

## The Freedom of Obedience

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Sunday, January 15, 1995  
Philippians 2:12-13  
Philippians

This morning we are going to continue in the series that I have been doing from the book of Philippians and we come to Philippians 2:12 which addresses one of the most basic issues that we must come to grips with as followers of Jesus and that is the matter of obedience. Obedience to God and obedience to the Word of God as we find it in the Bible. Obedience is so basic, it so much the bottom line issue of being a Christian that the apostle John says in 1 John 2:4, “The man who says I know him, but does not do what he commands is a liar and the truth is not in him.” If we say we are followers of Christ, but we continually refuse to do what God commands, then John says that we are self-deceived. By definition, Christians are people who obey. And so we read in Philippians 2:12-13:

### **Philippians 2:12-13**

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

In these two verses, Paul has packed in so much teaching and truth regarding the whole issue of obedience. And I want to help you to unpack these verses, but first, I feel like before we unpack these two verses in Philippians, I must help you to unpack the baggage that you came into church with this morning as it pertains to the matter of obedience.

For the past half-century, Americans tend to be very negative and very suspicious, very wary of the word obedience. Obedience is felt to be a largely negative quality outside the military. Movie heroes are people who rebel, who reject what superiors tell them. They prefer to do it their way – Clint Eastwood, Bruce Willis. Part of our wariness comes out of the experience of the second World War and the Holocaust.

As Nazis were tried for war crimes during the Nuremberg Trials in the late 1940's, Americans and the rest of the world heard the explanation for the most atrocious acts against humanity that anyone had ever contemplated. One after another, a parade of Nazis stood before the judgment of the world and said, “We were simply obeying orders.” They gave obedience as their excuse, as their justification for crimes against humanity.

Deep in the American consciousness there got to be this link-up of obedience with an idea of blind conformity to orders, even immoral orders. No thinking, no creativity, no freedom, just blockheaded, rigid submission, like German Nazis.

Now, the flip side of the coin of obedience, of course, is the matter of authority. As Americans began to be suspicious about obedience, they also began to be very suspicious regarding authority.

Frankly, the suspicion regarding authority goes back even before the second World War. I don't know how many of you realize that much of the modern educational system, that the philosophy underlying the way that we teach children, the approach that we take in elementary and high school to teaching is found in the philosophy of a man named John Dewey who wrote during the 1920's and 1930's a series of books giving this modern basis of education. And Dewey's philosophy has been employed for over sixty years now in training teachers.

One of the fundamental premises of Dewey is that in order to learn and grow you must hate authority. There is a profoundly strong anti-authority strain that runs through all of Dewey's writings. He gets so cynical and bitter as he speaks about authority that I can hardly read his stuff without feeling this spirit of angry, cynical, shriveled up old man just cursing every form of authority that would come.

I was reading a portion of Dewey's book this week called *Democracy and Education*. It is foundational in what you are seeing in the school system right now in America. And I believe it is fundamental in understanding why things are going the way they are in the American school system. Listen to what Dewey says. He is talking about the wonder of the experimental method, the scientific method, and he says that:

"The scientific method, for the most part, is regarded as belonging to certain technical and merely physical matters. [In other words, that people have restricted the range of science to purely scientific things in their minds.] It will doubtless take a long time to secure the perception that the scientific method holds equally as to forming and testing ideas in social and moral matters. [In other words, we need to employ this whole new way of thinking and I will talk about that in a moment when it comes not only to mixing up a batch of chemicals, but in social matters—arranging our marriages, and even in morals; in figuring out what is moral and what is true and what is good. And then here is the bitter invective. He is dripping now. He says...] Men still want the crutch of dogma, of beliefs, fixed by authority to relieve them of the trouble of thinking and the responsibility of directing their activity by thought."

Now listen to what Dewey is saying. He is saying that people who accept authority are, by definition, unthinking, ignorant, uncritical, unwilling to explore and to forge new paths, to boldly go where no one has gone before. Later on, he says we need to shape education to form in people's minds a basic suspicion of authority.

You see, if thinking and being creative and being free is stifled by obedience to authority, the solution is to blow up authority and then people will be really free. You wonder about the complete dismantling of any kind of order in schools; the struggle of teachers to get any semblance of quietness or discipline or respect in the classroom? You wonder, further, why there is such an incredible break-down in the larger moral order of America?

Those of you who are part of the baby boom generation, you know that the 1960's was all about rebellion against authority. We had bumper stickers that said, "Question Authority."

The generation that follows boomers has been labeled as "Generation X" or "Baby Busters", their approach to authority and rebellion is different than the boomer generation. The boomer generation organized marches and we got in the faces of people. "Hey, I am going to shout you down and we are going to have a sit-in and we are going to protest and we are going to picket." Generation X takes a different form to rebelling against authority, but it is rebellion nevertheless. But the form that Generation X takes is just to ignore authority. "I am not going to get in your face about it," a young person says, "I am not going to organize a march. I am not going to protest. That stuff doesn't work. I am just going to ignore what you say. I will just passively smile at you and do what I want to do and then laugh about you behind your back and tell jokes about what you just said." It is just another way to deal with authority, but it is a passive/aggressive way.

And you can see all of it being the fruit of a philosophy that we have been teaching our kids in schools for 50 or 60 years now. Authority is bad. It is restrictive. It will hurt you. You need to be free to explore your own truth and your own values and your own life. How to form your own relationships and how to become happy, you will have to discover that on your own because life has no road map.

Now, let me suggest the Christian alternative to the incredible hostility that modern America has to the notion of obedience and authority. The Christian alternative begins with the idea that all authority is not bad, some authority is good. And that the best authority is the authority of God. Christians further believe that obedience and submission to the authority of God will lead to freedom, creativity and happiness. That the more one yields themselves in submission and obedience to God, the freer and happier one is.

You see, we have two radically different viewpoints competing for air space in America right now. One says that all authority is bad, in fact, there is no ultimate authority beyond oneself. And the other, the Christian viewpoint, says that some authority is good, namely the authority of God, and there is authority above yourself that you must submit to.

Now, let me give you an illustration or word picture so that you can understand this radical difference. Again, I spend so much time on these preliminary matters because I want you to be able to hear what the Bible is saying without having your defenses up, without pulling back into your chair. I want you to hear the message the way it might have been heard by Paul's readers back in the first century, without a bunch of American defenses up to obedience.

To give you a little word picture, I would like you to imagine a time when you were driving around somewhere in an unfamiliar city or part of Columbus even, and you were just lost. You drove down different streets and you just simply could not find where you wanted to go. I don't know if you have ever had this experience, but I have on a

number of occasions been where I saw the highway that I wanted over to my left and I am driving along and there is just no road that intersects that highway. You pick one of the roads that appears to intersect the highway and you discover that the road goes under the highway, but there is no on-ramp.

You know, at those moments I want one of those springs that can somehow lift my car up onto the highway. Isn't there any kind of lift here or spring mechanism that will just pop my car up there? Can I drive up the grass? But it seems like I cannot get there from here. Do you know that experience?

Now, you know the blessing and the relief that comes when you finally stop and ask directions from someone who knows how to get on the highway. He says, "Oh, the on-ramp is down a mile from here on such and such a road." Or, you finally stop and take the time to read the map that is in your glove compartment. You pull off to the side of the road and read the map, instead of trying to figure it out, guys, for yourself. Because real men can figure out how to get on a highway, you don't need a map. You don't need directions. But you suppress your testosterone for a while and look at the map. You know the relief that comes when you see, "Oh my goodness. Okay, here is where I need to go"?

Well, Christians are people who believe that there really is a road map that will get us where we want to go, and the map accurately describes life. It is called the Bible. Thinking people are people who follow the road map. You are not unthinking or a blind conformist if you obey the map.

"I want to get there to internal peace and I am a very anxious person." "I want to get there to freedom from a life controlling habit. Right now, I find myself completely stuck in a repetitive, addictive, life-controlling habit. How shall I get there?"

Christians say, in contrast to most of the rest of America, there is a road map that is a true and reliable guide that will get me from here to there. You see, most of America has been taught that we just need to somehow, through friends and our own wits and our own gut instincts, draw our own road maps. We are lost on some road, somewhere in America. We see the highway, but we can't find the on-ramp. The teaching that we get in school and the assumption that we drink in through every movie and every TV show and most magazines is "Well, you simply have to find your own way. Draw your own map." And so millions of us just repeatedly drive in circles and hit dead end after dead end and never find freedom or happiness. But maybe this time, maybe this relationship, maybe if we just move to California or Florida or Colorado, or get divorced, or try yoga. Yeah, then we'll be happy.

There is a way to get there from here. You don't have to live this way. We don't have to be as blind as we are or as frustrated as we are with life. And the way, as I am going to explain today, is to gain freedom through obedience. Let's pray.

I am going to read, again, Philippians 2:12-13:

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Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

The apostle Paul, obviously, does not view obedience as the negative thing that we do in modern America. In fact, he starts off this section on obedience calling the Philippians his “dear friends.” Literally, he calls them “beloved”. He says, “Therefore, beloved...”. The “therefore” is there for this reason: He has shown the obedience of Christ in verses 5-11. He has held up the example of Jesus who was obedient to the Father in all that he did from the moment he left the throne to coming and living as a man, to suffering, to obedience to death, even death on a cross.

Having shown the example of Jesus as the truly obedient Son of God, Paul then announces that Jesus Christ is Lord and that every knee is going to bow to him. And so what he is saying is that now that obedient example has become the authority to which we must submit. But he wants us to know at the front-end that obedience to this authority, Jesus, following the road map that Christ has drawn for our lives, is something that he appeals to us to do because he loves us. The apostle Paul is not using a heavy-handed approach with the Philippians in trying to get them to obey God. He calls them “beloved”.

He is saying this is my advice to people whom I love. My advice is don't reject God's authority. Don't try to go your own way and write your own rules and draw your own map. That will just get you more and more lost. Because I love you, beloved, I want to call you into the life that is worth living and will bring blessing to you and to your family.

“As you always have obeyed, beloved, not only in my presence, but also in my absence...”

In other words, I want to talk to you about obedience that is not just a matter of wearing the proper church face when people are staring at you. That is not the kind of obedience that the apostle Paul is going to talk to us about. That is superficial and not obedience. It is so easy for us to clean up when we come to church on Sunday morning.

“How are you doing?”

“Wonderful. Praise the Lord.”

Paul is not interested in religiosity when you are being observed. You know, the workers in the office who suddenly get real busy when the boss walks in. He says, “I understand that you might be tempted to do that when I am there, but I want to talk to you about an obedience that works in your life when you are entirely alone.”

Boy, it is easy to do well when people are around. The truth is that our character is shown when we are alone, when no one is watching, other than God. Then what is the nature of your obedience?

He says, "...continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling."

Now, obedience is linked somehow to the working out of our salvation with fear and trembling. Let me break this down for you by talking to you for a moment about the goal of obedience. And it is the working out of salvation.

You say, "Well, what does that mean?"

Well, first of all, we must get rid of any notion that Paul is talking about an earned salvation. Paul rejects that. That is completely contrary to what Paul would teach that you somehow earn your salvation. In fact, Paul teaches quite the opposite in Philippians 3 where it says that he considers everything that he does rubbish, in verse 9 that he might gain Christ and be found in him not having a righteousness of his own that comes through law, but that which is through faith in Christ, a righteousness that comes from God and by faith.

Paul says essentially, over and over, in all of his letters that you have a choice regarding what you want to rely on to gain you salvation. You can rely on your own obedience and your own righteousness or you can rely on the obedience and righteousness of Jesus Christ. What is it that you want to rely on and trust in to gain you salvation? What you do? Your obedience? Your righteousness? Or the obedience and righteousness of Jesus Christ?

Listen, this is a no-brainer, "I think that I will do better to rely on the righteousness of somebody that is perfect. I think Jesus lived a better life than me and so I will trust in his better life, his perfect life, and not my own sinful life to get me entrance into heaven."

And some of you have not done that yet. You have not trusted in his perfect life and his sinless death as the penalty for your sins to earn you salvation. We will have a chance at the end of today's talk for you to make a commitment to Christ.

But, it is through relying on Christ's righteousness that God gives to us the gift of salvation. But now that gift of salvation needs to be enjoyed by us. It needs to be appreciated and opened up and explored. The full dimensions of salvation are to be worked out in your life. Check out all the rooms. Not just the room of forgiveness of sins, but also the room of freedom from sins.

Another word picture for you. I believe that many people, by faith, receive the gift of salvation. They are relying on Jesus and they are brought into the house of salvation. Well, that gift of forgiveness is the doorway into the house, but you know when you enter the doorway of the house, typically you are standing in a vestibule, a hallway, and there is a good deal more to the house than the hallway. Yet, that is where people stay.

"Oh, I have the gift of salvation. I have received it by faith. So I will stand here in the hallway. My sins are forgiven."

“Boy, that meal in the kitchen smells good, but I have never learned how to get to the kitchen.”

“It is kind of a drag to sleep here in the hallway. I would rather go upstairs and sleep in a warm bed, but I have never gone beyond this hallway of the forgiveness of my sins. Salvation includes the bedroom of your sexuality and the study and the dining room of your appetites. It is the whole house of your mind.”

Paul is saying, “I want you to work out the whole thing, the whole gift of salvation in your life.”

Beyond the forgiveness of sins, let me speak to you today about freedom. Do you know that one of the ways to understand salvation, the word “salvation” is to translate it “freedom”? You know, if the word “salvation” seems a bit religious for you, then you can retranslate it in your mind pretty fairly as “freedom”. Jesus Christ came as the great liberator. His mission was to set people free. In his inaugural address, in terms of his reign as he said, “This is what I am going to plan to do during my reign.”

He said in Luke 4:18, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, the recovery of sight for the blind. To release the oppressed.”

Contrary to the view that Jesus Christ and his authority is designed to create narrow, inhibited, oppressed people who refuse to think, contrary to the anti-authority mode of modern American, Jesus said, “I came for this purpose, to give you freedom.” And the apostle Paul loved the freedom that Christ gave. He celebrated it. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 3, “Where the Spirit of God is, there the heart is set free.”

F. F. Bruce, the English Bible scholar who spent fifty years of his life studying the letters of Paul summed up Paul’s whole career this way: “Paul was the apostle of the heart set free.”

Paul understood what Jesus taught. He understood this wonderful paradox that the more a person learned to be obedient to Christ, the freer they were, the more room inside they had. He understood, in his own experience, the words of Jesus when Jesus said, “If the Son of God sets you free, you will be free, indeed.” Obedience to Christ results in freedom.

John Stott, another great English Bible scholar, talks about freedom in one of his books and says, “Freedom comes in two dimensions. There is freedom from and there is freedom for.” Salvation means freedom from guilt. The penalty for your sins has been paid by Christ. If you come to him, you don’t have to bear the penalty in your own person or in your own conscience. The penalty has been paid by Christ for your sins.

But it is also freedom from having to continue in bondage to sin. People think that real freedom involves the freedom to continue to sin. But I want to tell you today that being an addict is not freedom. The drug abuser is not free except to continue the habit of drug abuse. The alcoholic is not free. Neither are you if you are addicted, if there are

compulsions as there are remaining in your life. If you are compelled, if you are obsessed, if there is a hook in you so that you cannot forgive and you continue to nurse wounds, if you have an eating disorder, if you are driven by an addiction to adrenaline, if you have a sexual compulsion, if you cannot not work, if you have a relationship that you cannot break free from because you are just knotted up in it and you have tried and tried to let go, but you can't, you are not free.

Freedom means being liberated, ultimately, from the bondage of false attachments and false gods and the burden of myself and my selfishness. True freedom means freedom from having to serve ourselves, to be liberated from all of that so that I might be free for God, to love him and to love others, and to be free and available to people. Freedom has a purpose. Freedom is given to allow us to be lovers and to receive love! And all that kills love in your life, the giving and receiving of love—fear, hurt and woundedness, addictions and obsessions, mistrust, jealousy—that is why Jesus came, to set you free.

Again the wonderful door into freedom is obedience, submission to the authority of Christ. Jesus said in John 8, “If you hold to my teachings [literally, if you obey my teachings] you are really my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.”

Obedience to Jesus moves us into this place where we have room in our lives. We are not crowded inside. There is room for love to God and love to others.

You say, “Well, how do I work this out in my life so that I might have this freedom?”

Let me suggest two things. Number one, I take steps of obedience to Jesus in whatever area I am called to obey. I take steps of obedience always in faith. Many people set obedience over here, way over on one side of the room, and faith all the way over on the other side and there is this big wall between them. But that is not the way the Bible teaches it. The Bible teaches that obedience and faith always go hand in hand. The apostle Paul understood this in Romans 1:5. The apostle Paul speaks about the obedience that comes from faith. You can't talk about faith without talking about obedience and you can talk about obedience without talking about faith. It is like talking about a coin that only had heads, but no tail. These two things always go together.

If you want to have an illustration of that in the Bible, all you need to do is to look at the life of Abraham. He is the ultimate example, other than when we get to the New Testament and look at Jesus Christ, himself. But Abraham is a wonderful illustration of the life of faith and obedience going hand in hand. In Hebrews 11:8, the writer says that by faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as an inheritance, obeyed and went. By faith, [listen to this now] by faith, Abraham obeyed.

You talk about obedience when it is tough, Abraham was asked to leave hearth and home and family and kindred, and all that was familiar, and he was asked by God to go to a place and Hebrews tells us that he didn't know where he was going. You say, “How did Abraham obey God when it was so hard?”



By faith. By faith in what? God gave Abraham a promise. God said to Abraham, "Leave your country (Genesis 12), your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you, I will curse. And all the people on the earth will be blessed through you."

Abraham had a promise—actually several promises. God said, "I am going to make you a blessing, Abraham. Abraham, if you obey me and follow, I will make you into a great nation. Abraham, if you obey me and leave your country, I will give you a new homeland, a new country. Abraham, if you obey me and follow me, I will make your name a blessing to the entire world and the whole world will be blessed through you."

How did Abraham obey? He believed that the promises of God were true. How do you obey when it is hard? Always by faith, never by anything else other than faith. Obedience without faith is nothing, it is dead. As much as faith without obedience is nothing and is dead.

Here you are, you are in the moment of decision when you are being challenged to go one way or the other. Should I go God's way and obey, right now? Should I follow the road map drawn by God, or should I draw my own map? Which will lead me to life and to freedom? What does the working out of your salvation mean in the moment of decision? You must, in the moment of decision, fight the fight of faith. You must believe that it will be better for you to obey. That it will turn out good for you if you obey. That obedience will lead you to greater freedom. That disobedience will bring you into greater bondage. In the moment of decision, you don't feel it. You can't see it. It seems that freedom is being offered to you through disobedience and drawing your own map to a happy life. But that is a lie. The freedom of disobedience is the freedom to be an addict. It is the freedom to stay hooked. It is the freedom to feel guilty. It is the freedom to be ineffective as a Christian. It is the freedom to be miserable.

The freedom that Jesus offers is the freedom to love. It is the freedom of a clean conscience. It is the freedom of security, the freedom of feeling the smile of God and the favor of God on your life, the freedom of anointed ministry.

Brothers and sisters, I would challenge you to look up in a concordance all the promises that God makes to those who will obey him. And you hold those promises before you. For example, I quoted this in my New Year's talk. It is something that has been special to me recently. Psalm 84:11,

"For the Lord God is a sun and a shield; the Lord bestows favor and honor; no good thing will he withhold from those whose walk is blameless."

You say, "I want good things in life."

The Lord says, "I will make you a promise. I will give you good things, if you will walk uprightly and obey me."

Peace in the Bible comes through obedience. A feeling of internal security comes through obedience. Answered prayer comes through obedience. The working out of our salvation through obedience is the working out of faith. And the working out of obedience is done in fear and trembling. Paul says, "Work out your salvation in fear and trembling."

Now here, too, you have to be real careful. People can get all kinds of confused ideas of the fear of God. Some of you were taught growing up the fear of God. And, unfortunately, it was that wrong kind of fear of God. It was that fear that kept you from God. Everything that the Bible teaches is designed to bring people to God, not keep people from God. The wonderful thing about being a Christian is that you might finally be delivered from the spirit of fear, Paul says in Romans 8:15. He says,

"You have not received a spirit of slavery, again, to fear, did you? But you received the spirit of Sonship [and daughterhood] by which you cry, 'Abba, Father' the Spirit, himself, bearing witness with our spirits that we are children of God."

Whatever your concept is of the fear of God as you read it, as you hear about it, never ever let it contain even the least little drop of that kind of fear that would keep you from going to God in any situation, no matter what you've done or where you find yourself. That is the lie, the ultimate lie, from the pit of hell. Jesus Christ died on a cross so that you could always go to God. Jesus taught us that even the lost son, the prodigal, who had been rolling around in the garbage dump would be welcomed back by the father with open arms. There is not even a hint of rejection, of scolding. The fear of God never means the fear of turning to God. That is what the Lord wants for you to do.

The fear of God really means "the fear of turning away from God" of drawing your own map and forging your own way in life. It is certainly the case that God does bring discipline toward those who walk away from him. When I think about fear and trembling, I don't think just about the discipline that the Lord might bring to me as he wants to correct me, although that is a fearful thing, but I also think about the great reality that life will bring me challenges that I won't be able to handle unless I have been walking in obedience to God.

Flip with me for a minute to Matthew 7. I want to talk to you for a few minutes about fear and trembling. Matthew 7, Jesus says:

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice [in other words everyone who hears what is being preached today and decides to be obedient] is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rains came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rains came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.

Now here is my understanding of building with fear and trembling. My understanding is this: that the rain, the floods, the wind will certainly come to everyone of us in virtually

every area of life whether we are Christians or non-Christians, whether we are obedient or disobedient, whatever can be shaken in your life will be, at some point, shaken and tested. At some point, whatever you are banking on, in any area, will be shaken.

You are banking on the continuation of your marriage. At some point you will be less than riotously happy in your marriage, at some point you or your spouse is going to die. You are banking on the continuation of feelings of good health, we all get old, we all get sick. You are banking on friendships – friends move; friends change; friends fail us. You are banking on your own ability to fight off temptation, you will be tempted. The rains come. They do. Jesus says that the floods come. There may be a shake-up in the economy, there may be a reorganization of the health care system, there may be new laws passed, or lay-offs at the office, cut-backs in the corporation, — the rains, the floods and the winds will come.

And you know what brings me fear and trembling? It is the question that I have and that you should have: whether what we have built will withstand the test. See, you can build, like the foolish man. The foolish man's goal was to get it up. Who cares how you build a life, just throw it together. Any old way will do as long as it is quick and easy.

"I don't have to listen to the commands of Jesus," the foolish man says, "No need to consult the map Christ has drawn for me. Look, I have the house. It looks exactly like the obedient Christian's house. It has the same dimensions, the same rooms. Hey, I don't have to listen to what the Bible says about marriage or how to have a happy marriage. I have a marriage. It is up.

"I don't have to listen to what the Bible says about raising kids, about giving money, about being connected to a church, about sex, about forgiveness. I have the thing built. It is quick, it is fast and easy, and it is just as good as the obedient Christian's."

But it doesn't last. In a time of testing it will come down. Whatever is not built on the rock of obedience to Christ will fall.

We can throw a church together, oh, we can. We can get a crowd out. We can entertain. We can throw it together. But in a time of testing, it will come crumbling down around our ears if that's all we've done!

It is much harder to build on rock though, isn't it? To have to consult the Bible and study it and carefully find out its direction for life, to have to blast away into the granite. It is much harder to build a home than a house, to have to work your relationship out with your spouse and to forgive and to get counseling and to work through problems and issues. It is much harder to work out a friendship in times of testing and challenge. To forgive and to have our wounds cleansed, is much harder. It is much harder to work out an obedient life to Christ than it is to go your own way, but you are building on rock.

And it will stand in your old age and in your bad health. What have you got that will stand against cancer? Or stand up to death? Working out your salvation in fear and trembling means to be careful and mindful as you build, that testing will come. I want to build a life, a home and a church that will last and be durable. I do not want it all to

come crashing down around my ears because I have been playing fast and loose. God does not want things to come crashing down around your ears. You have been playing fast and loose.

Well, we have reached this little bit of Paul's statement. He says, "Work out your salvation in fear and trembling [you be careful how you build] for God is at work in you both to will and to do his good pleasure."

Now, in talking about obedience, talking about how obedience is driven by faith in God's promise of the goal, ultimately, of freedom, liberation. And we are trying to now get to the very, very difficult question of what, exactly, is my role in working out this freedom, this liberation, for me and what is God's role?

I don't know if any question occupies more emotional energy for me, more time in my thinking, than the question of what I am supposed to do and what God is supposed to do in the creation of a fully liberated life. How many times have you struggled with the will of God and your own will? How does it all come together? What are you supposed to do in getting yourself unstuck, getting yourself on track? What can God do that you cannot do? Do you realize that this is the question? This question of man's will and God's will, it has occupied philosophy for thousands of years. There are millions of words written just on that. And some of the great Christian writers in the past, Martin Luther, Jonathan Edwards, devoted hundreds and hundreds of pages to the interaction between the will of God and the will of men and women.

Well, I can't solve the great mystery of the intersection of the will of God and our will today—not in a few minutes that I have remaining. But from these verses I think we can say a few things. We can't, in any way, exhaust the subject. But we can say a few things that will lead us to understand obedience a bit better.

We can say that it is not an either/or question—the will of God or your will; God's work or my work—in gaining us freedom. You work, and God works. You will, and God wills. But we can lay out at least two rules. Rule number one: we cannot do what God, alone, can do. Verse 13 says, "For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."

We cannot change our desires. And we do not have the power to do the will of God by ourselves, in of ourselves. God, alone, can transform us. We can't change ourselves. We cannot transform ourselves or our own inner desires. To believe that you can change yourself by yourself is like believing that you can lift yourself out of your chair by pulling on the top of your head.

By ourselves, we can reform ourselves but we cannot transform ourselves. We can reform. We can change certain behaviors by substituting other ones. That is what I mean by reforming. That is what most people are engaged in, in trying to get freedom—reformation. What they do is they stop drinking and they substitute drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes. If you have ever been to an AA meeting, you have never seen so many people drink coffee and smoke cigarettes in your life. There is a reformation going on. And I believe that the reformation is in a positive direction. It is

far more healthy to drink coffee, in general, than to abuse alcohol. And it brings less social problems.

But most of what we do is not true transformation, a true inward change of desire. Most of what we do is substitute. That is what we can do on our own.

So, you go on a diet and lose weight, but you are always angry. Or you substitute obsession with work for obsession with sex. You are still not free. You are still not really changed. There is still no room in your life for love to God and love to people.

Only God can change your desires and only God can empower your will so that you would do what he wants you to do. That is Paul's teaching, always, about the Holy Spirit. God must empower you. When it says, "For God is at work in you" it literally says, "God energizes you." The inner change, what I am calling transformation, is the work of God and is not the work of people. Deuteronomy 30:6 says, "The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants so that you may love him with all your heart, with all your soul and live." Jeremiah 24:7 says, "I will give them a heart to know me that I am the Lord. They will be my people and I will be their God and then they will return to me with their whole hearts." Jeremiah 31:33 says, "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. And I will be their God and they will be my people." Ezekiel 11 talks about God "giving us an undivided heart." Jesus talks about it as being like the vine and the branches and says, "Apart from me you can do nothing."

God's unique role is to change our desires and to empower us to do his will. If you are stuck in a habit, you can't change yourself. You don't have the strength and it doesn't come by will power to break that awful habit, only God can help you.

What is your role, then? If the first rule is that we cannot do what God, alone, can do. The second rule is this: God will not do what he commands us to do. We are commanded by God to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. God will not do what he commands us to do. Many people hear the message. They can't change themselves, they don't have the power to transform their desires, they think that means to sit back in utter passivity like a lump and say, "Well, God, I can't do anything and so I will just sit and continue to sin and sin and sin."

No, no, no, no. God is not saying that you be totally passive and be like a lump of mud. He calls upon you to work out your salvation. God won't work it out; you need to! What does that mean?

Well, let me suggest three things in closing that you can do to bring about that freedom that I have talked about that comes by the obedience of faith. There are three things you can do to bring fuller freedom and more room in your life that comes through the obedience of faith. Here is what you can do, every one of you. I don't care how addicted you are, how stuck you are, how in bondage you are. You can do these three things.

Number one: You can be as honest as possible about the problem that is going on in your life. In other words, as much as is possible, in that area that you still don't have salvation, meaning freedom, worked in your life, you can be as honest as possible about that area. You can allow yourself to be confronted by the truth of the Word of God.

And when I talk about being as honest as possible about the area of problem and bondage, what I mean is you be like Nehemiah back in the Old Testament, who when the Lord called him to rebuild the walls, the first thing he did was not to start building, but the first thing he did was to walk around the city walls and surveyed the damage. And he allowed the full scope of the problem to sink into his mind. Where the walls were collapsed, damaged and ruined.

And that is what God would say to you first of all that you can do. You can walk around and survey the whole scope of your marriage, where the walls have been kicked in and there have been hurtful things said. You can survey the whole scope of how this particular area of sin in your life has affected everyone and every thing. Because you are so angry or so easily hurt or so full of selfish ambition or so jealous or so lustful, so obsessed in some area, this is how it is played out. This is how it is played out for you in work and how it is played out for you in relationships. This is how it is played out for you in time management and in spending money. You can be as honest as possible about your problem.

Number two: You can own responsibility for the state of affairs as they currently exist. You do not have to push off your problem onto somebody else. You don't have to claim victim status. You don't have to say, "Well, what can I do? So and so hurt me; that's why I am the way I am. I am a victim." As you survey the walls and the damage and the walls that were collapsed, you can do what Nehemiah did. He said to God, "We are responsible." He owned stuff. You can do that.

And step three: You can turn to God. It doesn't matter how far away you are or how near you are. You can always turn to God and ask God to change your desires and to empower your will. You can't change yourself, don't even try. But after allowing conviction to settle in and owning your responsibility, you can turn to God and say, "God, change me. Change me inwardly. Reshape me, remake me. Empower me so that I can find that freedom that Rich describes. So that I can build a life that will last and that will stand up to the winds and the rain. So that I can know the freedom of obediently following the road map that you, God, have laid out for my life."

Let's pray.