

1 "Faith and Obedience"
2 *Parochial and Plain Sermons vol. 3 sermon 6*
3 St. John Henry Newman
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5

6 "If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments." Matt. xix. 17.

7 LET a plain man read the Gospels with a serious and humble mind, and as in God's
8 presence, and I suppose he would be in no perplexity at all about the meaning of these
9 words. They are clear as the day at first reading, and the rest of our Saviour's teaching
10 does but corroborate their obvious meaning. I conceive that if such a man, after reading
11 them and the other similar passages which occur in the Gospels, were told that he had
12 not mastered the sense of them, and that in matter of fact to attempt to enter into life by
13 keeping the commandments, to attempt to keep the commandments in order to enter
14 into life, were suspicious and dangerous modes of expression, and that the use of them
15 showed an ignorance of the real spirit of Christ's doctrine, he would in despair say,
16 "Then truly Scripture is not a book for the multitude, but for those only who have
17 educated and refined understandings, so as to see things in a sense different from their
18 obvious meaning."

19 Or, again, supposing one, who disbelieved our Lord's divinity, fell in with persons who
20 did thus consider that to keep the commandments by way of entering into life, was a
21 sign of spiritual blindness in a man, not to say of pride and reprobation; do you suppose
22 there would be any possibility of their silencing him as regards his own particular
23 heresy, with Scripture proofs of the sacred truth which he denied? For can the doctrine
24 that Christ is God, be more clearly enunciated than the precept, that, to enter into life,
25 we must keep the commandments? and is it not the way to make men think that
26 Scripture has no definite meaning at all, and that each man may fairly put his own sense
27 upon it, when they see our Lord's plain directions thus explained away?

28 The occasion of this unreal interpretation of Scripture, which, in fact, does exist among
29 us to a great extent, is, that St. Paul, in some passages of his Epistles, teaches us that
30 we are accepted and saved by faith; and it is argued that, since he wrote under the
31 guidance of the promised Spirit, his is the true Gospel mode of Speech, and that the
32 language of Christ, the Eternal Word of God, must be drawn aside, however violently,
33 into that certain meaning which is assumed as the only true sense of St. Paul. *How* our
34 Divine Master's words are explained away, what ingenious refinements are used to
35 deprive us of the plain and solemn sense which they bear on their very front, it profits
36 not here to inquire; still no one, it may be presumed, can deny, that, whether rightly or
37 wrongly, they *are* turned aside in a very unexpected way, unless rather they are put out
38 of sight altogether, and forgotten, as if superseded by the Apostolic Epistles. Doubtless
39 those Epistles are inspired by the Holy Spirit: but He was sent from Christ to glorify and
40 illuminate the words of Christ. The two heavenly witnesses cannot speak diversely; faith
41 will listen to them both. Surely our duty is, neither to resist the One nor the Other; but

42 humbly to consider whether there is not some one substantial doctrine which they teach
43 in common; and that with God's blessing I will now attempt to do.

44 How are we sinners to be accepted by Almighty God? Doubtless the sacrifice of Christ
45 on the cross is the *meritorious cause* of our justification, and His Church is the *ordained*
46 *instrument* of conveying it to us. But our present question relates to another subject,
47 to *our own part* in appropriating it; and here I say Scripture makes two answers, saying
48 sometimes "Believe, and you shall be saved," and sometimes "Keep the
49 commandments, and you shall be saved." Let us consider whether these two modes of
50 speech are not reconcilable with each other.

51 What is meant by faith? it is to feel in good earnest that we are creatures of God; it is a
52 practical perception of the unseen world; it is to understand that this world is not enough
53 for our happiness, to look beyond it on towards God, to realize His presence, to wait
54 upon Him, to endeavour to learn and to do His will, and to seek our good from Him. It is
55 not a mere temporary strong act or impetuous feeling of the mind, an impression or a
56 view coming upon it, but it is a *habit*, a state of mind, lasting and consistent. To have
57 faith in God is to surrender one's-self to God, humbly to put one's interests, or to wish to
58 be allowed to put them into His hands who is the Sovereign Giver of all good.

59 Now, again, let me ask, what is obedience? it is the obvious mode, suggested by
60 nature, of a creature's conducting himself in God's sight, who fears Him as his Maker,
61 and knows that, as a sinner, he has especial cause for fearing him. Under such
62 circumstances he "will do what he can" to please Him, as the woman whom our Lord
63 commended. He will look every way to see how it is possible to approve himself to Him,
64 and will rejoice to find any service which may stand as a sort of proof that He is in
65 earnest. And he will find nothing better as an offering, or as an evidence, than
66 obedience to that Holy Law, which conscience tells him has been given us by God
67 Himself; that is, he will be diligent in doing all his duty as far as he knows it and can do
68 it.—Thus, as is evident, the two states of mind are altogether one and the same: it is
69 quite indifferent whether we say a man seeks God in faith, or say he seeks Him by
70 obedience; and whereas Almighty God has graciously declared He will receive and
71 bless all that seek Him, it is quite indifferent whether we say, He accepts those
72 who *believe*, or those who *obey*. To believe is to look beyond this world to God, and to
73 obey is to look beyond this world to God; to believe is of the heart, and to obey is of the
74 heart; to believe is not a solitary act, but a consistent habit of trust; and to obey is not a
75 solitary act, but a consistent habit of doing our duty in all things. I do not say that faith
76 and obedience do not stand for separate ideas in our minds, but they stand for nothing
77 more; they are not divided one from the other in fact. They are but one thing viewed
78 differently.

79 If it be said that a man may keep from sin and do good without thinking of God, and
80 therefore without being religious or having faith; this is true, but nothing to the purpose.
81 It is, alas! too true that men often do what is in itself right, not from the thought of God,
82 but for some purpose of this world; and all of us have our best doings sullied by the
83 intrusion of bad thoughts and motives. But all this, I say, is nothing to our present

84 purpose; for if a man does right, *not* for religion's sake but the world's sake, though he
85 happens to be doing right, that is, to perform outwardly good actions, this is in no
86 sense *obedience*, which is of the *heart*. And it was obedience, not mere outward good
87 conduct, which I said belonged to the same temper of mind as faith. And I repeat it, for
88 by obedience is meant obedience, not to the world, but to God—and habitually to obey
89 God, is to be constant in looking on to God—and to look on to Almighty God, is to have
90 faith; so that to "live by faith," or "walk by faith," (according to the Scripture phrases),
91 that is, to have a habit of faith, and to be obedient, are one and the same general
92 character of mind;—viewed as sitting at Jesus' feet, it is called *faith*; viewed as running
93 to do His will, it is called *obedience*.

94 If, again, it be said that a man may be obedient and yet proud of being so, that is,
95 obedient, without having faith, I would maintain, on the other hand, that in matter of fact
96 a man is proud, or (what is sometimes called) self-righteous, not when obedient, but in
97 proportion to his disobedience. To be proud is to rest on one's-self, which they are most
98 chargeable with who do least; but a really obedient mind is necessarily dissatisfied with
99 itself, and looks out of itself for help, from understanding the greatness of its task; in
100 other words, in proportion as a man obeys, is he driven to faith, in order to learn the
101 remedy of the imperfections of his obedience.

102 All this is clear and obvious to every thinking man; and this view of the subject was
103 surely present to the minds of the inspired writers of Scripture—for this reason, because
104 they use the two words, faith and obedience, indiscriminately, sometimes declaring we
105 shall be accepted, saved, by *believing*, sometimes by *doing our duty*. And they so
106 interchange these two conditions of God's favour, so quickly pass to and fro from the
107 one view to the other, as to show that in truth the two do not differ, except in idea. If
108 these apparently *two* conditions were merely connected, not substantially one, surely
109 the inspired writers would compare them one with the other—surely they would be
110 consistent in appropriating distinct offices to each. But, in very truth, from the beginning
111 to the end of Scripture, the one voice of inspiration consistently maintains, not an
112 uniform contrast between faith and obedience, but this *onedoctrine*, that the only way of
113 salvation open to us is the *surrender* of ourselves to our Maker in all things—supreme
114 devotion, resignation of our will, the turning with all our heart to God; and this state of
115 mind is ascribed in Scripture sometimes to the believing, sometimes to the obedient,
116 according to the particular passage; and it is no matter to which it is ascribed.

117 Now, I will cite some passages from Scripture in proof of what I have said. The Psalmist
118 says, "Lord, who shall abide in Thy tabernacle? who I shall dwell in Thy holy hill? He
119 that walketh uprightly, and worketh righteousness, and speaketh the truth in his heart."
120 "He that hath clean hands and a pure heart, who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity
121 nor sworn deceitfully." [Ps. xv. 1, 2; xxiv. 4.] Here *obedience* is described as securing a
122 man's salvation. But, in another Psalm, we read, "How great is Thy goodness which
123 Thou hast laid up for them that fear Thee; which Thou hast wrought for them that *trust in*
124 *Thee!*" [Ps. xxxi. 19; xxxiv. 12-14, 18, 22.] Here, trust or faith is the condition of God's
125 favour. Again, in other Psalms, first, "What man is he that desireth life? Keep thy tongue
126 from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile. *Depart from evil and do good, seek peace*

127 and pursue it." ... Next, it is said, "The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a *broken heart*,
128 and saveth such as be of a *contrite spirit*." Lastly, "None of them that *trust in Him* shall
129 be desolate." Here, obedience, repentance, and faith, are successively mentioned as
130 the means of obtaining God's favour; and why all of them, but because they are all
131 names for one and the same substantial character, only viewed on different sides of it,
132 that one character of mind which is pleasing and acceptable to Almighty God? Again,
133 the prophet Isaiah says, "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on
134 Thee, because he trusteth in Thee." [Isaiah xxvi. 2, 3.] Yet, in the preceding verse he
135 had proclaimed, "Open ye the gates (of the heavenly city) that the righteous nation,
136 which keepeth the Truth, may enter in." In like manner Solomon says, "By *mercy and*
137 *truth* iniquity is purged:" Daniel, that "*mercy to the poor*" is a "breaking off of sin," and
138 "an healing of error:" Nehemiah prays God to "remember him," and "not wipe out
139 his *good deeds for the House of his God*;" yet Habakkuk says, the "just shall live by
140 his *faith*." [Prov. xvi. 6. Dan. iv. 27. Neh. xiii. 14. Hab. ii. 4.]

141 What honour our Saviour put on faith I need hardly remind you. He blessed Peter's
142 confession, and, in prospect, those who, though they saw Him not on earth, as Thomas,
143 yet believe; and in His miracles of mercy, *faith* was the condition He exacted for the
144 exertion of His powers of healing and restoration. On one occasion He says, "*All*
145 *things* are possible to him that *believeth*." [Mark ix. 23.] Yet, afterwards, in His solemn
146 account of the last judgment, He tells us that it is *obedience to His will* which will then
147 receive His blessing, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these My
148 brethren, ye have done it unto Me." [Matt. xxv. 40.] Again, the Angel said to Cornelius,
149 "Thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God;" and Cornelius is
150 described as "a devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, which gave
151 much alms to the people, and prayed to God alway." [Acts x. 2.] Yet it is in the very
152 same {85} Book of Acts that we read St. Paul's words, "*Believe*, and thou shalt be
153 saved." [Acts xvi. 31.] The Epistles afford us still more striking instances of the intimate
154 association existing in the Apostle's thoughts between believing and obeying, as though
155 exhibitions of one and the same spiritual character of mind. For instance, he says
156 Abraham was accepted (not by ceremonial observances, but) by *faith*, yet St. James
157 says he was accepted by works of *obedience*. The meaning is clear, that Abraham
158 found favour in God's sight, *because he gave himself up to Him*: this is faith or
159 obedience, whichever we please to call it. No matter whether we say, Abraham was
160 favoured because his faith embraced God's *promises*, or because his obedience
161 cherished God's *commands*, for God's commands are promises, and His promises
162 commands to a heart devoted to Him; so that, as there is no substantial difference
163 between command and promise, so there is likewise none between obedience and
164 faith. Perhaps it is scarcely correct even to say that faith comes first and obedience
165 follows as an inseparable second step, and that faith, as being the first step, is
166 accepted. For not a single act of faith can be named but what has in it the nature of
167 obedience, that is, implies the making an effort and a consequent victory. What is the
168 faith which earns Baptism—the very faith which appropriates the free gift of grace—but
169 an acquiescence of the reason in the Gospel Mysteries? Even the thief upon the Cross
170 had (it would seem) to rule his reason, to struggle against sight, and to bring under pride
171 and obstinacy, {86} when he turned to Him as his Saviour, who seemed to mortal eyes

172 only his fellow-sufferer. A mere confession or prayer, which might not be really an act of
173 obedience in us, might be such in him. On the other hand, faith does not cease with the
174 first act, but continues. It works with obedience. In proportion as a man believes, so he
175 obeys; they come together, and grow together, and last through life. Neither are perfect;
176 both are on the same level of imperfection; they keep pace with each other; in
177 proportion to the imperfection of one, so is the imperfection of the other; and, as the one
178 advances, so does the other also.

179 And now I have described the temper of mind which has, in every age, been acceptable
180 to Almighty God, in its two aspects of faith and obedience. In every age "the righteous
181 shall live by faith." And it is remarkable that these words of the prophet Habakkuk, which
182 St. Paul quotes three several times, to show the identity of true religion under all
183 dispensations, do also represent it under these very two characteristics, Righteousness
184 and Faith.

185 Before closing the subject, however, it may be necessary, in a few words, to
186 explain *why* it is that, in some parts of St. Paul's Epistles, a certain stress is laid upon
187 faith over and above the other parts of a religious character, in our justification. The
188 reason seems to be as follows: the Gospel being pre-eminently a covenant of grace,
189 faith is so far of more excellence than other virtues, because it confesses this beyond all
190 others. Works of obedience witness to God's just claims upon us, not to His mercy: but
191 faith comes empty-handed, hides even its own worth, and does but point at that
192 precious scheme of redemption which God's love has devised for sinners. Hence, it is
193 the frame of mind especially suitable to us, and is said, in a special way, to justify us,
194 because it glorifies God, witnessing that He accepts those and those only, who confess
195 they are not worthy to be accepted.

196 On this account, faith has a certain prerogative of dignity under the Gospel. At the same
197 time we must never forget that the more usual mode of doctrine both with Christ and His
198 Apostles is to refer our acceptance to obedience to the commandments, not to faith;
199 and this, as it would appear, from a merciful anxiety in their teaching, lest, in
200 contemplating God's grace, we should forget our own duties.

201 To conclude. If, after all, to believe and to obey be but different characteristics of one
202 and the same state of mind, in what a most serious error are whole masses of men
203 involved at this day, who are commonly considered religious! It is undeniable that there
204 are multitudes who would avow with confidence and exultation that they put obedience
205 only in the second place in their religious scheme, as if it were rather a necessary
206 consequence of faith than requiring a direct attention for its own sake; a something
207 subordinate to it, rather than connatural and contemporaneous with it. It is certain,
208 however startling it is to reflect upon it, that numbers do not in any true sense believe
209 that they shall be judged; they believe in a coming judgment as regards the wicked, but
210 they do not believe that all men, that they themselves personally, will undergo it. I wish
211 from my heart that the persons in question could be persuaded to read Scripture with
212 their own eyes, and take it in a plain and natural way, instead of perplexing themselves
213 with their human systems, and measuring and arranging its inspired declarations by an

214 artificial rule. Are they quite sure that in the next world they will be able to remember
215 these strained interpretations in their greatest need? Then surely, while we wait for the
216 judgment, the luminous sentences of Divine Truth will come over us, first one and then
217 another, and we shall wonder how we ever misunderstood them! Then will they confront
218 us in their simplicity and entireness, and we shall understand that nothing can be added
219 to them, nothing taken away. Then at length, if not before, we shall comprehend our
220 Lord's assurance, that "He will reward every man according to his works;" St. Paul's,
221 that "we must all appear before the Judgment-seat of Christ, that every one may receive
222 the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad;"
223 St. Peter's, that "He is ordained of God to be the Judge of quick and dead;" St. James's,
224 that "a man is justified by works and not by faith only;" and St. John's, that "they are
225 blessed that do His commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may
226 enter in through the gates into the city." [Matt. xvi. 27. 2 Cor. v. 10. Acts x. 42. James ii.
227 24. Rev. xxii. 14] Whatever else may be true, these declarations, so solemnly, so
228 repeatedly made, must hold good in their plain and obvious sense, and may not be
229 infringed or superseded. So many testimonies combined are "an anchor of the soul,
230 sure and steadfast," and if they mean something else than what they all say, what part
231 of Scripture can we dare trust in future as a guide and consolation?

232 "O Lord, Thy Word endureth for ever in heaven!" but the expositions of men are written
233 on the seashore, and are blotted out before the evening.