

POVERTY

OBEDIENCE

CHASTITY

TRANSPARENT
KNOWING

TRANSPARENT
BEING

TRANSPARENT
DOING

MEDITATION

CONTEMPLATION

PRAYER

There are the over-obedient ones. Maybe those are the pharisees, and yet that word doesn't really hold it. There are those of us who struggle with doing whatever it is that comes along and consciously doing that, and yet at the same time having the gnawing sensation that there is something more to obedience. Obedience is more than just doing whatever comes along, more than just doing what is demanded.

Then there are the other ones of us who are under-obedient. Maybe we need to talk about those as the libertines. The obedience comes along and a no is said to that. But it's not an unconscious no. It's an utterly conscious no that is said. Yet in the midst of that consciousness is again the nagging suspicion of needing to struggle with what is happening in my life in terms of obedience.

I would like to talk about obedience as being four /s's. I'd say that first of all that obedience is covenant. Obedience /s covenant. Where this first came to me was as a young boy. We used to do a lot of hitch-hiking, before it was unsafe or dangerous to hitch-hike. It was the only way to get around the area of the country I lived in. At the age of seven or eight years, I was usually out at some point of the week hitch-hiking; and sometimes I'd come home and I'd not have gotten where I wanted to go or I would have stayed by the road for an hour, a little seven-year-old boy. I was self-conscious enough to know that adults are supposed to pity little seven-year-old boys out on the side of the road hitch-hiking. I'd come home furious that I hadn't gotten where I'd wanted to go or that I'd only gotten half-way and gotten stuck and had to turn around and come back home. One time I told my father about that, and he just stopped me in the middle and said, "Who do you think you are? They don't owe you anything. They don't owe you anything." Suddenly obedience began to become clear to me in terms of being covenant, and not, as I reflected on that, as having to do with laws or rules.

Jesus was so clear on this. Whenever anybody would come up to him with one set or rules, why, he'd throw another one at them. Or if they'd come up with that one he'd contradict it with another. He was clear that obedience does not have to do with some set of rules. Rules are only tools that you and I have created in order to define certain arenas so that we at least stand a chance in terms of that battle. But that's not what obedience is about. Maybe the rules or the laws are ways that you and I have developed for getting off the hook. When an issue comes before us, in terms of a demand on our lives, why, we've got some neat little set of rules over here. Why, my goodness, you can't expect me to do that over there when I've got this to do over here. In terms of obedience being covenant, the first thing you understand is that no more than we have any claim on any other human being, you and I have no claim on God. We have no claim on God.

To say this another way, and I contradict myself it would seem, obedience is not doing in the ordinary sense of the word. It's not getting a job done. It's not how efficiently you can move in a certain area of life. Can you imagine in the covenant of your marriage, treating that covenant out of the understanding of obedience in terms of efficiency? And yet you go down to the drug store, and you can buy all kinds of books on how you can perform efficiently at that.

You understand the demonic death of understanding obedience as some kind of getting a job done or some kind of efficiency. Whenever somebody new begins to work with us, it doesn't take him long, as he looks at us, to see that there are a few things wrong. And in relatively short time, he begins to formulate, usually, some things that ought to be changed and begins talking to people about those things that ought to be changed. Usually after a month or two, he begins to doubt the wisdom of his ever having come in the first place. Well, I was going to say that the wise prior always looks in terms of obedience. What does the new person understand obedience to be about? In terms of the covenant, and in terms of obedience being covenant, only after you have understood what obedience is and have submitted are you ready to be the agent of change. Anyone who comes worrying about whether his opinions are going to be implemented. . . . Well, you begin to see that what you need to say is that that's not what this corporate group is about, and you need to go and find another.

comes to me as a very offensive kind of thing. And yet, what it means to love yourself is that when that demand is there, you move.

Or maybe the other way that you need to put it is that the affirmation of obedience is, finally, to love God. It is to be reconciled to Being Itself. It's not that you *do* obedience. Obedience is never something that you *do*. Whenever it becomes something that you do, it is just for the sake of yourself. It gets turned in and somehow becomes some sort of self-gratifying, self-feeding kind of sore, rather than being turned out. What obedience has to do with is *being* obedience, not *doing* obedience.

I think of the end of Salinger's book, *Franny and Zooey*, where he talks about Seymour shining his shoes for the fat lady. In terms of obedience, you see that what was demanded there was not something that you do. The shining of the shoes was not, finally, an act that you perform, but was a being that you were. Those shoes had to do with your being. To love God is to be obedient, and to obey his laws.

Obedience has to do with this affirmation. It also has to do with **unrestrained engagement**. It comes to me that, first of all (and this really feeds back to the previous point), the unrestrained engagement comes as saying yes. I think of Dag Hammarskjöld, who put this utterly secularly. He once wrote, "I don't know who or what put the question. I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer yes to someone or something and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that therefore my life in self-surrender has a goal."

I find myself pushing back to the way Paul Tillich talks about radical, total, and unconditional in his sermon, "You Are Accepted." Obedience is something radical, total, and unconditional demanded of your life. And, "You are accepted." In other words, the total, the unconditional is to say yes—you say yes to total engagement in the whole ongoing civilizing process.

And that never comes easily. It comes as a happening. And it's just a sheer happening. You may remember that rich man who came up to Jesus and asked the question, "What do I need to do to have eternal life?" And you know how we get that story all messed up, implying that somehow if you have money in your hip pocket or if you have a bank account, then somehow you cannot possibly be a man of faith. For Jesus' response to him was, "Have you obeyed all the laws?" And he said, "Yes, I've done all that." And he goes on to ask him some more questions, and he says, "Is there anything else that I have to do?" And Jesus says, "Yes, there's one thing: go and sell everything that you have and then come back." And you remember how the story ended: he went off sad-faced. You see that that story is not about poverty. It does not say that to be the man of faith you must be in poverty. What that story is about is surrendering. And whenever you surrender to unrestrained engagement, that comes as a radical happening.

This came for my wife and myself after we had been here a year. Actually it took us two years to make the decision. We had put all our possessions in storage in Phoenix, and we paid our monthly bill on that storage. Finally after two years we decided that the time had come to surrender. I tell you, it was heart-wrenching to take our stuff out of storage and to put it out on the street. It was a street sale; they go big in Phoenix. And if any of you are thinking of doing this, people just come; and there go your wedding gifts, and there go your books, and there go. . . I tell you, to make that decision is a happening.

And everyone of us around here and across the movement already has the image of two suitcases, that what's demanded of our times is two suitcases, so that at any moment you can just pick up and go. And you see, that has nothing to do with the intrinsic value of having lots of possessions, or not having possessions. It has to do with surrender. It has to do with that surrender which is prerequisite to moving in terms of engagement.

Where that engagement takes place is always in a particular task; I find it rather easy to be obedient in the broad, but difficult to be obedient in the particular, to this person or this particular

people, that's what's demanded." You know, what finally came out of that obedience to God was the great code of law that sustained the life of that community, not just through those forty years, but sustained the life of that community through centuries, century upon century. The hand of God, as Moses moved in as the obedient one, was forced, and a new construct of humanness itself came into being.

I think of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, there at the point of the decision whether to go through with it or not. You almost hear him saying there in the garden, "Now what's the point of all this really? I'm only 33 years old, never been married, it's been a hard life. Now really what's the point of going off on some trumped up charge? I have a feeling what's going to happen." You can almost hear him saying to God, "Over my dead body I'll do this—over my dead body." Then he goes down and finds his followers asleep, and comes back up, and finally goes back down and gives his body. H. Richard Niehbur began to get a feel after this in his article on "The Church as Social Pioneer," where he said that God responds, that God responded in himself and history was different. You begin to see what obedience is about—that it's always about suffering. There's always suffering in obedience. The obedient one never sees the end of the road. He is one without a home, who has no country. It's always a fight, or, it's a sword that I bring. Obedience has to do with suffering.

The Israelites had a master image whereby they understood so clearly what it meant to be obedient to God. They understood that to be the obedient servant in the midst of humanness is to be the suffering servant. And that suffering goes on till death itself.

Yet on the other side of the suffering there's always the hope in the destinal surrender of the obedient one. I'm not talking about a naive optimism, but the hope of life itself. Noah, as he was building that silly boat, must have had that hope as his neighbors came by and looked at this boat that he was building while everything was looking great. Or Abraham and Sarah. That's ever more real to me. How many times in hope must they have gone to bed at night to conceive that child, to conceive that one man-child, till finally in obedience that child was conceived, when all others had said it can't be done. That is destinal surrender: the one in obedience is the hopeful one.

If you come back to the new religious mode charts, you see that when obedience is pushed to the bottom it comes down through prayer and finally ends up in the whole category of freedom. Obedience pushed to the bottom is prayer. And to come back to Bonhoeffer, obedience is that which delivers up to the human being freedom. And in many ways I suppose this whole lecture is a commentary on the one sentence that says something like this, "The obligation that alone gives freedom and gives entire freedom is the obligation to God and neighbor as they confront us in Jesus Christ."

I tell you that God has never stopped running history, and he surrenders not one ounce of his sovereignty to man. You almost have to say to yourself, "Freedom itself is commanded of me by God. Freedom itself is the command to be obeyed. My freedom is the command to be obeyed." My freedom makes history all right, but it makes the history God wants it to make. And the minute I get fed up with that humiliation, that my creativity does not get into history exactly the way I want it to, the moment I get fed up with that humiliation, not only am I no longer free, but I am no longer the obedient one. I am the slave in rebellion again. This is what is so hard to get expressed. In the midst of obedience, at the very bottom of being free is surrender. At the very bottom of being free is obedience.