

THE WORD WE HAVE REMOVED FROM THE MARRIAGE VOWS

Hebrews 5:5-10

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 29, 2009, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Text

So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him,

*'You are my Son,
today I have begotten you';
as he says also in another place,
'You are a priest for ever,
according to the order of Melchizedek.'*

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

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In 1687, in an early American colony, Sarah Harrison stood at the altar to recite the marriage vows to James Blair.

- When the minister asked if she promised to “love, honor, and obey” her soon-to-be-husband, she refused to say the word “obey.”
- The minister asked again. Again she refused.
- After a third attempt, the minister turned to the groom, who nodded his assent to the bride’s refusal to promise obedience.

No matter what the minister thought about this on-the-spot amendment to the marriage vows, he completed the ceremony, exited the church, and more than likely skipped the reception. (I doubt he was missed.)

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The word “obey” was included in marriage vows in the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, first adopted in the sixteenth century, not ironically, during the reign of the multiply-espoused Henry VIII, who had a vested interest in exacting obedience from as many of his wives as he could.

In 1922, by a vote of 36 to 27, Episcopal bishops in America – all male – voted to remove the word “obey” from the marriage vows. The Bishop of Alabama even sought to make this action retroactive.

By 1946, when Presbyterians in America adopted the *Book of Common Worship* based on the *Book of Common Prayer*, “obey” was nowhere to be found.¹

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With the exception of the military, “obey” is not a word we generally use to describe relationships in our egalitarian, democratic, relational culture. Yet even as this is “the word we have removed from the marriage vows,” “obey” remains a part of our *religious* vocabulary. We hear it in preaching. We sing it in hymns and anthems. We recite it in prayers and services in which officers are ordained and in which new members are received into the life of the church.

In today’s text, the anonymous author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes of the obedience practiced and received by Jesus Christ:

In the days of his flesh,
Jesus offered up prayers and supplications,

¹ Thanks to Kim Clayton’s paper on this passage from The Moveable Feast Preaching Seminar, January 2009, for this background.

With loud cries and tears,
To the one who was able to save him from death,
And he was heard because of his reverent submission.

Although he was a Son,
He learned *obedience* through what he suffered;
And having been made perfect,
He became the source of eternal salvation
For all who *obey* him...

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What does “obedience” mean for us today? Can we use this cast-aside word in a way that is life-giving and meaningful for us? Can it be a renewed part of our religious vocabulary?

I believe that it can. I invite you to follow me through three ways of reclaiming this word with new understanding.

I.

When I was a child and teenager, life for me consisted of three things:

- School
- Sports
- The Presbyterian Church.

None of these seemed forced. None of these seemed oppressive. None of these was out of balance in relation with the others. Life was a seamless garment between school and sports and church. I was brought up to believe that if I did well in school, if I gave my best effort at the sports I played, and if I was involved and committed in church, I could become anything I wanted to become. “Doing my best” was the way I “obeyed” God, though I did not have the theological vocabulary at the time to use that term.

Once I became a minister, I began to notice that for many of us in the Presbyterian Church, “obedience” to God means something like what “doing my best” meant to me growing up. To be sure, work has replaced school and family has replaced sports for many of us, but what remains is our commitment to “doing our best” in these three spheres: work, family, church.

- For the ancient Hebrews, “the Law of God [the Ten Commandments and all that followed them] was a gift of God...instituted for ...joy and edification... a clear sign of divine favour.”² As such, that Law was worthy of obedience.
- For many of us, solid, sober, Presbyterians, “doing our best” in work, family, and church is a gift from God, a source of joy and edification, a clear sign of divine favour. It is akin to obedience to the Law for ancient Hebrews.

When we “do our best,” we believe we are doing what God desires. We are *obeying* God.

II.

But even if we “do our best” most of the time, situations will invariably arise in which a new kind of obedience presents itself.

For even the most serious and disciplined among us, the time may come when we sense an inner voice of conscience, an inner yearning for change, an inner sense of compulsion is calling us to do something different, to step outside the norm of the structures that have provided us so much comfort and consistency.

- When God called Abram, in Abram’s seventy-fifth year, God called him to “go from [his] country and [his] kindred and [his] father’s house” and set out for “the land that I will show you” – a land Abram and Sarai would recognize only when they arrived within its borders. *Outside the norm.*³

² This description of the role the Law played for Jews comes from Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 57.

³ Genesis 12:1-9.

- When a young Moabite widow named Ruth sensed it was not right to return to her homeland of Moab, where she might find protection and survival through a new marriage, but rather sensed it was right to remain with her embittered mother-in-law, Naomi, also widowed, even though Naomi's place in Israel was uncertain, Ruth was experiencing an inner sense of compulsion to do something different. "Where you go I will go; where you lodge I will lodge; your people will be my people and your God my God." *Outside the norm.*⁴
- When James and John heard the voice of Christ calling them from the shore, they left their fishing boat, their fishing business, and their father Zebedee who had founded the business and most likely had bought the boat – in order to become among the first disciples of Jesus Christ. *Outside the norm.*⁵

Throughout Jewish and Christian history, countless people have left

The familiar of work
 The familiar of family
 The familiar of church

To follow an inner compulsion from God, a voice of conscience implanted by God, outside the norm. "Go to the land that I will show you."

Have you felt such a call? Such an inner compulsion? Have you obeyed it?

III.

If obedience can be a matter of "doing our best" within a well-defined system, or if it can involve answering a call to do something outside the norm of the systems in which we live, there is a third way of obedience as well.

This way is given voice by the writer of Hebrews. He encountered this way of obedience in meditating on the life and death of Jesus Christ. He may have experienced it himself.

Although [Jesus] was a Son [this writer says],
 He learned *obedience* through what he suffered;
 And having been made perfect,
 He became the source of eternal salvation
 For all who *obey* him...

According to New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson,⁶ the writer uses a word-play in this passage. In the original Greek,

- "To learn" is the word *mathein*
- "To suffer" is *pathein*.
- The writer is saying "to learn is to suffer" and "to suffer is to learn."

To be clear:

- The writer is not saying that God sends suffering so we can learn. God is not a divine sadist, one who tortures us into submissiveness or enlightenment.
- Neither is the writer saying that Christ only became "divine" through the obedience he learned through suffering. In Hebrews, as elsewhere in the New Testament, Christ is the divine Son of God from the beginning.

What the writer is doing through this word/play is reminding us that pain and suffering – as negative as they are – can *deepen* our obedience as they *deepened* Christ's obedience:

Even though Christ was God's divine Son, even though he was unique in the union of his divinity and humanity, "he [still] learned obedience through what he suffered." The learning he took from his suffering was the learning of deeper

⁴ Ruth 1.

⁵ Mark 1:16-20.

⁶ The following material is found in Luke Timothy Johnson *Hebrews: The New Testament Library* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2006), 148-150. It is included in Clayton's paper.

obedience, and it qualified him even more than he was qualified by virtue of who he was to be the “source of eternal salvation for all who *obey* him.”

This is quite a claim for the writer to make:

- Jesus learned deeper obedience from his suffering.
- Obeying him, we can learn deeper obedience from our suffering as well.
- He learned – and we can learn – *deeper obedience* through our suffering.

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In one of the most jarring and convoluted short stories I have ever read, a middle-age woman goes through a series of manipulative and destructive relationships before she finally finds peace through a garden she builds by night “on the far northwest corner” of the property on which she lives.

Her story – called simply “The Story”⁷ – is hard to follow. But it is written to be that way, because it mirrors the suffering of her life – the death of her infant son when she was in her twenties in graduate school – and the long road on which she has walked to find meaning – perhaps even obedience – ever since.

Once she builds the garden, she is able to tell us, the reader, the story of her suffering clearly:

My own self is buried in Altabates Hospital, still between the sheet and the mattress of [my son’s] peach plastic Isolette, twisted around the tubes that wove in and out of him like translucent vines, trapped inside that giant ventilator, four times Eddie’s size without being of any use to him or his little lungs.

As gut-wrenching as her story is, it has become a clear story because of what she has learned over the many years she has dealt with her son’s death.

I have made the best and happiest ending that I can, in this world [she says]...

She acknowledges that she has made this ending

...out of the flex and netting and leftover trim of someone else’s life...

But she concludes with a clear defense, a clear sense of purpose:

I made it as the world should be and not as I have found it.

The road this woman has travelled, the destructive and manipulative relationships, the confusion, do not embody all that Jesus Christ offers us when we take the awful suffering that comes our way and learn a deeper obedience from it. But her final words, her words of resolution, are words

I believe we can affirm as Christian:

I made the world as it should be
And not as I have found it.

This is the suffering Jesus experienced.

In the days of his flesh,
Jesus offered up prayers and supplications,
With loud cries and tears...

This is the obedience Jesus deepened:

... and he was heard because of his reverent submission.

His familiarity with suffering, the strength he can provide us in and through our own suffering, is one reason it is worth our giving our lives to him, giving in a way that the word “obedience” captures as well as any other word we might choose.

Amen.

⁷ Amy Bloom, “The Story,” in *The Best American Short Stories 2000*, edited by E. L. Doctorow (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 12-22/