

DEVELOPING YOUR OWN SPIRITUALITY

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UNIT THREE SESSION SEVEN: Obedience



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What must come to pass, should come to pass. Within the limits of that must, therefore, you are invulnerable.¹



Like Jesus, you have to listen and listen. It will take you all your life to hear the Father's word of love for you; indeed it will take you all your eternity.²



You who wanted no sacrifice or oblation, opened my ear, you asked no sacrifice or holocaust for sin; then I said, 'Here I am! I am coming!'³



He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.⁴



¹ Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1964, 48.

² Maria Boulding, *The Coming of God*, 83.

³ Psalm 40:6f.

⁴ Philippians 2:8.

THE UNIVERSAL HUMAN DIMENSION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

**** Obedience is the disposition whereby we are willing and able to listen, hear and submit to the true and the real as it reveals itself in and through our lives.***

**** The disposition of obedience is central to all human life formation.***

**** The expression of the disposition of obedience is complex and subtle and very often confused with mere conforming.***



The obedience pattern

Recall a time when you ate or drank too much or you overworked or you slept too little because you willfully wanted to do this or that or you got too much sun because you did not bother to take precautions that you knew you should have taken or you simply did something in the face of contrary messages. Typically, when we do such things – when we overdo it, as the saying goes – we engage in a process that is more or less one of defiance. We know we should not eat this, drink that, work those hours and so on. But we do it. And we pay a price!⁵

Apart from the psychodynamics of this sort of behaviour – so typically human and perhaps more likely to occur in the young – we might ask the foundational question: “What is happening here?” Approach it from another angle: “What *should* I have done?” I should have paid attention to what my body told me, what experience had taught me; I should have listened to the factors involved in the situation and submitted to what “life” was suggesting to me, or I should have listened to the advice of wiser heads, and so on.

Such mundane situations will be more or less trivial or more or less significant in their outcomes or consequences.⁶ I might, for example, pass off the occasional incident of eating or drinking too much, with a little embarrassment and

⁵ We should not be simplistic about this sort of thing, treating it like some kind of predictable equation – do this and such and such will always follow. Motivation is one factor that can affect the outcome. Social factors can also be significant. We all know, for example, the dour type who always does “the right thing” and the lack of freedom and absence of *joie de vivre* in them can be sad to see and burdensome to endure. We also know the very likable types who cannot resist a good cream bun and as they eat it they say – as if seeking dispensation – “I really shouldn’t!”. The point in this discussion is to note a *pattern* rather than draw moral conclusions about this or that person’s behaviour.

⁶ We should acknowledge at the commencement of this discussion one of the paradoxes of life: Some of our best learning occurs in our failures and disappointments. Thus one bad experience with alcohol might stand us in good stead for the rest of our lives. Much depends on the response we make. An experience of our limits is sometimes a very effective way to discover our best possibilities.

some humor; I cannot pass off so easily the fact that I have defied the voice of my conscience and willfully lived out a script contrary to the deepest urgings of my very being and the genuine desires of my heart.

We could say that life invites and calls us to a pattern here:

- Pay attention, be alert, listen to the situation so that
- You can hear the wisdom or the practical needs or the necessary warnings and so on so that
- You can submit to and live your life in harmony with the real demands of life.

We can call this the “obedience pattern.” This pattern is at once simple and complex. As an idea it may appear deceptively simple. In the concrete human situation however, it is not quite so simple. For example:

- Culture can introduce many “social fictions” and “vital lies” that make it difficult for us to embrace the obedience pattern effectively; thus, for example, “respectability” – a more sophisticated version of what we call among teenagers, “peer group pressure” – and perhaps fear of criticism or of not belonging, may lead us to think, say and do, things that are untrue or unreal, or not think, say and do, things that are required of us as mature adults.⁷
- Family training and the various forms of idealization that can emerge within the dynamics of the family can sometimes obfuscate the obedience pattern and thus stand between us and what is real; thus, for example, we may “instinctively” react and behave in certain ways in groups, regardless of whether those “ways” are appropriate or constructive or good and true, because of our family experience and habits learned there.⁸
- The networks of formal and informal relationships in our lives can develop patterns of deception and pretence that seriously diminish our ability to enter the obedience pattern and thus make it well nigh impossible to distinguish the illusory from the real. For example, we may convince ourselves that we are not like the rest of the human race, that we are in fact superior to others because we belong to this or that family or social set. Quite unconsciously we can turn things on their head, the illusory seems real and the real seems illusory.

Each of the three examples given above is obviously a variation on the same

⁷ We could note here two culturally engendered behaviours that are highly dangerous. The first is cigarette smoking. The second is the artificial tanning processes that are known to cause cancer. We all know they are bad for your health yet many of us persist in doing one or both of these things. This is a refusal to enter the “obedience pattern” of daily life. It is a form of disobedience and the results can be tragic.

⁸ Prejudice of one kind or another is an obvious instance.

theme, with the common element self-deception aided and abetted by our interactions with others giving rise to some kind of partial or even total impairment of the ability to enter the obedience pattern. We must never forget that we all have a genius for self-deception and a vulnerability to what Karen Horney has so aptly called “the tyranny of the should.”

There are many ways, in fact, that the obedience pattern of listening, hearing and heeding can be interrupted, obfuscated, twisted, blocked, confused and so on. One of the sad ironies of life is that this deformation can take place under the heading of “obedience.” But more of that later.

Without implying that life can be reduced to a simple formula, and withholding moral judgments, it seems reasonable to suggest that the obedience pattern into which we are called by life on a daily basis, might be understood as follows:

- Willingness and ability to *listen*⁹ for what is true and real, together with the
- Willingness and ability to *hear* what is true and real, expressed in a
- Genuine desire and effort to *submit*¹⁰ to what is true and real.

This pattern seems to be a central dynamic in healthy life formation. Imagine a life in which this pattern is followed more or less substantially from beginning to end. This is the stuff of genuine wisdom and depth, richness of humanity and bigness of spirit. People who do live this pattern, more or less, tend to be transparent, well grounded people. They manifest a deep connectedness beyond themselves, a connectedness that gives them a sense of security and inner strength. We spontaneously admire such people. Perhaps this is the sort of thing implicit in Dag Hammarskjöld’s comment about “must” in the epigraph. Perhaps this is also why the words of Polonius to Laertes in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* continue to ring true across historical periods and cultural boundaries:

*This above all – to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.*¹¹

⁹ The English word *obedience* has its roots in the Latin word *audire* meaning *to listen*.

¹⁰ The English word *submit* comes from the two Latin words *sub* meaning *under* and *missus* meaning *sent*. The general thrust of the word in this context then is that we are sent under the authority of what is true and real. People who experience this kind of authority in their lives radiate a very different presence from those who have only the authority of the system or their functional abilities or a smooth personality. This is particularly pertinent when it comes to giving moral witness.

¹¹ Act I, Scene 3.

Beyond social conformity

1945 was one of the most eventful years of the last century. The Second World War ended and the first nuclear weapons were used to devastating effect in Hiroshima and Nagasaki;¹² the United Nations came into existence and the League of Nations went out of existence; Franklin D Roosevelt died and Winston Churchill ceased to be Prime Minister of Great Britain; Mussolini was executed by Italian partisans and Hitler was executed by his own hand; George Orwell wrote *Animal Farm* and Evelyn Waugh wrote *Brideshead Revisited*; the independent Republic of Vietnam was formed under Ho Chi Minh and the Arab League was founded to oppose the creation of a Jewish State in Palestine.

In 1945 the world also became aware of the Holocaust and the horrifying depths to which the human race had sunk in and through the Nazis ideology.¹³ At the Nuremberg trials, begun on November 20, 1945, the world heard an utterly rational but totally unacceptable defense used by those men and women who were being tried for war crimes: “We were only obeying orders.”¹⁴

The “obedience” spoken of here seems to have little or nothing to do with what we have referred to above as the obedience pattern that life formation invites us into and through which we grow to be responsible and accountable adults. True obedience lies beyond mere social conformity or doing as one is told, though it may – and mostly does – as a matter of fact, include both these. Healthy life formation must never be identified with social or cultural conformity. Perhaps the most obvious difference between mere conformity and genuine obedience is that

- The obedience pattern is a process that seeks the true and the good and the real as such, beyond what this or that person or group might maintain. The obedience pattern does not deny or dismiss the given social order, it merely perceives that order in the context of a bigger order, allowing decisions to be made in that larger context.
- Conformity, by way of contrast, is a process which seeks the maintenance of

¹² The dropping of the atomic bombs on those two Japanese cities is, arguably, the most stark act of terrorism in the history of the human family. Another stark act of terrorism occurred early in 1943, when the Allies dropped a combination of incendiary and ordinary bombs on the beautiful city of Dresden in order to create fire storms. The effects were devastating, with an unknown number of people being incinerated – perhaps in excess of 100,000. Dresden was not of any particular military significance at the time. In March 1945 the United States air force dropped napalm on Tokyo and generated a devastating fire storm that burned tens of thousands of people to death and left many others scarred for life. The US air force later used napalm in Vietnam to achieve similar effects.

¹³ It was in the immediate wake of the Holocaust that the word “genocide” gained currency.

¹⁴ It was worrying to hear this same defense used by the two French military operatives who had sunk the Greenpeace ship *Rainbow Warrior* in Auckland Harbour on July 10, 1985, killing a photographer on board. The same defense was also used by the US military personnel who tortured the Iraqi men in the Abu Ghraib gaol in Baghdad.

a certain social order, whether it be true or good or real is not the point. Conformity is also a process by which the individual seeks to be part of that social order. Conformity allows the individual to avoid the sanctions of that social order used against those who do not conform.¹⁵

Consider, by way of contrast, the so-called “civil disobedience” – the “social non-conformity” – of people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Edith Stein, Mahatma Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King and many thousands of others in that same century who listened, heard and chose to submit to another voice, a higher order, typically at great personal cost. What these people heard took precedence over the prevailing social order and its demands. Who would not recognize, for example, in the choices and commitment made by Bonhoeffer in his obedience, something far more deeply true and good and real and noble than the choices made by those Nazi officers in their “obedience”?

Genuine obedience will always threaten those who are trying to maintain an unreal existence. To begin with, the genuinely obedient cannot be controlled. Those who wish to exert power over others find this at least uncomfortable if not intolerable. Furthermore, the genuinely obedient people must sooner or later come into conflict with the unreality of the social order that is being maintained by lies or pretence. The reactions of those who find their identity in the social order – no matter how unreal – can sometimes be particularly violent and nasty to those who would unmask them. Thus the Nazis hanged Bonhoeffer literally days before the surrender and long after it became obvious that surrender was inevitable.

Genuine obedience may be resisted and evaded because the prevailing social order threatens death to those who obey a higher order. The unreality of social conformity may therefore be far more attractive – or at least less threatening – than genuine obedience.

Two observations, one ancient, the other more modern, point in the direction the obedience pattern may take us:

The comment by Henry David Thoreau comes to mind: “If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.”¹⁶

¹⁵ A variation on this theme of social conformity presented as obedience, may be seen in the relatively modern development of what some have called “victimology.” Put simply, it is typified in the defense: “Don’t blame me, I am a victim of ...” It represents a refusal to be accountable and responsible and makes it difficult for genuine victims to be heard and justly and compassionately treated.

¹⁶ Henry David Thoreau was born in Massachusetts, USA, in 1817 and died there in 1862. His major work was an extended essay entitled *Walden* (1854). Thoreau was a staunch advocate for civil liberties and expressed his views in a public lecture he gave on January 26, 1848. It was published as “Resistance to Civil Government,” in May of 1849, in Elizabeth Peabody’s *Aesthetic Papers*, a short-lived periodical that never managed a second issue. The modern title – “Civil

In the Sayings of the Desert Fathers we read something similar: “Abbot Anthony says: ‘A time is coming when people will go mad and when they meet someone who is not mad, they will turn to him and say, “You are out of your mind,” just because he is not like them’.”

The obedience pattern in the fields of living

Are we to say then, that the laws and customs of society and the maintenance of social order are in fact irrelevant to the whole question of “obedience”? That is probably not a helpful way to think about the issue, if for no other reason than that it appears too cut and dried, too either/or. Human life formation is far more mysterious and complex than that. Ambiguities and paradoxes abound in concrete life formation. And social order and its maintenance – for all their considerable limits and imperfections – are generally, for the most part, worth promoting. Therefore the obedience pattern will, often enough, have us participating in the given social order.

It is probably more helpful to think of the obedience pattern taking us ever more deeply into the true and the good and the real. Following the obedience pattern takes us progressively into who we most deeply are and where we belong in the mystery of formation as it manifests itself in each particular formation field.¹⁷ Part of that journey involves, more or less, the acceptance of certain givens with their respective possibilities, needs and limits:

- an historical-cultural dimension,
- a bodily dimension,
- a functional dimension and
- a transcendent dimension.¹⁸

The obedience pattern includes *listening, hearing* and *submitting* in each of these dimensions. Depending on how effectively we enter the obedience pattern with regard to these dimensions of our lives, we will be more or less free, more or less under the influence of what is true and good and real. To the extent that we simply allow any or all of these dimensions to dominate us uncritically, we will tend, more or less, to lose our freedom and be more or less dislocated from what is

Disobedience” – comes from *A Yankee in Canada, with Anti-Slavery and Reform Papers*, an 1866 collection of Thoreau's work. It's not known if Thoreau ever used the term "civil disobedience." Another memorable observation of Thoreau's concerns his assessment of the society in which he found himself: “The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent of anything, it is very likely to be my good behavior. What demon possessed me that I behaved so well?”

¹⁷ See Unit One, Session Four of this Course for a development of this construct.

¹⁸ See Unit Two, Session Two of this Course for a development of these dimensions.

true and good and real. The “disobedient” life leads to unreality, the “obedient” life leads to reality.¹⁹

As indicated above, there are many times in our lives when it is undoubtedly a good and reasonable thing to conform to the social custom and thereby maintain a certain social order. In fact, this will almost certainly be the case for most of us most of the time. For example, I may not feel like it but I will give my seat in the bus to an elderly person, or shake hands with someone who has done me wrong, or treat a violent murderer with justice and decency or wear a uniform, that I do not like, as part of my work, or conform to the rules of the road, or engage in the processes of voting for elected members of parliament even if I do not particularly like them or their policies, and so on.

In an emergency such as a bad bushfire, it is clearly necessary that someone takes charge and others do as they are told. All of this can quite reasonably be considered as part of the general obedience pattern of a deepening and healthy life formation process.

However, if these sorts of things are done *merely* out of a desire to conform and *merely* out of a desire therefore to be part of maintaining a certain social order, that would seem to be falling short of what one might expect from a mature adult. Such a motivation in fact lends an *absoluteness* to conformity and social order. This is a form of idolization or idealization. We might be applauded for it but we will not enhance the sense of reality in either ourselves or the surrounding society.

Forums of obedience

From the foregoing it is obvious that:

- The obedience pattern, when engaged intelligently and generously, will lead to greater *awareness* of what is happening in and around myself.
- This awareness can lead to greater *freedom*.
- This freedom can facilitate greater *participation* in the mystery.
- This cycle of living generated by the obedience pattern, when repeatedly and consistently entered with generosity also develops and refines *conscience* and one’s sense of *vocation*.
- It also engages more and more in that other pattern of life formation – dying in order to live.²⁰

The first forum within which the obedience pattern must be entered is *myself*, my very being. All the great wisdom traditions promote the pursuit of self-

¹⁹ Recall the lives of characters like John Marcher (Henry James’ *The Beast in the Jungle*), Flannery O’Connor’s Sheppard (“The Lame Shall Enter First”) and Karen Horney’s “tyranny of the should”.

²⁰ See this Course, Unit Two, Session One, “Crises in Life Formation”.

awareness. A comment from the great cellist, Pablo Casals, sums it up well:

*Each person has inside a basic decency and goodness. If he listens to it and acts on it, he is giving a great deal of what the world needs most. It is not complicated, but it takes courage for a person to listen to his own good.*²¹

A life built on self-ignorance is too prone to manipulation and the kinds of compulsive inner forces that arise from unacknowledged anxiety.

When I face myself, when I consistently and persistently *listen* lovingly and critically to what is going on with me; when I actually *hear* those voices of truth and goodness and reality²² and acknowledge them and allow them to release their wisdom and give form to my life through that wisdom; when I *submit* to that truth and goodness and that reality, and abandon myself to the Great Mystery being revealed in and through those continual manifestations of my being; when I do these things I am disposing myself to engage the world of people, events and things in the same way – in truth and goodness and reality. Is there any other basis for healthy, life-giving relationships?

The other forums within which the obedience pattern must be similarly entered include *my family of origin*, *society* (including the various sub-sets to which I belong) and *my work*. There is literally, in fact, no part of my life in which I cannot fruitfully apply the obedience pattern. There is no time in my life at which I will ever be able to say, “There is no more need for me to enter this obedience pattern.” It could be said to constitute the central dynamic of life formation. We will stop living to the extent that we stop being “obedient” in the best sense of that word. We will be as genuinely alive as we have been genuinely obedient.



²¹ Cited in Andrew Bienkowski & Mary Akers, *Radical Gratitude and Other Life Lessons Learned in Siberia*, Allen & Unwin, 177.

²² Sometimes the truth and goodness and reality will come to me as painful experiences, perhaps embarrassing moments, even frightening facts of my existence. The truth and goodness and reality are truth and goodness and reality whether they present themselves as pleasant or unpleasant experiences.

CHRISTIAN ARTICULATION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

* *For the Christian, the obedience pattern is focused on God.*

* *The pre-eminent model of obedience for the Christian is Jesus who was obedient unto death (cf Philippians 2:6-11)*

* *As with the whole of our lives, obedience is always lived in the context of a network of relationships and therefore community.*



Words for obedience in the Christian Scriptures

In both the Hebrew of the Jewish Scriptures²³ and the Greek of the Christian Scriptures, the words used which we translate as *obey, obedience, obedient*, and so on, all have a close relationship with the various words we translate as *hear, listen* and so on. One scholar summarizes the use of those Greek words in the New Testament:

The Greek verb akouō and the noun akoē, as used in the NT have both meanings (ie physical hearing and the apprehension of something with the mind) though originally these words denoted only the former. Various compounds are used to denote apprehension with the mind. Eisakouō and epakouō stress attentive listening, while the emphatic forms hypakouō and hypakoē (literally hear beneath) mean to obey and obedience. The linguistic and conceptual relationship between akouō and hypakouō recurs in Old and Middle English in the use of the same word for both hear and obey. It can still be traced in some modern languages, eg German hören and gehorchen. The former includes the latter, and in some contexts can be substituted for it. Conversely, parakouō and parakoē (literally hear beside) denote inattentive hearing, missing, not hearing, and thus disobedience.²⁴

In the biblical world, *listening* and *hearing* are profoundly significant. The word must be heard and heeded. The phrase, “Thus says the Lord,” recurs again

²³ We do not have space here to consider the Hebrew words for *obey*. As a sample, see Deuteronomy 6:4-9. There you have the beginnings of the Jewish prayer known as *Shema*. To this day the *Shema* is said morning, noon and sunset by the men of the family in the orthodox Jewish tradition. The word *Shema* – the first word of the prayer – may be translated as either *hear/listen* or *obey*, depending on the context. Scholars tell us that the Old Testament concept of obedience contains both the sense of intelligent listening and willingness to submit to the will of God that is heard in this way. In the Septuagint – the Greek version of the Old Testament written for the Jews in the Diaspora – the words *akouō* or *akoē* are used consistently for the Hebrew *Shema*.

²⁴ Colin Brown, *The International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Volume 2*, The Paternoster Press, 1976, 172.

and again. Yahweh has a conversation with his servants Moses²⁵ and Isaiah.²⁶ They listen, hear and go forth. In the prophetic writings the prophet must both see and hear in order to interpret visions.²⁷

The response of young Samuel epitomises the absolute fidelity called for by the Covenant: “Speak, for your servant hears.”²⁸ And because the Covenantal life is a conversation, God too is expected to hear. Throughout the Psalms God is frequently called upon to listen and hear.²⁹ In fact, what distinguishes Yahweh from the false gods is precisely that Yahweh is willing and able to be party to the conversation that the Covenant demands and the false gods are completely incapable of such a conversation.³⁰

In the Christian Scriptures Jesus is the object of obedience: “This is my Son the beloved: Listen to him.”³¹ This establishes the structure of obedience in the Christian tradition. Obedience is participating in an ongoing conversation with a view to being drawn more deeply into the Covenant. Obedience – in the full Christian sense – can only be understood in the light of God’s loving action in Christ in the world. Obedience is the natural response to our being loved into freedom by the Great Mystery. Christian obedience is *listening* to God revealed in Jesus’ being, *hearing* God speak in and through Jesus’ life and teaching and *submitting* to the revelation of transcendent Love that takes hold of us through this listening and hearing.³²

And this process is inextricably tied up with what we referred to above as the forums for the obedience pattern. Christian obedience, like everything else associated with the reality of Jesus Christ, is enfleshed. It has its human ground. We are speaking of our participation in the Incarnation – the enfleshing of God.

Obedience thus unites us ever more deeply with Jesus in his journey into life. At the same time and in the same way it unites us ever more deeply with the people, events and things of our world.

So many times Jesus says in the Gospels: “Follow me”. We enter the paschal

²⁵ See Exodus 3:1-15. Later Moses is referred to as the one with whom “the Lord used to speak face to face” (Exodus 33:11).

²⁶ See Isaiah 6:1-13.

²⁷ See for example Amos 7-9 and Jeremiah 1:11-19.

²⁸ 1Samuel 3:10.

²⁹ See for example Psalm 4:1; 39:12; 69:16; 102:1.

³⁰ Thus in Psalm 94:9 we read: “He who planted the ear, shall he not hear?” and in Psalm 115:6: “(The idols) have mouths but say nothing, have eyes but see nothing, have ears but hear nothing, have noses but smell nothing”. Listen also to the beautiful little line in Isaiah 1:18: “Come let us talk this over ...”

³¹ Matthew 17:5; see also Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35. John’s Gospel makes much of the thought that Jesus is God’s Word made flesh. (See the Prologue to John’s Gospel.)

³² In passing we could note that the biblical understanding of obedience asks much more of us than a fundamentalist reading of the Word. We are invited into a conversation with God that requires both of us to listen and hear and heed. This conversation calls for discernment and thoughtful response.

rhythm of living through him, with him and in him. Unlike Adam,³³ Jesus, in his very being, epitomises the obedience pattern we are all called to enter. And, as the baptised,³⁴ in entering that obedience pattern our union with Him grows and becomes ever more deeply the essence of our lives:

Have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of human beings. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient (hypakoos) unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.³⁵



³³ Jesus' obedience is in stark contrast to Adam's disobedience. St Paul puts it this way: "By one man's disobedience (*parakoē* – literally *hearing beside* or *failing to hear*) many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience (*hypakoē*) – literally *hearing under*) many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:19).

³⁴ We are "baptized into Christ Jesus" (cf Romans 6:3).

³⁵ Phillipians 2:5-11.

Snippets for meditation

(1) *“At every moment you choose yourself. But do you choose your self? Body and soul contain a thousand possibilities out of which you can build many ‘I’s’. But in only one of them is there a congruence of the elector and the elected. Only one – which you will never find until you have excluded all those superficial and fleeting possibilities of being and doing with which you toy, out of curiosity or wonder or greed, and which hinder you from casting anchor in the mystery of life, and the consciousness of the talent entrusted to you which is your ‘I’.”³⁶*



(2) *“Proud people do not know themselves. If they knew themselves and their own stupidity, they would not be conceited. How can those people who do not even know themselves, attain to the knowledge of God.”³⁷*



(3) *“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the door posts of your house and on your gates.”³⁸*



(4) *“Mark the Hermit emphasizes that the forgetting of God is the source of sin; he insists on the restoration in us of ‘memory’ (that is, conscious attention) directed to him whose grace alone is our life, and finally the constant exultation with which that ‘memory’ should fill us.”³⁹*



³⁶ Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1964, 19.

³⁷ Mark the Hermit, *De ieiunio*, 4. See Johannes Quasten, *Patrology, Volume III*, Christian Classics, 1986, 506.

³⁸ Deuteronomy 6:4-9.

³⁹ Louis Bouyer, *A History of Christian Spirituality: The History of the Middle Ages*, Seabury, 1968, 561. Mark was a disciple of St John Chrysostom and was abbot of a monastery in Ancyra, Galatia, in the first half of the 5th century. He greatly influenced St Symeon the New Theologian who lived in the 10th century.

(5) *“What am I? I am myself a word spoken by God. Can God speak a word that does not have any meaning? Yet am I sure that the meaning of my life is the meaning God intends for it? Does God impose a meaning on my life from the outside, through event, custom, routine, law, system, impact with others in society? Or am I called to create from within, with him, with his grace, a meaning which reflects his truth and makes me his ‘word’ spoken freely in my personal situation? My true identity lies hidden in God’s call to my freedom and my response to him. This means I must use my freedom in order to love, with full responsibility and authenticity, not merely receiving a form imposed on me by external forces, or forming my own life according to an approved social pattern, but directing my love to the personal reality of my brothers and sisters, and embracing God’s will in its naked, often impenetrable mystery (see Romans 11:33-36). I cannot discover my ‘meaning’ if I try to evade the dread which comes from first experiencing my meaninglessness!”*⁴⁰



(6) *“Inseparable from the love that issued in action, the love that embraced the cross, was obedience. Catherine of Siena’s obedience was a radical, world-ignoring attachment to Jesus and God’s will for her. Out of that obedience was forged a reformer of unspeakable purpose. She spoke of obedience to vocation to one of her young followers: ‘Resist no longer the Holy Spirit that is calling thee – for it will be hard for thee to kick against Him. Do not let thyself be held by thine own lukewarm heart, or by a womanish tenderness for thyself, but be a man, and enter the battlefield manfully.’ Obedience was often associated with this militant sense of doing God’s battle which she knew herself called to take up. She was a general, urging forth armies. Catherine’s obedience was also very concrete. The very visible and sinful Church and its priests and popes were the symbols for her of God’s presence in the world. She was obedient to the Church. But she insisted that pope and Church be worthy of obedience, and by the very stubborn loyalty of her attachment called churchmen from the inside, as it were, to be the pastors their office signified.*

“Her obedience to Urban VI enabled her to insist that he exercise his authority as one who feeds, and who sees to it that the Church becomes the Mother she is called to be rather than a rapacious robber. Catherine’s obedience to the Church seemed to be bound up with her image of the Church as mother and nurturer. The Fathers of the Church are to be mothers whose principal role is to feed the faithful. Hers was no servile obedience to hierarchy, but rather an obedience to the presence of God in the world in the sacramentality of the Church. And if Gregory XI was unwilling to

⁴⁰ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, Herder and Herder, 1969, 84.

fill out that office of good shepherd, resign or be damned, wrote Catherine. Such an obedience was a powerful instrument for change. ”⁴¹



(7) *“The belief that man can do what he wants, without God, is as far from me as the North Pole. I don’t think religion should be connected with dogma or revelation. Since he’s a silent God, he talks in deeds, in events, and we have to learn this language. The belief in God is as necessary as sex. Whatever you call him – nature or higher power – doesn’t matter. The power that takes care of you, and the farthest star, all this is God. The Almighty keeps promising things and he does not keep his word. What hasn’t he promised us Jews! It took him 2000 years to get us to Israel. Maybe the politicians will also keep their promises after 2000 years. One thing is clear: our nature will be exactly the same. A man will park his car on the moon and live on Madison Avenue, but he will have the same appetites and the same tsuris (troubles).* ”⁴²



(8) *“You see before you the Lord’s servant, let it happen to me as you have said.* ”⁴³



(9) *”One has to work actively at solitude, not by putting fences around oneself, but by destroying all fences and throwing away all the disguises, getting down to the naked root of one’s inmost desire, which is the desire of liberty-reality. To be free from the illusion that reality creates when one is out of right relation to it and to be real in the freedom which reality gives when one is rightly related to it.* ”⁴⁴



(10) *“What this means in practice is fidelity and attentiveness to the Words of God. ‘He that is of God hears the words of God.’ To be ‘aware’ of God is to enter into contact with One, Who, infinitely hidden and transcendent, cannot be known as He is in Himself unless He reveals Himself to us. But God speaks to us, in His Scriptures, and has given Himself to us in His Son – our whole life of faith is a life*

⁴¹ Eleanor McLaughlin, “Women, Power and the Pursuit of Holiness in Medieval Christianity” in Ann Loades, editor, *Feminist Theology: A Reader*, SPCK, 1990, 113-14 (99-123).

⁴² Isaac Basheivs Singer from an interview with him by Israel Shenker in *The New York Times Book Review*, August 11, 1991, 11.

⁴³ Luke 1:38.

⁴⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Intimate Merton: His Life From His Journals*, selected and edited by Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo, Harper, 1999, 292.

of attentiveness, of 'listening' in order to receive the word of God into our hearts. Fides ex auditu (faith comes from hearing). And we listen to God in the Liturgy, in the Scriptures, in meditation, in every expression of His Will for us. 'Not be bread alone doth man live but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.' It is this listening and obedience to the word of God that restores the Divine likeness in our souls, and brings us the truth that makes us free."⁴⁵



(11) "For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and discovering my true self."⁴⁶



(12) "If you are willing to obey, you shall eat the good things of the earth."⁴⁷



(13) "If we take a more living and more Christian perspective we find in ourselves a simple affirmation which is not of ourselves. It simply is. In our being there is a primordial yes that is not our own; it is not at our own disposal; it is not accessible to our inspection and understanding; we do not even fully experience it as real (except in rare and unique circumstances) and we have to admit that for most people this primordial 'yes' is something they never advert to at all. It is in fact absolutely unconscious, totally forgotten. Basically, however, my being is not an affirmation of a limited self, but the 'yes' of Being itself, irrespective of my own choices. Where do 'I' come in? Simply in uniting the 'yes' of my own freedom with the 'yes' of Being that already is before I have chosen to choose."⁴⁸



(14) "Morning by morning he wakens— wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward."⁴⁹



⁴⁵ Thomas Merton, "Spirit in Bondage" in *The New Man*, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1961, 123..

⁴⁶ Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, Anthony Clarke, 1972, 25.

⁴⁷ Isaiah 1:19.

⁴⁸ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Image Books, 1968/1989, 266.

⁴⁹ Isaiah 50:4-5. (NRSV)

Suggestions for further study

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- De Waal, Esther, *Seeking God: The Way of St Benedict* – especially Chapters III and IX.
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- Groeschel, Benedict, “Obedience: A Practical Approach to a Difficult Dimension of the Spiritual Life” in *Studies in Formative Spirituality*, V, 2 (May 1984) 203-210.
- Maes, Charles, “Listening, Silence and Obedience” in *Studies in Formative Spirituality*, V, 2 (May 1984) 211-218.
- Marrion, Malachy, “St Benedict: Listening, Conversion and Constant Prayer” in *Studies in Formative Spirituality*, V, 2 (May 1984) 219-228.
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- Ricoeur, Paul, “Listening to the Parables of Jesus,” in C. E. Reagan & D. Stewart, eds., *Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, Beacon Press, 1978, pp.239-245..
- Ungunmerr-Baumann, Miriam Rose & Frank Brennan SJ, "Reverencing the Earth in the Australian Dreaming", *The Way*, 29:38-45 (Jan. 1989).
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Suggested exercises

1. The most basic question I can ask in any situation is: What is happening? In the coming week gently ask this question a number of times – and listen, pay attention, see if you can hear what *is* happening. Be more intent on listening and hearing than on doing anything about it.
2. Listen carefully to the Our Father next time you say it.
3. Pray the following prayer of St Ignatius of Loyola each day during this coming week: “Take O Lord and receive my entire liberty, my memory, my understanding and my whole will. All that I am and all that I possess you have given me. I surrender it all to you to be disposed of according to your most holy will. Give me only your love and your grace – with these I will be rich enough and will desire nothing more.”

