

## Hope – The Power to Obedience

Romans 15:1-21

March 11, 2018

We are beginning to wind down our series looking at Paul's letter to the early Christians in Rome. Paul himself is winding down his letter. In our passage this morning he is beginning to bring it to its conclusion. Last week, Ramon, looking at Romans 14, talked some about strong Christians and weak Christians, which in reality is all of us. In some areas we are strong and others we are weak, which is why God calls us to walk this journey of faith together. We all need each other, or as Paul points out in verse one of our passage this morning, "we have an obligation to one another." Contrary to what our culture wants to tell us today, there is no such thing as an individual Christian. While we might be saved as individuals, we become sanctified (made Holy) only by walking and interacting with other people, both believers and non-believers.

In preparing our sermons from Romans, especially since moving to one chapter a week, the challenge has been to try and find the one main topic or theme of each chapter. It has been both challenging and good. In Romans 15 there are two themes that are interrelated to one another, two that we don't often think of as being related, Hope & Obedience. We find the word "hope" several times in Romans 15. If there is something we need today more than anything else – it is **Hope!** In a world that seems to be filled with news of violence each and every day: school shootings, other mass shootings, violence in our cities, political corruption, drug abuse, overdoses, suicides, people dying from tragic accidents, illnesses and cancer in people from infants through adults, and on and on and on. And then there is the one great equalizer that none of us can beat – death. In our life here on earth it is often hard to have hope!

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines Hope as – "to cherish a desire with anticipation; to desire with expectation of obtainment; to expect with confidence; trust."

Paul tells us in verse 4 of our passage this morning that biblical hope comes through the Word found in Scripture. A little while later (in v.13) he tells us that it comes through the Holy Spirit. Actually the two work in tandem. The Bible tells us that it is the Holy Spirit who is the divine author of the Scriptures, not the human authors.

John Piper, in a devotion just this past week on what biblical hope, referred to Romans 15:4 says, "Biblical hope is not some vague emotion that comes out of nowhere, like a stomachache. Biblical hope is confidence that the stupendous future promised to us by the Word of God is going to come true."

Paul's longest chapter in any of his books in the Bible is his great chapter on the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15. "If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Cor. 15:19). Christians should have more hope than any other people, but hope as a Christian is neither superficial or a false hope.

"The Christian fellowship should be marked by *hope*. The Christian is always a realist, but never a pessimist. The Christian hope is not a cheap hope. It is not the immature hope which is optimistic because it does not see the difficulties and has not encountered the experiences of life.

The Christian hope has seen everything and endured everything, and still has not despaired, because it believes in God. It is not hope in the human spirit, in human goodness, in human achievement; it is hope in the power of God.” William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans*

So, what really is the goal of the Christian life? Is it just to prepare us for the life to come? In the end that is rather individualistic and narcissistic, probably the two greatest characteristics of American culture and society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At the end of Paul’s great chapter on the resurrection he doesn’t say, “okay now that you have grasped the power of the resurrection that comes through faith in Jesus Christ, just relax and sit tight until the end of your life here on earth today comes to an end.” No he says, “Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Cor. 15:58). I think the goal of the Christian life is found here in our passage this morning in verse 18, “to bring people to obedience – by word and deed.” Why do I say that?

Well, what is it that separates human beings from God, beginning with Adam & Eve in the Garden? That which separates human beings from God is disobedience. In Genesis 2:16-17, “And the LORD God commanded the man not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,” and then later in Genesis 3:11, after God went looking for Adam and Eve because they went and hid, God asks, “Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you that you should not eat?”

Obedience to the command, for Adam and Even it was just one, was the condition of their abiding in Paradise forever. That’s at the very beginning of the Bible. And then we read at the end of the Bible, in Revelation 22:14 (KJV), *Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city.* From the beginning of the Bible until the end it is **obedience** that gives access to the tree of life and the favor of God.

If disobedience is that which has separated human beings from God than it is only obedience which can reunite us with God. While the Bible says that it is Abraham’s faith which was credited to him as righteousness, it was his obedience to God’s commands which gave evidence of his faith. None greater than his willingness to obey the command of God to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, found in Genesis 22, which was the story in the quarterly from last Sunday for those Sunday school classes following along with that: *Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham, take your son, your only son, whom you love – Isaac – and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.”*

And as the story unfolds in the Scriptures it doesn’t even seem like Abraham hesitated. Early the next morning he gathered up the supplies needed for the task, saddled up his donkey, took two of his servants, along with Isaac, and set out for what God had commanded him to do.

Of course the Good News in the story is that God provided another sacrifice in Isaac’s place, a ram caught by its horns in the thicket nearby, that which points forward to the perfect sacrifice offered by God to come. But Abraham passed the test God had given him, would he be obedient to the command of God or not:

*The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time<sup>16</sup> and said, "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son,<sup>17</sup> I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies,<sup>18</sup> and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."*

Genesis 22:15-18 (NIV)

The story of God seeking obedience from his people continues throughout the entire Old Testament. After the Israelites wandering around the wilderness for forty years, and of them experiencing the consequences of their disobedience, God is ready to start anew with them as they are about to enter the land of Canaan, otherwise referred to as "the Promised Land." It is summed up in Deuteronomy 11:26-28 (ESV): "*See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God and the curse, if you do not obey.*"

Blessing(s) for those who obey and curse(s) for those who do not. The God of the Old Testament is still the God of the New Testament. For the prophets who foretold of the coming New Covenant in Jesus Christ, obedience was still an essential ingredient.

God speaking through the prophet Jeremiah:

*"I give them this command: Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in all the ways I command you, that it may go well with you."*

Jeremiah 7:23 (NIV)

Then there was God speaking through the prophet Ezekiel:

*"I will give you a new heart, and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to obey my laws."*

Ezekiel 36:26-27 (NIV)

What makes it difficult is that there is not always a direct correlation between obedience and the blessings we receive during our time here on earth. People who are very obedient still suffer many difficulties today. And the opposite is also true, many people who seem to be walking far from God seem to prosper during their life here on earth. But we need to remember that our heavenly and eternal rewards are a lot different than our earthly rewards.

God doesn't demand obedience because He is some tyrant who wants to rule over people and that he himself is narcissistic. He demands obedience because He and only He know what is really best for us.

Although God demands obedience from us, throughout all of human history no human being has ever proved himself or herself perfectly obedient to God, save for one, that one being Jesus Christ. As it tells us back in Romans 5:19 – *For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.*

Just as one man, Adam's disobedience made us prone to sin, the obedience of Christ makes possible our righteousness. That righteousness is made possible in position, in power and by example.

Through faith in Jesus Christ and what He did for us on the cross, through His perfect obedience of living a sinless life and dying for the sins of all the disobedient, we take on the righteousness of Jesus in the eyes of God. We are at once justified and delivered from the power of sin and death by Christ's sacrificial death. We stand before God in the position of righteous people.// (pause and think about that). But that's not all. We also receive the power to become obedient. Just as Adam's disobedience was the power that ruled my life before coming to Christ, a disobedience which leads only to death, Jesus' obedience becomes the life-power, through the work of the Holy Spirit, to make me obedient today, though never perfectly obedient, because there is some of the sin nature still left over in me. Jesus also becomes my/our example.

In Hebrews we read:

*During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.<sup>8</sup> Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered<sup>9</sup> and, once made perfect, **he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.** Hebrews 5:7-9 (NIV)*

As Christians mature we are supposed to take on, more and more, the nature of our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus' two greatest characteristics while he walked his life here on earth, apart from not sinning, those which separated him from all the others, are those of humility and obedience. It was his perfect obedience to God the Father that caused him not to sin.

Last week Ramon brought an excellent sermon from Romans 14, talking about disputable matters, that as Christians we are called to get along with one another and to resolve conflicts when it comes to disputable matters. There are many disputable matters in the Bible, and many not in the Bible, that the church has fought over and have caused many church splits over the centuries. It has also hurt our witness to the world. But we need to be careful, because there are some non-disputable matters in the Bible as well. If there weren't any non-disputable matter in the eyes of God then there would be no commands by God to obey. Eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil for Adam and Eve in the Garden, was a non-disputable matter. Loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself, is a non-disputable matter.

The Ten Commandments are non-disputable matters. There are many other commands in the Bible that are non-disputable. The non-disputable matters in the eyes of God are those that when we disobey we need to confess, repent of, and at least intend to turn from them. Jesus' brother James tells us, "confess your sins to one another and you will be healed" (James 5:16). Perhaps our greatest challenge today as the people of God, the church, is discerning which are disputable and which are non-disputable and doing it in a humble and loving way. Think about it, if there were no non-disputable matters, Jesus would not have had to go to the cross to die for our sins, the greatest act and example of obedience to God's will that Jesus gives us, his followers.

The response song this morning is “When we walk with the Lord,” or better known as “Trust and Obey.” The words trust and hope can easily be interchanged:

*When we walk with the Lord in the light of his word, what a glory he sheds on our way!  
While we do his good will, he abides with us still, and with all who trust and obey.*

*Not a burden we bare, not a sorrow we share, but our toil he does richly repay.  
Not a grief or a loss, not a frown or a cross, but is blessed if we hope and obey.*

*But we never can prove the delights of his love, until on the altar we lay,  
for the favor he shows, and the joy he bestows, are for them who trust and obey.*

*Then in fellowship sweet we will sit at his feet, or we'll walk by his side in the way,  
What he says we will do, where he sends we will go, never fear, only hope and obey.*