

Obedience and Conscience

By Prof. Christopher Klofft

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Readings: Isaiah 8.23-9.3; 1 Corinthians 1.10-13,17; Matthew 4.12-23

“You had one job!”

This common modern expression is often used when someone fails at the single simple task they were assigned, often with costly results. It seems then that this would also be an apropos statement to apply to the life of faithful obedience to Christ. As human beings who are sinners, yet who are also made in the image and likeness of God, this faithfulness really is our one job, and if we fail to take it seriously, the results may be eternally costly.

Moral Muscle Memory

Athletes, musicians, and anyone else who masters a physical skill are aware of the idea of muscle memory: by repeating the same action over and over, the person’s ability to perform it becomes seemingly automatic and effortless. Knowing the goal of the moral life - that is, to be fully human as God made us - should help us to see our moral-decision making process as smooth and easy. The “muscle” we need to work on in this case is our conscience – the inner impulse that leads us to make the right decision.

The Church teaches us that we are morally obligated to follow our conscience, because she teaches that our conscience is God’s Spirit operative within us, moving us to become the persons we’re supposed to be. But we all know that sometimes it seems that even when we do follow our conscience, we still make the wrong choice. This is because not only do we need to *follow* our conscience, but we also have an obligation to properly *form* our conscience. We must exercise this moral muscle so that we can achieve moral muscle memory. In order to do this, we must learn to think from the heart of the Church, which is exactly what the scripture readings today enjoin us to do.

Freed to be Light

The reading from Isaiah today is a messianic prophecy, but it was also a prophecy of promise in its particular historical context. King Hezekiah, one of the few “good kings” of Israel during the period of the monarchy, sought to re-unite the northern and southern kingdoms of God’s people, which had become split several generations before.

God likewise always seeks to re-unite us with Himself. The whole reason for the Incarnation was to fulfill a rescue mission for those who had wandered away from the source of their joy. While this mission succeeded on the Cross, it is still up to us to accept this victory. One prominent way in which we demonstrate our acceptance of Christ’s victory is through the moral life.

Living the life of holiness to which we are called can sometimes seem like a heavy burden to us. In this passage, the prophet talks about a life of gloom and darkness. Sometimes this is because our selfishness makes it difficult to do what is right, but sometimes it’s just hard even to know the right thing to do. This is why we must follow our conscience. When we do so, our yoke is smashed and our burden relieved.

Isaiah also uses the image of a great light. This light can be likened to the teaching of the Church. In our moral lives, where once there was the darkness of confusion or ignorance, following a well-formed conscience provides understanding and a clear direction. The prophet then tells us that we will find “abundant joy” and “great rejoicing.” This sounds like an excellent incentive! Unfortunately, it’s often difficult to get out of the way and let God work in us, as Paul found with the people in Corinth.

To Whom Do You Belong?

In the young Christian community at Corinth, there were arguments about status in the Church. The people there thought that the value or power of their baptism was conditioned by the prestige of the one who had baptized them. As a result, the community was fractured, just as God’s people were fractured in the reading from Isaiah.

It’s not at all surprising that human beings prefer to see things in a way that most benefits them rather than the way things really are. We chafe at the idea that we are being told what to do, always confident that we know best. Or we at least want to have the choice to obey whom we want to obey, rather than feel that an authority has been imposed on us. Such was the case with the Christians of Corinth. They wanted to see themselves in a way that favored them, rather than recognizing that they all were under the authority of the one Christ.

It was not enough for Paul simply to clarify this for them. At the end of this passage and in the chapters that follow, he reveals that the way of the Cross – that is to say, the way of obedience unto death – is foolishness by the standards of the world, but for those who are in Christ, being obedient is following the wisdom of God. Going against the standards of the world can often be difficult, even when we know it’s the right thing to do. Yet, if we want to live in peace with the way things really are, we have to put aside our illusions about ourselves and the way we might want the world to be and instead be obedient to the teachings of Christ and his Church. Fortunately, the story of the Church is filled with examples for us to follow, including the apostles in today’s Gospel reading.

Listening to the One Who Calls Us

The word “obedience” comes to us from the Latin *ob audire*, literally “to listen to.” To be obedient is to listen. We can see how this plays out in today’s Gospel reading. The beginning of this passage reiterates the same prophecy from Isaiah. In Matthew’s text, however, he is using the prophecy to describe the beginning of Jesus’ ministry in Galilee, the same northern region mentioned by the prophet. This connection with our first reading sets the stage for what is to follow.

At the beginning of Jesus’ proclamation of the Kingdom, he encounters Simon and Andrew, and then James and John, all fishermen hard at work. Jesus says a simple phrase to them: “Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.” In response to both of the invitations, the text uses similar language: they left “immediately,” “at once.” This demonstrates for us the obedience of faith. Jesus speaks and they follow. They didn’t selfishly ponder whether this call was the “best” choice for them or what they would be giving up to go after this man. They simply followed. Of course, what came next was not at all easy for the men! But their decision brought them peace and eternal joy. Voices in the world constantly call us to make choices according to one standard or another, but there is only one standard that matters: the way put forth by the One who loved us into being and made himself known through his Mystical Body.

Walking Forward Lightly in Light

The Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, has the responsibility to teach us and call us to faithful obedience. An important part of our response is the formation of a good conscience, so that we might live a good life. This must be done in fidelity to the teachings of the Church; it is not something that can be determined by any other standard, unless we want to remain fractured in ourselves and potentially alienated from the source of life. When we listen and follow faithfully, we walk in the light, with the burden of decision-making made easier by the confidence that we are seeing things as they really are, not as we want to see them. As a result, we cooperate with the grace of God in order to accomplish the “one job” for which we were created: to be fully human.

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For Further Reading

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church, ## [1776-1802](#)*
- *Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI), "[Conscience and Truth](#)"*
- *Janet Smith, "[Obedience vs. Conscience](#)"*

In Short . . .

- *The Church teaches the necessity of following one's conscience. Yet, the conscience must be properly formed in the truth.*
- *The properly educated conscience gives one freedom and peace of heart.*
- *Obeying the teachings of Christ and his Church is essential for the formation of conscience and the living of a holy life.*
- *We all are called to divine union through obedience to - "listening to" - Christ.*
- *In obeying Christ, we become more fully human and more fully members of the Mystical Body of Christ.*