

Lots of people are troubled by parts of the Christian faith. Like whether they can be a Christian if they have trouble believing in miracles or Mary's virginity. Such questions are important, and lots of other people spend a lot of time trying to win others to the "Christian way" of thinking about them.

But I'm here today to tell you that being a Christian is more than a way of thinking about things. Christianity is a way of living, a matter of following Jesus rather than just thinking about him

I'm sure some of you have doubts about parts of this faith. Well, in John's Gospel, beliefs, doubts, and questions are important. But in today's passage, as Jesus prepares to depart from his disciples and go in obedience to his death, he simply commands them to obey him, to love him by living as he taught them.

I hope this is good news to you because, often, if you can't understand Jesus, you at least can obey him!

Years ago, during the Iranian Hostage Crisis, a woman told her pastor that she'd had gotten to know a graduate student from Iran. She'd even received him into her home where he lived with her family. Because of the Iranian revolution, his funds had been cut off and she was trying to help him find odd jobs to support himself. Her pastor heard her story when she tried to get him to hire the young man to do yard work.

"Does he support the revolution?" her pastor asked.

"He thinks it's all just wonderful," she replied.

"Well I think it's remarkable that you have befriended him, are trying to help him out, and have even taken him into your home. How did you come to do that?" he asked in amazement.

She slammed her fist down on her desk. "Because I'm a Christian, darn it! You think this is easy?"

Now there's a person who simply, obediently, followed orders from Jesus. Even when it wasn't easy.

All of us are obeying somebody. We answer to many masters – our peers, family, friends, government, popularity or success. All of us are doing "what we are told" in some way. That is, all of us are living our lives on the basis of some external source of authority that we didn't just think up ourselves.

So maybe the issue is not "Will I be obedient or disobedient?" but rather, "Which Master shall I obey?"

Christians are those who believe that, in obeying Jesus, we find our true freedom, our true purpose, abundant life. That's what Jesus says to us today.

But note that he urges obedience not just because that's what he wants from us. He urges us to obediently love one another and follow him so others may see him in us, so the world might look at how we live together and know that he is truly Lord and Savior of the whole world.

A man was sharing his faith in Jesus with another who was not a Christian. When he found that the other man agreed with most of what he said, he asked, "What's your major reservation to being a Christian?"

And he replied simply, "Christian? I really admire what I know of Jesus. My problem is I can't remember ever seeing anybody who says he believes in Jesus, taking him seriously, actually following him."

How many people can't believe that Jesus is Lord because they've never seen anybody taking him seriously?

A young woman told one of her friends that she was tithing, giving ten percent of her income to the work of the church. Her friend asked her, "Why do Christians make such a big deal over money? Why are they expected to tithe? Where does Jesus say that you're supposed to tithe?"

The young woman responded, “Look, I’m a new Christian. I don’t know all that much about the Bible. All I know is that giving money for others is what Christians are supposed to do. Right now, I just do it.”

Yf’ers will remember a Bob Dylan song from a retreat a few years ago, “You Gotta Serve Somebody.” You take your orders from somebody and when you obey one master’s command that means that you must disregard the command of another master. As Jesus said, “No one can obey two masters.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer had a clear choice, and made it for Christ. On April 9th, 1945, in a cold, dank cell in Flossenburg, a little Southern German town, two guards appeared and said, “Prisoner Bonheoffer, come with us.” Then they took him, stripped him, and hung him to death, another victim of Nazi atrocity.

Bonhoeffer came from a noble, educated, and well-to-do German family. He was a brilliant student, and he surprised his family by deciding to become a pastor. His death was a sad end for someone of such noble stock.

His last act before being executed by the Nazis, was to take a copy of *Plutarch’s Lives* and write his name in it. It was the last book he wanted to read. Plutarch tells the stories of the greatest Romans and how they heroically gave their lives for the Roman Republic. Bonhoeffer chose to give his life for Christ.

Bonhoeffer went to his end reading both the Bible and Plutarch. While in prison, he studied the Gospel of Mark, a gospel which culminates with prisoner Jesus being led to the cross. In a way, in his life and death, Bonhoeffer embodies Mark’s Gospel.

Bonhoeffer could’ve left Germany. Before the war, he taught for a while at Union Seminary in New York, where he could’ve stayed and been an honored professor. But he chose go back to Germany, where he joined the resistance against Hitler. He said, as headed back to Germany, that he was filled with a great sense of peace because he was obeying what he knew God wanted him to do.

In his *Ethics* Bonhoeffer stressed the importance of obedience to Christ as the mark of a true Christian. In his life and death, he didn’t just think about Christian ethics; he embodied Christian ethics.

While in prison Bonhoeffer wrote that Mark’s Gospel spoke to him with a new power. Read in the context of prison, its words came alive. It made him struggle with the true meaning of the cross, especially the words Jesus cried as he died, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” What do those words mean when spoken in agony by one who sought only to obey God’s will? Still, he never wavered from obeying God.

The judge who sentenced Bonhoeffer to death was obeying someone else, obeying with amazing eagerness. In the very last days of the war, Hitler had ordered Forbeck to execute Bonheoffer. Forbeck took a train to Flossenburg, and when it stopped 12 miles from the killing camp, he was so eager to obey Hitler’s command, and carry out Bonheoffer’s “trial” and execution, that he got a bike and peddled the rest of the way, to put to death a man who stood for Christ.

These two men were both Lutherans, both worshipped the same God and had read many of the same books. How did they come to such vastly different conclusions? One answer was that each of these men was following a different “savior” and obeying a different voice, aligning their lives to a different story.

As Bob Dylan sang, “You gotta serve somebody. Our lives all show who we’ve chosen, they’re all answers to the question, “Who you gonna obey?”

In today’s Gospel, Jesus simply asks us to obey him. Thank God! Though it’s not easy, we can do it!

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, who in your resurrection trampled down death and triumphed over Satan,
...giving birth to your church and opening to all the doors of the kingdom,
...strengthen us in our various ministries that in serving you we might please you
...and that in obeying you we might witness to the world that you are Lord,
...that you will reign, and that you will triumph forever.

Give us the wisdom to know your way.

Give us the courage to follow your way.

Give us the grace to be content in your way.

We pray for others in situations of challenge and need, where obedience to your way is costly.

For those stationed around the world in military service,

...that you might bless them with safety and security,

...helping them to make good choices within the confines of their instructions,

...that our hope of their safe return may be realized, for these and for their families we pray.

For the leaders of the world, grant them wisdom and a measure of your Holy Spirit,

...that they may come to know the things that make for peace,

...and recognize that it is in service and not power that we become the people as God fashioned us,

...for these and for their families we pray.

For refugees, for the abandoned, the forgotten, the suffering, those in prisons, the falsely accused,

...and those accused of nothing at all yet who languish in cells for your sake and for the gospel,

...for these and for their families we pray.

God of heaven, God of justice, God of commandments, God of mercy, for these we pray.

Amen.

The Word with Children

(Download and print a public domain photo of tree rings to illustrate this story. If your building has a cornerstone with the year it was constructed take and print a photo of that as well.)

Nowadays when we construct a building you may find a cornerstone with the year when it was finished and dedicated. *(Use next sentence only if applicable.)* Here's a photo, for instance, of the cornerstone from our church. It says the building was finished and dedicated to God in _____.

That's great when there are people around to write down and remember what year things happened, but what about something that was built hundreds of years ago by people who did not write things down in a way that we understand? How do we know when something was built in that case?

Believe it or not, there is a way to do so. It's called Dendrochronology. Chronology is a word for keeping time, and Dendro means tree. It's keeping track of time by tree rings.

When you look at this picture of a tree trunk that has been cut away, you can see there are many rings. Each ring stands for a year. Some are darker and some are lighter. Some are thicker and some are thinner. The difference in these rings comes from the kind of weather they had that year. A tree that lived hundreds of years will have hundreds of rings, and the rings of other trees that lived at the same time will have the same rings. That means that by comparing the tree rings of many different trees scientists can tell what year a tree was cut down, even if it was hundreds of years ago. By looking at the tree trunks in buildings that were made long ago, a scientist can tell what year the building was finished. They can tell if it was a hot year or a cold year, a wet year or a dry year.

Like the cornerstone in a building, tree rings can tell us when something was built if that tree is used in a room. Tree rings tell us what was going on because all of nature and the world is connected.

In today's Bible passage Jesus tells the disciples that we are also connected together, like grape vines. And whether we know the right words to say, people can look at us, like the tree rings, and know that in hot years and cold years, dry years and wet years, good years and bad years, we all belong to Jesus.