

Dear Friend,

Every believer knows that the death of Jesus was for (in the place of) him or her. "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Peter 2:24). "Christ died for sins, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God" (1 Peter 3:18). We know that Jesus took upon himself the wrath of God that we deserve. The cross of Christ stands at the heart of the Christian faith because it is through that death that every good thing comes to the one who trusts in him.

While we think much of the cross and rejoice in it, most of us have a much more difficult time when it comes to thinking about the life that Jesus lived and how that relates to us. Most of us think about the active obedience of Jesus to the Law of God, i.e., his life, in one of two ways. We either think that he obeyed the Law so that he had no sin of his own and was thus free to die in our place because he was not under the death penalty himself (1 Peter 1: 18-19). Or we think of his life in terms of an example. Everyone who wears a W.W.J.D. (What would Jesus do?) bracelet thinks this way about his life.

However, our being declared righteous by God (justified) is not less dependent upon his obedience while he lived than it is dependent upon his obedience in dying. Romans 5: 19 says, "For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also, through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous." "The disobedience of the one man" refers to Adam's disobedience in eating the forbidden fruit. By his act of disobedience, we became sinners (Note: we sin because we are sinners. We do not become sinners by sinning.). The "obedience of the one man" is not merely a reference to Jesus' obedience in dying but also to his obedience in living according to God's Law.

Why is this important? Imagine that God has a ledger or an accounting sheet for every human being. This ledger records how much righteousness each person possesses. Every human being, apart from Christ, not only has no righteousness (Rom. 3:10) but also has an infinite debt of unrighteousness that must be paid off (Rom. 3:23, 6:23). It isn't that our ledger is blank. We have an infinite amount of unrighteousness on the debit side of the ledger. Jesus by his death paid the debt we owe due to our unrighteousness. In other words, his death brought us back to zero. But we need perfect righteousness to have fellowship with God and to live in his presence (Psalm 15). Where can we find perfect righteousness? Only Jesus possesses it because only he fully obeyed God's law. In other words, Jesus obeyed God's Law in our place.

For example, Jesus never once disobeyed or dishonored his parents. You and I (have) often disobey(ed) and dishonor(ed) our parents. God promises to punish every person who disobeys his or her parents with an eternal hell. God promises to give eternal life only to those who always obey and honor their parents. So Jesus dies to pay our death penalty but he lived in order that God might credit his obedience to his parents to each one who trusts in him. Because Jesus always obeyed the Law, everyone who is in him has been credited with his perfect righteousness.

Here's how this has been helping me. I am so aware of how short I fall when it comes to obeying God. I am often overcome with a great sense of despair as I see how little I've loved people or lived to God's glory. When my disobedience looms over me and threatens to crush me I think of how Jesus obeyed where I disobeyed. I think of how he did that for me, in my place, so that God could credit his righteousness to my account (2 Cor. 5:21). At every point where I fail to obey God's will, Jesus never failed. He did that for me and everyone else who trusts in his life and death. It causes me to rejoice in his obedience and to admire and love him more. Let me encourage you, as you read through the gospels, to look at Jesus' obedience to his Father as if he were obeying for you, because he was.

Rejoicing in his "active" obedience,