

Motives for Obedience to God in the Christian Life

by Wayne A. Grudem

Why should Christians obey God? Most believers would think of the first reason listed below: We should obey God because we love Him.

Of course this is true, but we might be surprised to see how many more ways God uses to motivate us to obedience. Here is a list of thirteen of those motives, drawn from various parts of the New Testament:

1. We should obey God because we love Him and desire to please Him.

Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15) and, "Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me" (John 14:21) If we want to know what it means to love God, John tells us, "This is the love of God, that we keep his commandments." (1 John 5:3)

2. We should obey God in order to keep a clear conscience before him.

Paul says we are to be subject to the government not only to avoid punishment but also "for the sake of conscience." (Rom. 13:5) In practical terms, this means I have to be honest in reporting even cash income, and I have to pay the toll at night when I pass through an unattended toll booth, and I have to obey copyright law when making photocopies, not just for fear of being caught and punished, but also to keep a clear conscience before God. Paul wanted his hearers' lives to be full of the kind of love that issued from "a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith." (1 Tim. 1:5) Paul himself said that he served God "with a clear conscience." (2 Tim. 1:3) When we pray, a clear conscience gives us confidence before God, because John said, "If our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God, and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him." (1 John 3:21-22)

3. We should obey God because we each want to be a "vessel for honorable use" (2 Timothy 2:20-21) and have increased effectiveness in the work of the kingdom.

Paul says we are like the different kinds of dishes and pots in a large house: "Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work." (2 Tim. 2:20-21)

Paul wants us to ask ourselves, which kind of vessel do I want to be in God's kingdom? If, as a Christian, I fill my mind and heart with "dishonorable" things before God, I can expect to be like a vessel for "dishonorable use" (like the scrub bucket or the garbage can or the dish we put the dog food in). God may still use me for something in his kingdom, but there won't be much blessing in it. But, if I turn away from things that dishonor God, if I keep from my eyes and my mind from "what is dishonorable," then I will be to God like a dish made of gold or silver, "a vessel for honorable use ... ready for every good work." If we want God to use us in significant ways, we have to walk in obedience to him.

4. We should obey God because we desire to see unbelievers come to Christ through observing our lives.

Peter tells believers that their good conduct will be their defense against slander and will often lead to the conversion of those who first speak against them: "Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation." (1 Pet. 2:12)

5. We should obey God because we desire to receive present blessings from God on our lives and ministries.

We have to be very clear about two things here. On the one hand, we should never tell non-Christians that they can be saved by trying to obey God, for "all who rely on works of the law are under a curse" (Gal. 3:10), and "no one is

justified before God by the law" (Gal. 3:11), for "the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom. 6:23) We receive forgiveness of sins not by works but by trusting in Christ alone.

On the other hand, the New Testament writers do not hesitate to tell believers that God will bless us in this life if we live in obedience to him. Peter tells believers that they should not "repay evil for evil ... but on the contrary, bless ... that you may obtain a blessing." (1 Pet. 3:9) To prove this, he quotes Psalm 34 and applies it to Christians:

"Whoever wants to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit; let him turn away from evil and do right; let him seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil." (1 Pet. 3:10-12)

He wants us to ask ourselves, do I want the Lord's eyes to be on me, directing my steps and blessing my work day by day? Do I want the Lord's ears to be open to my prayers? Do I want to "see good days?" Of course we all want that! Then Peter tells us we should "turn away from evil and do right." (vs.11) What an incentive to walk in obedience! If we will obey God's Word, Peter indicates that we can expect to see God's favor and blessing on our lives and ministries.

6. We should obey God because we desire to avoid God's displeasure and discipline on our lives.

Of course God loves us, but he can also be displeased with us at the same time. Jesus says, "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent" (Rev. 3:19), and Paul warns us, "do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption." (Eph. 4:30) In fact, if God did not discipline us at all it would mean that he didn't love us: "For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." (Heb. 12:6)

So many pastors who have fallen into serious sin failed to fear God's discipline and failed to reckon on the withdrawal of God's blessing from their lives. What could be more costly than the withdrawal of God's blessing? If God's blessing is gone, then what kind of ministry, what kind of life will we have?

7. We should obey God because we desire to seek greater heavenly reward.

Paul told the Corinthians that one reason he always tried to please God was that "we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil." (2 Cor. 5:9-10) He also told them that they should be careful how they did the Lord's work, because it will all be tested by fire on the last day, and: "If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire." (1 Cor. 3:14-15)

8. We should obey God because we desire for a deeper walk with him.

Jesus says that the "pure in heart ... shall see God" (Matt. 5:8), and John tells us that we "abide" in Christ, and he in us, if we walk in obedience to Christ's commands: "Whoever keeps his commandments abides in him, and he in them." (1 John 3:24)

9. We should obey God because we desire that angels would glorify God for our obedience.

When Paul gave Timothy a hard command about not showing favoritism to elders who had sinned, he reminded him that he was saying this "in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels." (1 Tim. 5:21) Angels would watch to see whether Timothy obeyed what Paul said. We also should remember that angels watch us today, and they are grieved when we sin, and they rejoice and glorify God when we obey his Word.

10. We should obey God because obedience is best for us.

God is a good God who deeply loves his children. And this good God, this all-wise Creator, has not given us commands to harm us, but commands that will do us good!

In fact, as we live in obedience we will increasingly discover in practice that God's will for us is "good and acceptable and perfect." (Rom. 12:2)

11. We should obey God because this increases our assurance of our salvation.

John says, "By this we may be sure that we know him, if we keep his commandments." (1 John 2:3) Peter tells his readers that they can make their "call and election sure" (2 Pet. 1:10) by continuing to exercise godly qualities such as faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection, and love (vss. 5-7). As we live in obedience to God year after year after year, we will begin to see a Christ-like character that God is producing in us, and this should give us deep assurance of our salvation.

12. We should obey God because our hearts delight in the goodness of his commands, and our hearts delight to do what is right.

In the Old Testament, David could say, "I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart" (Ps. 40:8), and the writer of Psalm 119 could say, "Oh how I love your law!

It is my meditation all the day." (Ps. 119:97) If these Old Testament believers could love God's law for them so deeply, should we not love God's commands for us even more today, and obey it even more fully?

13. We should obey God because obedience foreshadows the kind of life we will live in heaven.

Part of the reason we look forward to heaven is that there will be no evil there. We look forward to "new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells." (2 Pet. 3:13) If we obey God's commandments to us today, then we are living something of a heavenly life right now, experiencing a bit of the joy that will be fully ours in the age to come.

There are probably more motives for obedience that other people could find in the New Testament, but these at least should be wonderful encouragements to us. How wise God is, giving us this wide variety of reasons to obey him! And all of this is for our good! We should never think that obedience to God is burdensome or oppressive, for James calls God's law "the perfect law, the law of liberty" (James 2:12), and John says, "his commandments are not burdensome." (1 John 5:3)

Someone might object, where is grace in all of this discussion? Grace is all through the discussion. It is only God's grace that enables us to find forgiveness of our sins in Christ, "for by grace you have been saved through faith." (Eph. 2:8-9) By grace God continues to work in us so that we are able "to will and to work for his good pleasure." (Phil. 2:13) It is all of grace, and God deserves all the praise.

But grace should never be set against obedience, and the New Testament never uses grace as a reason to discourage obedience or to make us think that obedience is unimportant. Rather, grace enables us to obey God and to find much blessing in day by day obedience.

(This article is adapted from Wayne Grudem's book *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Zondervan, 1994), pages 757-758.) 1. All Bible quotations are taken from the English Standard Version, due to be published in September, 2001, by Crossway Books.