

**Marc Roby:** We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine Christology. In our previous session we made the point that the only way a person can be saved is by being born again, and that if a person has been born again, then he is a new creation and his behavior will change. He will obey Jesus Christ his Lord and King. Dr. Spencer, how would you like to continue with this topic today?

Dr. Spencer: Well, at the end of the last session we discussed the work that the Holy Spirit does for believers. First, he is the primary agent in causing us to be born again, Then, secondly, he indwells every believer to enable us to understand the Word of God. That doesn't mean we will have every possible question answered or will understand it perfectly, but he does enable us to understand the basic gospel properly and he empowers us to continue to study and learn more and more as time goes on.

**Marc Roby:** I'm quite confident that our learning will continue for all eternity – God and his Word are inexhaustible topics.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, they certainly are. And the next thing we discussed is a most important point in terms of practical Christian living. I noted that the Holy Spirit enables us to *obey* the Word of God. This is a sticking point for many professing Christians, and so it is very important for us to look carefully at what the Bible says about Christ ruling as our King even now while we are still in this world. We briefly examined Romans 8:14 last time, which the Rev. P.G. Mathew translates as, "those who are being led by the Spirit of God, they and they alone are the sons of God."<sup>1</sup> And we must state what I think is obvious here in context; namely, that when it refers to those who are being led it implies that they are obediently following that lead!

**Marc Roby:** Paul speaks of that obedience at the beginning of his letter to the Romans. In Romans 1:5 Paul wrote that "we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith."<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Spencer: Yes, the English Standard Version, which more literally follows the Greek, translates that part of Romans 1:5 as, "we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations". In his commentary on Romans, Mathew writes, "The gospel proclamation demands the obedience of faith, meaning saving faith in Jesus that issues in total obedience to Christ the King."<sup>3</sup>

**Marc Roby:** I think a lot of people will take exception to the idea that saving faith issues in *total* obedience.

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<sup>1</sup> P.G. Mathew, *Romans: The Gospel Freedom* (Volume 1), Grace and Glory Ministries, 2011, pg. 536

<sup>2</sup> All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® (1984 version). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™.

<sup>3</sup> Mathew, op. cit., pg. 11

Dr. Spencer: I'm quite sure that by total obedience he does not mean *perfect* obedience. But he *does* mean real, observable, tangible obedience. And Mathew isn't the only one. In his commentary on Romans the great 20<sup>th</sup>-century theologian John Murray wrote the following about this verse, "Faith is regarded as an act of obedience, of commitment to the gospel of Christ. Hence the implications of this expression 'obedience of faith' are far-reaching. For the faith which the apostleship was intended to promote was not an evanescent act of emotion but the commitment of wholehearted devotion to Christ and to the truth of his gospel."<sup>4</sup>

Marc Roby: Emotional commitments are common, and they are also commonly forsaken as is evidenced by the divorce rate in our culture. I like the comparison that is sometimes made between committing ourselves to Christ and signing a mortgage or joining the army – once you have committed you don't have the freedom to renege on that commitment without serious consequences.

Dr. Spencer: That is a good comparison. Although in the case of committing our lives to Christ, we have God's promise that he will not let us fail. Therefore, if someone leaves the faith permanently, we can conclude he or she was never born again and was never a true believer at all. We read in 1 John 2:19 that "They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us."

But getting back to the obedience of faith, even more important than the view of any theologian on this verse, the Bible itself is clear that obedience is expected of true believers. We noted last time that in his great commission to the church, Jesus told us in Matthew 28:19-20 to "Go ... and make disciples ... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you". And in John 14:15 Jesus said, "If you love me, you will obey what I command."

Marc Roby: And we could add many more verses to those. For example, we are told in Luke 11:27 that "a woman in the crowd called out" to Jesus, "Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you." And then we read in Verse 28 that Jesus replied, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it." And in John 14:23 we read that Jesus said, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him."

Dr. Spencer: We are also told in John 15:10 that Jesus said, "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love." Jesus is our example, and he obeyed his Father perfectly. We are commanded in 1 Corinthians 10:31, "whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." Now, we all have to eat and drink to survive, but these mundane tasks are listed to indicate that every single aspect of our lives is to be directed to the glory of God. And if we then ask, how do I glorify God? Jesus himself gives us the answer. We read in John 17:4 that while praying to God the Father Jesus said, "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do."

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<sup>4</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Vol. 1, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1965, pp 13-14

**Marc Roby: And God has given all of us work to do. That isn't just true for Jesus, his apostles and certain special people called by God for great works of service.**

Dr. Spencer: You're completely right about that. Every single Christian has work that God has assigned for him to do. Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:10 that "we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." And we shouldn't think that this only applies to occasional big things of a so-called spiritual nature. This is speaking about our daily walk. In fact, in the original Greek, the verse uses the verb περιπατέω (peripateō), which means to walk. The English Standard Version gives us a more literal rendering of this verse, it says that "we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

**Marc Roby: Yes, I like that way of putting it. It makes it clear that we are active and that it includes everything we do, every step. And since we have been speaking about the Holy Spirit being given to believers to enable them to believe, understand and obey God's word, the statement made by Peter and the other apostles to the Sanhedrin in Acts 5 seems to be particularly relevant.**

**The Sanhedrin was the Jewish ruling council and they dragged the apostles in to question them because they were preaching the gospel in spite of having been commanded not to. In Acts 5:29 they gave the well-known reply, "We must obey God rather than men!" But then they went on to speak of Jesus' resurrection and said, in Verse 32, "We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."**

Dr. Spencer: That is a great verse for our present topic. There is a circularity here of course. We need the Holy Spirit to believe and obey, but we are told that God has given the Holy Spirit to those who obey him. The circularity is really more of an upward spiral though. God grants us new birth through the action of the Holy Spirit, which causes us to repent and believe, which causes us to be united to Jesus Christ by faith, which justifies us in the sight of God. We are also enabled by our new nature and the indwelling Spirit to obey, which results in our being given more of the Holy Spirit and so on. It is a glorious upward spiral if we live an obedient life.

**Marc Roby: That is indeed a marvelous upward spiral. God initiates it, God empowers it, God guides it and, in the end, God rewards it with eternal pleasures in his presence.**

Dr. Spencer: All very true. But getting back to this point that Christians are called to obey, we see a very explicit statement in the doxology at the end of Paul's letter to the church in Rome. In Romans 16:25-27 Paul closes his letter by writing, "Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him—to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen."

Now, we must pay very careful attention to what Paul wrote about the reason for God commanding that this mystery be revealed, it was, "so that all nations might believe and obey him". Or as the English Standard Version phrases it, which is more faithful to the original Greek,

“to bring about the obedience of faith”. The expression “the obedience of faith” is the exact same expression in the Greek as we saw in Romans 1:5 a few minutes ago.

**Marc Roby: That is a very explicit statement about the purpose of the gospel. In terms of the lives of God’s people here and now, the purpose is to bring about the obedience of faith.**

Dr. Spencer: And God’s people bring him glory through their obedience. Let me finish this point by quoting a very important statement. In Hebrews 5:8-9 we are told that “Although [Jesus Christ] was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him”. The limiting clause at the end of that statement is exceptionally important. Jesus is not the source of eternal salvation for everyone, or even for those who pray a prayer and call him their Savior or Lord, he is the source of eternal salvation “for all who obey him”, and we could add, for no others.

**Marc Roby: We should probably circle back and address directly the argument against requiring obedience. You will hear some professing Christians say something like this, “If you claim that obedience is necessary for salvation, you are adding to the biblical message, which says that ‘if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.’ In other words, you are denying that we are saved by grace alone.”**

Dr. Spencer: I have heard that exact argument. And it is fallacious for several reasons. You were quoting directly from Romans 10:9, so the statement is certainly biblical. But as always, we must interpret the Bible according to the first rule of hermeneutics, which says that the Bible itself must be used to interpret the Bible. God never contradicts himself. So, for example, when we read in Romans 10:9 that “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved”, we cannot interpret that to mean simply that you have said “Jesus is Lord” and that *you* think you truly believe. Your declaration is not definitive on this point or else Jesus’ statement in Matthew 7:21 makes no sense. He said there that “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” And the passage goes on to tell us that these people told him about many things they had done in his name. They all thought they were saved, but Jesus says they were not. Therefore, we have to be careful in how we understand Romans 10:9. It must be consistent with Matthew 7:21.

**Marc Roby: And in that statement Jesus clearly said that only those who do the will of his Father will enter heaven.**

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. It boils down to obedience. So, the first reason the argument you presented is wrong is that it doesn’t interpret the gospel in a way that is consistent with the teaching of the entire Bible. The second reason it is wrong is that it misunderstands the *role* of obedience in our salvation. I’ve said this before, but I’ll say it again in different words. Our obedience is not the basis for our salvation, it is the proof of our salvation. We are justified by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone. But the faith that saves must be an obedient faith or it isn’t real.

**Marc Roby: And the Lord’s brother, James, very famously deals with this point in his letter.**

Dr. Spencer: He does, yes. In James 2:14 he asks the question, “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?” And he then goes on to discuss the question and concludes in James 2:26 by saying, “For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.”

**Marc Roby: That’s a graphic picture. It makes me think of a dead person lying on a table in the morgue. The body is there, but there is no life.**

Dr. Spencer: And that is exactly what faith without works is like. It may have the outward form, but it is missing the power, the movement, the energizing life force. It is a very sad fact that this describes many professing Christians. They may be very nice people. They may give to the poor and help serve food at a homeless shelter. They may do all sorts of things that are good. But their lives lack obedience to God. When God says that you shouldn’t be in debt, they make up some reason why that rule doesn’t apply in our modern society. When God says that he hates divorce, they reply that no one could live with their ex. When God says that marriage is between a man and woman, they come up with some contrived answer about that only being true in an ancient culture. When God says not to be drunk, they say that only means not to be habitually drunk and so on.

And, most importantly, when God says that we are to love him with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength, they demonstrate by their almost total inattention to his Word and their lack of prayer and worship that they don’t love him at all. They love this world. And yet, John wrote in 1 John 2:15, “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.”

**Marc Roby: And, of course, that doesn’t mean that there are no legitimate pleasures in this life, but our focus is not to be on this life. And the letter you just quoted from, 1 John, talks about how we can make sure that our faith is real. In 1 John 2:3-4 he wrote, “We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him.”**

Dr. Spencer: And he gives us a number of specific tests in that letter that we can apply. In fact, we are commanded in 2 Peter 1:10 to make our calling and election sure. And in 2 Corinthians 13:5 the apostle Paul tells us to, “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?” And in Philippians 2:12 he told us to “work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling”. These admonitions make no sense unless our inward faith can be tested by looking at our outward actions.

**Marc Roby: And those outward actions must be evaluated based on the Word of God, not our own ideas of what is good.**

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. We are to examine whether or not we are obedient to God. Not whether or not we are “nice” people who do “nice” things by the standards of our society. You can’t say someone is a Christian just because he smiles all the time and never has an unkind word to say. In examining ourselves we must be very careful to use the Word of God. If we have been born

again, we have been transformed. There is always much more work to be done of course. None of us will ever reach perfection in this life. But there must be observable change and there must be a desire to obey God and some measure of success in doing so or we have no basis for believing that we have been saved. In Matthew 7:13-14 we read that Jesus said, “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”

**Marc Roby: That is a scary verse.**

Dr. Spencer: It is. But if we are truly saved, then Jesus Christ is our King. He is our Lord. And we desire to obey him. And he gives us his Holy Spirit to enable us to obey him. Paul wrote in Philippians 4:13 that “I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”

And God’s Word gives us a number of tests that we can apply to see whether or not we are born again. No one will receive a perfect score on these tests, but the only rational basis for having any confidence that we are born again is our present obedience to the will of God as found in his Word.

**Marc Roby: I look forward to continuing this discussion, but we are out of time for today, so let me take this opportunity to remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org), and we’ll get back to you.**