

The obedient son: Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

Radical obedience means going to the cross.

by [Susan Pendleton Jones](#) in the [September 8, 1999](#) issue

"Mommy, I want to go to the cross" were the first words out of her mouth when we arrived at Grandma's late one evening. A lighted cross sat high up on a hill overlooking the lake. Four-year-old Sarah was drawn by the beauty of its lights as they reflected on the lake and by her Sunday school knowledge that it stood for something special about the love of Jesus. She was far too young to understand the meaning or gory details of any crucifixion—much less the implications of the crucifixion of Jesus. She knew nothing of the debates over how Christ's death is an atonement for sin, or about charges that the cross represents "divine child abuse." In childlike faith, she wanted to go to the cross.

The stories in Matthew 21 center on controversies that occur days before Jesus goes to the cross. They draw our attention to issues of authority and obedience. Jesus is confronted by the chief priests and elders who want to know by what authority he has been doing "these things." We assume "these things" to be the events recorded earlier in this chapter: the entry into Jerusalem, the cleansing of the temple and now his teaching in the temple. In good rabbinic style, Jesus answers their question by posing a question. His question involves their understanding of the authority of John the Baptist. If they answer that John the Baptist was divinely inspired, then they open themselves to the charge of ignoring God's will and of being unrepentant. If they say that John's authority was from human beings, then they risk offending the crowd that believed John was a prophet. Either way, they are condemned. And so they plead ignorance.

Jesus then tells a parable about two sons which offers an interpretation of the previous confrontation. The first son tells his father that he will not go and work in the vineyard, but then changes his mind and goes to work. The second son tells his father that he will work in the vineyard, but doesn't. "Who has been obedient to the father?" Jesus asks the chief priests and elders.

It is clear to all who have "ears to hear" that the disobedient son represents the chief priests and elders. It is small wonder that on Friday of that same week they took counsel against Jesus to put him to death. And on the night before, in the Garden of Gethsemane, this somewhat reluctant son had to decide whether to be obedient to his Father's will. Matthew records that three times he had prayed: "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." Yet, like the son in the parable who hesitated at first and in the end did as his father had asked, Jesus affirms three times: "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt." It is this response of radical obedience that takes Jesus to the cross.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul tells them to go to the cross. He wants the church members there to pattern their lives on Christ. As they struggle with divisions within the church and hostilities from outside the community, Paul encourages them to have the "same mind . . . that was in Christ Jesus."

The cross of Christ is the centerpiece of this letter, in its disclosure about the true character of Jesus (radical obedience, humility, self-giving love) and also in its shaping of the early Christian community. As Wayne Meeks has argued, "This letter's most comprehensive purpose is the shaping of a Christian phronesis, a practical moral reasoning that is 'conformed to [Christ's] death' in hope of his resurrection." Paul quotes the "Christ-hymn" in Philippians 2:6-11 to describe how they might have the "same mind . . . that was in Christ Jesus." Being so conformed, they will then be able to fulfill his hope for them: that they may "walk in a manner worthy of the gospel."

The hymn in verses 6-11 is one of the earliest known professions of faith of the first Christians. It is the story of salvation in Christ in three parts: self-emptying (incarnation), obedience (death on a cross) and exaltation (resurrection and ascension). Through the incarnation, Jesus willingly takes on human form and limitations, freely embracing humanity in body, mind and spirit. Through his humble obedience, Jesus serves as a counterexample to those in the garden who, for their own selfish gain, "grasp" at likeness to God. In his "self-emptying" Jesus does not see equality with God as something to be used for his own advantage, but as an offering for others. It results in radical obedience and service to others, even suffering and death on a cross.

In the exaltation (vv. 9-11), God vindicates the self-denying service to others embodied in Christ's death. The one who came as servant is now proclaimed "lord"

of all. Christ's authority to be called "lord" comes not only from his exaltation by God through the resurrection and ascension but through his self-emptying obedience. He who did not "grasp" at likeness to God is, because of his obedience, given the title "Lord"—the first known proclamation of faith among gentile Christians.

Therefore, Paul suggests that incorporation into the body of Christ demands humility and obedience of the type demonstrated by Jesus. Only in this way will his followers have the "mind" of Christ. This humility is not humiliation; nor is the obedience blind. Rather, they are expressions of faith and trust in the gracious and loving character of God. Such faith and trust, Jesus's parable suggests, are found more often among the "tax collectors and prostitutes" who hear the good news and believe than among the self-righteous guardians of religious order. In "fear and trembling" we hear these words of judgment spoken in the shadow of the cross.