

The Practices of Jesus: Obedience
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
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Matthew 26

One of the gifts of being a pastor at LaGrave is that as a congregation, you are an extremely attentive and committed group. It's evident to us, your pastors, that you come here hungry for a word from God. You come here week after week knowing your need to be both fed by God's Word and challenged by it. Perhaps you've heard before the saying that 'the Word of God we love so much has the power to both comfort the afflicted and at the same time to afflict the comfortable.' And that is the truth.

So let me just start out by naming the hard part, the uncomfortable part, of what we'll be thinking about together. It's called obedience. And I think you and I know-it's one of the hardest practices to embrace on the journey of faith. Why is that so?

Well, because obedience is about submitting our own will to the will of someone else. It's about setting aside what we want, what we want to do, what we want to have, maybe even what we believe we have coming to us. It's setting aside what we think we deserve, what we think is best for us, and then doing instead what serves best the good purposes of God.

Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane, prays to His Father saying, "Not what I want, Lord, but what you want." This is not a very popular idea for us today. You likely won't be the hit of your next dinner party by asking, "So, how's everyone doing with submitting to the will of God lately?"

Eugene Peterson, in his book, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, claims that our current cultural context makes it especially difficult for us to focus on obedience. "We live," he says, "in a time where there is a great market for religious experiences, but there is little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations of Christians called holiness." He writes, "Everyone is in a hurry. The persons whom I lead in worship, among whom I counsel, visit, pray, preach and teach, want shortcuts. They want me to help them fill out the form that will get them instant credit (in eternity). They are impatient for results. They have adopted the lifestyle of a tourist and only want the highpoints."

I'm sure there's truth there. But I'm also aware that for quite a few weeks now, we have chosen to be apprentices of Jesus. We have been studying Jesus' practices; practices like prayer and worship and loving our neighbors and being patient with interruptions, believing that nurturing these practices are good and important. And I'm convinced that deep down we *do* want to be more than tourists in this life. We want to be disciples whose practices help us live deeply and faithfully and obediently and joyfully. And so today we bravely follow Jesus into the Garden of Gethsemane, and we see that in order for Jesus to do, not what *He* wants in His human nature, but what *God* wants. Jesus has carved out time and space to wrestle with His part in God's unfolding plan for the world.

Let me propose to you, then, that obedience, that submitting to God's will, almost always requires some wrestling. My guess is we are all wrestling with some matter of obedience in our lives. Maybe it's about your prayer life, or about some jealousy or unforgiveness you're hanging on to. Maybe it's about a growing addiction or about curbing your screen time. Maybe right now you're wrestling with whether or not to make some big purchase-a house or car or cottage or the paying of tuition. And your struggling to know the will of God in it.

Maybe what you're wrestling with is that letter you received recently that says you've been nominated as a pastoral, administrative elder, or deacon at LaGrave, and you'll soon need to say whether you'll keep your name in the mix or not. There's no getting around that it will require of you precious time; time for meetings, time for visits, time for extra phone calls and emails, time away from the comforts of home and family. And so understandably, there's wrestling to do.

So let's go further into the garden and notice *how* Jesus wrestled with the will of God. What I first noticed about Jesus' struggle to be obedient was that in it, He moved toward God. Jesus sought out and drew near to the One He trusted most, to the One who loved Him most. And what Jesus knows about the One calling for His obedience, is that the ways of God are good and are for the blessing of this world. Jesus knew His obedience was ultimately about submitting to a plan rooted in love. And also, importantly, that He Himself was beloved of God.

Following the will of God for our lives-is first of all about knowing ourselves to be loved by a loving God. "This is my Son," declared the voice of God breaking through the realm of heaven to earth, "in Him I am well pleased."

Obedience grows out of knowing yourself to be loved by God, the One to whom you belong body and soul in life and in death. John Calvin in his institutes affirms this idea. I quote: "We are not our own. Let not our reason nor our will, therefore, sway our plans and deeds. We are not our own; let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh... Conversely, we are God's: let us therefore live for Him and die for Him. We are God's: let His wisdom and will therefore rule our actions. We are God's: let all the parts of our life accordingly strive toward him..."

Jesus knew himself to be loved by God. But Jesus also knew this-that in the economy of God, that in the way things work in the Kingdom of God-it's in sacrifice, it's in giving of ourselves, that we receive. It's in dying to ourselves that we are born to new life. It's in obeying what may seem like the restrictive or confining will of God that we find fullness of life and flourishing. How can that be? What does that look like? Well, here's a picture.

Let me introduce you to Elder Jane. When Jane received the nomination letter from her church, she was sort of shocked someone had identified elder gifts in her. She felt honored but she also felt very hesitant. She liked having her evenings available to her. She liked being free to meet friends for dinner or to stay put at home in comfy clothes catching up on missed Netflix episodes. She also had this nagging doubt that the gifts someone identified in her were even real or good enough to fill the need. But in Jane's wrestling to do the will of God, she concluded she would let her name stand. And she was elected.

I can't speak to all that happened inside Jane as she served a three-year term but I can speak to what I saw happening. I saw that Jane's obedience led to a time of awakening for her, a time of growth, a time when her capacity for loving God and loving others grew. Jane found that as hard as it was to go and visit someone who was sick or grieving, she often left with a sense that she had been on holy ground there. God had met her there. Jane's obedience, instead of limiting her, grew her, changed her, increased her capacity for love and joy and service.

Please understand, I'm not saying there aren't good reasons for saying no to serving on council or any other ministry. But I am saying that though obedience can seem like something that shrinks our freedoms or limits our life, in the realm of the upside down Kingdom of heaven, it's just the opposite. In God's economy, every time we choose to die to ourselves, to submit our will to the will of God-something grows in us. Something changes in us. There is something about our capacity that increases. And this is also true. The more we practice obedience in small

every day ways, the more it prepares and conditions us for the bigger, perhaps more painful, messy, difficult things of life we all encounter.

I'm reminded that on October 2, 2006, the world was horrified by the news that a man with a gun had entered a country school house in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania and shot 10 young Amish girls (five survived) and then himself. Well, it wasn't long before news of the shooting mingled with news that the families and community had bestowed their forgiveness. On the very day of the killings, members of the Nickel Mines community took food to the man's widow. And six days after the shooting, families who had just buried their daughters attended the shooter's funeral. The question that rose out of the ugliness of those action was; of course-How could they do that? How could they possibly forgive in light of the horrors done to them?

I remember hearing Dr. Neal Plantinga speak about it. What he called folks to realize is that the deep commitment on the part of the Amish community to practice forgiveness in small daily ways is what prepared them to be able to offer forgiveness in the face of such tragedy. It's a little like developing muscle strength. It is daily movement and stretching and use that prepares a muscle to do it's work when the time comes for heavy lifting. It's the same for us. As we practice submitting ourselves in small ways to the will of God, the Holy Spirit moves and works and prepares us for life's unfolding.

Finally, one more observation about Jesus in the Garden. It's interesting to me that Jesus invited His closest disciples, His closest people along to pray and wrestle with Him. I think this a good practice though obviously friends can sometimes fail us. What it says, though, is that we need each other when it comes to obeying the will of God. In fact, when Luke tells the Gethsemane story-as Jesus is struggling so severely that He's sweating drops of blood, when His friends fail, God sends an angel to attend him.

God will not ever leave us alone in our struggle to live out the will of God.

You know, maybe Jesus took those disciples along as a reminder that for Him to submit to the will of God, would mean life for them. And maybe in having them there, He was reminding Himself about you too. About His love for you. About His desire for you too, to have fullness of life today and the assurance of new life to come.

It's reported that Dietrich Bonhoeffer was leading worship as a prisoner in Flossenbug during WWII, and had barely ended his last prayer when, on April 8, 1945, two men entered the room and said, "prisoner Bonhoeffer, come with us." One of the worshippers there who made it out reports that Bonhoeffer's last words to those left behind were, "This is the end, but for me it is the beginning of life."

Friends, because Jesus got up and went obediently from the Garden of Gethsemane to the hill outside Jerusalem where He took our wounds and our pain and our disobedience on Himself and to the cross-you and I have been given new life, new hope, new joy.

Yes, obedience can sometimes look like an end to something, but because of the immeasurable love and grace of God, and the obedience of Christ our Lord-it is also the beginning of life for us, today and for eternity. Thanks be to God.

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