

Obedient Children of God

Series: Strangers and Neighbours: Learning to Be Christian in a Post Christian World from 1 Peter

Date: 7 August 2022, 8th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Texts: 1 Peter 1:13-2:3; Leviticus 19.1-8; Luke 8.4-15

Obedience

When I was ordained I had to promise that I would obey my “bishop and other ministers given authority over you, gladly and willingly following their godly and lawful directions.” I’m given a lot of freedom in my role, and obedience is not something that comes naturally. But to be a Christian is to commit yourself to obey Christ. Jesus says, “If you love me, keep my commands.” “Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching.”¹ I’m thankful that I have to obey my bishop, because submitting to his authority helps me learn to submit to Jesus' authority.

Obedience might be a virtue in traditional societies where honouring parents and respecting authorities are valued. Not so much in Australian culture. We value freedom and autonomy. We don't like anyone telling us what we can and can't do. We're suspicious that religion in general and Christianity in particular are just means of social control. The idea that God might command my obedience is seen as squashing my freedom and dressing up the all too human power of an outdated institution.

We can often think that being a Christian is about being a good person. It is true that the Christian life is one of obedience to God. But our obedience to God is not in order to earn God's favour or so that we can escape judgement or enter paradise. Or at least it ought not to be. Because that is obedience motivated by self interest. And if self interest is our deepest motivation, then we will not obey when it's no longer in our interest. Rather our obedience is in response to God's grace to us in Christ. It is about living the life he has made us for.

Today we're continuing our series called Strangers and Neighbours: Learning how to be Christian in a Post Christian world from 1 Peter. Last week we saw how we're on a journey to our true home with God. That's our hope. This new home from God's future gives us a new identity as God's children. The new birth we have in Christ also distances us from our old way of life. We're resident foreigners, citizens of the city of God, living in the city of men. In 1.2 Peter says that we've been sprinkled by Christ's blood for obedience. In verse 14 Peter calls us “obedient children”. In verse 22 he says we've purified ourselves by obeying the truth. Obedience is our theme today. We're going to look at three questions: Why obey? What does obedience look like? And how do we learn obedience?

Why Obey? (13-21)

Let's have a look at the reasons Peter gives for obedience to God in verses 13-21.

¹ John 14.15, 24

In verse 13 Peter reminds us of the context for our obedience, namely the living hope that God offers us in Jesus.

Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming.

We are on a journey in this life to God's future, but it's easy to fall asleep at the wheel. The phrase translated as "with minds that are alert" literally is "gird up the loins of your mind". This carries the force of being ready for action. Why do our minds need to be so ready? Because we can be easily distracted from our hope in Christ.

Peter continues, verse 14,

As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. The word for evil desires is *epithumia* which literally means "over desire". This is a word that comes up again and again in the New Testament. Often we think of sin in terms of simply breaking God's law. We come at repentance by just trying harder, but then find ourselves slipping back into doing the wrong thing. Peter here doesn't speak about obedience in terms of not sinning. He speaks about it in terms of working on the level of our desires. Ashley Null speaks of the human condition as understood by the reformers Cranmer and Melancthon like this: "What the heart loves, the mind chooses and the will justifies." Obedience has to come from the heart, it springs from a change in our desires, not simply a change in action.

Now, I don't know about you, but I need all the motivation I can get to obey God. It doesn't come naturally. Peter here gives a number of different ways into our hearts that they might be changed to desire God and so obey him.

The first is imitation. Verse 15.

But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; **16** for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'

This is a quote from Leviticus 19. It's a great summary of the why of obedience in the Old Testament. We read Leviticus 19 to see what that holiness looks like. It's a beautiful picture of the whole of life lived for God: Honouring parents, right worship, caring for the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger, not stealing, not lying and so on. Why do children imitate their parents? Because they love them and want to be like them. So it is with us. If this is what God is like and we are his children, then we are to imitate our heavenly Father.

The second way in, to change our hearts is fear. Verse 17.

Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear.

At first glance fear seems to be about self interest rather than love for God. That is to say, if God is the judge then we obey because we fear being punished. There is a healthy fear of God's judgement. But I don't think that's the whole of what Peter is saying. Rather let's stick with the family metaphor. Why are kids afraid of their parent's judgement? Yes, sometimes because they don't want to get in trouble.

But also because they want to please their parents. They fear their parents' displeasure. Peter encourages us to have such a fear of God - that all we do may please our heavenly Father. This verse also reminds us of that dual identity we saw last week that runs through the letter. In Christ we are chosen, given new birth, adopted as God's children. And in this world we are "foreigners". We are citizens of the city of God living in the city of men. We don't live for approval of those around us, we live for an audience of one - our Father.

The reason for our obedience is that we've been redeemed. Read with me verse 18.

For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, **19** but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

What does it mean to be redeemed? It refers buying a slave their freedom. This may be a strange picture for us, but it was an everyday thing for Peter's first audience where about 1/3 of the population of the Roman empire were slaves. The picture of redemption also comes from the story of Exodus where God redeemed his people from slavery in Egypt.

Peter says that we have been redeemed. From what? The empty way of life handed down from our ancestors. This is a description of life apart from Christ in every culture. Yes there are good things we can affirm, because every person and every culture reflects the image of God. But they also reflect the Fall. Apart from Christ every culture is empty. Ignorant of the true and living God. Shaped by misguided human desires. The image is shattered. Maybe you've felt that frustration about the world around you. Apart from Christ every culture remains in the end conflicted, futile, bending towards death. This is true for strong traditional cultures that value authority and conformity. It's true for contemporary Western cultures that value freedom and autonomy. It's true of the culture of those who colonised Australia, and those who were here before. Only in Christ is there life.

Redemption implies that we are in fact slaves to this empty way of life and unable to free ourselves. Jesus says anyone who sins is a slave to sin.² But that is what he has come to do - redeem us. We no longer need to be bound to follow the unwritten rules of our culture. This is why Peter says to gird up the loins of your mind - because it takes effort not to simply go along with those around us. Not that that is a licence for doing whatever we want and offending people. Peter will go on to speak about how we are to conduct ourselves as citizens of heaven in the city of men. We're called to do good to all.³ But as God's redeemed children we are foreigners, even in our home culture. We obey Christ, not our culture. We have been redeemed in order to live for God.

Our redemption is at great cost. Peter says it was not it with gold or silver exchanged in the marketplace that we were freed from slavery. It was with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. It was at infinite cost, the cost of his own life that Christ freed us from our old way

² John 8.34

³ 1 Peter 2.12, 15

of life that led to death. Peter switches the metaphor to the sacrificial system. Jesus is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.⁴ “Through him,” Peter says, “you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.”⁵

Why obey God? Because we are his children; redeemed from the meaninglessness of sin and hopelessness of death that characterised our old way of life; called to imitate our Father in holiness; knowing he is our impartial judge.

What does Obedience Look like? (1:22, 2:1)

We’ve looked at why obey? Now, more briefly, we turn to the question, “what does obedience look like?” Peter gives us a snapshot in verse 22.

Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart.

Love. This is what obedience looks like. According to the Bible, love is the sum of the moral life. Yet love is not simply affirming people whatever they do. What love looks like is filled out by all the Bible’s moral teaching. St Paul writes,

The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ‘You shall not murder,’ ‘You shall not steal,’ ‘You shall not covet,’ and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’⁶

Here though, Peter focuses in on our relationships as sisters and brothers in the church. He picks up Jesus’ words -

‘A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.’⁷

Love is what we are to be known for as Jesus’ disciples. Love is what it looks like to obey Jesus. And the place we learn that is in the church.

Peter gives the contrast of love in 2 verse 1.

Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind.

Malice. Deceit. Hypocrisy. Envy. Slander. These are not the way of love. Which of these do you need to rid yourself of?

How do we learn obedience? (1:23-25, 2:2-3)

Finally, how do we learn obedience? Peter has one answer in two parts for us. We learn obedience through the Word of God. Read with me from 1.23

For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. **24** For,

⁴ John 1.29

⁵ 1 Peter 1.21

⁶ Romans 13.9

⁷ John 13.34-35

‘All people are like grass,
 and all their glory is like the flowers of the field;
 the grass withers and the flowers fall,
 but the word of the Lord endures for ever.’

And this is the word that was preached to you.

Peter here quotes from Isaiah’s prophecy that one day God himself would come to redeem his people. Peter sees that fulfilled in Jesus. The word about Christ is the same word that Isaiah preached in his day. Here we see how Christ is both the sum and goal of all of the Bible. The Bible is God’s Word, but we can only understand it as it finds its fulfilment in the good news of Christ’s redemption. This is how Peter can say we are given new birth through the resurrection of Jesus back in 1.3 and here that we are born again through the living and enduring word of God. It is through Christ that we are born again, but it is through the Bible that we come to know Christ.

Notice that the word of God is living and enduring in contrast to all the sum of human effort, our “glory” which withers and falls like flowers in the field. This is why we build our life on Christ and his Word, rather than the futile way of life handed down to us by our ancestors. He alone is the solid rock upon which we can stand.

This new birth is the beginning of our learning obedience: being made holy, being made to look like Christ, in the power of the Spirit. And that brings us to the second part of how we learn obedience. Read with me verse 2.

2 Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, **3** now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

Peter switches from an agricultural to a maternal picture. What is the pure spiritual milk that will nourish us who have been given new birth in Christ? The Word of God, the Bible. It is through the Bible, as we read it, hear it preached, study it together in our Bible Study groups, meditate on it, memorise it, and ultimately obey it, that we grow up into our salvation, into all that God has for us.

Today, how do you need to grow in obedience to God? Is it for you the response of love? Does it look like loving those around you? Are you taking every opportunity to drink from the milk of God’s word to grow? Are you building your life on the living and enduring word of God, or human glory, empty, and futile? Do you seek to be holy, as the one who called you is holy? This is what our journey to the city of God looks like - growing in obedience. But we obey in love, because Christ himself was obedient to death for us. And he is always there to pick us up when we stumble.