

The school of suffering

Hebrews 5:8

February 17, 2008

What is the best decision you ever made? As you think back over your life, whether longer or shorter, what is the best decision you ever made? Was it your choice of schools? Your choice of careers? Maybe a decision to change careers or change jobs?

Was it your decision where to live? Your decision to move? Your choice of friends? Your choice of churches? Your choice of whom to marry? Deciding to marry Lynne was a good decision for me, a very good decision. It was the third-best decision I ever made! The second-best decision I ever made was to follow Jesus.

And the best decision I ever made? The best decision I ever made was to keep on following Jesus! To keep on following Jesus, because the choice to follow Jesus has to be made again and again with every new day and in every new situation.

It is easy to wander off the path. I have ...

It is easy to think you're following Jesus, when in fact you're just following the crowd. I have ...

It is easy to take a detour, thinking to yourself, "I'll catch up with Jesus later." I have ...

And it is not so hard, it is all too easy, to leave Jesus' way intentionally, because you want to go another way, because you want something that is not on that path, and to do so openly and defiantly, or to do so shutting your own eyes and claiming you can't follow Jesus because you can't see the path! I have ...

I have, but I'm still on the way. I decided to keep on following Jesus!

It's not an easy decision to make, because it requires obedience. Jesus' way is the way of obedience: *He was humble and walked the path of obedience all the way, all the way to his death on the cross.* That's a hard way to go, a hard path to follow. If you do choose to take that path, if you do choose to follow Jesus, it will require of you courage and endurance and resolve and ... obedience.

"Obedience." That's one of those words like "sin" or "chastity" or "contrition" that is entirely out of fashion. No more do you hear a woman promise to love, honor, and obey her husband-to-be, which is a good thing, unless both wife and husband are prepared to make that promise to each other! And no more do you hear anyone say, "My, you have such obedient children!" They will say instead something like, "Your children are very well behaved!"

Do you hear the difference? Our culture, our age, is all about self-actualization, self-motivation, self-direction, self-control. Our culture, our age, is all about self! When we say a child is well-behaved, we are speaking about his choice, about the particular behaviors she has chosen to exhibit -- which is of course what we are striving for, for children who are able to make good choices for themselves.

But we don't say "obey." We don't talk about a child submitting his will to his parents' will, just because it is his parents' will. We don't talk publicly about a child

setting aside her own wishes simply to obey the wishes of her parents. We feel the need to give them good reasons for choosing one behavior over another, to convince them it is in their own best interest to do so.

The only place I can think of that we use the word “obey” anymore is in the realm of rules and laws. You obey the speed limit. You obey the rules of the land in which you live or the rules of the club to which you belong. You obey the rules or you obey the law, but you don’t obey someone.

We don’t like that! It offends our sensibilities. It is an affront to our dignity to think of obeying someone, whoever that someone might be. Even Jesus. But Jesus says: *If you love me you will obey my commandments*. You will do what I tell you. You will go where I lead you. You will obey me.

Obedience is not easy. It requires deferring our wishes, submitting our wills, humbling our selves, denying our selves. It’s not a behavior that comes naturally to us, we have to learn obedience. So how do we learn obedience? In the same way Jesus did ... in the school of suffering!

Even though he was God’s Son, he learned through his sufferings to be obedient.

Hold on now! I don’t think I want to go to that school! I think I’ll skip that class, thank you! Seriously, if suffering is the path to learning obedience, wouldn’t you want to look for another path? There must be some other way to achieve the same result. Jesus! I’ll follow you, listen to you, do what you want me to do, just spare me the suffering!

But if Jesus learned obedience only through suffering, who are we to think we can learn obedience without it? Soren Kierkegaard says we can’t. You can read a quote from his commentary on Hebrews 5:8 on the cover of your bulletin:

Without sufferings none can learn obedience, for suffering is the very guarantee that our devotion is not our own self-will.

I we go with Jesus and the way is easy, maybe we go because we find the way pleasurable, because it accrues to us benefits, because the way is filled with blessings, because we just feel like going that way or because we are in the habit of going that way. And if we go for any of these reasons, when the going gets tough we may abandon the way, or at least question the wisdom of continuing to follow Jesus.

Suffering brings us up short and casts doubt over the whole enterprise and pushes us to turn aside. If we do continue in the way, we do so only out of obedience. That’s what Jesus did: *The way is hard. If it is possible, take this cup of suffering from me! Yet not what I want, but what you want.*

He learned through his sufferings to be obedient.

Obedience is learned through suffering, and faith is made real through obedience, and the end of faith is ... joy! The path that we follow with Jesus, the path of obedience, leads to joy!

But, as I've been reminded, this is all rather abstract! Let me give you some examples.

You are running late for a job interview. If you step on the gas, you can make it there on time, but if you obey, if you obey the posted speed limit, you will be late and you will lose the job. If you obey, you suffer. Any other time you might drive the speed limit just because it seems prudent or because you have no reason to hurry or take chances. But if you drive the speed limit now, it is only because you have chosen to be obedient.

And the joy of it? By obeying the speed limit, you may well have avoided the accident caused by your excessive speed or you may well have avoided getting the traffic ticket which would go on your record and brand you forever as a lawbreaker! Maybe it wouldn't have happened that way, but maybe it would have. The purpose of obeying the speed limit is to preserve life -- your life and the lives of those who share the road with you.

Another example: Jesus says, *Love your enemies*.

That's nice is principle, but, Jesus, you couldn't have meant her! She's evil! She tells lies about you. She betrays your confidences. She makes you look foolish in front of your friends and your coworkers ... and your bosses. If you love her, if you do good to her, if you keep her confidences -- instead of fighting fire with fire -- you are only letting her get away with it and setting yourself up for more hurt. You are almost certainly going to suffer, and be made a fool, if you are nice to her. Obedience is the only reason to do it.

And the joy of this way of suffering? You may make a friend. Your acts of kindness may prove the occasion of her transformation as well as your own. Or maybe not. Maybe she will continue to walk all over you! But you will have the joy of walking with Jesus, of walking with Jesus in the way of light and life, the way of eternal life, life that is governed by love and self-sacrifice, and not by hatred and jealousy.

One more example.

Maybe you are not the one done wrong, maybe you are the wrong-doer. Maybe you are not the one sinned against, maybe you are the sinner. And to turn around, to turn back, to confess your wrong-thinking and your wrong-doing to God and to those you have hurt would be unbearably hard. It would bring you such indignity, such humiliation, such suffering!

It would be so much easier just to keep on going, wherever you are going. It would be so much easier just to offer excuses or call it a mistake in judgment or just act as if it never happened. The only reason to turn around, the only reason to humble yourself, the only reason to offer to God your broken spirit, is obedience. The only reason is to choose to get back on the path, the path of obedience, the path that leads to joy, the path that is joy.

I can think of other examples, and I know you can, too: examples of situations and circumstances and relationships where following Jesus is not easy, where great suffering makes it easy to turn away, to give up, to stop trying, to stop caring. But these are situations and circumstances and relationships too where suffering can teach obedience, and obedience can build up faith, and faith can lead you home.

Obedience will not end the suffering. On the contrary, obedience proves itself in the midst of suffering. To obey means to put yourself in God's hands, regardless of what you may suffer, as Jesus did. It means to trust yourself to God's goodness, regardless of what threats you may face, as Jesus did. It means to defer your will to God's will, regardless of where that may lead you, as Jesus did.

And where it leads you ... is to eternal life! The school of suffering makes us fit for eternal life, Kierkegaard writes, because *there is no obedience apart from suffering, [and] no faith apart from obedience, [and] no [eternal life] apart from faith.*