

Phases of Obedience: Power for Christian Living

By Bob Young

"Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:37, 38).

Jesus summarized godly living (at least for those living under the Old Testament law) in two "love statements". I often call these two commands #1 and #2. They are not limited to the Old Testament law. They reflect eternal principles. God wants people to love him; God wants people to love one another. How do we move beyond #1 and #2? Is there #3? The question may be restated: How does one live a powerful Christian life? I believe most Christians go through three distinct stages in growth toward obedience in the Christian walk.

Most Christians begin their Christian walk out of convenience. The primary influences of my life—my mother, my family, my grandmother, my closest friends—all encouraged me toward Christianity. I began going to church on Wednesday nights because I could drive there by myself (at age fourteen in Kansas in 1962). In the early stages of our spiritual journey we often make decisions from convenience. We decide what outcome we want and make decisions that will lead to the desired outcome. We make decisions based on our perception as to whether those decisions move us toward our personal goals. If our personal desires do not match God's will (negative outcomes), convenience will not provide a sufficient motivation to obey. Many times, our personal desires match God's desires (a positive outcome), and we make obedient decisions. This is outcome-based obedience. This is selfish obedience.

God desires that each of us live an obedient life. To help us move from outcome-based obedience to a submission to the will of God obedience, God works in our lives—through individuals who help us grow in the Christian faith, through experiences that reinforce faith, and sometimes through crises into our lives. In times of crises, convenience causes us to turn to God to alleviate the problems. (You have probably heard of "fox-hole" Christianity.) Convenience is a normal beginning point in the faith journey, but God doesn't want us to stay at this level.

As we grow in faith, we expand our circle of friends, we look beyond ourselves, and we begin to make some decisions from concern and compassion. We see others in need and seek to meet those needs. We move from the selfishness of convenience to a God-like compassion and concern. We are willing to sacrifice for the well-being of others. We learn what it means to exist in community. We love and are loved; we help and are helped. We obey because we have learned compassion, and in this obedience we are becoming more and more like God. Nevertheless, there remains one more measure of obedience—one that represents the highest of Christian motivations.

Ultimately, God desires us to live a life of obedience and intimacy rooted in conviction. We obey His commands from a heart of love and devotion to him. We discover the personal love of God in our lives in ways we have never before experienced. The love of Christ compels us. We act out of conviction (what we assuredly know). This moves faith from the unseen to the seen. This is not just "hope-so belief" but "know-so faith". By faith we understand and know. The love of God demonstrated in Jesus is the foundation of our faith.