

Español
Northwest Nazarene University

The Sermons of John Wesley - Sermon 97

On Obedience To Pastors

"Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: For they watch over your souls, as they that shall give account, that they may do this with joy, and not with grief: For that is unprofitable for you." Heb. 13:17.

1. Exceeding few, not only among nominal Christians, but among truly religious men, have any clear conception of that important doctrine which is here delivered by the Apostle. Very many scarce think of it, and hardly know that there is any such direction in the Bible. And the greater part of those who know it is there, and imagine they follow it, do not understand it, but lean too much either to the right hand or to the left, to one extreme or the other. It is well known to what an extravagant height the Romanists in general carry this direction. Many of them believe an implicit faith is due to the doctrines delivered by those that rule over them, and that implicit obedience ought to be paid to whatever commands they give: And not much less has been insisted on by several eminent men of the Church of England: Although it is true that the generality of Protestants are apt to run to the other extreme, allowing their Pastors no authority at all, but making them both the creatures and the servants of their congregations. And very many there are of our own Church who agree with them herein; supposing the Pastors to be altogether dependent upon the people, who in their judgment have a right to direct as well as to choose their Ministers.

2. But is it not possible to find a medium between these two extremes Is there any necessity for us to run either into one or into the other If we set human laws out of the question, and simply attend to the oracles of God, we may certainly discover a middle path in this important matter In order thereto, let us carefully examine the words of the Apostle above recited. Let us consider,

I. Who are the persons mentioned in the text, they "that rule over" us

II. Who are they whom the Apostle, directs to "obey and submit themselves" to them

III. What is the meaning of this direction In what sense are they to "obey and submit" themselves I shall then endeavour to make a suitable application of the whole.

1. Consider we, first, who are the persons mentioned in the text, "they that have the rule over you" -- I do not conceive that the words of the Apostle are properly translated; because this translation makes the sentence little better than a tautology. If they "rule over you," you are certainly ruled by them; so that according to this translation you are only enjoined to do what you do already-to obey those whom you do obey. But there is another meaning of the Greek word which seems abundantly more proper: It means to guide, as well as to rule. And thus, it seems, it should be taken here. The direction then, when applied to our spiritual guides, is plain and pertinent.

2. This interpretation seems to be confirmed by the seventh verse, which fixes the meaning of this. "Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God." The Apostle here shows, by the latter clause of the sentence, whom he meant in the former, Those that "were over them," were the same persons "who spoke unto them the word of God;" that is, they were their pastors, those who guided and fed this part of the flock of Christ.

3. But by whom are these guides to be appointed And what are they Supposed to do in order to be

entitled to the obedience which is here prescribed

Volumes upon volumes have been wrote on that knotty question, By whom are guides of souls to be appointed I do not intend here to enter at all into the dispute concerning church government; neither to debate whether it be advantageous or prejudicial to the interest of true religion that the church and the state should be blended together, as they have been ever since the time of Constantine, in every part of the Roman Empire where Christianity has been received. Waiving all these points (which may find employment enough for men that abound in leisure,) by "them that guide you" I mean them that do it, if not by your choice, at least by your consent; them that you willingly accept of to be your guides in the way to heaven.

4. But what are they supposed to do in order to entitle them to the obedience here prescribed

They are supposed to go before the flock (as is the manner of the eastern shepherds to this day,) and to guide them in all the ways of truth and holiness; they are to "nourish them with the words of eternal life;" to feed them with "the pure milk of the word:" Applying it continually "for doctrine," teaching them all the essential doctrines contained therein; "for reproof," warning them if they turn aside from the way, to the right hand or to the left; -- "for correction;" showing them how to amend what is amiss, and guiding them back into the way of peace; -- and "for instruction in righteousness;" training them up in inward and outward holiness, "until they come to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

5. They are supposed to "watch over your souls, as those that shall give account." "As those that shall give account!" How unspeakably solemn and awful are those words! May God write them upon the heart of every guide of souls!

"They watch," waking while others sleep, over the flock of Christ; over the souls that he has bought with a price, that he has purchased with his own blood. They have them in their hearts both by day and by night; regarding neither sleep nor food in comparison of them. Even while they sleep their heart is waking, full of concern for their beloved children. "They watch" with deep earnestness, with uninterrupted seriousness, with unwearied care, patience, and diligence, as they that are about to give an account of every particular soul to him that standeth at the door, -- to the Judge of quick and dead.

II. 1. We, Secondly, to consider who those are whom the Apostle directs to obey them that have the rule over them. And in order to determine this with certainty and clearness, we shall not appeal to human institutions, but simply (as in answering the preceding question) appeal to that decision of it which we find in the oracles of God. Indeed we have hardly occasion to go one step farther than the text itself. Only it may be proper, first, to remove out of the way some popular opinions which have been almost everywhere taken for granted, but can in no wise be proved.

2. It is usually supposed, First, that the Apostle is here directing parishioners to obey and submit themselves to the Minister of their parish. But can anyone bring the least shadow of proof for this from the Holy Scripture Where is it written that we are bound to obey any Minister because we live in what is called his parish "Yes," you say, "we are bound to obey every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake." True, in all things indifferent; but this is not so; it is exceeding far from it. It is far from being a thing indifferent to me who is the guide of my soul. I dare not receive one as my guide to heaven that is himself on the high road to hell. I dare not take a wolf for my shepherd, that has not so much as sheep's clothing; that is a common swearer, an open drunkard, a notorious sabbath-breaker. And such

(the more is the shame, and the more the pity!) are many parochial Ministers at this day.

3. "But are you not properly members of that congregation to which your parents belong" I do not apprehend that I am; I know no Scripture that obliges me to this. I owe all deference to the commands of my parents, and willingly obey them in all things lawful But it is not lawful to call them Rabbi; that is, to believe or obey them implicitly. Everyone must give an account of himself to God. Therefore every man must judge for himself; especially in a point of so deep importance as this is, -- the choice of a guide for his soul.

4. But we may bring this matter to a short issue by recurring to the very words of the text. They that have voluntarily connected themselves with such a pastor as answers the description given therein; such as do in fact, "watch over their souls, as they that shall give account;" such as do "nourish them up with the words of eternal life;" such as feed them as with the "pure milk of the word," and constantly apply it to them "for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness;" -- all who have found and chosen guides of this character, of this spirit and behaviour, are undoubtedly required by the Apostle to "obey and submit themselves" to them.

III. 1. But what is the meaning of this direction This remains to be considered. In what sense, and how far, does the Apostle direct them to "obey and submit" to their spiritual guides

If we attend to the proper sense of the two words here used by the Apostle, we may observe that the former of them peiqesqe, (from peiqv to persuade) refers to the understanding, the latter, upeikete to the will, and outward behaviour. To begin with the former. What influence ought our spiritual guides to have over our understanding! We dare no more call our spiritual fathers Rabbi, than the "fathers of our flesh." We dare no more yield implicit faith to the former than to the latter. In this sense "one is our Master," (or rather Teacher,) "who is in heaven." But whatever submission, of even our understanding, is short of this, we may, nay, we ought to yield to them.

2. To explain this a little farther. St. James uses a word which is nearly allied to the former of these: "The wisdom which is from above is, eupeiqs, easy to be convinced, or to be persuaded." Now, if we ought to have and to show this wisdom toward all men, we ought to have it in a more eminent degree, and to show it upon every occasion, toward those that "watch over our souls." With regard to these, above all other men, we should be "easy to be entreated;" easily convinced of any truth, and easily persuaded to anything that is not sinful.

3. A word of nearly the same import with this is frequently used by St. Paul; namely, epieikhs. In our translation it is more than once rendered gentle. But perhaps it might be more properly rendered (if the word may be allowed) yielding; ready to yield, to give up our own will, in everything that is not a point of duty. This amiable temper every real Christian enjoys, and shows in his intercourse with all men. But he shows it in a peculiar manner toward those that watch over his soul. He is not only willing to receive any instruction from them, to be convinced of anything which he did not know before; lying open to their advice, and being glad to receive admonition, or reproof; but is ready to give up his own will, whenever he can do it with a clear conscience. Whatever they desire him to do, he does; if it be not forbidden in the Word of God. Whatever they desire him to refrain from, he does so; if it be not enjoined in the Word of God. This is implied in those words of the Apostle: "Submit yourselves to them;" yield to them; give up your own will. This is meet, and right, and your bounden duty, if they do indeed watch over your souls as they that shall give account. If you do thus "obey and submit yourselves" to them, they will give an account of you "with joy, not with groaning," as they must

otherwise do; for although they should be clear of your blood, yet "that would be unprofitable to you;" yea, a prelude to eternal damnation.

4. How acceptable to God was an instance of obedience somewhat similar to this! You have a large and particular account of it in the thirty-fifth chapter of Jeremiah. "The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, saying, Go unto the house of the Rechabites, and give them wine to drink. Then I took the whole house of the Rechabites;" all the heads of their families; "and set before them pots full of wine, and said unto them, Drink ye wine. But they said, We will drink no wine: for Jonadab," a great man in the reign of Jehu, "the son of Rechab," from whom we are named, being the father of our family, "commanded us, Ye shall drink no wine, neither ye nor your sons for ever. And we have obeyed the voice of Jonadab our father, in all that he charged us." We do not know any particular reason why Jonadab gave this charge to his posterity. But as it was not sinful they gave this strong instance of gratitude to their great benefactor. And how pleasing this was to the Father of their spirits we learn from the words that follow: "And Jeremiah said unto the Rechabites, Because ye have obeyed the voice of Jonadab your father, therefore thus saith the Lord of hosts, Jonadab shall not want a man to stand before my face forever." [Jer. 35]

5. Now it is certain Christians owe full as much gratitude and obedience to those that watch over their souls as ever the house of the Rechabites owed to Jonadab the son of Rechab. And we cannot doubt but he is as well pleased with our obedience to these as ever he was with their obedience to Jonadab. If he was so well pleased with the gratitude and obedience of this people to their temporal benefactor, have we not all reason to believe he is full as well pleased with the gratitude and obedience of Christians to those who derive far greater blessings to them than ever Jonadab conveyed to his posterity

6. It may be of use yet again to consider, In what instances is it the duty of Christians to obey and submit themselves to those that watch over their souls Now the things which they enjoin must be either enjoined of God, or forbidden by him, or indifferent. In things forbidden of God we dare not obey them; for we are to obey God rather than man. In things enjoined of God we do not properly obey them, but our common Father. Therefore, if we are to obey them at all, it must be in things indifferent. The sum is, it is the duty of every private Christian to obey his spiritual Pastor, by either doing or leaving undone anything of an indifferent nature; anything that is in no way determined in the word of God.

7. But how little is this understood in the Protestant world! at least in England and Ireland! Who is there, even among those that are supposed to be good Christians, who dreams there is such a duty as this And yet there is not a more express command either in the Old or New Testament. No words can be more clear and plain; no command more direct and positive. Therefore, certainly none who receive the Scripture as the word of God, can live in the habitual breach of this and plead innocence. Such an instance of willful, or at least careless disobedience, must grieve the Holy Spirit of God. It cannot but hinder the grace of God from having its full effect upon the heart. It is not improbable that this very disobedience may be one cause of the deadness of many souls; one reason of their not receiving those blessings which they seek with some degree of sincerity.

8. It remains only to make a short application of what has now been delivered.

You that read this, do you apply it to yourself Do you examine yourself thereby Do not you stop your own growth in grace, if not by willful disobedience to this command; yet by a careless inattention to it, by not considering it, as the importance of it deserves If so, you defraud yourself of many blessings

which you might enjoy. Or, are you of a better mind; of a more excellent spirit? Is it your fixed resolution and your constant endeavour "to obey them that have the rule over you in the Lord;" to submit yourself as cheerfully to your spiritual as to your natural parents? Do you ask, "Wherein should I submit to them?" The answer has been given already: Not in things enjoined of God; not in things forbidden by him; but in things indifferent: In all that are not determined, one way or the other, by the oracles of God. It is true, this cannot be done, in some instances without a considerable degree of self-denial, when they advise you to refrain from something that is agreeable to flesh and blood. And it cannot be obeyed in other instances without taking up your cross; without suffering some pain or inconvenience that is not agreeable to flesh and blood. For that solemn declaration of our Lord has place here, as well as on a thousand other occasions: "Except a man deny himself, and take up his cross daily, he cannot be my disciple." But this will not affright you, if you resolve to be not only almost, but altogether, a Christian; if you determine to fight the good fight of faith, and lay hold on eternal life.

9. I would now apply myself in a more particular manner to you who desire me to watch over your souls. Do you make it a point of conscience to obey me, for my Master's sake to submit yourselves to me in things indifferent; things not determined in the Word of God; in all things that are not enjoined, nor yet forbidden, in Scripture? Are you "easy to be entreated," as by men in general, so by me in particular -- easy to be convinced of any truth, however contrary to your former prejudices -- and easy to be persuaded to do or forbear any indifferent thing at my desire? You cannot but see that all this is clearly contained in the very words of the text. And you cannot but acknowledge that it is highly reasonable for you so to do, if I do employ all my time, all my substance, all my strength both of body and soul, not in seeking my own honour, or pleasure; but in promoting your present and eternal salvation; if I do indeed "watch over your souls as one that must give account."

10. Do you then take my advice (I ask in the presence of God and all the world) with regard to dress? I published that advice above thirty years ago; I have repeated it a thousand times since. I have advised you not to be conformable to the world herein, to lay aside all needless ornaments, to avoid all needless expense, to be patterns of plainness to all that are round about you. Have you taken this advice? Have you all, men and women, young and old, rich and poor, laid aside all those needless ornaments which I particularly objected to? Are you all exemplarily plain in your apparel; as plain as Quakers (so called,) or Moravians? If not, if you are still dressed like the generality of people of your own rank and fortune, you declare hereby to all the world that you will not obey them that are over you in the Lord. You declare, in open defiance of God and man, that you will not submit yourselves to them. Many of you carry your sins on your forehead, openly and in the face of the sun. You harden your hearts against instruction and against conviction. You harden one another; especially those of you that were once convinced, and have now stifled your convictions. You encourage one another to stop your ears against the truth, and shut your eyes against the light, lest haply you should see that you are fighting against God and against your own souls. If I were now called to give an account of you, it would be "with groans, and not with joy." And sure that would be "unprofitable for you:" The loss would fall upon your own head.

11. I speak all this on supposition, (though that is a supposition not to be made,) that the Bible was silent on this head; that the Scriptures said nothing concerning dress, and left it to everyone's own discretion. But if all other texts were silent, this is enough: "Submit yourselves to them that are over you in the Lord." I bind this upon your consciences, in the sight of God. Were it only in obedience to this direction, you cannot be clear before God unless you throw aside all needless ornaments, in utter

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