

# Constructing The Topical Sermon

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The construction of the topical sermon can be divided into four or five stages, four for the detailed outlined sermon and five for the manuscript sermon. Each preacher must develop an approach to sermon building which fits him and his situation, but his approach should touch the bases of genuine preparation which produce true gospel preaching. The following approach is sound in the preparation demanded and in the structure which it involves. If this plan is followed carefully, adequate preparation will most likely be made for preaching the topical sermon, and the danger of lifting verses from their contexts will be averted.

The weakness of the topical sermon is that passages from various places of the Bible are used to prove points or truths presented. Unless the preacher recognizes or acknowledges the context and function of each verse he uses, he is open to wresting the Scriptures and using verses to prove thoughts they were never written to prove.

This practical plan will illustrate the different stages a topical sermon passes through before it reaches the delivery stage. While it is not the only procedure that can be used in building a topical sermon, it is one which is worthy of consideration.

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## A PRELIMINARY FACTUAL DATA SHEET<sup>1</sup> (FOR A TOPICAL SERMON)

A WORKSHEET FOR BRAINSTORMING

**The subject:**

Obedience

**The theme:**

What is acceptable obedience?

Can we actually obey God?

How does salvation by grace harmonize with obedience to God?

**Possible proposition:**

You must obey God.

You can obey God.

Obedience to God brings many blessings.

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<sup>1</sup>Charles W. Koller refers to this worksheet as "a preliminary factual data sheet." It is simply a worksheet which contains the brainstorming which has been done concerning a topic or a sermon idea. Possible approaches or directions for a topic plus possible content matter are recorded for reference for the actual construction of the sermon. It can be used to produce the sermon idea, or it can be used as a preliminary stage of developing the sermon idea into a full-fledged sermon.

**Possible approaches to (or directions for) the topic:**

What are the characteristics of acceptable obedience?

1. Obedience from the heart
2. Obedience that honestly and conscientiously tries to do God's will
3. Obedience that trusts Jesus for salvation

How do we obey God?

1. By giving God our hearts
2. By doing our best to do what He says
3. By trusting Jesus to save us

Why should we obey God?

1. For pardon
2. For peace
3. For power
4. For His presence
5. For the prospect of heaven

Does God demand obedience?

1. Express statements prove that He does
2. Examples prove that He does
3. Inferences prove that He does

**Possible Scriptures (and/or contexts) to use:**

1 Samuel 15, Saul. Context: Saul being rejected as king

1 Kings 13, the prophet of Judah. Context: Jeroboam being rebuked

Jonah, running from God. Context: Jonah and God's love for Nineveh

Jesus as pictured in the garden (Matthew 26).  
Context: Jesus struggling in prayer before the cross

Jesus as pictured in Philippians 2. Context: Humility between Christians

Matthew 15:9. Context: Religious tradition versus God's commands

2 Chronicles 16:9. Context: Asa's rebuke for relying on man instead of God

Ephesians 2. Context: A before and after discussion of salvation

Titus 3:5. Context: Another before and after

passage

**Possible illustrations:**

The prophet of Judah is destroyed because he failed to obey (1 Kings 13).

An imaginary story is told of a Christian man who died and was standing before the bar of judgment. He was asked by the Judge of all the earth, "What do you have to say for yourself?" The Christian man listed his good traits. The eternal Judge said, "You need 100 points to be eternally saved. What you have just told Me adds up to merely 1 point. You need 99 more points for Me to let you into heaven." The Christian man responded with despair, "May You have mercy upon my soul" To his desperate cry the Judge replied, "Your acknowledgment of a need for mercy is worth 99 points."

A boy was made to sit in the corner for his meanness. He said to his mother. "I may be sitting down on the outside, but I am standing up on the inside."

A farmer father wrote his will for his boys. His will stated: Field #1 is to be used for growing wheat, field #2 is to be used for growing barley, and field #3 is to be used for growing corn. Upon his death, the sons went to carry out his will. They decided to grow wheat in field #1 and barley in field #2, but they decided to grow cotton in #3. How many times did they obey their father's will? Not one time! When his will harmonized with theirs, they obeyed it, but the first time their father's will conflicted with theirs, they went on doing their own will.

A young man was swept up in the great Johnstown flood. As the water rushed down upon the city, he was caught outside. He looked up at his parents who had gone upstairs in their house and were looking out the window at him. In a split second, they told him to climb upon the roof of a nearby building. He had cultivated the spirit of obeying them without question. They could see the onrushing water, and from his vantage point he could not. He obeyed them immediately and was saved. He was saved by obedience.

Noah found grace in God's sight but had to obey by building the ark.

**Possible ideas which may need to be included:**

Show the place of the intent of the heart

Show that perfection is not required, but this does not give a license for disobedience

Show the place of grace in God's demand of obedience

Show God demands obedience

**Possible applications:**

In becoming a Christian  
In coming back to the Lord  
In daily living for Christ  
For peace  
For assurance of salvation

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**THE GIST OF THE SERMON<sup>2</sup>  
(FOR THE PRELIMINARY STAGES  
OF SERMON CONSTRUCTION)****A TOPICAL SERMON IDEA****Subject:**

Obedience

**Theme:**

The Characteristics of the Obedience God  
Accepts

**Title:**

The Obedience God Requires

**Proposition:**

You can render acceptable obedience to God.

**Interrogative Question (or Probing Question):**

What?

**Key Word:**

Characteristics

**Sermonic Objective:**

(Evangelistic) To motivate non-Christians  
and Christians to manifest acceptable obedience  
to God.

**Major Points:**

- I. An Obedience That Involves a Devoted  
Attitude
- II. An Obedience That Involves an Honest  
Attempt
- III. An Obedience That Involves a Sincere  
Acknowledgment

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<sup>2</sup>The gist of the sermon or the sermon idea is really nothing more than the foundational elements of the sermon written down in a logical order. The sermon idea should be a natural outgrowth of the brainstorming which is recorded on the factual data worksheet. The sermon idea shows the proposition, its divisions, and the type of sermon to be constructed.

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**A DETAILED OUTLINE<sup>3</sup>  
(FOR THE PREACHER'S STUDY)  
THE OBEDIENCE GOD REQUIRES****INTRODUCTION**

- A. (Introductory Theme) Saul, through self-centeredness, failed the test of obedience to God.
- B. (Outlined Portion) Somebody has said, "A man all wrapped up in himself makes a very small package."
  1. It was said of Edith, "Edith was bounded on the north by Edith, bounded on the east by Edith, bounded on the south by Edith, and bounded on the west by Edith." The only person in Edith's life was Edith.
  2. Some people live for themselves and for none beside, as if the Lord had never lived, as if He has never died.
  3. The shortest route to destruction is the road of self-centeredness.
  4. By the time we get to 1 Samuel 15, Saul, the first king of Israel, has become selfish and self-willed. He is headstrong and full of pride.
  5. He cannot pass the test of obedience to God.
  6. Relate the story of Saul in 1 Samuel 15.
    - a. God instructed Saul to destroy the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15).
    - b. God had announced that they were under the ban four hundred years before (Exodus 17:14; Numbers 24:20; Deuteronomy 25:17-19).
    - c. Saul, however, did not completely obey the Lord. He saved alive Agag, the Amalekite king, along with other Amalekites, and some choice cattle and sheep.

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<sup>3</sup>The detailed outline includes all the foundational and functional elements of the sermon. It is helpful to label at the least the functional elements. This kind of outline is for use in the preacher's study as he thinks through the structure of the sermon. It is not the outline which is designed for the pulpit.

d. Samuel uttered the classic Old Testament value-statement concerning obedience to Saul (1 Samuel 15:22, 23).

C. (Sermonic Explanation) This incident from the life of Saul clearly indicates that obedience to God is required.

1. But let us raise a significant question regarding obedience to God: "Can we actually obey God?"
2. Man's response to God is always flawed; the service we render to God is always imperfect.
3. Is God's standard of obedience so high that no man can attain it? Is it possible to obey God?
4. When we understand the kind of obedience God wants, we will find the answer to this question.
5. What kind of obedience does God want?

(Transitional Sentence) The first characteristic of acceptable obedience is a devoted attitude.

#### I. A DEVOTED ATTITUDE

A. (Clarification/Restatement) God desires an obedience which springs from spiritual attitudes or a committed heart.

B. (Explanation/Argumentation) Vital to our relationship with God is the commitment of our hearts to Him.

1. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees and the scribes of His day because they had "voluntary" heart trouble (Matthew 15:8, 9).
2. Jesus summarized our response to God to the inquiring lawyer (Matthew 22:37).
3. God receives and blesses obedient actions which flow from a dedicated heart (2 Chronicles 16:9).

C. (Illustration/Common Sense) Any beautiful act of service is robbed of its meaning and significance if our hearts are not in it.

1. Can you picture a husband bringing his wife a dozen roses on her birthday

out of mere duty? He hands her the lovely flowers, and she becomes ecstatic. She bubbles with joy as she says, "Thank you so much. They're so beautiful. You've been very thoughtful," only to hear him say, "No problem. I believed it was my duty to do something for your birthday since you're my wife. So I just got some flowers. I don't know how I'm going to pay for them, but I knew I should do something. Husbands are required to do something for their wives when they have a birthday, you know." How heartless! He might as well have given her weeds, for her recognition that his heart was missing from the gift turned the lovely roses into weeds. No heart, no gift!

2. When the prodigal returned to his father from the far country, he had only one thing to give his father—his heart! After giving his father his heart in love and devotion, his father would accept the use of his talents and abilities on the farm.

D. (Application/Evangelistic) Conversion to Christ begins with giving our hearts to God (Romans 6:17).

1. No restoration to Christ can occur unless the heart is rededicated to Christ (Acts 8:20-22).
2. Obedience to Christ will not be accepted unless it emanates from a heart devoted to Christ.

(Transitional Sentence) The second characteristic of the obedience God wants is an honest attempt to do what the Lord has said.

#### II. AN HONEST ATTEMPT

A. (Clarification/Restatement) Acceptable obedience to God includes the specific action of an honest attempt to do God's will.

1. God wants His will carried out.
2. He told Saul to destroy the Amalekites. He wanted that command carried out.

B. (Explanation/ Argumentation) Our salvation hinges upon our doing the will of God (Matthew 7:21).

1. We are saved by grace through faith, but obedience is encompassed in that faith (Hebrews 5:8, 9).
2. Jesus did not come into this world to talk about loving God while doing whatever He wanted to do (Philippians 2:8).
3. True obedience involves specific action.

C. (Illustration/ Historical) As an integral part of the Reformation, Martin Luther said, "We will do nothing which the Bible expressly condemns." His approach to the Scriptures for authority in religion was revolutionary. But Luther did not go far enough. His approach to Scripture leaves out an element of obedience. When the Restoration got started in America and other places, it soon voiced the approach, "We will do nothing for which we do not have biblical authority."

1. The Restoration soon became predicated upon the premise that obedience to God involves making an honest attempt to do everything the Lord said to do.
2. A prophet of Judah was told by the Lord to go to Bethel and rebuke Jeroboam for his religious wickedness (1 Kings 13). He was also told to come back another way and not to eat with anyone while in Bethel. That was what the Lord wanted him to do; the Lord was clear in His instructions. The prophet from Judah went with an old prophet and ate with him. Because of his disobedience, the prophet was later killed by a lion. God was clear in what He wanted the prophet to do. That was enough. It was up to the prophet to obey God.

D. (Application) God is clear in what He wants us to do.

1. True obedience to God issues forth in an honest attempt to do what God has

commanded.

2. Set your heart on doing what the Lord has asked.
3. You will grow in your knowledge of His will.
4. You will never render perfect obedience, but you will be making an honest attempt.

(Transitional Sentence) The third characteristic of acceptable obedience is a sincere acknowledgment that we are saved by grace.

### III. A SINCERE ACKNOWLEDGMENT

A. (Clarification/ Restatement) Acceptable obedience includes a sincere acknowledgment that we are saved by God's grace, not by perfect obedience. We must remember that we cannot earn salvation.

B. (Explanation/ Argumentation) One of the paramount teachings of the New Testament has to be salvation by God's grace.

1. Paul affirmed that grace is the source of salvation (Ephesians 2:8, 9).
2. Salvation begins and ends with God, not man (Ephesians 2:4, 5).
3. Grace actually surrounds the Christian's life.
  - (a) He is saved by grace (Ephesians 2:8).
  - (b) He stands in grace (Ephesians 2:6).
  - (c) He is stimulated by grace to do good works (Ephesians 2:10).
  - (d) His only eternal security is grace (1 John 5:13).
  - (e) He has accepted God's grace in his initial gospel obedience (Romans 3:24).
  - (f) He appropriates God's grace daily as he lives his life for Christ (1 John 1:7).
  - (g) He anticipates eternal grace as he looks for the return of Jesus (Titus 2:11-14).

C. (Illustration/ Argumentation) An imaginary story is told of a Christian man who

died and was standing before the bar of judgment. He was asked by the Judge of all the earth, "What do you have to say for yourself?" The Christian man listed his good traits. The eternal Judge said, "You need 100 points to be eternally saved. What you have just told Me adds up to merely 1 point. You need 99 more points for Me to let you into heaven." The Christian man responded with despair, "May You have mercy upon my soul" To his desperate cry the Judge replied, "Your acknowledgment of a need for mercy is worth 99 points."

- D. (Application) Behind all that we do in obedience to Christ is the grateful appreciation of what God has done for us through His precious Son.
1. Trust Jesus to save you and honestly try to do His will.
  2. We do not obey Christ to merit salvation; we obey Christ to receive the gift of God's grace.

## CONCLUSION

- A. (Objective Sentence) You can render acceptable obedience.
- B. (Outlined Portion) What, then, is acceptable obedience to God?
1. (Summary) First, acceptable obedience involves the heart. Second, acceptable obedience calls for specific action as we honestly attempt to fulfill the Lord's will in our lives. Third, acceptable obedience contains a sincere acknowledgment that we are saved by grace and not by human merit.
  2. Obedience is one of the great themes of the Bible (Leviticus 10; Acts 5).
  3. Obedience opens the door to . . .
    - a. The Lord's pardon (Hebrews 5:9)
    - b. The Lord's peace (Isaiah 26:3)
    - c. The Lord's power (Joshua 1:7)
    - d. The Lord's presence (Proverbs 29:6)
    - e. The Lord's promise of heaven (Revelation 22:14)

- C. (Invitation) Have you obeyed God by becoming a Christian? Are you living as an obedient child of His?
1. The answers to these two questions will answer another question: "Are you standing in His grace?"
  2. Come today to obey Christ.

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## A BRIEF OUTLINE<sup>4</sup> (FOR USE IN THE PULPIT)

### THE OBEDIENCE GOD REQUIRES

#### INTRODUCTION

- A. Selfishness
- B. The story of Saul (1 Samuel 15)
- C. Can we obey God? What is acceptable obedience?

#### I. A DEVOTED ATTITUDE

- A. Heart must be in it.
  1. Matthew 15:7, 9
  2. Matthew 22:37
  3. 2 Chronicles 16:9
- B. Husband brings wife flowers out of duty.
- C. Heart is involved in gospel obedience and restoration.

#### II. AN HONEST ATTEMPT

- A. Must try to carry out His will.
  1. Matthew 7:21
  2. Hebrews 5:8, 9
- B. Compare Reformation and Restoration cries.
- C. Relate the story of 1 Kings 13.

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<sup>4</sup>A brief, easily read outline is much better for the pulpit than a detailed outline. A detailed outline is hard to read as one is preaching, while a brief outline can be read at a glance. A brief outline is adequate for pulpit use if the sermon has been properly prepared. The brief outline serves as merely a reminder of the major points and illustrations of the sermon.

D. Just honestly try to do what Jesus said.

### III. A SINCERE ACKNOWLEDGMENT

A. We are saved by grace.

1. Ephesians 2:8, 9
2. Ephesians 2:6

B. We are surrounded by grace.

C. The story of man before judgment bar.

D. Trust Jesus to save you, and do your best.

### CONCLUSION

A. Obedience is a great theme of the Bible.

B. Obedience opens the door to great blessings.

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## A MANUSCRIPT<sup>5</sup>

### THE OBEDIENCE GOD REQUIRES

Somebody has said, "A man all wrapped up in himself makes a very small package." It was said of Edith, "Edith was bounded on the north by Edith, bounded on the east by Edith, bounded on the south by Edith, and bounded on the west by Edith." The only person in Edith's life was Edith.

Some people live for themselves  
and for none beside,  
As if the Lord had never lived,  
as if He had never died.

The shortest route to destruction is the road of self-centeredness.

By the time we get to 1 Samuel 15, Saul, the first king of Israel, has become selfish and self-willed. He is headstrong and full of pride. Israel is facing hard times because the man who walks with the future and fortunes of the nation of Israel upon his shoulders has become so selfish that he cannot pass the test of obedience to God.

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<sup>5</sup>Very few preachers preach from a manuscript, but it is a good discipline to write out a sermon in manuscript form every so often. Writing out a sermon improves the preacher's writing ability and preserves his sermons for other uses such as publication in magazines and in book form.

God, through His prophet Samuel, instructed Saul to destroy the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15). These enemies of Israel had been under the ban of destruction for four hundred years. The reason they had been marked for destruction is given in Exodus 17: As Israel was coming out of Egyptian bondage and moving toward Mount Sinai, they were attacked repeatedly by the Amalekites in raid-like fashion. At this time it is estimated that Israel numbered over two million. Can you imagine two million people making their way through semi-desert regions with little organization and fresh out of bondage? The weak, aged, and infirm brought up the rear of the Israelite march. Unable to travel as fast as the others, they struggled to even move, much less keep up. Apparently, the Amalekites would run by these unfortunate ones, beating them up and robbing them of whatever they had. Finally, Moses took action. He asked Joshua to gather together some fighting men and engage the Amalekites in battle. Moses stationed himself on a nearby hill which overlooked the battlefield "with the staff of God in his hand." He lifted his hands toward heaven as an entreaty to God for help. When his hands grew weary and heavy, he sat down on a big rock while Aaron and Hur held up his hands. Thus entreated, God provided a victory for Israel. That day God devoted the Amalekites to destruction: "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Write this in a book as a memorial, and recite it to Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven'" (Exodus 17:14; see also Numbers 24:20; Deuteronomy 25:17-19).

Following Samuel's announcement of God's command to destroy the Amalekites, Saul gathered an army numbering 210,000 foot soldiers—10,000 coming from Judah and 200,000 coming from the eleven other tribes. Using the strategy of ambush, Saul defeated the Amalekites with the Lord's strength. Saul, however, did not completely obey the Lord. He saved alive Agag, the Amalekite king, along with other Amalekites and choice cattle and sheep. That night God spoke to Samuel and told him the tragic news that Saul had not carried out His word. Samuel, brokenhearted because the first king of Israel had failed the test of obedience, cried all night long.

Samuel met Saul at Gilgal. After greeting Samuel, Saul said, "I have carried out the com-

mand of the Lord.” Samuel responded to his greeting and affirmation with a question: “If you have obeyed the Lord, why do I hear cows mooing and sheep bleating?” Saul said, “Oh, that! The people wanted to save the best cattle and sheep for sacrificing to the Lord.” King Saul evidently turned to leave. Samuel said, “Wait and let me tell you what God said to me last night.” After rebuking Saul for his failure to obey God, Samuel uttered the classic Old Testament value-statement concerning obedience:

Has the Lord as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry. . . . (1 Samuel 15:22, 23).

Samuel informed Saul that God has rejected him that day as being king over Israel. Saul, crushed by his rejection, said, “I have sinned.” His confession, however, seems affected and superficial. Saul pleads with Samuel to walk away with him so the people will regard Samuel and Saul as still in fellowship and will not recognize the full import of Samuel’s rebuke. Samuel does walk back with him, but from that day forward Saul is rejected of the Lord and Samuel never comes to see Saul again; Following chapter 15, the inspired writer immediately records the anointing of David, the departure of the Spirit from Saul, and the coming of an evil spirit into the life of Saul to terrorize him (1 Samuel 16:1-14). Saul had disobeyed God, and terrible results would follow.

This incident from the life of Saul clearly indicates that obedience to God is required. But let us raise a significant question regarding obedience to God: “Can we actually obey God?” Man’s response to God is always flawed; the service we render to God is always imperfect. Is God’s standard of obedience so high that no man can attain it? Is it possible to obey God?

When we understand the kind of obedience God wants, we will find the answer to this question. What kind of obedience does God want? What are the characteristics of acceptable obedience?

### **A DEVOTED ATTITUDE**

God desires an obedience which springs from spiritual attitudes or a committed heart. Obe-

dience which does not involve the heart is not obedience at all. God does not want robots—He wants loving children!

Vital to our relationship with God is the commitment of our hearts to Him. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees and the scribes of His day because they had “voluntary” heart trouble. He said, “This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me” (Matthew 15:8). These people had not kept their hearts truly committed to God even though they had been keeping all kinds of religious rules and time-worn traditions. Their feverish activities were not pleasing to God. Jesus said, “But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men” (Matthew 15:9).

Jesus summarized our response to God by saying to the inquiring lawyer, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37). God receives and blesses obedient actions which flow from a dedicated heart: “For the eyes of the Lord move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His. . . .” (2 Chronicles 16:9).

Any beautiful act of service is robbed of its meaning and significance if our hearts are not in it. Can you picture a husband bringing his wife a dozen roses on her birthday out of mere duty? He hands her the lovely flowers, and she becomes ecstatic. She bubbles with joy as she says, “Thank you so much. They’re so beautiful. You’ve been very thoughtful,” only to hear him say, “No problem. I believed it was my duty to do something for your birthday since you’re my wife. So I just got some flowers. I don’t know how I’m going to pay for them, but I knew I should do something. Husbands are required to do something for their wives when they have a birthday, you know.” How heartless! He might as well have given her weeds, for her recognition that his heart was missing from the gift turned the roses into weeds. No heart, no gift!

When the prodigal returned to his father from the far country, he had only one thing to give his father. He had no money—he has spent it. He had no worthwhile accomplishments—he had made a mess out of his life. He had no friends to present—they had forsaken him. He just had one thing to really give—his heart! After giving his father his heart in love and devotion,



his father would accept the use of his talents and abilities on the farm.

Conversion to Christ begins with giving our hearts to God (Romans 6:17). As we obey the gospel, our hearts are laid at the foot of the cross. No restoration to Christ can occur unless the heart is rededicated to Christ. Any daily Christian service must have behind it a committed attitude toward Christ. Obedience to Christ will not be accepted unless it emanates from a heart devoted to Christ.

### **AN HONEST ATTEMPT**

Acceptable obedience to God includes specific action of an honest attempt to do God's will. God wants His will carried out. He told Saul to destroy the Amalekites. He wanted that command carried out. Obedience means specific action.

Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). Our salvation hinges upon our doing the will of God. We are saved by grace through faith, but obedience is encompassed in that faith. The writer to the Hebrews said, "Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation" (Hebrews 5:8, 9). Jesus did not come into this world to talk about loving God while doing whatever He wanted to do. He gave Himself to specific action—the controlled action of carrying out His Father's will. Paul said of Jesus, "And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:8). True obedience involves specific action.

As an integral part of the Reformation, Martin Luther said, "We will do nothing which the Bible expressly condemns." His approach to the Scriptures for authority in religion was revolutionary. It shook the religious world of his day. But Luther did not go far enough. His approach to Scripture leaves out an element of obedience. When the Restoration got started in America and other places, it soon voiced the approach, "We will do nothing for which we do not have biblical authority." The Restoration soon became predicated upon the premise that obedience to God

involves making an honest attempt to do everything the Lord said to do. The principle of obedience is not, "We will refrain from doing what the Lord has expressly condemned." Such a view is important, but it is limited in its scope. The actual principle of obedience is this: "We will honestly attempt to do what the Lord has told us to do."

A prophet of Judah was told by the Lord to go to Bethel and rebuke Jeroboam for his religious wickedness (1 Kings 13). He was also told to come back another way and not to eat with anyone while in Bethel. That was what the Lord wanted him to do; the Lord was clear in His instructions. The prophet rebuked Jeroboam and even started back a different way. He was intercepted, however, by an old prophet who lived in Bethel. The old prophet lied to him, telling him that an angel had told him to bring him home with him for a meal. The prophet could have reasoned, "The Lord did not specifically say, 'Do not eat with a prophet from Bethel'" The prophet from Judah went with the old prophet and ate with him. Because of his disobedience, the prophet was later killed by a lion. God was clear in what He wanted the prophet to do. That was enough. It was up to the prophet to obey God.

God is clear in what He wants us to do. True obedience to God issues forth in an honest attempt to do what God has commanded. In order to be saved by God's grace, we must manifest faith which expresses itself in the specific action of doing God's will.

### **A SINCERE ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

Acceptable obedience includes a sincere acknowledgment that we are saved by God's grace, not by perfect obedience. We must remember that we cannot earn salvation by human perfection. We cannot render perfect obedience, but, even if we could, perfect obedience could not atone for the sins committed before we obeyed the gospel. A committed heart which is honestly doing God's will simply open up one's life for the constant reception of the grace of God.

One of the paramount teachings of the New Testament has to be salvation by God's grace, Paul affirmed that grace is the source of salvation: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast" (Ephesians 2:8, 9). Grace is the source of it,

and obedient faith is the avenue to it. We must acknowledge that salvation begins and ends with God, not man: "But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)" (Ephesians 2:4, 5).

Grace actually surrounds the Christian's life. He is saved by grace (Ephesians 2:8), he stands in grace (Ephesians 2:6), and he is stimulated by grace to do good works (Ephesians 2:10). His only eternal security is grace (1 John 5:13). He has accepted God's grace in his initial gospel obedience (Romans 3:24), he appropriates God's grace daily as he lives his life for Christ (1 John 1:7), and he anticipates eternal grace as he looks for the return of Jesus (Titus 2:11-14).

An imaginary story is told of a Christian man who died and was standing before the bar of judgment. He was asked by the Judge of all the earth, "What do you have to say for yourself?" The Christian man replied, "I have lived the majority of my earthly life as a Christian. I served for several years as an elder in the Lord's church. I have conducted numerous home Bible studies. My children grew up to become Christians and to marry Christians. I have always tried very hard to do what is right." The eternal Judge said, "You need 100 points to be eternally saved. What you have just told Me adds up to merely 1 point. You need 99 more points for Me to let you into heaven." The Christian man responded with despair, "May You have mercy upon my soul." To his desperate cry the Judge replied, "Your acknowledgment of a need for mercy is worth 99 points."

Behind all that we do in obedience to Christ is the grateful appreciation of what God has done for us through His precious Son. Without God's grace we are nothing and cannot be saved. Underlying our obedience to God is the sincere acknowledgment that we cannot earn salvation by our obedience but are saved by grace. We do not obey Christ to merit salvation; we obey Christ to receive the gift of God's grace.

## CONCLUSION

What, then, is acceptable obedience to God? First, acceptable obedience involves the heart. Obedience which does not proceed from a heart committed to God cannot be pleasing to God.

Second, acceptable obedience calls for specific action as we honestly attempt to fulfill the Lord's will in our lives. Obedience means obeying. Third, acceptable obedience contains a sincere acknowledgment that we are saved by grace and not by human merit.

Obedience opens the door for us to receive the Lord's pardon as we become Christians, the Lord's peace as we daily live for Christ, the Lord's power as we daily work for Christ, the Lord's presence as we worship Him, and the Lord's promise of heaven as we anticipate the future.

Have you obeyed God by becoming a Christian? Are you living as an obedient child of His? The answers to these two questions will answer another question: "Are you standing in His grace?"

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## ON PREACHING

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"Several years ago at a Bible camp in northern Minnesota, I watched beautiful little hummingbirds drinking a special solution from a feeder. They hovered and whirled about in fascinating maneuvers. The kind folk who fed these creatures advised me that great care must be taken to be sure the solution is not too weak, for then the hummingbirds would be weakened and perhaps unable to fly to their distant destinations in seasonal migration. Similar concern must be taken that preaching be richly biblical and faithful to the intent of the human and divine authors. Too thin a solution can cause a debilitating deprivation."

David L. Larsen  
*The Anatomy of Preaching*

"A young girl was asked: 'Whose preaching brought you to Christ?' 'It wasn't anybody's preaching; it was Aunt Mary's practicing,' she replied."

George Mueller

"Relevancy is certainly not the only issue in preaching, nor is it the most significant. More important than any other factor is that our sermons be rooted in biblical truth. But if our preaching is to get a hearing, it must first be pertinent."

Martin Thielen  
*Getting Ready for Sunday's Sermon*