

**“Is *Obedience* a Dirty Word?”**  
**Matthew 3:13–17**  
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In just over forty years of ministry, I have refused to perform only one marriage ceremony. It was years ago in another setting, and in our first planning meeting, the young man who was marrying a young woman in the church I served looked over the options for vows I had given the couple. With a clear look of disappointment, he said, “I don’t see anything here about the wife honoring and obeying her husband.”

Dana’s father called attention to the same issue after Ian and Brittany’s wedding, which I performed in Memphis last year, but he was kidding. “There’s one thing I didn’t hear,” he said, “Honor and obey.” I said, “In your marriage to Joann, which lasted over fifty years, how much of that time did *you* honor and *obey* her?” “Every single day!” he said with a smirk, thus confirming my suspicion that he was kidding.

But this young man was not kidding. Before telling him why these words were not included, I asked him why this was important to him. He said the only marriages that last, the only ones God blesses, are the ones where the wife obeys the husband. His parents were still together because his mother obeyed his father, even when he physically abused her, which he probably shouldn’t have done, he said... Probably? But she still obeyed, he said, that’s how marriage is supposed to work.

“But if you’re going to choke on the words...” he started to say, at which point, I interrupted him, saying, “Son, I’m not going to say the words at all nor is anyone else in our church.” I spent some time talking to him about healthy relationships, the overarching biblical desire for mutual love, even suggested counseling, but his mind was closed.

An Assemblies of God minister ended up marrying them, but even he refused to use this language. The mother of the bride thanked me profusely for not doing the wedding. “That girl hasn’t listened to anything her parents have said since she was fourteen years old,” she said, “The thought of her *obeying* that little boy is absurd!”

Obedience has almost become a dirty word, and for good reason. While we like our children and pets to obey certain rules; we all have to obey various laws; and in military life, adherence to a chain of command is critical; forced obedience based on gender is an unpleasant vestige of patriarchy, not a sacred principle. Furthermore, blind obedience to any other human being, organization, or system is dangerous. Thinking for ourselves is a good and noble thing.

Yet obedience to God, or at least our understanding of Divine intent, is another matter. When a woman being ordained in another setting balked at the idea of kneeling before any man, I understood her concern, but when we kneel for ordination, men *and* women offer words of blessing, and we're not really kneeling before them. We're kneeling before God, which seems appropriate.

There are reasons not to kneel, including bad knees, it's why we sit for ordination here, but it still makes sense that we are humble before God. It's not just that God is worthy of respect; we find our deepest joy in obedience to God's desire. In the film "Chariots of Fire" there is a scene in which Olympic sprinter and missionary Eric Liddell says, "I believe that God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast, and when I run, I feel his pleasure." Obedience to God is not an arbitrary act of compliance. It is an opening to joy.

This is a part of what is going on in the story we have read from Matthew about the baptism of Jesus. The question of why Jesus is baptized by John has been asked by many people over the millennia, beginning with John himself! John knows that Jesus is the central figure of a new faith, not him, and this is a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus doesn't have anything to be forgiven of, according to 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Hebrews 4:15.

So, why is Jesus baptized? Part of the answer lies in his need to be affirmed as God's beloved son, blessed and affirmed in a way that will encourage him, especially in those moments when he may be tempted to question his identity and calling. I have preached on this reality before. But there is another reason why Jesus feels a need to be baptized. He says, "For it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

In Matthew, righteousness is about being obedient to God. In Matthew 5:17, Jesus says he has come not to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfill them, to do what God desires, to be obedient to God. His willingness to be baptized is one act of such obedience. He is blessed in the water, and he is setting an example for others, but Jesus is also embracing his identity and calling. Baptism is an act of obedience to Divine intent, which is no small thing for Jesus, since this means the way of the cross, but it is the most fulfilling path for him.

This is at least a part of what baptism is for us. We are opening our lives more fully to God's love and making a commitment to follow Jesus in the ways of love and justice. We are claiming our true identity as beloved daughters and sons of God. We are making a commitment to the way of the cross. These are all good and noble things which demonstrate that there are times when *obedience* is not a dirty word. Following God's will is a good thing.

The first step lies in discerning what God's will is. We don't have to accept someone else's perspective on that, no matter how much scripture they quote, in or out of context, or how much conviction they express. It is God and God alone who deserves our obedience, and we each have to listen for what God desires. But once we have clarity about God's intent, faithfulness involves living in accordance with this intent, not simply knowing what it is.

In her book *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict*, Esther de Waal writes about the connection between listening and obeying. The Latin words *audire* and *oboedire*, to hear and to obey, have common roots. To hear really means to act upon what we have heard, she says, to see that the listening achieves its aim (p. 43). In everyday terminology, there are children who hear what their parents are saying, and there are children who *hear* their parents, really *hear* them. In other words, they do what they are asked or told to do.

Even canine children display varied responses. We have one German Shepherd who tries to do everything we ask him to do. If he has not obeyed some rule — for example, not jumping up on the bed — and he is caught, he gets down and looks remorseful. And then, we have another German Shepherd who either ignores us when she is corrected,

or looks at us as if to say, “I hear you talking, but why should that matter to me?” If she is forced to get off the bed, there is absolutely no sign of remorse, just an indignant look of having been inappropriately inconvenienced! Obedience involves acting upon what we hear, especially when it comes to what we hear from God.

But it is important to note that in scripture, righteousness is about more than obeying commands and following rules. It is a relational concept. It is about trust in God, trust that what God desires for us is not arbitrary but the best we can experience. In Genesis 15:6, Abraham believes the Lord and it is reckoned to him as *righteousness*. It is not a matter of moral perfection. Abraham is not perfect. But he does trust God, and because of this trust, he tries his best to follow God’s call. That is righteousness, and that is what Jesus seeks in baptism.

It is what we seek too. We want to live as God would have us to, ever imperfectly, in the context of grace, but our desire is grounded in a basic trust in God, a trust shaped by an intimate relationship, a trust that when we do God’s will, we will know God’s pleasure and our deepest joy. We express this trust in many ways, beginning with baptism.

In his book *We Are Still Married*, Garrison Keillor includes this witty, poetic reflection on obedience (p. 236).

There was a boy whose name was Jim  
And although life was good to him  
And gave him home and food and love,  
He thought that it was not enough.  
That it was time for him to do  
Those things that he’d been told not to.

‘I am ten and must be free  
To enjoy what’s been denied to me,  
And I shall do it all,’ he said.  
‘I’ll spread some black dirt on my bread,  
And spill food on my Sunday clothes  
And I shall put beans up my nose.’

Everything that to this kid  
His Mom said, 'Don't,' he went and did.  
He gulped his sandwich, dragged his feet,  
Threw bags of garbage in the street,  
Leaned out windows, ran down halls,  
And wrote exciting words on walls.

Until at last, at half past two,  
He could not think of more to do.  
Anger, gluttony, and pride -  
He'd drunk and smoked and cursed and lied,  
Stuck out his tongue, dropped his britches,  
And shoved old ladies into ditches  
And other things good folk condemn —  
He'd done it all by 3:00 P.M.,  
And satisfied his appetite:  
Now what was there to do that night?

That's the way we often think about obedience, and not just when we are children. Rules restrict life, rule makers are killjoys, we want to be free to go our own way. And as we have said, some demands for obedience are unhealthy. But most rules have a purpose, like — don't run in front of a car — surely God's rules do, they are guides and boundaries to protect and enrich life, not restrict or deflate it. And faithfulness doesn't begin here anyway. It begins with our relationship with God, our basic trust in God to want the best for us.

We may still have at best mixed feelings about the word *obedience*. It has been used to manipulate, control, and demean. But it isn't always a dirty word, especially when used in reference to God. That kind of obedience is life-giving, an opening to joy, the best path we can choose.