

Does God Require Perfect Obedience? A Study of James 2

Why does one sin make a person guilty before God? This article explains why Scripture requires perfect obedience and why only the righteousness of Christ can save us.

Why God requires perfection

For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it. 10 For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. 11 So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. James 2:11-12 (ESV)

At first glance, it seems unreasonable to condemn a person for an entire spectrum of sins because he committed just one. In a class on justification, this question arose on the grounds that it seems unnecessarily severe.

James must establish the following principle before we see the need for a complete salvation rather than a partial one: Partial obedience is disobedience. God could require nothing less without compromising his holiness. Perfect obedience is therefore the only ground on which God has ever accepted anyone.

Example: If we were to present a decorative vase to a king, we would want it to be perfect. No cracks, no missing parts. It would not matter to what degree it may be broken. Any imperfection would be unacceptable.

James is not saying a person is guilty of adultery just because he committed a serious sin of another nature. He simply perceives God's moral law as a comprehensive unit that defines a state of righteousness. In this sense, the moral law is more than a list of directives like the Ten Commandments. It is a description of the moral perfection God requires.

This is why James calls it “the law of liberty” (V.25). Not only does he recognize moral perfection as indispensable, but he also sees holiness as the only grounds for divine blessing and true freedom. The moral law is a description of that perfection.

*But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.
James 1:25*

The need for imputed righteousness

Right there is revealed the drastic need for the imputed righteousness of Christ, which is the essential point of our justification. If our obedience was the cause of acceptance before God, it could only be if that obedience was perfect. Our acceptance must be based on the obedience of Christ since our own is imperfect.

Suppose God gave a man fifty things to accomplish, and the man completed forty-eight of them. Then God assigns to another a hundred tasks, and the man does ninety-two of them. Which of the two has the highest percentage of obedience?

Answer: Neither, because both scored zero. Imperfect obedience is disobedience. Both need forgiveness and the righteousness of Christ imputed to them.

Another way to put it is that Christ did not come to supplement the righteousness of anyone. He came to replace it entirely with his own because his alone is perfect. If the vase is broken, it must not be repaired but replaced with a perfect one.

Many verses, along with sound theological logic, reveal that God requires perfection.

You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. Matt 5:48

This text cannot mean anything apart from the need for perfect obedience.

Our debt

We read in 1 John 3:4 that sin is the transgression of the law. If the command to be perfect is a law, then we continuously transgress by being imperfect.

...since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." 1 Pet 1:16

So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty." Luke 17:10

God owes us nothing in return for perfect obedience because the creature owes obedience to the creator anyway.

This text would be meaningless if partial obedience were enough.

The obedience of Christ

There would be no need to provide a perfect righteousness of Christ under the law if an imperfect obedience were acceptable. The obedience of another imperfect man, though better than us, would suffice.

If partial obedience were acceptable, this would raise the question, "How much obedience is required?" If this question is unanswerable, then assurance of salvation is impossible.

However, the scriptures teach that assurance of salvation is both desirable and possible. (1 John 5:13) It could only be possible if a perfect standing is available to us.

The sacrifice of Christ would be unnecessary if God accepted only partial obedience.

For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous. Rom 5:19

We need to understand the connection between grace and the legal righteousness imputed to us. We see this in Romans 5:17.

...those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness...

If grace is the cause of the free gift of righteousness, then our degree of personal performance could not be the reason for our acceptance with God. The perfect obedience of Christ, in life and death, is the only grounds for acceptance. This is justification.

Conclusion

- God requires perfect obedience
- Perfect obedience is necessary because we have a moral obligation to God as his creatures.
- We are unable to render perfect obedience to God.
- The perfect obedience of Christ under the law is attributed to the believer through faith in him alone.