

02 Sunday of Lent
March 8, 2009
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Two Forms of Obedience

Genesis 22:1-18
Psalm 116
Romans 8:31b-34

To paraphrase the great philosopher, Aristotle, “Evil people obey out of fear; good people, out of love.”¹

In the Gospel reading today, we heard God the Father tell Peter, James, and John, “This is my beloved Son. Listen to him” (Mark 9:7). The words of the Father are calling us, as they did the apostles, to obedience. The word, “obedience” literally means to listen. In fact, the Greek word for obedience used in the New Testament is a combination of two Greek words that mean “under” (ὑπό) and “listen” (ἀκουε). Obedience, then, is when we humble ourselves and place ourselves “under” the word that is being spoken to us. The Greek, New Testament word for *disobedience* is a combination of two words as well—“beside” (παρά) and “listen” (ἀκουε). In other words, to be disobedient means to try to “get around” the word that is being spoken.

As I’ve read various Scripture verses on obedience, it seems to me that there are two different, but somewhat related, forms of obedience. The first invitation into obedience comes from the covenants, laws, beatitudes, and commandments that God has given to us through Sacred Scripture. Give some examples here.

An example from the New Testament of this type of obedience can be found in the first letter of Peter, chapter one.

Like obedient children, do not act in compliance with the desires of your former ignorance but, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in every aspect of your conduct. Since you have purified yourselves by obedience to the truth for sincere mutual love, love one another intensely from a (pure) heart.

-1 Peter 1:14-15, 22

Such calls into obedience should seem pretty logical to us. However, there are times when God calls us individually, personally into an illogical form of obedience; an obedience that has very little to do with following previously given commandments and more to do with growing in our intimate relationship with the Father. We read about Jesus accepting this type of obedience in verses such as these:

Son though he was, [Jesus] learned obedience from what he suffered; and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

-Hebrews 5:8-9a

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¹ http://www.finestquotes.com/select_quote-category-Obedience-page-0.htm

[Jesus], though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

-Philippians 2:6-8

Another great example of an illogical call into obedience for the sake of relationship with God is the story in our first reading today. There is no precedent in Sacred Scripture for what God asked of Abraham. There were no commandments or laws in Judaism that involved a father sacrificing his son. Yet, it was Abraham's willingness to be obedient to what did not make sense, what seemed illogical, that deepened his relationship with God.

As we grow in our relationship with God, He will eventually invite us into a similar—though less extreme (hopefully)—form of illogical obedience as a way to strengthen our trust and faith. I remember several years ago a man sharing with me that he felt God had told him in prayer that He wanted him to fast from beer. The man did not understand why God would ask him to fast from beer since he did not drink very often. The only times he really ever drank alcohol was in social settings with friends, and even then he only drank moderately. To him, the call to be obedient seemed illogical.

In reality, God was less concerned about whether or not the man drank beer and much more concerned with the man's willingness to be obedient regardless if it made sense or not. This is the same thing God was doing in Abraham's life in the first reading. It is the same thing that He will do in our lives if we're willing to deepen our relationship with Him. This type of obedience is not for those who are just beginning their relationship with God. No, the more obvious, logical form of obedience—the following of basic commands and beatitudes—is for those beginning the journey. This deeper form of obedience—the illogical kind—is for those who have been on the spiritual journey for a while and are being lovingly invited even deeper by God—obedience done out of love.