the idea that faith alone is all that is necessary to be accepted as God’s son. In James’ day there were people who advocated the same thing. They taught that when it comes to acceptance before God, or justification, that faith alone is sufficient and good works should not enter into the discussion. But James powerfully rejects this idea as being “empty” or “foolish” (Jas. 2:20).

In order to reject this false understanding he takes us back to Genesis 22, to the example of Abraham’s great act of obedience to the Lord’s command to sacrifice his one and only son. As James explains it, “You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did” (Jas. 2:22). Here we see that faith is not saving, or complete, until it is fulfilled with action, or obedience. What does James mean that faith is not complete without action?

James explains what he means, “And the Scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,’ and he was called God’s friend” (Jas. 2:23). God’s estimation of Abraham as righteous in Genesis 15, when he believed, finds its fulfillment in Genesis 22, with his act of obedience to slay his son. Both are justifying moments in Abraham’s life. In Genesis 22, Abraham is called God’s friend *because he* obeyed God in faithfulness. To be “called God’s friend” is the same as to be justified, or reckoned to be in a right relationship with God (Is. 41:8; 2 Chr. 20:7).

As we have seen, on both occasions Abraham believed the Lord, and on both occasions he obeyed the Lord, keeping covenant with the Lord God. In Genesis 15, the Lord highlights faith, and in Genesis 22 he highlights obedience. In both Genesis 15, and in Genesis 22, Abraham was “reckoned right” with God. Obedience is always the

necessary outworking of our faith, for justification, or the keeping of the covenant. This is why James closes this passage by saying, “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (Jas. 2:24).

This is the main point that James wants us to get. We could say it this way, “You see that a person is *not* justified by faith alone.” The logic is the same. But we must be clear; neither is James saying we are to add works to faith, as if these are two unrelated elements that need to be artificially joined. Rather, faith is the *means by which* we are to obey for justification. Faith serves the purpose of enabling obedience, as Paul puts it—an “obedience of faith” (Rom. 1:5;16:26). James’ whole point is to keep faith and obedience tightly knit together when it comes to talking about justification, or the keeping of God’s covenant. “What God has joined together, let man not separate.”¹³

13 The confession that we are “justified by faith alone” has become characterized through Luther and Calvin as the understanding of the covenant that keeps the church on the right track. This has become the “non-negotiable” doctrine of faithfulness, “the standing and falling church.” The irony here is staggering. It appears that James would call such an assertion “foolish” and “empty.” This faith alone view begs the question of why James would make what amounts to an unorthodox statement (that we are *not* justified by faith alone) in the defense of orthodoxy. Of course, it is argued that obedience is the *necessary consequence* of a saving faith, and that James is rejecting people who are teaching that works are not the necessary consequence of a saving faith. This is reflected in the well-known saying, “Faith alone justifies, but faith is never alone.” However, this misrepresents James. James is saying that works make faith saving by completing faith itself. Works are not a necessary consequence as much as a part of faith that saves. This faith alone view goes radically astray as it divorces obedience from justification, the very thing that James is loath to do, and is the main point of his whole discussion.

