

The Work of Christ – part 1

Philippians 2:8 – page 981 in the pew Bibles

For the next two Sundays, today and next week, I want to take a look at the work of Christ in both His life and death, leading up to Easter.

Now instead of doing a historical survey of these things, we're going to look at one aspect in particular which marked the whole of Christ's ministry here on earth, and was actually the aspect of His work that describes His whole mission and necessity of coming to earth as a man in the first place. It is the one thing that Christ had to accomplish in order to earn and secure our justification.

The aspect I'm referring to is Christ's obedience. Please turn with me to Philippians chapter 2, and verse 8. Follow along with me as I read:

Philippians 2:8 *And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

When thinking about our salvation through the finished work of Jesus Christ, it's important for us to understand that salvation consists of a whole lot more than just being forgiven of our sins. It also involves an extremely important aspect called justification. Justification means having a right standing before God based on the righteousness of Christ. And Christ's righteousness is the product of His perfect obedience to the law of God throughout His whole life as a man.

As we look at our passage today in Philippians 2:8, and when we ponder the totality of Christ's redemption for sinners, we see that there are two types of obedience that He displays that became the foundation of our redemption. The first, and what we will be looking at today, is what is called in theology Christ's *active* obedience. We see that it says that "*he humbled himself by becoming obedient.*" This has to do with how Jesus lived His life in perfect obedience to God, whereby He earned the right to be the Savior. The second, which we will look at next week, is called Christ's *passive* obedience. The passage goes on to say that Jesus "*humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*" That has to do with Christ's willingness to submit to the wrath of God being poured out upon Him as He hung on the cross. He passively received the curse there that was rightly ours.

If you were to ask a young child in Sunday school what Jesus did for them, they would answer something to the effect, "Jesus died on the cross for me." And this is, indeed, a true and very profound statement.

And when we think of Christ's redemptive work, indeed, most of the focus is first on His birth, and then on His death on the cross. Very little is often said about what Jesus accomplished in between those two events. It's like looking at a tomb stone and you see the date the person was born, then a dash, and then the date the person died. There's a lot of information in that dash. A whole lifetime of living. Well, today we're going to be looking at that dash in between Jesus' life and His death, and the significance of what happened in that dash to our redemption.

As we look at the Scriptures, the first thing we see in this regard is that...

Point #1: Jesus Christ fulfilled all righteousness.

If I were to ask all the people in this room, most, if not all of you, would agree that Jesus Christ lived a completely sinless life.

Hebrews 4:15 tells us explicitly,

*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, **yet without sin.***

But many may not understand just how vital that sinlessness was to accomplishing His overall mission of salvation.

If Jesus merely needed to die on the cross to save His people, He could have descended from heaven as a man on the morning of Good Friday, gone straight to Golgotha, died on the cross, risen, and left again. The problem of our past sins would have been fixed. He did not need to be born to Mary in a stable, go through all the trials and tribulations of growing up in this fallen world, or endure the animosity of the Jewish leaders during His ministry. However, Jesus did not live those thirty-three years for nothing.¹

First, I want us to take a look at a very familiar passage in Matthew's gospel.

Turn to Matthew chapter 3.

Matthew 3:13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; ¹⁷ and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Notice two things in this passage:

1. Jesus stated that the reason He was coming to be baptized was "to fulfill all righteousness."
2. Second, notice the Father's response: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

John had been sent by God as a herald of the Messiah, to announce His arrival. He never expected that he would baptize Jesus. He felt that Jesus actually should baptize him. He knew who Jesus was and understood fully that He had no need to undergo a cleansing ritual because he had no sin.

¹ R.C. Sproul. *The Work of Christ*. (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2012), 7.

Jesus asked John to trust Him and baptize Him, for by doing so they would “fulfill all righteousness.”²

This is an extremely important text which defines the work of Christ. It tells us that Jesus was sent to this earth to fulfill all righteousness. For the Jews, that meant obeying every jot and tittle of the law.

The law of Moses revealed the perfect holiness and righteousness of God. Obedience to that law was mandatory for God’s people. In order to live in covenant with God, and thus, live in an eternal sense, God’s people were obey His commands perfectly.

But as we learn in Romans, especially in chapter 7, there’s a problem. Neither Israel, nor anyone else was, or is, able to perfectly obey God’s law. And that’s not a problem with the law, it’s a problem with us. We are broken because of sin, and thus we all need redemption.

In undergoing baptism, it’s important to realize that Jesus was not acting for Himself, but for His people whom He would save. Since God’s people were required to keep the whole law, He had to keep the whole law. Likewise, since His people were now required, according to the command of the prophet John the Baptist, to submit to this baptism ritual, He had to submit to it.³

Jesus had to adhere to the whole law of God because the redemption He brought was not accomplished solely by His death on the cross. Again, God did not send Jesus to earth on Good Friday and straight to the cross. Jesus not only had to die for our sins, but had to live for our righteousness. To be fully redeemed, when we stand before the Lord on that final day, we need to hear an echo of what the Father said to His Son: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” If Jesus had only died for our sins, his sacrifice would have removed our guilt up to that point. If Jesus had only paid for our sins, He would have succeeded only in taking us back to square one. We would have been forgiven for our sins, but we would not have done anything to obey the law of God, which is what is required for righteousness.

Therefore, it is Christ’s active obedience, His “fulfilling all righteousness,” that fully qualified Him to be our Savior and Redeemer. It was by His perfect obedience that He became the lamb without blemish. More on that next week.

The covenant with Moses declared that everyone who perfectly obeyed the law received the blessing, and everyone who disobeyed the law received the curse. Jesus obeyed the law perfectly, fulfilling all righteousness, thus earning the blessing, not the curse. And as we will see next week when we look at what Jesus accomplished on the cross, there was a transfer that happens, where our curse was transferred to Him, but His righteousness is counted to us. THAT is why Christ’s active obedience is so important.

But this brings us to another important aspect of Christ’s active obedience, and that is seen in our second point this morning...

² Ibid, 70.

³ Sproul, 71.

Point #2: Jesus Christ was victorious where the first Adam failed.

What we're doing here is taking a closer look at another facet of this beautiful diamond called "Christ's obedience." As we hold up this diamond to the light and turn it, we see different facets of beauty, radiating and shining forth from it. This is yet one more.

Turn with me over one chapter to Matthew chapter 4.

After Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in the form of a dove, anointing Him for ministry. But the first thing the Spirit directed Him to do wasn't to preach, heal, or call disciples. Rather, the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness so that He would be tempted by Satan.

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ² And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. ³ And the tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." ⁴ But he answered, "It is written,

*"Man shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God."*

⁵ *Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple ⁶ and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written,*

"He will command his angels concerning you,"

and

*"On their hands they will bear you up,
lest you strike your foot against a stone."*

⁷ *Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.'"*

⁸ *Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. ⁹ And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to him, "Be gone, Satan! For it is written,*

*"You shall worship the Lord your God
and him only shall you serve."*

¹¹ *Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.*

Why did Jesus have to go into the wilderness and face the unbridled assault of the devil? The answer to that question is found in understanding Jesus' role as what 1 Corinthians 15 calls "the Last Adam."

From the beginning, starting with Adam, who was the representative of the whole human race, mankind has been required to obey God perfectly. He is the Creator, we are the created. Well,

that requirement of perfect obedience still applies today. It has never been rescinded. Just because Adam fell and we are now all born with a sinful nature, doesn't mean God says, "Well, things being as they are, I don't require perfect obedience anymore." No! Perfect obedience to God is still required of all humanity! And THIS is the reason why Jesus had to come as a man, and THIS is why Jesus had to live a perfectly obedient life as the Last Adam!

The major failure of the first Adam was his response to temptation. One thing that Jesus absolutely HAD to do was to accomplish what the first Adam failed to accomplish.

We read in Romans 5:15...

For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many.

And then in verses 18-19, of the same chapter we read,

¹⁸ Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. ¹⁹ For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

Paul was comparing and contrasting the first Adam and his failure to perfectly obey God, and the success of Jesus, the last Adam, who endured a similar temptation.

In many ways the two temptations were the same, but in other ways, what Jesus went through was radically different than what Adam did.

First, compare the places where the two temptations took place.

In the case of the first Adam, the temptation came while he and Eve were enjoying the pleasures of the garden of Eden, often referred to as Paradise. Jesus' temptation took place in the desolate Judean wilderness, which was one of the most foreboding deserts anywhere in the world. Even wildlife refused to live there. It was anything BUT Paradise!

Secondly, when Adam was tempted by the devil, he had the company of his wife, whom God had given to him as a special creation to be his helper and confidante. God had declared in the garden in Genesis 2:18 that "It is not good that man should be alone." When our justice system wants to punish criminals severely, they often send them into solitary confinement where they are cut off from all human interaction. This is what Jesus had to endure as he went into that harsh Judean wilderness alone.

Third, Adam was tempted in the lush, rich environment of the Garden, which was filled with food, water, and all the things necessary for human flourishing. Jesus's temptation came in the context of a forty day fast in the middle of a desolate desert. Jesus was literally starving.

The final difference was that when Adam was tempted, there was no already-established practice of sinning in the world. There had been no sin before Adam and Eve first committed it. Jesus,

however, was in a world where the presence of sin was commonplace. Jesus had to act against the commonplace practice of human beings and remain resolute in the midst of it.⁴

Despite the differences, there were very important similarities between the two temptations.

First, Satan's point of attack against Adam and his point of attack against Jesus were virtually the same. Genesis 3:1 says that the serpent was "more cunning than any beast of the field." When Satan came against Eve, he came in subtlety. He started off simply questioning whether God had said a certain thing, trying to put doubt in Eve's mind. "'Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" In fact, God HADN'T said that, and Eve corrected him. Which tells me that Eve had a full understanding of exactly what God said.

From that point, however, Satan moved from being subtle to a direct contradiction. "You will not surely die."⁵ For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." Basically he was trying to get Eve to suspect that God was withholding good things from them.

"⁶ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate."

Satan got Adam and Eve to turn their focus in on themselves and away from their perfect obedience to God. And thus bringing about their ruin, as well as the ruin of all of Adam's posterity throughout all history.

Now look at how this unfolded for Jesus. After Jesus fasted for 40 days and nights and he was very hungry, Satan came to him with a subtle suggestion: "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." Basically he was saying to Jesus, "If you are who you think you are, then why are you starving out here? You would have the power to change stones into bread and relieve your hunger."⁵

But the last words Jesus heard before He was led out into the wilderness was His Father saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." Jesus knew He was the Son of God. Satan was subtly challenging that truth.

So how did Jesus respond to this temptation by the devil? With the Word of God! "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" Obedience to the will of the Father expressed in the Word of God was more important to Jesus than his hunger.

Then Satan took Him to Jerusalem and set Him on the pinnacle of the temple. This time he tried to be even more sneaky and use Scripture like Jesus did. He said, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'" It's as if Satan was

⁴ Sproul, 82-84

⁵ Sproul, 83-84.

saying to Jesus, “Well, you think the Word of God is true, let’s prove it and see if God does what He says.”

What did Jesus reply? Again, He went to the Word of God. “Again it is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

Verse 8, “⁸ Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. ⁹ And he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”

And yet again, Jesus responded with the Word of God. “Be gone, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.’”

In Luke’s account of this story in Luke 4:13, we read, “And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time.”

This was not the end of Satan’s assault on Jesus. Throughout His life Jesus faced temptations from the devil who was trying to get Jesus to go a different way. In one such instance, in Matthew 16, Jesus had just told His disciples that He had to go to Jerusalem and suffer and die. Peter objected and said, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.”

Jesus recognized that this was not merely an objection from Peter, but a temptation from Satan. He turned to Peter and, as if speaking directly to Satan as He did in the wilderness, He said, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

Jesus lived His life...all His life...in perfect obedience to God. Which is what is required of all humanity. Jesus lived how humans were supposed to live in God’s good plan all along. In so doing, by being completely faithful to obey God, and being the new representative for mankind as the first Adam was, he fulfilled mankind’s requirement of being perfectly obedient to God. A fulfillment that we can now partake of by faith.

Conclusion

The Scripture clearly states that “For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.”

We see, then, that the issue of obedience is paramount. Both to our condemnation as well as to our justification.

Adam was the representative of all who came after him. His disobedience became our disobedience.

And that is precisely why it was necessary for Jesus to live a life of perfect obedience.

I want to end right where we began, by going back to Philippians chapter 2.

Philippians 2:4-8

Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Jesus came to earth. He was born as a man. Being fully God, He put on full humanity. Why? To become servant. To live obediently. To perfectly obey God's law, and accomplish what the first Adam didn't. All so that we, by faith in His perfect and finished work, can become how God intended humans to be...righteous.

Would you pray with me?