

The Elements Of Motivation (Part Four): Obligation

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The beginning of each article in this series has shown that accepting Christ's blood and entering into the New Covenant is just the beginning of the creative process initiated at God's calling. His calling, not an end in itself, places us under obligation to live up to the terms of the covenant. If we respond, we will be motivated to produce works, which must be done if God's will for us is to be accomplished. This in no way earns us salvation, but it enables God's creative efforts to be completed.

Romans 2:1-13 shows our responsibility for keeping His commandments, a work. It is good to remember that Paul writes this to a Christian congregation.

Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. But we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who practice such things. And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who "will render to each one according to his deeds": eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness—indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek; but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God. For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law (for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified). . . .

In verse 1, Paul says that anybody participating even in some of the more easily mastered practices of human nature is putting himself on dangerous spiritual quicksand. Today, in the wake of the breakup of the Worldwide Church of God, a common judgment is to call Herbert Armstrong into account yet say at the end, "But I loved him." Those who do this have overlooked how vulnerable and subject to God's judgment this makes them.

Verse 2 carries Paul's warning a step further by reminding us that God judges according to truth. Those who judge and act as Paul describes in verse 1 have precious little truth. However, this major element gives God the right to judge. He alone knows all the facts and can arrange them all in the light of perfect righteousness.

He reveals in verse 3 the weak position of those judging: They are guilty of committing the same sins, or ones just as bad, as those they are judging! Paul is saying that those who live in glass houses should not throw stones! In fact, their judgment of others may be one of those sins! In verse 4, he counsels them to lay aside their pride and concentrate on making the best use of God's patience by repenting of their sins.

In verse 5, the apostle plays on the word "riches" in the previous verse. Physical wealth is something one normally sets aside and treasures, but those who persist in evil works are "treasuring up" judgment for themselves! Verses 6 through 11 are a classic argument for the doing of good works after justification from the mind and pen of the very man most often accused of saying no works are necessary.

Within the context of the entire book, Paul is saying here that, while a person is justified by grace through faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, establishing a relationship with God that because of sin never before existed, good works should result from justification. Good works are the concrete, open, and public expression of the reality of our relationship with God. They are its witness.

Just as surely as day follows night, if our faith truly is in God, the works that follow will be according to God's will. Living by God's will should be the natural consequence of faith in God. Though we are justified by faith, II Corinthians 5:10 spells out that we are judged according to our works. "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad." Is it not logical, then, for a person, knowing he will be judged according to his works, to want at least some clearly stated absolutes to show him what is expected of him rather than a fuzzy and vague statement about loving one another? Would not such a person want to know more specifically what constitutes love?

In Romans 2:7, Paul is not saying using one's faith will be easy, but that those who have that faith will use it to work. "Patient continuance" presupposes a measure of hardship, and "seek" implies pursuing something not yet attained. Together, they indicate a persistent quest of God's righteousness. In verse 10, the apostle uses the phrase "to everyone who works what is good." He does not define what "good" is at this point, but whatever it is, work is necessary to accomplish it. In verses 11-12, he reiterates that we will be judged, introducing a word that many seem to find so repulsive: *law*!

Repulsed by Law

Why is this term so repulsive? Law implies authority, and human nature likes no authority over it, even if the law expresses the authority of God and defines love. It is especially interesting that Paul says we will be judged according to what we actually know. Know of what? The law of God. The good works he mentions earlier include the works of keeping the law. Obviously, it is God's will that we live moral lives. Morality must have standards, or there is no such thing as morality. Laws define morality. We will be judged against what we know of the laws of God. Thus, he says in verse 13 that the doers of the law will be justified.

Despite what these verses say, theologians attempt to justify their "no-law" theology by claiming that Paul writes here of the natural man, not converted people. While partially true, it avoids the fact that this epistle was written to a church of God congregation (Romans 1:1-7) and that Paul repeatedly uses the person pronoun "you"—as in "you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge" (Romans 2:1). This usage, combined with the fact that it is written to a church of God congregation, easily catches the converted in its purview.

In addition, it also avoids the fact that one reason God gives His Holy Spirit is to lead us into all truth (John 16:13). This includes the truth regarding morality, lawkeeping, and good works. As God leads us to greater depths of knowledge and understanding of His truth, it builds in us a more responsible knowledge of God's will. This raises the stakes in judgment because "to whom much is given, from

him much more will be required" (Luke 12:48). Growth results in closer scrutiny against a higher standard of morality.

In the broader context of Romans, it becomes clear that each person—Jew or Gentile, converted or unconverted—is judged against what he knows, and God holds him responsible for working to produce obedience at that level. This is similar to what teachers expect of school children. They hold children in the higher grades more responsible for knowing and doing than those in lower grades. Courts use the same general system, holding adults more responsible for their crimes than children. Thus, for the same crime, an adult will receive a sterner punishment.

The called must realize that, because of their calling, the requirements—and thus the judgments—are much stiffer since we know so much more. This is why Paul says in Romans 3:31, "Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law." Faith upholds law or makes it firm because the law points out what righteousness, love, and sin are, and guides us in how faith is to be used.

Obligation, Self-satisfaction, and Faithfulness

All this leads to the fourth motivational factor. We have seen that the fear of God, vision, and hope all contribute to being motivated. We need to add to these a deep sense of obligation to Christ, an important factor because it leads to a deeply held, personal loyalty to Him for a number of very good reasons.

Obligation's closest synonym is "duty." It is produced by a strong and compelling sense of indebtedness for a benefit or service received, or by being bound by contract, promise, or law. Obligation is what one owes in return for a favor or because a law or promise demands one must give it. Adherence to duty or obligation produces loyalty or faithfulness.

II Timothy 3:1-5 gives us a concise but graphic overview of powerful and evil attitudes driving this world toward the brink of annihilation:

But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!

We have all been victims to some degree of these ungodly attitudes. We cannot escape being affected by them, and even after conversion, it is difficult to fend them off. This overriding way of life has an invasive way of forcing one to concentrate attention on self-satisfaction. It leads one to believe that life, government, employer, or society owes one a living. A strong sense of obligation to serve others, especially freely given service, and loyalty are major victims of its onslaught because it produces the attitude that one is owed rather than that one owes.

Notice how many of the descriptors given in these verses directly relate to focusing on the self. Self-satisfaction is the foundation, the launching pad, and driving force that motivates sin. It is sin's very essence. We should not be deceived into thinking that God does not want us to have any satisfaction

in life, but we should rather understand that human nature, aided by Satan, easily allows conduct to get out of control and finds satisfaction beyond the bounds of righteous standards. God wants satisfaction to be produced differently in us.

Sex is an area in which we can see this principle quite easily. God created and pronounced it very good as He stopped His work during Creation week. The Bible shows it is to be used for reproduction and binding a marriage ever more closely in an intimate, loving, pleasurable, and satisfying way as each partner gives and serves the other. God intends it for use within marriage only.

However, as we can see by observing the world, if a person lacks a strong sense of obligation to his mate or to God due to taking wedding vows, to God's laws, or to his personal relationship with Christ, its use can get out of control when one seeks only to please himself. Self-satisfaction then becomes a destroyer of marriage and family life. The stability of the community is disturbed, and above all, one's relationship with God can be shattered by means of something He intended for our good. A deep sense of obligation motivates us toward the vital virtue of faithfulness.

The Bible uses several metaphors to teach the result of human nature's perverse longing for self-satisfaction. Paul notes in Romans 6:23, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Sin indebts us to death to an amount that, if we paid it, cuts off all hope of eternal life. Proverbs 22:7 adds important understanding to the spiritual principle involved here: "The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender." Sin put us in debt to the one we obeyed in sinning. Once we sin, we are living on borrowed time, and we, the borrowers, the debtors, lose our independence. In terms of sin, we owe our lives to someone else. A sinner is no longer his own man!

The idea of "servant" becomes clearer when we understand it as "slave." Slavery is another metaphor for what self-satisfaction produces. Sin puts us in bondage to the cruelest taskmaster in the universe, Satan, the one who generates this host of self-centered attitudes. We are completely unable to break free from this bondage without supernatural help, as Hebrews 2:14-15 says:

Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.

Enter Christ, Redemption, and Gratitude

At this point, a major reason that demands our obligation and thus our deep commitment and loyalty to Christ comes to the fore. It is the reality of our redemption by means of Christ's sacrifice:

And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your sojourning here in fear; knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. (I Peter 1:17-19)

Redeem means "to buy back." The essential purpose of biblical redemption is to deliver a person or thing from captivity or loss, and as such, it becomes an almost-perfect image for God's saving actions in behalf of sinning mankind. How much would we be willing to pay for the life of someone we love

dearly? Kidnappers take perfidious advantage of this desire for the safety of a loved one. They steal a person precious to another—usually a child but sometimes a mate—and hold them for ransom to extort a grand sum of money they think will put them on easy street.

God the Father was willing to pay the ransom price for us by giving up the life of the One He loved most, His own Son, the only other being in all of creation that lived life on the same level as He did. He freely made this sacrifice in exchange for our liberty from our bondage to Satan and our debt to death at the same time. Likewise, the Son willingly volunteered to be the payment in full.

Now, let us turn this reality around and examine it from the perspective of the one released. As one released, how great a sense of loyalty and obligation born out of gratitude do we feel toward the One who came to our rescue by paying such a huge price for our freedom? Plainly and simply stated, this is the issue in regard to our spiritual obligation. This aspect of our salvation is one of the major themes of the book of Ruth. At one point in the narrative, Ruth prostrates herself at her redeemer's feet (Ruth 3:7-14), illustrating her recognition of her obligation.

The book of Philemon relates an interesting event in Paul's life in which he calls upon Philemon's sense of gratitude and obligation to him. In verse 8, Paul says he could use his authority to order Philemon to accept the slave Onesimus back, charging any debt he owed Philemon to Paul. However, he appeals to him through other means. In verse 19, he delivers a double-barreled proposition. First, Paul himself writes in his own hand that he will repay any of Onesimus' indebtedness, putting Philemon in greater-than-normal obligation. Then, Paul reminds him that he owes Paul his very life spiritually. He implies that Philemon's spiritual indebtedness to him should more than cover any material debt Onesimus owed to Philemon.

Therefore, Paul suggests that Philemon charge it to his account. What Paul did for Onesimus reflects in a small way what Christ did for us. As Paul laid himself out for Onesimus, Christ did for us in a much greater way to pay our spiritual indebtedness and set us free. As Paul claims Philemon's indebtedness to him, so Christ claims our indebtedness to Him.

I Corinthians 6:9-11, 19-20 is helpful toward showing our parallel to Paul's experience with Philemon:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God. . . . Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit which is in you, which you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.

The basis for our obligation to Christ could not be stated any clearer. He gives three reasons:

1. Verses 9-11 show what put us into indebtedness to make redemption necessary.
2. Verse 19 says that our body is now the temple of the Holy Spirit.

3. Verse 20 states that, because of redemption, we now belong to the One who redeemed us, and we must glorify Him in body and spirit.

Concerning our bodies being "the temple of the Holy Spirit," it is good to reflect on the Old Testament symbolism that God abode in the Holy of Holies within the Temple. Paul reminds us that God now lives in us (John 14:17, 23), and we are obligated to live with the utmost circumspection so that He in no way is defiled by our conduct. So it is with Christ: We are obligated to consider His demands in every area of life all the time and under every circumstance. What an honor!

I Corinthians 7:22-24 reflects back to chapter 6 and the subject of redemption:

For he who is called in the Lord while a slave is the Lord's freedman. Likewise he who is called while free is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price; do not become the slaves of men. Brethren, let each one remain with God in that calling in which he was called.

A way of illustrating what Paul is teaching is that, if an employer is paying us to work for him, we should work for him, not for ourselves or someone else. Our time on the job belongs to the one paying our wages. So it is with Christ: We are obligated to consider His demands in every area of life all the time.

Paul expands upon and defines this concept more specifically in Romans 6:11-23:

Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instrument of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not! Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin to death, or of obedience to righteousness? But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. What fruit did you have then in the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Even as Christ has paid our indebtedness to sin and death to set us free, we are now under obligation to give our lives to Him in obedience to righteousness. Even as we were the slaves of sin while incurring the debt, we are now to give ourselves as His slaves for obedience to righteousness.

Exodus 6:6 contains the first biblical mention of redemption: "Therefore say to the children of Israel: 'I am the Lord; I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, I will rescue you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments.'" At this time, He does not mention the redemption price, only that it will be at the cost of great judgments.

Exodus 13:2, 14-16 supplies those details:

Sanctify to Me all the firstborn, whatever opens the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and animal; it is Mine. . . . So it shall be, when your son asks you in time to come, saying, "What is this?" that you shall say to him, "By strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. And it came to pass, when Pharaoh was stubborn about letting us go, that the Lord killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animal. Therefore I sacrifice to the Lord all males that open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem." It shall be as a sign on your hand and as frontlets between your eyes, for by strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt.

We can safely conclude that the price of buying the Israelites' freedom was the devastation of Egypt's land, and above all, the killing of Egypt's firstborn. God designed the redemption of Israel's firstborn to remind them of the high cost of their liberty. The Egyptians slain for Israel's release belonged to God just as surely as the Israelites, but God used them to pay for Israel's freedom. That collective sacrifice became a type of Christ. The practical inference is that Israel was obligated to the One who paid the price—God. To us, that God would use virtually an entire nation to pay for another nation's freedom can be a stunning, even shocking concept. However, God is Creator. He owns everything and is certainly free to do as He pleases.

God will even things out later, though, as Isaiah 19:18-25 shows. Then, Egypt will once again be a great nation. The redeeming of Israel's firstborn was to serve as a costly and constant reminder that freedom is not free and that they were obligated to God for their redemption from Egypt. Forgetfulness produces ingratitude, which in turn produces disobedience because such people are no longer motivated by a sense of obligation to the One who worked so powerfully in their behalf (Deuteronomy 8:10-20).

Obligation and Fellowship with Christ

To this point, we have examined the legal basis upon which our liberty and obligation rest. But something more wonderful and valuable beyond price is provided—a relationship with our Redeemer, a continuing, personal, loving friendship with our Elder Brother and loving Father. Christ encourages us in Matthew 28:20, ". . . and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." This phrase is more literally "all the days until the end of days." Hebrews 13:5 adds more comfort by proclaiming, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

That we believe this is vital to building faith because it is so difficult for us to believe the great God would actually be aware of ones so puny as us out of billions He could choose from. A series of verses from Proverbs and one from John give instruction about how important this concept is in giving encouragement and hope.

Proverbs 17:17: "A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity."

Proverbs 18:24: "A man who has friends must himself be friendly, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother."

Proverbs 27:10: "Do not forsake your own friend or your father's friend, nor go to your brother's house in the day of your calamity; better is a neighbor nearby than a brother far away."

John 15:13-15 ties these together by bringing Jesus Christ into the picture: "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you."

These proverbs are not saying a brother cannot be a true friend or that somehow a friend from outside the family will prove a better help in time of need than a family member. They do not pit a brother against a friend, but use "brother" in the sense of the friendship of David and Jonathan. In that kind of friendship, the friends are truly as brothers should be. In adversity, a true friend functions as if he were really a brother. The spiritual reality for us is that Jesus is both Friend and Brother.

Proverbs 18:24 is a mild caution against having too many friends, of spreading oneself too thin. It is better to have truly good friends who will stick with us through thick and thin. Understood within the context of these four verses is a warning that, if one has too many interests as a result of having too many friends, the one true friendship we can develop with Christ—who really will stick with us through thick and thin—will probably be the one pushed aside. It is better to be loyal to one true friend who is faithful at all times than numerous unreliable ones.

Proverbs 27:10 directly confronts the subject of obligation and loyalty in human experience. The first clause is simply a Hebraic way of saying, "Don't desert tried and true friends." An available friend is better than an unavailable relative. The second and third clauses reinforce the first. Be loyal to and rely upon help that is near, tried, and true.

John 15:13-15 presents us with an interesting and exciting expansion of our place within our relationship with Christ. Redemption, at first glance, elevates us from being a slave of unrighteousness and Satan to being a slave of righteousness and Jesus Christ. Yet, here Christ elevates our calling to an almost unimaginable height—intimate friendship with Him and the Father.

In many cases, our understanding and therefore our appreciation of this falls short of what it should be. Few or none of us have known either the depths of actual, physical slavery to another individual or the heights of walking the halls of power. During the Clinton administration, there existed a small group of people known as the F.O.B.: "friends of Bill"—Bill Clinton, that is. Outsiders conferred respectability and influence upon them because of their unique relationship with the President. In ancient Rome, the friends of the Caesar had greater access to him than his governmental counselors and military advisors. History says they had access to him at all times, even into his bedchambers.

A slave would never know such a relationship. A slave never receives a reason for the work assigned him; he simply must do it because he has no other choice. However, a friend of Christ is a confidant of the One in power, who shares the knowledge of His purpose with him. Then the friend voluntarily adopts it as his own, perhaps for no other reason than the basis of their friendship.

We do not follow Christ simply because of some chance impulse. We have been specifically chosen, summoned by Him to be His friend! Here is our obligation set boldly and clearly before us: "You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give it you" (John 15:16). We have been specifically appointed, ordained, placed in this unique relationship that we may produce the right things in life.

At first, our obligation rests upon the fact of Jesus giving Himself as the price of our spiritual redemption from slavery and death. If we have any sense at all—any discernment of what He has rescued us from and what He has given us the opportunity to possess—our sense of gratitude should explode in zeal and motivate us to loyalty because we owe Him so much!

Our sense of obligation is further built and strengthened by the knowledge that we have been specifically summoned and appointed to share in an intimate, loving, family relationship and friendship that He sustains through His office as High Priest. If we have any sense of gratitude for His work in intervening, leading, guiding, correcting, and perfecting our character so that we produce much fruit and love one another, our sense of obligation will be further stirred to ensure that we do not let Him down in any area of life. We will always strive to glorify Him.

This motivational factor is largely dependent upon feeling—but not the sickeningly sweet sentimentality of some of this world's Christianity. This feeling is derived from a clear understanding of what has been done and continues to be done in our behalf. This deep, heartfelt, and comprehending feeling arises in the minds of people who have had firsthand experience with the suffering that sin and death bring. They know in their heart of hearts that they are guilty of rebellion against this wonderful Personality who created us, died for us, and continues to be our friend through thick and thin. They know He greatly desires that friendship to continue for all eternity because He is changing us to be like Him and be one with Him.

Hebrews 12:6-10 tells us that God chastens every son He loves, and He does this that we might be partakers of His holiness. We are not nameless, faceless, impersonal blobs to Him. Moreover, He and His purpose are surely something worth being obligated to! The person who keeps these thoughts near the forefront of his mind—and refreshes them from time to time lest he take them for granted—will feel such a sense of obligation that he will even attempt to pay Him back, knowing all the while it cannot be done. He will drive himself to self-control and sacrifice in obedience to Christ's every wish. As one can see, the key to this motivational factor is not merely knowing that Christ is Savior, but also knowing and abhorring sin and its devastating effects.