

Subject: Examine Your Obedience

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Matthew 21:28-32 (Pentecost 19)

Dear Christian,

Nobody really likes to be examined or evaluated by others. That's especially true when the one doing the examining or evaluating was not asked for their thoughts. Unwanted advice often tends to be ignored. Yet how often do those receiving the advice say all the things that the examiner wants to hear from you just to please them or get them off your back?

Examining is what Jesus had done. I was a Pharisee, one of the religious leaders among the Jews. We were considered among the great men of Israel. It was during what has been called Holy Week we had gathered against Jesus questioning his authority. After refusing to give us an answer, Jesus asked a question expecting to hear an opinion from us concerning the parable he was about to tell. "What do you think?" Jesus said. It was an open ended question that was meant to lead us to examine ourselves and our own obedience to God. As the almighty God himself he knew our hearts and he knew our version of "obedience". Jesus had examined our obedience and found it lacking. Most of us didn't really appreciate the "advice" he was about to give us, but I did.

After Jesus asked that question so that we would be paying attention and thinking about what he was about to say, he told us a parable, a story meant to teach a spiritual truth we needed to hear. **"What do you think? A man had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go work today in my vineyard.' He answered, 'I will not,' but later he changed his mind and went. He came to the second and said the same thing. The second son answered, 'I will go, sir,' but he did not go."** (vs. 28-30) This father tenderly asked his two sons to work in his vineyard that day. He addressed both his sons in the same loving way, but their responses are polar opposite. The first son flat out refused to go, but later on he changed his mind. The second son said all the things his father wanted to hear answering in a respectful way. He said he would go as he was asked, but he didn't. If you were in that father's shoes, what would you be thinking? How would you feel? I know how I would feel.

With the response of the first son, he would no doubt have felt disappointment, sadness, and anger at his son's outright refusal to obey him. Then at seeing him change his mind and go work in the vineyard, he would have been happy. His feelings toward the second son would have been just the reverse. He would have been happy at his son's response to go and work in the vineyard, but then seeing the intentions of his son's heart disappointment, sadness, and anger would set in. His son said all the things he wanted to hear, but his son's actions showed they were just "lip-service obedience" - obedience without action.

At the end of the parable, Jesus' question changed. No longer was it open-ended. It wasn't too hard to figure out. After all, there was only one possible answer. "Which of the two did the will of his father?" The answer was obvious. It was the first son. Even though his words said "no" initially he changed his mind and did what his father wanted. After answering his questions, Jesus then applied the parable to us, the religious leaders of the day. **"Amen I tell you: The tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, but you did not believe him. However, the tax collector and prostitutes did believe him. Even when you saw this, you did change your mind and believe him."** (vs. 31b-32)

Jesus' words caused me to examine my own obedience. My version of "obedience" was really just lip-service to God. As a Pharisee, I seemed so righteous in the temple courts. I knew all the words to say and the ways to act, but the only "righteousness" I had was self-righteous lip-service that offended God. I claimed to be doing God's work and fulfilling his will. I was outwardly saying all the right things that God wanted to hear from me so that I would look so good, but my heart's desire was not set on repentance nor was it desiring to obey at all. I was that second son.

So often in your life, you have been like that first son who said "no" to God doing what he doesn't want us to do or, like that son, refusing to do what God wants us to do. Sins of commission and omission are present in your life every day. Yet when you examine your own obedience, do you see how you are like that second son too? Your words say all that God wants to hear from you as if you are saying "yes" I am a sinner and "yes" I will now do differently, but then turned around as your actions reveal the real intent of the heart: "No, I don't want to". Let me give a specific example.

When you gather for worship in God's house, you often come before him confessing your sins saying all that God wants to hear from you. "Holy and merciful Father, I confess that I am by nature sinful, and that I have disobeyed you in my thoughts, words, and actions. I have done what is evil and failed to do what is good... But I am truly sorry for my sins." You say you are sorry for all the times you said, "no" to God by your sinful actions, but your actions speak the same kind of obedience of the Pharisees, as I did. Like that second son, your words say, "Yes, Lord I have sinned and I will do what you want me to do," but your actions speak your heart's intent instead, "No, Lord. I really don't want to do as you say and I won't." Obedience that is only concerned about saying the right things without any regard for action is no obedience at all. God is not deceived by that "obedience", and he will not be mocked by lip-service. What great sadness God feels at that kind of "obedience"!

True obedience does not begin with outward words, but in the heart with real repentance. It is a change of mind and heart about sin. "Which of the two did the will of his father?" The first son was the obvious answer to Jesus' question. He sternly and clearly had said that he would not go work in the vineyard as was asked of him, but later changed his mind and went. With his change of mind, his obedience was real obedience as he simply did what his father had asked him to do. Real repentance is a change of mind and heart. It is a change worked by the Holy Spirit in you and I so that even though our words and actions so often said "no", a "yes" is spoken and actually lived. What is the content of that "Yes"?

"Yes I have sinned. Yes I have said no to what you want me to do and not to do. Yes I truly am sorry for what I have done. Yes, I trust that Jesus came into the world to take away those sins. Yes he is the way of righteousness John the Baptist pointed us to. Yes I am made right in your sight by Jesus." Yet repentance in the heart cannot be just words. Real repentance leads to real obedience as a fruit of that faith giving us the desire to say with our actions, "Yes, Lord! I will seek to do what you want me to do."

Jesus' parable and words were directed towards all of us, but they hit home for me. It caused me to examine my own obedience. For Jesus to say that the tax collectors and prostitutes were getting into God's kingdom of grace, his family of believers, before me was eye opening. They were generally despised. They were considered to be the lowest social class and not worthy to be ministered to. They were treated as lost causes, but many had repented and believed before we did. They had said "no", but now their obedience was a result of trusting in Jesus. One of Jesus' disciples was a perfect example of that. Matthew was once a tax collector and now was a follower of Jesus. Sadly, many of my colleagues still refused to believe in him, but I took his words to heart.

When I examined myself, I saw that I was that second son who thought I could say all the right things, but not really be concerned with actual action. So my “obedience” to God was no obedience at all. Hearing Jesus, you could say my mind was changed. I repented and believed what many of my now former colleagues refused to believe. Now I want my actions to reflect that change of mind and heart which was worked in me. I may not be a Pharisee anymore, but I still have that inner Pharisee which would rather do “lip-service obedience”. So daily I need to repent of my own lack of obedience. Daily I need to trust my Savior who obeyed perfectly for me so that daily my faith is put into action not just saying the right things God wants to hear, but also doing them because I have a Savior who came to save me.

Dear Christian, you don't have to be a Pharisee to have a Pharisee's mentality. When you examine your obedience every day, you will find that inner Pharisee lurking in your heart. He comes out so easily saying all the right things that God wants to hear but not acting on them. Every day you find yourself saying, “Yes, Lord.” Yet every day you turn around and say, “No, I will not!” You have a need daily to truly repent from the heart. Daily you need to keep placing your trust in Jesus. Trusting in him who came to take away your sins, not only do you say like the second son, “Yes, Lord,” but also with actions that say like that repentant first son, “Yes, Lord, I want to do this! I want to obey you!” After all, real obedience is really just faith in action, faith that is outwardly confessed and lived in our lives as God's redeemed people.

Your friend in Christ,

A former Pharisee



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