

Christ Community Covenant Church
Advent: Down to Earth “Obedience”
Pastor Gloria Merritt - December 4, 2016

If you'll take a look at the bulletin cover for our Advent series, you can see that it kind of looks like a child's drawing, and I really like that for so many reasons. Our Advent series is called “Down to Earth” – it was also used as the theme for yesterday's Christmas Tea. In fact, before we get started, let's look at a fun video that's called, “Christmas According to Kids” – maybe you've already seen it because it's been floating around on the internet.

[video] “Christmas according to Kids”

Well, if that isn't truly down-to-earth, I'm not sure what is. And here's the disclaimer: The views represented in this video are not necessarily those held by this establishment!

We chose the theme “down to earth” and as we discuss it in these Sundays during December, I believe there will be some practical things to draw from. Today we'll look at Down to Earth Obedience – the kind that Jesus modeled for us. In other years of celebrating Advent, we have looked at the Christmas story with the words joy, peace, hope and love, which are all important Advent words. But when we consider what happened as Christ came down to earth, all of the miraculous events surrounding the birth of Jesus were a response to God becoming flesh – and the practical parts of how Jesus lived and calls us to live are what we want to look at these next four Sundays. We want to explore Christ's humility, and love, and His sacrificial lifestyle and today we will look at His down-to-earth obedience, but first, let's pray.

PRAYER: Heavenly Father, as we look into Your word today, we ask for the presence of Your Holy Spirit to teach and to guide us. I ask you to watch over the words I share today, that they would be down-to-earth, and yet reflective of Your heavenly and divine work in our lives. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing and acceptable to you, my Lord and my God. Amen.

So, I want to begin today by asking you a question. What is the hardest thing you've ever done? Think about it for a moment. What is the hardest thing you've ever done, and why was it hard? Did it require faith? Discipline? Sacrifice? Patience? Strength? Restraint? How did you feel afterward? Did you succeed, or fail? Did it require obedience of any kind? From what or from whom did you draw the strength and resolve to do this hard thing?

I think some of the hardest things we ever do in life require something that comes from someplace deep in our souls, a reserve or resource that we might not have known we had. I think that place deep in our souls was created by God himself and when that resource is filled by God himself, by His word, by His blessings, then we are able to accomplish much in the Kingdom of God and we are able to accomplish more than we could have imagined.

Let's turn now to Philippians 2, which will be our text during our Advent series. All of the themes I mentioned earlier will be drawn from this chapter, but for today, we'll look specifically at verses 7-11. More than likely, you're a bit familiar with this passage.

- ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
- ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!
- ⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
- ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Let's look at verse 8 again: "And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!" This verse tells us that even for the Lord Jesus, His obedience was a process, and that's what I found intriguing.

While I was preparing for this message this week, I struggled with it, because on the one hand, obedience is a pretty black and white, cut and dried, just-do-it-and-get-it-over-with-kind-of-thing. But, I struggled, because I know it's not that easy, and I kept praying and asking the Lord to show me His heart for us this morning. Because, it's easy for us to think that for Christ, obedience was just simply an automatic even robotic response that came from His being God's son. We might think it was effortless for Christ to go to the cross, but there are statements in scripture that tell us otherwise.

Earlier when I asked you about the hardest thing you've ever done, I mentioned having a resource, or a reserve from which to draw. Here are some of the things that I found in scripture that speak to how we can build that reserve or resource within us. As I found these things in scripture, I couldn't help but refer to my own experiences as a parent. You may have heard me talk about how I enjoy taking care of my grandsons every week on my day off, and I do! But every week, I watch their little personalities and how they are growing and I am reminded all over again about how important these truths about obedience are. So, for every one of us in this room – young, older, and oldest – let's be reminded of some truths from God's word.

First of all, **obedience is learned.** We aren't told a lot about Jesus and his childhood, but what we are told tells us a LOT. Luke 2:51-52 packs so much in a couple of sentences. "Then he [Jesus] went down to Nazareth with them [his parents] and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. ⁵² And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man."

[back to **Obedience is learned.**]

Can you imagine what it must have been like for Jesus, the Son of God, to be subject and obedient to his earthly parents? For one thing, it was a demonstration of Christ's humility. I think the little Lord Jesus could trust that his Heavenly Father searched the whole earth and found just the right parents to train and teach His son. I think he found a mother and father whose hearts fully belonged to God, hearts that were filled with the word of God so that they would patiently model it and teach it to Jesus. Any parent's goal in training their children to obey is for their character development; it's for how they will get along in life. The ultimate goal for a child's obedience training is that the child will learn to obey God. I believe that part of Jesus' humanity was for him to learn to overcome his flesh – something that He would have to draw on in the future. As Jesus learned obedience, and as we learn obedience, it became a physical habit and response, a precious resource.

As Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man, he learned from the scriptures that **obedience is blessed and rewarded.** The blessing and reward of obedience in scripture is repeated again and again in the book of Deuteronomy when God was establishing the nation of Israel. And in Psalm 119, a passage of scripture that was often memorized in Jewish households, the opening verses say [from The Message]

You're blessed when you stay on course,
walking steadily on the road revealed by GOD.
You're blessed when you follow his directions,
doing your best to find him.
That's right—you don't go off on your own;
you walk straight along the road he set.
You, GOD, prescribed the right way to live;
now you expect us to live it.

Our obedience to God is blessed and rewarded and just like a savings account, it pays great dividends down the road, although sometimes it takes years for the dividends to be realized. But again, those

blessings can be a wonderful resource and reserve from which to draw when tough things or tough times come.

A huge reason that our culture is filled with so many troubling problems boils down to the simple fact that we are a lawless culture. We are a disobedient culture. We don't want to believe that there are consequences to this kind of lawlessness, but there are. Isn't it interesting that there is a demand for our government to create more and more laws to protect us, and yet a number of people, and thankfully they are in the minority, won't ever obey those laws. They are in rebellion to God's protective commands that are for our good. We don't need more rules and laws; we need a change of heart!

And one of the things that needs to come from our hearts is love. **Obedience is a demonstration of LOVE.** Jesus himself said that "whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them. Our lives as Christians who love Jesus, is demonstrated through our obedience. 1 John 2:5-6: But those who obey God's word truly show how completely they love him. That is how we know we are living in him. ⁶ Those who say they live in God should live their lives as Jesus did. Of course, this can be boiled down to the 2 greatest commandments – to love God [Love God, Love People] with heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves.

I thought it might be helpful to hear a little bit from someone in our congregation who, as an officer of the law has seen some of the good, bad, and ugly of obedience and disobedience. I've asked Dutch Smith to come and share a little bit about the role that obedience plays in his job as a police officer and detective.

[Dutch Smith] Thank you, Dutch. Your words are a blessing to us!

There's another part of obedience – the learned part – that needs further development if we're to take it from a learned response to a matter of the heart – and that is **obedience is a place of suffering or sacrifice.** Scripture tells us that Jesus' obedience was achieved through suffering. Hebrews 5:7-9, "When Jesus was *on the earth, a man of flesh and blood*, He offered up prayers and pleas, groans and tears to the One who could save Him from death. He was heard because He approached God with reverence.⁸ Although He was a Son, Jesus learned obedience through the things He suffered. ⁹ And once He was perfected *through that suffering* He became the way of eternal salvation for all those who hear and follow Him," Those statements are loaded! Jesus cried out to God – we read here of his anguish over what he was about to suffer. Jesus' cries were heard because of his "reverent submission", his obedience! It says that he learned obedience from what he suffered – do you ever think of your areas of temptation as a place of suffering? You should. Do you ever think that crying out to God during times of temptation – any places where you might be tempted to compromise what you KNOW to be right, even places deep within your heart – are the very places where you can bring glory to God through obedience, through surrendering those places to Him?

Friends, we don't ever have to be discouraged when we consider the places where we struggle to obey, because God is FOR us. That's why Jesus came down to earth. "For this reason, he [Jesus] had to be made like us in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted." (Hebrews 2:18) You see, God not only wrote the rule book, but He came to HELP us obey the rules, because he understood that we couldn't do it on our own. He did that by sending Jesus Down to EARTH to be the perfect, spotless, obedient Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He did that by sending the Holy Spirit – whom Jesus called the HELPER.

If we're honest with ourselves, don't some of the spiritual battles that we face have to do with our own willfulness, our own disobedience? If we are simply doing something that is within our own goodness, or natural to our personality and human nature to do, is that all there is to obedience? After all, some people are just wired to be rule followers. Doesn't Christ's example of obedience require more than that? When you think back on the hardest thing you ever did – did it include any kind of suffering or submission that you didn't think was possible?

Also, we must beware of using a facade of obedience to mask a sinful heart. Living the Christian life is not all about rules. The Pharisees in Jesus' time relentlessly pursued acts of obedience to the Law, but they became self-righteous, believing they deserved heaven because of what they had done. As followers of Jesus, we have to admit that self-righteousness is one of our greatest temptations and it's one of our greatest sins.

When we are followers of Jesus, signed, sealed, delivered, belonging to Him, God wants to bless us, He wants to cover us with His favor – the kind of favor He poured out on Jesus, and even on Mary, the one who was chosen to be Jesus' earthly mother. He wants to help us live our lives in this temporary home that we call earth. One of the ways that happens is when we SURRENDER and live in submission and obedience to Him instead of in rebellion to Him. Rebellion and disobedience results in lots and lots of brokenness, and we only need to look in the mirror to see that. But sometimes, just like my children, and two little grandchildren, and like ME, we look defiantly toward Heaven and say, Nooooo! I want to do things my way. Then we fall down, we hurt ourselves, we get the consequences of our sin, we get into trouble, and our tender Heavenly Father says, "I wanted to help you do it right. This didn't have to happen."

We're about to turn to this practice of communion which Jesus told us was a special time of remembrance of what was accomplished through his obedience to death on the cross. He said that when we eat the bread and drink from the cup we would proclaim His death before all of the world; the death that demonstrates His love for us.

Before we do that, I want to invite you to do a couple of things. First of all, if you have not yet taken the step of obedience to say "yes" to God, to His Son, to His love, and to His call to repent of your sins and believe His word and walk in obedience to Him, then I ask you to take that step today and to let this communion meal be your first as a new Christian. We'll pray about that in a moment.

If you already are a follower of Jesus Christ today, I ask you to take some moments in reflection, in silent prayer. I ask you to consider areas in your life where you might not be loving the Lord with your obedience – it may be that right now He's opening your eyes to an attitude of your heart, a place of Phariseeism, or of some area that you know isn't in line with God's word. Let the Lord's amazing grace and mercy wash over you as you turn back to Him now. Remember our Lord Emmanuel, who came down to earth out of His love for us.

Let's first have some silent prayer, and then we'll prayer together.

[Silent Prayer]

PRAYER FOR NEW BELIEVERS:

So, if today you want to start a journey of faith and be a follower of Jesus Christ and participate in this Communion meal as a new Christian, please pray along with me. You can silently repeat these words.

"Heavenly Father, I believe that you love me and that you are for me, and that you created me for good. You have opened my eyes to your amazing grace. I understand that you are calling me to believe, that You sent Jesus to die for me and to forgive me of my sins. I confess with my mouth that Jesus Christ is Lord and I ask for the Holy Spirit to fill me, and help me, and comfort me, and guide me so that I can walk with You and serve You both now and in eternity. Amen."

Now, having spent some time allowing God to whisper to our hearts, I've asked Dave to lead us in this prayer of confession:

Father God,
you are the one who leads us
from darkness into light,
from captivity into freedom,
from anxiety into peace,
from despair into joy.

Yet we long to break free,
like children,
choosing independence,
convinced of our own wisdom,
forgetting your love and amazing grace.

Forgive us,
draw close to us,
embrace us once again
in your loving arms,
and enable us to obediently follow you
in worship and grateful service
each day of our lives,
Amen

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, let's not take this time of Communion lightly. Let's consider the obedience that Jesus demonstrated in going to the cross for us. Remember that we read earlier that our Lord was obedient to death – but not just any death. He was brutally tortured, and subjected to severe humiliation and to one of the most horrific deaths imaginable out of his love for the Father, out of his love for us. He did it obediently. Can we not respond out of love to him with our own obedience?

Friends, ²³ For I pass on to you what I received from the Lord himself. On the night when he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread ²⁴ and gave thanks to God for it. Then he broke it in pieces and said, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way, he took the cup of wine after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant between God and his people—an agreement confirmed with my blood. Do this in remembrance of me as often as you drink it." ²⁶ For every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are announcing the Lord's death until he comes again.

Here at 4Cs, as part of the Evangelical Covenant Church, we practice what is called an open table. That means that if you are a true follower of our Lord Jesus Christ, then you are welcome to eat this meal with us. We do not require membership here with us, but we recognize that you are a member of the Body of Christ and our brother or sister in the Lord. We just ask that you please hold onto the elements of the bread and wine and wait until we all take them together, spending these moments in reflection, or singing along with the worship team.

Eat and drink. The body and blood of our Lord symbolized in these elements.

[Prayer for the offering]

Lord Jesus, as we have reflected upon and celebrated your obedience today, we now offer up to you our down-to-earth tithes and offerings. We give them in obedience to you and ask that you grant us generous hearts as we give, and that you multiply these gifts for your honor and glory, and for your Kingdom purposes. Help us to be especially mindful and generous to those who are in great need this winter season. And, may you be generous and abundant with your healing power on all who are sick or discouraged. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

In conclusion: obedience allows us to live a life of joy without shame, rooted deeply in the Lord and confident in our eternal hope. So, may you be blessed with supernatural strength to turn your eyes from foolish, worthless, and evil things, and to shut out the demeaning and the negative. Instead may you behold the beauty of things that God has planned for you as you obey His Word. May your life be characterized by all of the things that bring Glory to God! Have a blessed week!