

Obedience Doesn't Earn the Gift, It Receives It

By: David Burruss

There is a difference between earning a gift and accepting a gift, and until that difference is clearly understood, much of what Scripture teaches about salvation will remain confusing.

Imagine parents who buy their child a bicycle for a birthday. They tell the child, "Come into the garage and get it." Walking into the garage did not earn that bicycle. It did not pay for it, and it certainly did not place the parents under any obligation. Walking to the garage was simply what the child had to do to receive a gift the parents had already decided to give. The gift was theirs to give before the child ever moved. The walking was not the payment. It was the response.

This is precisely the relationship between grace and obedience that Paul describes in Ephesians. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). God had already determined to give salvation before we did anything to receive it. Paul makes the same point to the Romans: "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). The price was paid apart from anything we contributed. We did not earn it and could never have earned it.

But God still tells us how to receive what He has given. Scripture consistently presents a pattern of response to grace: we are to believe (John 8:24), repent (Luke 13:3), confess Christ (Romans 10:9-10), be baptized (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38), and remain faithful (Revelation 2:10). None of these actions places God in our debt. None of them purchases anything. They are simply how the gift is received, in the same way that walking into the garage was how the bicycle was received.

Suppose a doctor gives a patient medicine that will save his life and tells him, "Take one pill every morning." The medicine does the healing, not the patient's willingness to swallow it. Yet if the patient refuses the pill, he will not experience the cure the doctor intended for him. Nobody would say the patient healed himself by taking medicine he did not create and could not have manufactured. In the same way, baptism, repentance, and obedience do not save because they carry some inherent power of their own. Christ saves. These are simply the conditions He appointed for receiving what only He can give.

This distinction matters because Scripture draws a sharp line between two very different postures toward God. One says, in effect, "I earned this. God owes me." Paul rejects that posture without qualification: "Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness" (Romans 4:4-5). The other posture says, "God gave me instructions, and because I trust Him, I obey." Scripture never condemns this posture. It commends it, again and again, as the shape that genuine faith takes.

Jesus Himself pressed this point directly. "But why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do the things which I say?" (Luke 6:46). If obedience to Christ's commands were itself a form of earning salvation, then this question would make no sense, and neither would His statement in John 14:15: "If you love Me, keep My commandments." Jesus never treats obedience as a rival to grace. He treats obedience as the evidence that grace has actually taken root in a person's heart.

We see this principle acted out repeatedly in the Old and New Testaments. Noah built an ark according to very specific instructions, and the ark itself saved no one apart from God's mercy, yet Noah still had to build it (Genesis 6). Naaman was told to wash seven times in the Jordan River, and the water carried no healing power of its own, yet his leprosy was not cleansed until he obeyed (2 Kings 5). Israel marched around Jericho for seven days, and no army defeats a fortified city by walking around it, yet the walls did not fall until the people did exactly what God commanded (Joshua 6). A blind man was told to wash in the Pool of Siloam, and clay and water do not restore sight, yet he remained blind until he went and washed (John 9). In every case, the obedience did not earn the blessing. It positioned the person to receive what only God could provide.

There is also a temptation to treat God's instructions the way a child sometimes treats a parent's instructions, by accepting the parts that are agreeable and quietly setting aside the rest. A mother tells her child, "Before dinner, wash your hands and come to the table." If the child says, "I want to come to the table, but I don't want to wash my hands," he has not partially obeyed his mother. He has disobeyed her, because he has decided that his own preference outweighs her instruction. Trust in a parent is shown by doing what was asked, not by selecting the parts of the instruction that require the least of us.

The same is true of our relationship with God. Some are willing to say, "I'll believe, but I won't repent," or "I'll follow Jesus, but baptism isn't necessary for me," or "I'll follow Christ, but on my own terms." Yet this is not the pattern of faith Scripture describes. Saving faith is obedient faith. It does not treat God's commands as a menu of options.

This is where baptism is so often misunderstood. Because baptism is a physical act, some conclude it must be a human work that competes with grace. But Paul specifically corrects that assumption. He describes believers as "buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead" (Colossians 2:12). Notice carefully whose working Paul identifies. It is the working of God, not the working of man. The person being baptized does not save himself any more than the blind man restored his own sight by washing in Siloam. Peter states plainly that "baptism doth also now save us" (1 Peter 3:21), not because water has cleansing power, but because in baptism God is at work forgiving sin, exactly as Ananias told Saul: "arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16). The power was never in the water. The power has always been in God.

Once this is understood, the tension many feel between grace and obedience begins to dissolve. Obedience does not earn God's gift. It accepts God's gift on the terms the Giver has established. God's grace made salvation possible. Christ's blood purchased it. The gospel tells us how to respond to it. And when a person responds in obedient faith, believing the gospel, repenting of sin, confessing Christ, and being baptized into Him, God forgives, adds that person to His church, and gives what no human effort could ever produce. The writer of Hebrews summarizes it well, describing Christ as "the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him" (Hebrews 5:9). Not to all who earn Him. To all who obey Him, trusting that the One who gave the instructions is also the One who gives the gift.