

"Living As Children of God"

Philippians 2:1-18

September 25, 2011

15th Sunday After Pentecost

Obedience is part of being a child. This may not be popular (especially among children), but it is true. It is part of the 4th Commandment's command, "Honor your father and your mother." It is recognized as common sense by every culture, including our own. The question, whether it's raised in a religious setting or a secular setting, is not *whether* a child should obey, but *how* this obedience is brought about.

The first thing that should be noted is that obedience is not required to make you a member of the family. In other words, you don't "try out" to be your parents' son or daughter by being good. You join the family by being born into it. You didn't choose to be a son or daughter for your parents. You could say that it is entirely a matter of grace. God put you into your family, entirely apart from your own choice and prior to any obedience on your part, by virtue of your birth.

The second thing that should be noted is that obedience is expected of you as a child in your family. Your parents give birth to you and give you life. It is then up to you as to how you live your life and what you do with it – whether you obey or not obey your parents. It's up to you to work that out.

But obedience is often a difficult thing. To be honest, children often don't want to obey their parents. They think only of themselves – their wants and their needs. Sometimes, children just won't obey their parents. At times, it's as if they can't obey their parents. This causes great conflict within families. This disobedience can fracture and even shatter relationships between parents and children.

So, what's the answer? How can we get children to obey? That's the \$64,000 question. Medicine, counseling, punishment, and other methods have been attempted with varying success. If I knew the answer to that question, I could write a book and make millions. However, although I don't

have the answer regarding the obedience of earthly children to their earthly parents, I do have what the Word of God says regarding the obedience of the children of God.

Regarding obedience as children of God, people usually understand this in one of two ways. Some people think that you have to exhibit some sort of obedience in order to become children of God. Whether it's the obedience of doing good works or the obedience of deciding to believe and trust in Jesus, some obedience is required for you to enter the family of God.

But this is not true. Like becoming a member of a natural family, obedience is not a prerequisite for membership in the family of God. It is true that sin keeps you out of the family of God, but obedience does not get you into the family of God. Like a natural family, you are born into the family of God without you choosing it or meriting it. In Holy Baptism, you were born as a child of God. Applied to you through the water and the Word of God were the benefits earned by Jesus Christ: forgiveness for all of your sin, new life, and a place in the family of God as His dear son or daughter. You are "in Christ". You are saved.

What about obedience as children of God? The second way people look at obedience of the children of God is that it is no longer required since we are forgiven and are saved. To say that God does not expect obedience from His children is as wrong as saying He requires obedience for you to become His children. God wants and expects His children to obey Him, their loving Heavenly Father.

But obedience is hard for us. Let's be honest, as sinful human beings, we don't want to obey God. We say we do. And maybe we think we do. But that lasts only as long as our will coincides with God's will. But, when our will conflicts with God's will – when God's will means doing something we don't want to do or not doing something we want to do, that changes. We are all about us. We look out for our own needs and priorities. We do what we want to do.

Even if we really want to be obedient to God, it doesn't work. Do you try your hardest? Do you fail? We find ourselves echoing St. Paul's lament in Romans 7: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do....For I have the desire to do what is good, but I

cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.” (Rom. 7:15,18-19)

So, what do we do? In our text, Paul gives us the answer. He says to the Philippians (and to us), “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” Notice he doesn’t say “Save yourself!” Many have misunderstood him to be saying that. Nothing could be further from the truth. Paul is the one who wrote, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.” (Eph. 2:8-9) You are already saved through faith by grace for Christ’s sake. However, just as you receive life as a gift from your parents and then are expected to work out that life in obedience to your parents, so also you have received your salvation as a gift from God and are expected by God to work out that salvation in obedience to God in order to bring it to completion.

Think about that. You and I are to use our gift of salvation wisely – to obey God and serve our neighbor – and bring it safely to completion. No wonder he says that it will be done with “fear and trembling”. That seems to be a very difficult – some would say impossible – task.

But, immediately after giving this command, Paul goes on to give us the solution. He says, “for it is God who works in you to, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” What God commands for us, He works in us.

God works in us to will – that is, to desire – His good pleasure. He literally changes our will to conform to His. By being “in Christ”, we have the mind of Christ – the mind that is humble and obedient. As our text says, Christ “made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

With that kind of mind, let God’s Spirit change your attitude. As Paul encourages his readers, I encourage you, “complete my joy by being of the same mind, have the same love, being full accord and of one mind.” This doesn’t mean that we all have to think the same thing or agree on everything,

but it does mean a common disposition to work together to serve one another while loving one another deeply.

To carry that out, God also works in us to work – that is, to accomplish – His good pleasure. He works in us by living through us to bring about obedience to His will. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” (Gal. 2:20)

Use that humble attitude of Christ to live a Christ-like life of humble service. As St. Paul says, “Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” When you count others as more significant than yourselves (as Christ did), I believe the rivalry and conceit will vanish. You will not look out just for your own wants and needs (there’s nothing sinful about that), but you will also look out for the wants and needs of others, too.

St. Paul goes on, “Do all things without grumbling that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish.” It’s more than simply doing these things, but doing them sincerely and joyfully, showing wholehearted, unmixed devotion to God’s will. Think of how our life together here and the ministry for the Lord could be if we work out our salvation by God working in us and through us – by changing our attitude to be like His so that our lives would be changed to be more like His. It would be a joy to be here together with an eagerness to serve. We might have a shortage of ways to serve, rather than the shortage of servants as is too often the case.

How do we take advantage of this? “If God is the One who works in us both the willing and the working, then we Christians must ever go to God whose continuous grace will move us to will and to translate the willing into deeds.” (Lenski, p.799) That’s not a hard thing to do. God makes Himself available to us and abundantly offers that grace to us as we “hold fast to the word of life.” “The means of grace renew and increase our hold on salvation for the gospel is the power of God for salvation.” (Lenski, p.298) His Word, as we hear it, sing it, and pray in the Divine Service and as it

came to us in Holy Baptism and comes to us in Holy Communion will give us the grace that forgives our sins, strengthens our faith, and transforms our lives by the working of God within us.

One important aspect of any good book or movie for many people is a “happy ending.” If a story has been happy, a sad ending will ruin it. If a story has been sad or difficult, a happy ending will redeem it. For many who are not children of God, their happy lives will be ruined by a sad ending as they continue their separation from God for all eternity. For those of us who are children of God, life is often sad and it is difficult to be obedient to Him in a world and a culture which so strongly oppose us. We are tempted to be disobedient in order to serve our sinful flesh or just to “get along” with others. We worry about our ability to be obedient even with God working in us to will and to work His will. But there is a happy ending which St. Paul gives to the Philippians early in his letter and which is for us, as well: I am “confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 1:6) Amen