21 John 8:51: Obedience Should Save

Before we discuss what Jesus teaches on obedience for salvation in John 8:51, we need to dispel a myth of the Fable of Cheap Grace. It insists we can not be obedient. We are allegedly too weak. We supposedly can never expect to live obediently. Thus, God would allegedly be unfair if He ever made our salvation depend on ongoing obedience.

This teaching is a blatant lie of Satan. God tells us: “Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach.” (Deut. 30:11.)

God is emphasizing therefore our capacity to respond to His commands and exhortations so that we take them to heart. From God’s assurance that we can is how God tells us we should. There is no responsibility without capacity to respond.¹

Thus, God wants us to be energized by His word toward a reassuring and positive outlook on our duty and ability to obey Him. Only God is Good and without sin. But

¹. Charles Finney, the famous evangelist, concurred in 1837 in Justification By Faith, saying many exaggerate the effect of sin by Adam. We still have a nature created with capacity to obey God. Adam’s sin causes us merely to be “subjected to aggravated temptation,” but it “has by no means rendered [human] nature sinful.” Finney says man’s nature, “in all its elements...essential to moral agency,... God has made it as well as it could be made, and perfectly adapted to the circumstances in which he lives in this world.” (Otherwise, how did Jesus overcome sin while fully in human flesh and exercising no perogatives of the Son of God?) Finney adds: “The truth is, man’s nature is all right, and is as well fitted to love and obey God as to hate and disobey him.” Those who read various Psalms out-of-context (‘no, not one’) to prove the opposite make a mockery of God’s word. See my prior work, Jesus’ Words Only (2007) at 268-70.
God wants us to have a positive outlook on our capacity to respond so that we should do good and call on Him for help to do so.

This is why it is such a heresy of the “deceiver and antichrist” to teach Jesus did not come in “human flesh” (2 John 1:7). A key point of Jesus’ life was that during His time on earth, He was fully human yet never would exercise any superior power to avoid sin. As Son of God, He could have. Satan, in fact, tempted Him to use His powers to save Himself from difficulty. (Matt. 4:1-11, “command these stones....”) But Jesus refused to use those powers for such purposes. Jesus knew part of His mission was to prove sinless despite living in human flesh. “For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.” (Heb 4:15.) Hebrews makes the point this was not miraculously achieved, but was despite the fact Jesus shared identically our human nature. Hebrews says Jesus “partook...of flesh and blood....” and “it was necessary for Him to become like His brothers in all [respects]....” (Heb. 2:14,17.) Jesus’ death then becomes an inspiration to us: “For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted.” (Heb 2:18.) Jesus “left us an example, that we should follow His steps: who did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth.” (1 Peter 2:21-22.) By our capacity to follow His example and doing so, we are given His perfection: “And [Jesus] being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him.” (Heb 5:9.) Thereby, Jesus’ obedience unto death teaches us our similar capacity to obey. Anyone who teaches you Jesus did not come in “human flesh,” and instead had some superior flesh untainted by human nature, Apostle John says is the “deceiver and antichrist.” (2 John 1:7). Instead, Jesus showed us the path of righteousness is in fact a path open to any human who prays to God the Father to avoid temptation. Jesus did this by giving mankind the most perfect example of a human obedience to God under the severest trial.
John 8:51 And The Overlap Of The Great Commission

Jesus told the apostles to make disciples of all the nations, “teaching them to obey [tereo] everything I commanded you.” (Matt. 28:19-20.) Why were these commandments to be taught and obeyed by the nations?

Because Jesus explained in John 8:51: “I tell you the truth, anyone who obeys [tereo] My teaching will never die!”2 To be more accurate, “obeys” is “should have kept on obeying” (aorist subjunctive) and “will never” is actually “should never ever.”3 Thus, it says, “all those who should have kept on obeying My Teaching should never ever die.”4

This is the same message in Jesus’ parable about the one who builds on sand. “And every one that heareth these words of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand [whose end is destruction].” (Matt. 7:26-27 ASV.)


2. New Living Translation. The King James renders “obey” in this verse as “kept guard.” In Greek, the literal meaning is “to attend to carefully” or “guard.” Metaphorically it means obey, observe, etc. The leading translations of tereo are: “obey” (NIV, NLT, GNB), “observe” (KJV, ASV, Vulgate, YLT), “observing” (ALT), and “guard” (KJV/SRV).
3. The word for obey and have are both active aorist subjunctives. See my prior book, Jesus’ Words Only (2007) at Footnote 15, page 383.
4. For discussion on how the subjunctive tense is often ignored to serve doctrinal biases, see my prior book, Jesus’ Words Only (2007) at Footnote 15, page 383.
5. See “Jesus’ Answer To The Direct Question On How To Obtain Eternal Life” on page 123 et seq.
What Is A Failure To Tereo In Jesus’ Doctrine?

Is the failure to believe the disobedience which Jesus is concerned about? Is it just one command to believe that He has in mind?

No. It means obedience to multiple commandments. First, in Revelation 22:14, it speaks of multiple commandments: “Happy [are] the ones doing His commandments (entolas), so that their right shall be to the tree of life, and they shall enter by the gates into the city.” (Rev 22:14.)

Second, when Jesus gave the Great Commission, Jesus told the apostles to teach all the nations to “tereo [obey, observe diligently] all [things, panta, plural] that I have commanded [entellomai] you.” (Matt. 28:20.)

Lastly, Jesus used tereo another time, just as He did in John 8:51, to refer to plural commandments. Jesus even said the obedience to them gained eternal life. This arose when a rich young man asked Jesus how to have “eternal life.” Jesus answered the young rich man: “To enter life, obey [tereo] the commandments.” (Matt. 19:17). Jesus then quoted nine of the ten commandments.

Meaning Of Tereo

The Greek word tereo is synonymous with obey because of its derivation. It literally means to keep diligent watch. It was a maritime term. On the old sailing ships, they watched the stars for their navigation directions. They would watch the North Star so that they could maintain their correct course of travel. Sometimes a strong wind would blow them off course or clouds might obscure the star, but by keeping careful watch on the stars, they could return back to their correct course. This process of diligently keeping one’s course on the North Star was the action of tereo. Thus, outside of the maritime context, it came to mean diligently follow or obey.

6. See “Right To The Tree Of Life” on page 373 et seq.
What did Jesus mean by obey (tereo) in John 8:51? We have assistance by reading Revelation 3:3 where Jesus uses tereo again to warn Christians who had started well but were now failing. Jesus’ usage of tereo is very enlightening:

Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it [keep watch of it diligently] (tereo) and repent. But if you do not keep watch (lit. wake up), I will come like a thief.... (Rev. 3:3.)

Jesus thus says here ‘repent and obey.’ What was this a repentance from? A singular failure to believe initially? Hardly. It is abundantly clear from what Jesus told them to repent: the failure to have completed works! Jesus said in the prior verse:

Become watching [fig., Wake up], and strengthen the rest which you were about to be throwing out, for I have not found your works having been completed before My God. (Rev 3:2 ALT.)

Thus, Jesus wants the Sardisians to diligently follow what He has previously commanded. They obviously started well, and had partial works. Yet, their works were incomplete. What did this mean? This is identical to the Parable of the Sower where the second and third seed “believed for a while” (Luke 8:13) but then fell in temptation or were choked by thorns, and did not “produce to completion.” (Luke 8:14, ALT.) They did not bear “fruit to the end” as did the fourth seed.7

It is this same tereo-obedience behavior that Jesus says, if diligently followed, should end up that you “never ever die.” (John 8:51.)

7. See “The Parable Of The Sower” on page 311 et seq.
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Commandments To Remember And Obey

So what are some of these specific commandments from Jesus which lead to life if obeyed in patient endurance, or hell if disobeyed? Here is a small sampling of verses from just the early chapters of Apostle Matthew’s Gospel. None are parabolic. Hence, there is no mystery involved. All threaten damnation if certain principles are disobeyed. Or they promise eternal life if certain principles are obeyed:

- “One who is angry with his brother shall be in danger of judgment.” Matt. 5:22 ASV.
- “Whosoever shall say ‘Fool’ shall be in danger of Hell fire.” Matt. 5:22 ASV.
- “Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.” Matt. 7:19 ASV.
- “[B]ut I say unto you, that every one that looketh on a married woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart. And if thy right eye causeth thee to stumble, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not thy whole body be cast into hell.” Matt. 5:28-29 ASV.
- “[B]ut I say unto you, love your enemies, and pray for them that persecute you; that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.” Matt. 5:44-45 ASV.
- “And be not afraid of them that kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell...But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father who is in heaven...He that findeth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.” Matt. 10:28, 33, 39 ASV.
- “And behold, one came to him and said, Teacher, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life? And he said unto him,... ‘[I]f thou wouldest enter into life, keep the commandments. He saith unto him, Which? And Jesus said, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Honor thy father and mother; and, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.’” Matt. 19:16-19 ASV.
Yet, despite the clarity of Jesus’ Gospel, how many evangelicals would teach obedience to Jesus’ commands in these verses *actually* are crucial for salvation? Each verse expressly says so. Nothing in them should surprise us. Jesus said the same thing in John 8:51. Obedience to Him *should* save. He is Shiloh unto whom obedience is owed. Gen. 49:10.
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