

S37 - OBEDIENCE LEADS TO INTIMACY
Final Sermon in the Series on Discipleship
1 John 2:3-5 and John 8:31-47

Today we come to our final sermon in the series on Discipleship. Our title today is 'Obedience leads to Intimacy.' Over the past eight weeks we have looked at how getting nearer and closer to God and growing more like Him leads to receiving His Spirit and unconditional love [Intimacy leads to Affirmation]. Being affirmed by God means that we know who we truly are – the adopted children of God and that God loves us, his adopted children as much as he loves his own Son [Affirmation leads to Identity]. Knowing who we are means we will have the authority of sons and daughters and that God will trust us when we step out in faith in his name, we are commissioned to bring others to the faith and will have a ministry to perform [Identity leads to Authority]. Now that we have the authority, we need to take it up and use it. However, service should not be for what we get out of it, rather what we can bring to God as an offering; we need to see where God is at work and join in [Authority leads to Destiny]. We don't know what gifts we have until we try to do things; we need to trust God and step out in obedience to what we hear God is calling us to do [Destiny leads to Obedience].

Today we are looking at how an obedient walk with God will lead into an ever-increasing awareness of his closeness and his unconditional love for us. In our Gospel reading it says, **'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free.'** We know the truth, of course, by reading our Bibles and listening to his Word; learning what God has done for us by giving us his Son Jesus and by the Holy Spirit leading us into the truth day by day. So when we have faith and are in a close relationship with Jesus we can enjoy the freedom that comes when we follow Him. But freedom cannot be

separated from obedience. If we want the deeper relationship that Jesus offers, we need to learn to obey him because the fruit of obedience is freedom. The truth that sets us free is what we discover from a close relationship with Jesus and from living our lives according to his teaching because Jesus is the Truth.

Obedience is not always the most popular of virtues. Those of us who have been parents will know this well and none of us are too old to remember our teenage years and how annoying it was to have to obey our parents. If we are honest with ourselves I think that we will agree that it is not always easy to accept being told what to do by someone else. There is a belief among many of the general public that freedom means that we can do whatever we like, but that is not true. Where there are no rules the result is license, not freedom. Imagine what our country would be like if we did not have the rules enshrined in our laws, I suggest that there would be chaos and misery. I am reminded of the Collect for Peace in the Book of Common Prayer which, you will know, begins like this: -

‘O God who art the author of peace and lover of concord, in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal life, **whose service is perfect freedom.**’

In the Church there has been a reaction to the harsh teachings of some in previous generations, which left listeners with the view of God as a cruel and demanding Judge, who was waiting for us to step out of line so that he could punish us. I certainly remember well many of the older preachers, at the Methodist Church I attended for the first fifteen years of my life, preaching what was known as ‘hell, fire and damnation.’ The rediscovering of grace has been vital for the renewal of faith in more recent times.

Obedience to God sounds like a duty, but it is actually a joy. It results in a closer relationship with God, and in perfect

freedom. As members of God's family, obedience is how we demonstrate our love for Him. We also need to remember that God loves us, just as we are. The popular hymn 'Just as I am' echoes the fact that God will receive, welcome, pardon, cleanse and relieve us, just as we are. We are accepted just as we are, but God does not want to leave us as we are, because repentance and transformation are also essential parts of the Gospel.

Furthermore, obedience is not sacrifice; it is about living in his family as his children. God is our loving Heavenly Father, which means that He only commands what is best for us. Just as earthly parents have to set reasonable rules for their children – a reasonable bedtime, responsible use of the Internet, or a healthy diet, for example, these rules come from love and are not arbitrary or negative. God's commands are only what he knows are best for us and for our benefit - his children. Being obedient is therefore also about love. We show that we believe that God is good, and that he has our best interests at heart, by doing what he asks. But what are his commands? 1 John 3:23 says this, **“And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.”** The text indicates there is really only one commandment, but in two parts: believe in his Son and love one another. The word “believe” here also embraces the idea of “trusting” and having “confidence”. We are asked to believe and trust in Christ, his work and his death on the cross for our sins. Secondly, God commands us to love one another; this is central to walking in obedience with God, because “God is love.” Since an essential aspect of God's character is love, to walk in obedience to him requires that we walk in love, like him. Obedience is a way of giving our love back to God. We have the confident assurance of our relationship with him. We know that we are God's children and that he loves us, and because we love him and each other.

In some ways “Obedience leading to Intimacy” is like a summary of all that we have looked at in this Sermon Series, it is at the heart of Discipleship. Obedience, it could be said, is a gift to ourselves because choosing to obey God is always choosing the better way, allowing ourselves to experience grace, allowing the Spirit to transform our lives. Obedience comes most easily and naturally from desiring God more than anything else. It’s about us wanting to stay close to God because we know that it is there that we will be satisfied. Learning obedience is more than just not doing what is wrong – it actually comes from learning how to love God and draw ever closer to him. Our spiritual growth will always centre on developing deeper intimacy with God our Father.

Paul Harcourt’s book title ‘Growing in Circles’ on which this sermon series has been based, is only a partial truth – in reality we are spiralling upwards. On our journey into discipleship, we return to confront the same truths again and again, each time a little more deeply and profoundly. The “upward call of God in Christ Jesus”, as some translations of Philippians 3:14 put it, started as soon as we became Christians, and, helped by the Spirit, it is a lifetime journey of growth and progress into Jesus’ image. As we learn, so we should also be helping others. Jesus’ plan was for discipleship to be a never-ending cascade until all God’s people reach their full potential.

One day we will all get there. 1 John 3:2 says that when Jesus returns, **“We shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.”** Until then, we are daily being changed. As we focus on his glory we ‘are being transformed into his image, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.’

Paul Harcourt concludes his book with these words: -
“We shall be like him. Enjoy the journey.”
Amen.

