

Obedience

Elder Boyd K. Packer,
Quorum of the Twelve Apostles
That All May Be Edified
[Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982], pp. 253-261.

I would like to speak this morning about a subject that the Lord has returned to again and again in ancient and in modern scripture—a matter that is of critical importance to young people. Of importance to students who are seeking to learn secular and, particularly, spiritual things. That is the matter of obedience. You do not talk about obedience unless you talk about authority, and you do not talk about obedience and authority unless you talk about agency.

The finest statement that I have ever read on the balance of authority and individual freedom in the Church comes, interestingly enough, from the preface of the *General Handbook of Instructions*, which is signed by the First Presidency of the Church. I would like to read a quote from that preface:

A distinguishing characteristic of the Church organization lies in its balance of authority and individual rights. Priesthood is a brotherhood, and in its operation the highest capacities of man—his capacity to act as a free agent and his capacity to be spiritual—must be respected and enlarged. Leaders invite, persuade, encourage, and recommend in a spirit of gentleness and meekness. Members respond freely as the Spirit guides. Only this kind of response has moral value. An act is moral only if it expresses the character and disposition of the person, that is, if it arises out of knowledge, faith, love, or religious intent. Fear and force have no place in the kingdom because they do not produce moral actions and are contrary to God's gift of free agency. (*General Handbook of Instructions*. 1963.)

Authority Versus Individual Freedom

That statement explains how authority and individual freedom ought to be, and are, managed in the Church. This morning I would like to discuss an even higher expression of that—how it works with the individual, with you. Surely we have had enough demonstrations of the fact that young people are really agents unto themselves. You can do just exactly what you will do. You may face some restrictions and constraints, sometimes even force,

but not from the Church—because the prophet said:

Remember, my brethren...ye are free; ye are permitted to act for yourselves; for behold, God hath given unto you a knowledge and he hath made you free. (Helaman 14:30.)

If you feel pressed in and pressured and not free, it may be for one of two reasons. One, if you have lost freedom, possibly it has been through some irresponsible act of your own. Now you must regain it. You may be indentured—indentured to some habits of laziness or indolence; some even become slaves to addiction. The other reason is that maybe if you are not free you have not earned it. Freedom is not a self-preserving gift. It has to be earned, and it has to be protected.

For instance, I am not free to play the piano, for I do not know how. I cannot play the piano. I could quickly prove that, but I think it may be a mistake on your part if you ask me to. The ability to play the piano, the freedom to do that, has to be earned. It is a relatively expensive freedom. It takes an investment of time and of discipline. This discipline begins, as discipline usually does, from without. I hope that you do not have contempt for discipline that originates from without. That is the beginning. A parent usually presses a youngster to practice the piano. But somewhere, it is hoped, practice grows into self-discipline, which is really the *only* kind of discipline. The discipline that comes from within is that which makes a young person decide that he wants to be free to play the piano and play it well. Therefore, he is willing to pay the price. Then he can be free from supervision, from pressure, from whatever forms of persuasion parents use.

In our family I have a key that I use, a kind of fatherly key. With my children I know when it is time to lift supervision. As I meet young people around the Church, they are always saying, "When will my parents ever think I have enough maturity to act for myself?." I know when with my family. I have employed this key. I know that they are ready for full freedom in any field of endeavor the very minute they stop resenting supervision. At that moment I can back off, let them go alone, and really just be there to respond if they come for

help.

Free to Choose

We are all free to choose. We are making choices. I chose to be a teacher. I wanted to be a teacher. I remember when I decided that-I was overseas in the military. As I sat one day pondering, I made the decision that I was going to be a teacher. I really wanted to be a teacher. Now, because of that choice, I am not free today to act as a surgeon or an architect or many other things. But that does not matter to me. It matters very little-it is not critical at all. I think young people might be surprised to learn how little, relatively speaking, some of these decisions are: whether you are going to be a mailman, a clerk, an architect, a lawyer, or whatever. These decisions are relatively unimportant.

There are some decisions, however, that affect all of those decisions or any of them. These are the decisions that are critical and basic. These are the decisions in which one must be free to be an agent unto himself to choose.

Freedom to Be Obedient

I am free, and I am very jealous of my independence. I am quick to declare my independence and my freedom. Choice among my freedoms is my freedom to be obedient. I obey because I want to: I choose to.

Some people are always suspicious that one is only obedient because he is compelled to be. They indict themselves with the very thought that one is only obedient because he is compelled to be. They feel that one would obey only through compulsion. They speak for themselves. I am *free* to be obedient, and I decided that-all by myself. I pondered on it; I reasoned it; I even experimented a little. I learned some sad lessons from disobedience. Then I tested it in the great laboratory of spiritual inquiry-the most sophisticated, accurate, and refined test that we can make of any principle. So I am not hesitant to say that I want to be obedient to the principles of the gospel. *I want to*. I have decided that. My volition, my agency, has been turned in that direction. The Lord knows that.

Some say that obedience nullifies agency. I would like to point out that obedience is a righteous principle. We read from the Doctrine and Covenants:

Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection.

And if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and obedience than another, he will have so much

the advantage in the world to come.

There is a law, irrevocably decreed in heaven before the foundations of this world, upon which all blessings are predicated-

And when we obtain any blessing from God, it is by *obedience* to that law upon which it is predicated. (D&C 130:18-21; italics added.)

Obedience to God can be the very highest expression of independence. Just think of giving to Him the one thing, the one gift, that He would never take. Think of giving Him that one thing that He would never wrest from you. You know these lines of the poet:

Know this, that every soul is free
To choose his life and what he'll be,
For this eternal truth is given
That God will force no man to heav'n.

He'll call, persuade, direct aright,
And bless with wisdom, love, and light,
In nameless ways be good and kind,
But never force the human mind.

("Know This, That Every Soul Is Free" *Hymns*, no. 90.)

I quote again from the Doctrine and Covenants:

And again, I say unto you, I give unto you a new commandment, that you may understand my will concerning you;

Or, in other words, I give unto you directions how you may act before me, that it may turn to you for your salvation.

I, the Lord, am bound when ye do what I say; but when ye do not what I say, ye have no promise. (D&C 82:8-10.)

Obedience that which God will never take by force—He will accept when freely given. And He will then return to you freedom that you can hardly dream of—the freedom to feel and to know, the freedom to do, and the freedom to *be*, at least a thousandfold more than we offer Him. Strangely enough, the key to freedom is obedience.

I would expose you this morning to some tender, innermost feelings on this matter of agency. Perhaps the greatest discovery of my life, without question the greatest commitment, came when finally I had the confidence in God that I would loan or yield my agency to Him-without compulsion or pressure, without any

duress, as a single individual alone, by myself, no counterfeiting, nothing expected other than the privilege. In a sense, speaking figuratively, to take one's agency, that precious gift which the scriptures make plain is essential to life itself, and say, "I will do as thou directs," is afterward to learn that in so doing you possess it all the more.

I Want to Do What You Want Me to Do

I illustrate with an experience. When I was president of the New England Mission, the Tabernacle Choir was to sing at the world's fair in Montreal. The choir had one day unscheduled and suggested a concert in New England. One of the industrial leaders there asked for the privilege of sponsoring the concert.

Brother Condie and Brother Stewart came to Boston to discuss this matter. We met at the Boston airport and then drove to Attleboro, Massachusetts. Along the way Mr. Yeager asked about the concert. He said, "I would like to have a reception for the choir members. I could have it either at my home or at my club." He wanted to invite his friends who were, of course, the prominent people of New England-indeed, of the nation. He talked of this, and then he asked about serving alcoholic beverages.

In answering, Brother Stewart said, "Well, Mr. Yeager, since it is your home and you are the host, I suppose you could do just as you want to do."

"That isn't what I had in mind," this wonderful man said. "I don't want to do what I want to do. I want to do what you want me to do."

The Key to Freedom

Somewhere in that spirit is the key to freedom. We should put ourselves in a position before our Father in Heaven and say, individually, "I do not want to do what I want to do. I want to do what Thou wouldst have me do." Suddenly, like any father, the Lord could say, "Well, there is one more of my children almost free from the need of constant supervision."

I know that I am free to do as I will. If the First Presidency or the president of the Twelve were to assign me to attend a conference north in the winter or south in the summer, I could have my own way concerning that. I could settle that with two words. I could just say, "I won't." In fact, I could say it in one word, "No." I could have my way every single time.

But I will it to be the other way. I want to do what they want me to do. Why? Because I have the witness, the conviction, that they are the servants of the Lord. They are placed as my leaders. I feel remorse when I disappoint them by failure to measure up to their high

expectations or by some clumsy action.

Why do I feel that way? They are just men, you might argue. No, they are *not just men*. They are chosen above all other men, and they are the servants of the Lord.

A Continual Pattern of Choices

Life is a continual pattern of choices. We are always free. How vital it is as youth that we learn that there is something important about letting the Lord know that we have made that great decision and can say, "I do not want to do what I want to do. I want to do that which Thou wouldst have me do!"

I am continually anxious over my failures. Occasionally I am hurt by the actions of others, by the pain of being misused by somebody else. That happens to all of us, you know. But I know only one *agony*, and that is to know that I have hurt or offended someone else.

We have one boy who has a twinkle in his eye and all that goes with it. He is just full of humor and innocent mischief all the time. I came home one day to discover that there had been an infraction of family discipline. Circumstantial evidence was complete, so I disciplined him. He protested his innocence, but I knew he was guilty because he was always guilty of that kind of thing. That night I learned that he was innocent. I went to his room to apologize. I told him I was sorry and asked his forgiveness. Then I added another lesson. I said, "Son, I hope you're big enough to take this, because life has a way of doing that to us. Life has a way of serving up some judgments that we may not deserve or think we do not deserve. If you're not big enough to face a few of those in life, you've got a mighty long row to hoe, and there are some mighty deep ruts in it. So, your great concern, my boy, isn't when you're misused now and again. Your great concern ought to be when you hurt or offend another."

I Want to Be Good

There is one principle of safety that I would like to share. There is another decision that I have made. I am free to decide-I am free to be obedient if I will. I desire to be good. Some people would be ashamed to say that, but I am not. I want to be good. I want to be a good father. I want to be a good servant of our Heavenly Father. I want to be a good brother, a good husband. That is not easy. I sometimes fall short; but when I do, I have a steady grip for which I reach. I cling to one rod that relates to the decision about wanting to be good.

When the judgments are rendered and I stand there for my accounting with the list of infractions to be reviewed, there is one thing that I can cling to. From the

day of that commitment the element of intent is absent. Intent cannot be introduced if I really want to obey and I want to be good.

I live in the hope that when I stand before God that fundamental truth relating to obedience and agency will be operative. When it is, it opens the great portals of mercy.

Theodore Roosevelt invented a rather favorite epithet once. He was not the greatest admirer of Woodrow Wilson. Wilson made a statement in reference to governmental policy, and Theodore Roosevelt said that he was using "weasel words." I quote:

When a weasel sucks eggs the meat is sucked out of the egg. If you use a "weasel word" after another there is nothing left of the other. (Noel F. Busch, *T.R., the Story of Theodore Roosevelt and His Influence on Our Times* [New York, 1963], p. 305.)

The "weasel words" Roosevelt was referring to related to Wilson's statement on universal, voluntary military training. In response, Theodore Roosevelt stated, "If it's universal, it isn't voluntary; and if it's voluntary, it never will be universal. The one word cancels out the other one."

Liberty Jail

I know a place where some might think there are such words in our Church history, for one word seemingly cancels out the meaning of the other. Those two words are *Liberty Jail*. Isn't that interesting, *Liberty Jail*. The Prophet and others were confined in the Liberty Jail. A jail, yes-but at that moment he was most free of all men. A few verses from the Doctrine and Covenants catch the spirit of Joseph's pleadings:

O God, where art thou? And where is the pavilion that covereth thy hiding place?

How long shall thy hand be stayed, and thine eye, yea thy pure eye, behold from the eternal heavens the wrongs of thy people and of thy servants, and thine ear be penetrated with their cries?

Yea, O Lord, how long shall they suffer these wrongs and unlawful oppressions, before thine heart shall be softened toward them, and thy bowels be moved with compassion toward them? (D&C 121:1-3.)

Then, as Joseph's prayer continued, the Lord spoke:

My son, peace be unto thy soul; thine adversity and thine afflictions shall be but a small moment;

And then, if thou endure it well, God Shall exalt thee on high; thou shalt triumph over all thy foes. (D&C 121:7-8.)

Then, the conclusion of that section:

No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned;

By kindness, and pure knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the soul without hypocrisy, and without guile-

Reproving betimes with sharpness, when moved upon by the Holy Ghost; and then showing forth afterwards an increase of love toward him whom thou has reproved, lest he esteem thee to be his enemy;

That he may know that thy faithfulness is stronger than the cords of death.

Let thy bowels also be full of charity towards all men, and to the household of faith, and let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly; then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God. (D&C 121:41-45.)

I Want to Obey

Then, my fellow students, somehow you will come to know that God lives. You can come before Him-by yourself, no compulsion, no force, no coercion-and say, "I want to obey." In yielding that divinest of all possessions, you gain it all the more.

And the doctrine of the priesthood shall distill upon thy soul as the dews from heaven.

The Holy Ghost shall be thy constant companion, and thy scepter an unchanging scepter of righteousness and truth; and thy dominion shall be an everlasting dominion, and without compulsory means it shall flow unto thee forever and ever. (D&C 121:45-46.)

God bless you. May you somehow know that obedience is a key to agency, that obedience is the doorway to freedom. God grant that you can come to know that Jesus is the Christ, that He lives. I know that He lives! I pray that you will know that He has a body of flesh and bones, that this is His Church, that He presides over the Church. May you know that there stands at His

direction a prophet of God, a First Presidency, and others called to associate with them in the ministry. May you know that across the Church are His servants-bishops, stake presidents, quorum leaders-who have the spirit of persuasion, long-suffering, meekness, and love unfeigned. They desire to invoke that outward discipline as the beginning of self-discipline. Self-discipline, obedience, opens the portals of life eternal.

I bear witness that the gospel is true. I testify again that I want to obey it-that is the key to my agency. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Address given at Brigham Young University December 1971.