

Hearing & Obeying

Proper 21 a
Php.2.1-11 Mt. 21.28-32

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There's a story I read once that I would like to share with you. It goes like this:

A number of years ago in northern Virginia, an old man stood on a riverbank waiting to get across. Since it was bitterly cold and there were no bridges, he would have to "catch a ride" to the other side. After a lengthy wait, he saw a group of horsemen approaching. He let the first one pass, then the second, third, fourth, and fifth. Finally, there was only one rider left. As he drew abreast, the old man looked him in the eye and said, "Sir, would you give me a ride across the river?"

The rider, without a moment's hesitation said, "Why certainly, get aboard." Once across the river, the old man slid to the ground. Before leaving, the rider said, "Sir, I could not help but notice that you permitted all the other riders to pass without asking for a ride. Then, when I drew abreast, you immediately asked me for a ride. I'm curious as to why you didn't ask them and why you did ask me."

The old man quietly responded, "I looked into their eyes and could see no love and knew in my own heart it would be useless to ask for a ride. But, when I looked into your eyes, I saw compassion, love, and the willingness to help. I knew you would be glad to give me a ride across the river."

With this the rider very humbly said, "You know, I'm grateful for what you are saying. I appreciate it very much." With that, [the rider] Thomas Jefferson turned and rode off to the White House. It has truly been said that our eyes are the windows of our souls. In this particular case, the old man read them correctly. Question: If you had been the last rider, would the old man have asked you for a ride "across the river?" [Z. Ziglar, *See You at the Top*, Pelican, 1977, pp.114-15]

It's a good question to ask yourself. What is in your eyes? Or more particularly -- what is in your heart? Concern for others, or concern for self? Love that grows outward or love that grows inward?

Our Lord puts it in the form of a question of obedience to the Father's will, in the gospel for today. St. Paul sees it that way too in the second lesson, but he calls it humility. How much obedience and humility is within you, Christian?

I'm not sure that there's much encouragement to humility and obedience in our society today. In fact the total opposite seems to be true. Every day it seems we see people clamoring about "me and my rights." They write it on signs and wave them on street corners. They plaster it all over their cars and trucks with stickers and flags. Even advertising is a constant appeal to self-concern and self-adulation and self-promotion. How can humility and obedience fit into a society where all that is going on?

And yet the Bible talks a lot about humility and obedience. A lot. Nearly 250 separate references. Do we even understand the words when we hear them? Can we even hear them, given all the competing notions all around us? With that many references, I dare say, we ought to try.

When the Bible speaks of obedience, it speaks of more than simply doing what we are told. Children do what they are told by their parents. And they are obedient. But they do it without investment, sometimes even without understanding. They simply do it because they are told to do it. And they are considered obedient. The Bible speaks of much more when it talks about obedience.

To begin with, the Old Testament Hebrew word for "obey" can also be translated as "to hear." It's true in the New Testament Greek as well. That's a key. Because what we are trying to HEAR in scripture is God's word. And HEARING it means taking it into ourselves -- receiving the Father's will -- making that word and that will a part of us -- and trusting it. And trusting it, we are moved to act in accordance with that word and that will. Our will becomes the Father's will, and we act on it. Our faith is in the Father's will, and we act on it. We obey. We hear, and we obey.

But then there are Christians who don't seem to think that there is any obeying to do since Christ. "All I need is faith in Christ and that's enough. I don't need the church for that." But there's a dilemma here. God clearly commands us to worship -- it's the third commandment. And even Christ makes demands of obedience of us. What's the problem here?

The problem is that Christians who think there is no obeying cannot HEAR. And if they cannot HEAR, they cannot OBEY. And the reason they cannot hear, is because of all the other noise around them, telling them, "You are first," "You deserve the best," "You should be all that you can be," "You are the center of the world."

No! GOD is first. GOD deserves the best. GOD must be all that HE can be IN your life. GOD is the center of the world and the whole universe. And you are his child, his chosen, the one that he SPEAKS to. Are you LISTENING?

You see, my friends, the point of reference is different. And it's only after I move the point of reference from me to God that I not only hear and obey, I hear and obey in all humility.

Now humility makes sense. Now I can do exactly what Paul bids me to do in that second lesson. Now I can have the same mind as those good Christians around me. I can be in full accord. I will do nothing from selfishness or conceit, because God is my meaning for living and my goal. I do the Father's will, and with him at the center of my life, I can truly count others better than myself. I can look out for their interests as well as my own interests. I can humble myself, as Christ humbled himself.

That, of course, is Paul's model -- and ours -- for humility. Christ is not a "rags to riches" story. Christ is a "riches to rags" story. That's the whole point of his

incarnation. He did not have to leave his place with God to become frail flesh like us. But he did not count that equality with God as something to be grasped. He laid that godly power aside, and became human. And as if that humbling wasn't enough, he humbled himself even to the point of death. "He humbled himself and became OBEДИENT unto death." Why? Because he HEARD God's word, received it in faith, and acted upon it. The Father's will became his will, and he acted upon it -- obediently. Obedience leads to humility, you see. That is why Christ is the model -- and the source -- for all humility.

This is critically important for us to understand, my friends, as individual members of the body of Christ and as the church -- and even as members of our society. Maybe ESPECIALLY as members of our society. And right now in particular when politics is ready to offer up people's lives just to achieve political goals. The church -- the HUMBLE church -- needs to be showing that humility out in the world where it can do some good calling others to love, humility and obedience also.

Have you HEARD God's word for your life today, Christian? Have you listened carefully? Or can you only hear the rabble of the world out there, advancing its self-desires?

Listen! Listen very carefully. God is calling you this day. Hear him. Receive him. Trust him. And your will WILL be his will.