

“The Cost of Discipleship: Obedience”

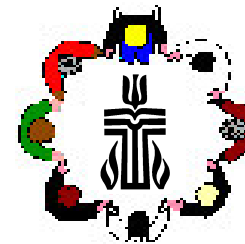
Sermon by  
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Ash Wednesday  
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Matthew 4:18-22

“Reaching Up to God ...  
Reaching Out to Others.”



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## Matthew 4:18-22

This passage should sound a little familiar to you if you've joined us in worship lately, because we talked about it a few Sundays ago during Epiphany. I talked a little bit about how I think I might have responded to Jesus' call to just drop everything and follow him—

Which is to say, I don't think I'd have done it. I don't think I'd have left behind my family and my home and my friends and my job to follow Jesus, not only because he was someone I'd never even met before, but also just because it would have been incredibly hard for me to give up everything I'd have had to give up in order to follow Jesus.

Because following Jesus back then *was* hard. It was hard for the disciples, because following Jesus not only meant giving up life as they knew it, it also meant swimming against the tide, as it were, of public opinion.

It meant shifting their priorities so that what used to be important in their old lives was no longer important, because the only thing that was important in their new lives now was Christ.

It meant, in other words, living their lives as Jesus instructed them—in *obedience* to Jesus Christ.

*Obedience.* It's a word that's very difficult for most of us in this day and age, especially here in the United States, where individuality and "doing your own thing" are far more important to us than conforming to someone else's ideal of who we should be—even if that person *is* Jesus Christ.

We resist authority, it seems, almost reflexively. We do everything we can in an effort to manage our world so that things work out the way we think they should.

Most of the time, it seems that the only "obedience" we acknowledge is obedience to "self."

And yet ... this is not the way it's supposed to be—at least, not according to the bible. Because the bible is very clear in what it tells us—we are to be, above all else, an *obedient* people. We are told to love God, and to love one another, and the bible tells us over and over and over exactly how we're to do this—and yet, we don't do it. Despite the Ten Commandments—despite the Golden Rule—despite *everything*—we don't obey.

But, as the bible also points out to us, we are not alone in our disobedience. For example, Adam and Eve didn't obey. Israel didn't obey. The Pharisees didn't obey. Open the bible randomly to almost any page, it seems, and you will encounter an example of *someone* who doesn't listen—*someone* who doesn't do what he's told—*someone* who doesn't obey.

This general lack of obedience has been of great concern over the years to God, and so God has, from time to time, appointed people to speak on God's behalf to teach us how to be obedient. In ancient times, for example, God sent us prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel ... then later, in more recent times, God sent us prophets like Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and theologian who lived in the early part of the twentieth century, reaching adulthood right about the same time as Adolf Hitler rose to power in Nazi Germany. Bonhoeffer's growing concern over what he saw as violations to basic human rights led him to actively participate in resistance efforts against Hitler—efforts which ultimately led to his arrest and execution in a Nazi concentration camp in 1945.

Before he was martyred, though, Bonhoeffer produced an extraordinary body of work, much of which explored the fundamental issue of what, *exactly*, it means to follow Jesus in an upside-down world that often isn't very Christian in the way it lives life.

Bonhoeffer concluded that the key to being a Christian was simple—all you had to do was be *obedient* to Christ. All you had to do was consider what the will of God was in any given situation, and then act accordingly.

For Bonhoeffer, obedience is only possible where there is faith; and, conversely, faith is only possible where there is obedience. You cannot separate them, and one doesn't follow the other; that is, you don't obey and *then* have faith, and you don't first have faith and *then* obey.

To illustrate this simple truth, Bonhoeffer looked to the call of the disciples—the same passage we just read. He noted that out of obedience, Peter left his nets and followed Jesus, which made his faith possible; but at the same time, it was his faith in Christ that led to his obedience to begin with.

And so, for Bonhoeffer, only those who believe are obedient, and only those who are obedient believe. It is this obedience—this *single-minded* obedience, as Bonhoeffer puts it—that sets us apart as disciples of Christ.

And, for Bonhoeffer, nowhere in scripture is the essence of discipleship set forth as clearly as it is in the Gospel of Matthew, in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

And so, for the next six weeks, we'll be looking at some of those passages in the Sermon on the Mount and exploring just what it means to obey Jesus. We'll explore how Bonhoeffer viewed the relationship between grace, suffering, and compassion. We'll examine how all of this comes together for us when we die to self to be resurrected in the image of Christ.

And, throughout it all, we'll explore just what it means for us to be *obedient* to Jesus Christ.

Tonight, Ash Wednesday, let us take a moment or two and reflect upon the many ways in which we disobey Christ—routinely ...

Those times where we know what we *should* do ... but we don't do it;

Those things we know we *shouldn't* say ... but we say them anyhow;

Those situations in which we know we should put *others* first ... but we put ourselves first anyway.

Because this kind of critical self-awareness is what Lent is all about, because it's this kind of self-examination that leads us to identify those things of which we want to repent;

Those things that we want to turn around;

Those things on which we want to do a better job in terms of following—of *obeying*—Christ.

Following Jesus is hard. It was hard for the disciples back in ancient times, and it's hard for us today. Because following Jesus not only means giving up life as we know it, it also means swimming against the tide, as it were, of public opinion.

It means shifting our priorities so that what used to be important in our old lives is no longer important, because the only thing that's important in our new lives is Christ.

It means, in other words, living life as Jesus instructs us—in *obedience* to Jesus Christ.

May this Lent be a time of renewed obedience for us as we focus our attention on what it means to be a disciple of Christ;

May God grant us the wisdom, and the courage, to be truly obedient.

Amen.