

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Obedience

by Dan Trygg

“Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right... ⁵ Slaves, obey your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ...”

Ephesians 6:1,5

There is a distinct change in the way that Paul talks about the relationship of children to parents, and slaves to their masters. While we are all to be “ordering-ourselves-under” one another (5:21), and actively choosing to defer to and prefer one another, we are not simply told to “obey” one another, ...at least not in the way that children and slaves are to respond to those in authority over them. **Wives are *not* told to “obey your husbands”, nor are husbands told to “obey your wives”,** ...although obedience to their stated wishes or desires may be the result of our choice to support, encourage or invest in them. **The relations between husbands and wives, or free citizens to their government, is never presented simply in terms of “do what I say”. Cooperation and compliance come as we choose to “arrange ourselves under” others in these and other settings.** The point of “order yourself under” is that it is a **voluntary choice, ...a choice that you freely make, out of love, respect and faith.** It is a *missional choice*, ...a choice to empty yourself from your own self-privilege or self-agenda enough to *serve and invest in someone else*, for the purpose of helping them grow or accomplish the will of God, ...or a choice *to avoid unnecessary confrontation or conflict over matters that are not our primary responsibility.* We are to keep the main thing the MAIN THING, and not allow secondary issues distract us or disrupt our ability to freely carry out our ministry calling.

There are two very different Greek words for “obey” or “obedience” that are important to realize. There is the word, *peithō*, which means “I convince, persuade, or trust”. This kind of obedience is given because I can perceive or understand why I am asked to do something, and I agree with the request. It is “*I obey because I am persuaded*”. We see Paul “persuading” people through his preaching, reasoned arguments, and exhortation (Acts 13:43; 17:4; 18:4; 19:8 and 28:23,24). Some were persuaded (*peithō*) by the things he spoke, while others were unbelieving. Their faith response was a “persuaded-obedience” to the gospel. In Galatians 5:7, where the believers were being led astray by legalistic teaching, Paul asked, “...who cut in on you *so as* not to obey (‘to-be-persuaded-by’) the truth?”. **In Hebrews 13:17, where it says, “Obey your leaders...”, the “leaders” are “thinkers, planners, guides”. It is *not* a reference to “elders”, “deacons”, or people in some “spiritual office”. The admonition literally says, “be persuaded by the thinkers and yield/give-way to them”. It is not a “do as they say”, so much as “go along with their ideas”. If they are God-gifted planners, you don’t want to miss out on their ministry-gift. Make room for it! In a similar context, Paul told Titus to remind the disciples to “be subject to (or, ‘order under’) civil-rulers, to authorities, to be obedient (‘be persuaded by’ or ‘follow the advice of’), to be ready for every good work” (3:1). Openness, cooperation and compliance is advocated, ...*not blind obedience.* Finally, James wrote, “...we put the bits into the mouths of horses so that they might obey (‘be-persuaded-by’) us” (3:3).**

The other word for “obey” or “obedience” is *hupakouō*. This is a compound word from “*akouō*”, meaning “I hear”, and the word for “under”. It is used of the response of a doorkeeper to a knock (Acts 12:13), or to hearken to a command given by a superior (Eph. 6:5), or for a choice to give heed to the request of someone you care about (1 Pet. 3:6). It is “*I obey because I ‘hear under’ or ‘give heed to’ someone’s request or command.*” The wind and waves “heard-under” and obeyed the command of Jesus (Matt. 8:27; Lk. 8:25). The unclean spirits “heard-under” Jesus, and obeyed His command (Mk. 1:27). In Acts 6:7, “**the Word of God kept spreading, and a great multitude of priests became obedient (‘heard-under’ or ‘gave-heed-to’) the faith.**” “But not all obeyed (‘heard-under’ or ‘gave-heed-to’) the gospel” (Rom. 10:7) **Paul saw that God had given him grace and apostleship to bring about “the obedience of faith among the nations”,** i.e., that they would “hearken to” and “respond to” faith, as evidenced by their choice to follow Jesus (Rom. 1:6). The gospel is the revelation of the mystery that had been hidden for ages past, but which has now been made apparent according to the prophetic scriptures and the ordinance of God, to bring about the obedience of faith among the nations (Rom. 16:25,26). **The “obedience of faith” is the “giving-heed-to” response of those who hear and believe.**

As I mentioned at the outset of today’s study, **the relationship of children to their parents, and of slaves to their masters is different than that of husbands or wives, or of our relationship to the government, or to one another.** Children are to “hear-under” their parents. **They are to “give-heed” to them, ...meaning to do as they say.** This is **for their own benefit**, ...both for protection, for guidance and for learning wisdom. “Hearing-under” is the other side of “honoring” their parents. The word for “honor” means to value them. **As children, we are vulnerable, and our parents are responsible to guide and protect us. We are under their authority and oversight, ...both in practical matters and even legally. If anyone was a child who trusted in Jesus, his or her faith was to be expressed through giving-**

heed to the instructions of the parents. Not only was this practical wisdom, it also was an important practical outworking of faith. **A rebellious child would not be good advertisement for Jesus.** To follow Jesus meant not only the attitude of deference and respect, but also the carrying out of the commands of the parent. This was good character-building for the child, and also a positive result of a child's faith in Christ. **It is hard to criticize Jesus, if following Him meant that your son or daughter became more respectful and obedient.** Colossians 3:20 instructs children to obey their parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord. **Note that there is a word of balance given to parents** in both of these contexts. Ephesians 6:21 instructs fathers not to provoke their children to anger, and Colossians 3:21 tells fathers not to irritate or embitter their children, or they may become disheartened and lose motivation. **How we treat those under our authority can motivate and encourage them, or leave them discouraged, frustrated and angry.**

The same is true for slaves toward their masters, or vice versa. This has some carryover to our relationship with employers, but, in the case of slavery, a slave had no rights, and could not simply leave an undesirable job. **The transformative power of faith in Christ, and the Spirit within, can enable even a powerless and mistreated slave to rise above his or her circumstances. Faith is made evident by an attitude of ready-service. Being quick to hear and obey revealed Jesus' presence in one's life in a positive way.** In 1 Peter 2:18, domestic servants are exhorted to "order-themselves-under" their masters. That is a voluntary *attitude* of submission. In Ephesians 6:5 and Colossians 3:22, the focus is on the *action* of obedience. They are to "hear-under" their masters, ready to serve, in everything. Note that the heart attitude is important to Paul, as well. They are to serve with singleness of heart, as if they were serving Christ Himself. They are not just to do the outward things, but to serve with full devotion, as to the Lord. They are to serve with good will and enthusiasm, as though they were not just serving people, but serving Jesus. **Again, this is not only practical counsel to help these people overcome circumstances that could be oppressive or discouraging, but also to demonstrate to the unbelieving world that knowing Christ brings about positive transformation of heart.** However, in these passages there are also messages to the masters, reminding them that they will be held accountable for how they treat their servants. **Believing masters are to treat their slaves with good will, as serving Christ Himself.** They are not to threaten or intimidate, but to treat their servants with justice and fairness (Eph. 6:9; Col. 4:1).

Children and slaves were in a legal arrangement where their expected duty was to be obedient ("hear-under"). Their parents, or their masters, had recognized legal authority over them, and this included the right to give directions, and expect compliance. There *was* a recognized authority structure in these relationships. **The challenge for believing children, ...or slaves, ...or people in the workplace, ...or citizens in society is "Will I trust in God, and adjust myself to respond in faith in these circumstances and relationships I find myself in, ...even if it is undesirable to me right now?" Will I "be persuaded by" what the scriptures say, so that "I give heed to" the counsel of God, ...or will I be resistant, non-compliant, defiant, rebellious and complaining?** The example of Jesus was that He "kept entrusting Himself to God, who judges righteously" (1 Pet. 2:23). The word for "entrusting Himself" literally means "giving Himself over". He "gave Himself over" to God, even when being persecuted, mistreated and going to the cross.

We have enough difficulty "giving ourselves over" to live for God when we have to deal with an impatient or impolite person! It goes against our flesh, our pride, and even self-preservation. **Most of the time, when God is calling upon us to "give heed to" Him, it is in small areas of service, not dramatic, sacrificial or extreme situations.** In any case, **it is helpful to know that even Jesus had to learn to "hear-under" His Father.** When He came here as a human child, He had to become like us in all things (Heb. 2:17), ...except for our propensity to sin. He experienced weakness, sickness, weariness, exhaustion, hunger, and human emotion. He encountered people who were mean, unjust, unfair, and even violent, ...*just like we do.* **It appears that He knew who He was by the time He was 12, but He still had to live a human life among everyday people.** In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications, even with loud crying and tears. Life was not easy-peasy for Jesus as He grew up. **Even though He was the Son of God, ...as a human being He had to "learn obedience ('hearing-under') through the things He suffered or endured, ...just like we do!** We learn that God is dependable by being thrust into circumstances where we have to depend on Him, ...and He comes through for us! We discover that when He asks us to do something we *don't understand*, and we entrust ourselves to Him by *giving heed* to Him or His Word, it works out to be positive. **As we get to know God more, we discover that He is reliably worthy of our trust, ...so our faith grows and we "give heed" to Him more and more.** He will allow circumstances to challenge us, or He will direct us to do things that we would not have chosen on our own. As we "give heed" to Him in these situations, we experience Him more, ...and we see that His ways are good. **This is the same kind of "spiritual muscle-building journey" that Jesus Himself took. He LEARNED hearing-under obedience through the things HE suffered.** The word for "learn" here is "experiential-learning". It is the same root word that "disciple" comes from. **WE are also "experiential-learners", ...learning to "hear-under-and-respond" to God.** When Jesus was "completed", He was ready for His life-work, the deepest challenge. **We, too, are learning to trust beyond what we can see and understand. We are learning to walk by faith, ...to "hear-and-obey" God.**