

Telling Christians that their Obedience Will Bring God's Blessing: Is this Harmful Legalism?

Protestants agree that we are "justified by faith alone," and that our good works do not contribute to our justification. And we are often told that "grace" means "God's unmerited favor." But then how can we teach Christians about the hundreds of moral commands in the New Testament? Does obedience to the moral commands of the New Testament make any difference in how God relates to us? Does obedience bring blessing, as many passages seem to indicate? And if so, how do we teach this while avoiding legalism?

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I. Obedience brings blessing: The Bible frequently promises that our obedience to God's commands will result in various blessings from God

A. New Testament evidence

1. The blessing of "seeing good days"

For "Whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit; ¹¹ let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it. (1 Peter 3:10-11)

2. The blessing of having God's eyes and ears more attentive to you (I understand God's "eyes" to represent his providential care and his "ears" to represent his readiness to answer our prayers.)

For "Whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit; ¹¹ let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it. ¹² For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil." (1 Peter 3:10-12)

The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. (James 5:16 – context indicates this means actual righteous conduct, not Christ's imputed righteousness)

Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. (1 John 3:21-22)

3. The blessing of becoming a "useful vessel" for "honorable use" by God

Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable.²¹ Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work. (2 Tim 2:20-21)

4. The blessing of being an effective witness to unbelievers

Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. (1 Peter 2:12; see also 1 Pet. 3:1)

5. The blessing of deeper fellowship with God

Jesus answered him, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. (John 14:23)

If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. (John 15:10)

6. The blessing of closer fellowship with other Christians

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. (1 John 1:6-7)

7. The blessing of avoiding God's painful discipline

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. (Ephesians 4:30)

Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. (Revelation 3:19)

For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. (Hebrews 12:11)

Ananias and Sapphira: Acts 5:5,10-11

For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.³⁰ That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. (1 Corinthians 11:29-30)

8. The blessing of increased heavenly reward

So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him.¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. (2 Corinthians 5:9-10; see also 1 Cor. 3:12-15)

B. Numerous OT passages teach the same idea (but they contain more emphasis on material,

earthly blessings)

Deut. 28 (!) See verses 1-14 (blessings) and 15-68 (curses)

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. (Ps. 1:1-3)

Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart. (Ps. 37:4:

The steps of a man are established by the LORD, when he delights in his way (Psalm 37:24)

Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. (Malachi 3:10)

+ many, many more verses in the OT

II. Objections: For several reasons, we (and Christian pastors and leaders generally) might be reluctant to teach that greater obedience will bring greater blessing from God

- A. Fear of disappointment (people might obey and not seem to experience any more blessings)
- B. The danger of sounding too much like the “prosperity gospel” preachers
- C. The danger that people will draw the wrong conclusions about Christians who are suffering, or about Christians who outwardly seem very successful (reasoning backward from apparent blessing or lack of blessing)
- D. The danger of seeming to nullify or diminish God’s grace
- E. The danger of sounding judgmental regarding people’s behavior
- F. The danger of seeming to preach salvation by works
- G. The danger of encouraging pride and self-righteousness in some people
- H. The danger of fostering continual self-condemnation in other people

III. Responses: The New Testament contains some teachings to guard against these dangers

A. Fear of disappointment (people might obey and not seem to experience any more blessings)

Response: We need to ask ourselves: Do we believe God's Word?

Hebrews 11:6: And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

B. The danger of sounding too much like the "prosperity gospel" preachers

Response: Clearly emphasize the differences:

1. Many faithful believers experience hardship and suffering in this life (Jesus, Paul, Job)

Peter 4:12-13: Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.¹³ But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

2. It is simply not true that strong faith guarantees material prosperity in this life:

James 2:5: Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?

C. The danger that people will draw the wrong conclusions about Christians who are suffering, or about Christians who outwardly seem very successful (reasoning backwards from apparent blessing or lack of blessing)

Response:

1. Caution people that it is dangerous to reason backwards from blessing or suffering to conclusions about God's favor or lack of favor (see point 1 in previous section).

And sometimes in this life, the wicked prosper: See Ps. 73

2. But also tell people to watch and ponder:

Hebrews 13:7: Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.

2 Timothy 3:8-9: Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith.⁹ But they will not get very far, for their folly will be plain to all, as was that of those two men.

(see also Hag. 1-2)

D. The danger of seeming to nullify or diminish God's grace

Response: Teach that even our obedience is a result of God's abundant grace:

1 Corinthians 15:10: But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

1 Peter 5:12: By Silvanus, a faithful brother as I regard him, I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this [that is, all that he has written in this epistle] is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it.

E. The danger of sounding judgmental regarding people's behavior

Response: Teach Rom. 14:13: Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.

F. The danger of seeming to preach salvation by works

Response: After justification, Eph. 2:10 says we are created for good works

Ephesians 2:8-10: For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

G. The danger of encouraging pride and self-righteousness in some people

Response: Teach James 4:6: But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

H. The danger of fostering continual self-condemnation in people

Response: Teach 1 John 1:9: If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

and Rom. 8:1: There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

IV. These dangers and complexities mean that teaching about obedience and God's blessing is not a simple matter. But there are many doctrines in the New Testament that are not simple, yet we have a responsibility to teach them. (They can be taught rightly by bringing to bear "the whole counsel of God," Acts 20:27.)

V. The greater danger: Failing to teach a clear emphasis in the New Testament, with the result that our hearers will not be challenged and encouraged with this teaching