

# A LONG OBEDIENCE

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## Louder Than Words (Part 7) | Galatians 6:1-10

Do you ever **“grow weary of doing good”**? Have some of you been investing yourself in something or someone for so long, with such little apparent result, that you’ve grown exhausted and begun to think to yourself: “Why shouldn’t I just give up?” Maybe it’s a key relationship you’ve plowed yourself into. It could be the one you have or are trying to have with your spouse, your child, a parent, friend, or workmate. You give and give, talk and talk, but the love, or growth, or change of character you hope for never seems to come. Or maybe you’ve met that sort of weariness at work or in some volunteer activity. It seems like no amount of diligence on your part quite wins you the recognition, results, or reward you feel should be due. You wonder why you’re bothering to put in all these hours when nothing, or so very little, seems to come from your efforts.

As if natural frustration were not enough to make us question the worth of continuing to give it our best, all around us are messages that life should not be so. Television presents us with a world where other people’s problems are usually solved in an hour, and are only occasionally even “to be continued.” Society sells us packages of instant everything -- from popcorn to press-on nails. And then we’re reminded that if something isn’t working we’re not to worry because it’s disposable anyway, and a new and improved replacement is almost certainly available over the counter or, at worst, behind the scenes.

In light of this influence, is it any wonder then, that when the going gets tough, even the tough think of just going. Frustration turns to irritation... irritation turns to anger... anger to depression... depression to apathy... and apathy to an attitude that says: **“Why go on? Why not spend my energies elsewhere? Why not give up?”** After all, did not Jesus himself once say that there might come times when the most appropriate thing in the world would be to **“shake the dust”** from our feet and move on to more fruitful ground? He certainly did. But I don’t think he ever envisioned that the exceptional situation he cited would become so much the rule.

I believe that the heart of God must break at how quickly now the champions of truth and justice our society needs, throw in the towel when results are slow... at how often partners in marriage or business sever the relationship and move on... at how swiftly people leave companies or organizations that need their reforming efforts. I sincerely doubt that Jesus is pleased by the way that some parents too early abandon their efforts to discipline a child’s behavior... or by the rapidity by which those who attempt to make a significant change in their health or habits surrender to the old ways. Too many volunteers and church members drift away from the commitments they had made. International allies abandon each other when the going gets rough. Friends far too easily give up on friends when the other proves all too human. You and I are suffering through a pandemic of **Fidelity fatigue**.

It was, apparently, not dissimilar in the Apostle Paul's time. Weariness with the disciplines of discipleship had become a crisis of chronic proportions that threatened the very survival of Christianity in the several churches he'd founded during his first missionary journey through the Roman province of Galatia. Impatient with what increasingly seemed like the all-too-nebulous promises of a life based on faith alone, many of the Galatian Christians had abandoned that way in favor of the quick-results lifestyle advocated by a group of people, Paul called simply, "the Judaizers." These Judaizers had begun a movement emphasizing the importance of following the laws of the Pharisees -- an elaborate code of do's and don't -- which, if adhered to strictly, promised people the quick satisfaction of seeing visible results for their labors. Circumcision and special dietary plans were just a few of the concrete self-help programs which the Judaizers held forth as routines which guaranteed as immediate and visible assurance that one's efforts were not for naught.

It was to this community that Paul penned the words that are the focus of this morning's Scripture lesson. Paul passionately sought to call the Galatians back to that distinctive way of looking at human endeavors that made Christ's way so different from that of the Pharisees. What was that perspective? And how does it apply to your life and mine? I think I have a clue -- one that came to me in a conversation I had with a man named Lamberton many years ago.

I knew Jack Lamberton when he was in his seventies. He and his two sons managed a sheep and dairy farm on a patch of land on the shores of Lough Swilly in the northwest county of Ireland called Donegal. The Lamberton farm is a stretch of spectacularly picturesque property which served as a favorite retreat place for me during the time between college and seminary when I served a church in troubled Belfast. Weather and economics being what they are in Ireland, farming is far from an easy business. It always amazed me that Jack Lamberton and his family still worked that farm, when years ago they had amassed more than enough resources to move to the city or leave the country as so many others had.

One day, while out fixing some broken fence with Jack, I got up the nerve to ask why he had never left. He replied, "Because, Danny, my family has always done what I'm doing." I said, "But that doesn't change the fact that you could do something else, Jack. There have got to be easier more predictable ways of life for a man your age; why not do something else?" "You're not hearing me right, Danny," he said. "The Lord and I are partners out here. My family has been farming this same patch of land for 400 years. I was born to do this work, Danny; and I'll do it till I die."

Jack Lamberton is gone from this earth now. He kept his promise. He faithfully fulfilled his calling all the way to the end. It seems to me that Jack understood something very deep about life and discipleship -- something which I believe the Apostle Paul sought to convey when he penned these words: **Let us not grow weary of doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up** – or as another translation renders it – **if we do not lose heart**. In other words, if you want the richest rewards of life, be prepared to work and wait for them. There's no "get rich

quick" scheme when it comes to developing a great spiritual life or a great reputation or a great family or a great organization or even a great golf game. These harvests are reaped only by those who live with that quality of Christian character, which the Bible calls "faithfulness."

Do you know what "faithfulness" is? Let me give you a simple definition: **Faithfulness is a commitment to obedience over expedience.** We grow a spirit of faithfulness within us as we choose to make the principles by which we live more important than the products we immediately turn out. We are living with faithfulness when we become much more concerned about obediently planting the seeds of God's kingdom in whatever person we meet or whatever row we happen to be walking than worrying over the pace at which those seeds grow. All of us will experience some weariness in our marriages, our parenting, our workplace, church, wherever. When we're tired, it's only natural to start thinking: This commitment isn't EXPEDIENT. It's not working. Or it's working too slowly. But God says: No matter the apparent results today, remain OBEDIENT to my calling. Keep doing the right things. For **"at the proper time – which is to say GOD's time – you WILL reap a harvest if you do not give up."**

What sort of harvest can we rightfully expect as we remain faithful? Well, the Apostle Paul tells us that there is, first of all, the harvest of eternal life. Elsewhere in his letter to the Galatians, Paul emphasizes that those who are faithful to the purposes of God will certainly reap rewards in heaven that will make even the most painful hoeing of this time seem well worth the investment.

For those who choose to focus on the the here and now there is also the harvest of personal integrity. It is the blessing of knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt that no matter how the external world around you shakes or decays, you are internally sound. You have walked your talk. You have kept your promises. You have done the right thing. You have fulfilled what you were born to do -- what the Christian family at its best has always done – you have mirrored in your life the absolute consistency of care and commitment that God has shown to us. We could use more people of integrity like that in our time.

And there is, finally, the harvest of human impact which the faithful will surely cause here, but may not get to see till they're viewing life from higher ground. I am reminded in this regard of the story Tim Hansel tells of Clarence Jordan, a man of remarkable ability, with doctorates in both agriculture and Biblical languages, and the potential to do almost anything he wanted with his life. Clarence Jordan chose to serve the poor. During the 1940's he founded a farm in Americus, Georgia, that became a haven of hope for poor whites and blacks struggling to survive in the wake of the Depression.

As you might imagine, an institution like Koinonia Farm didn't go over very big in the Deep South of the 1940's. Over the course of fourteen years the folks in his neighborhood showed them just how much they liked his vision -- boycotting him, slashing the tires of Farm members when they came to town, and threatening worse. Finally, in 1954, the Ku Klux Klan decided they'd had enough of Clarence Jordan and

determined to get rid of him once and for all. In the middle of the night they came -- many of them church members; they came hooded to the Farm, set ablaze every one of its buildings, riddled Jordan's home with bullets, and chased off every family on the farm, save one.

The next day, a newspaper reporter came out from town to see what remained of the Farm. Walking through smoldering rubble and scorched land, he found Clarence in the field, hoeing and planting. "I heard the awful news," he called to Clarence, "and I came out to do a story on the tragedy of your farm closing." Recognizing the voice of the reporter as one of the hooded figures who'd been there the night before, Clarence just kept on hoeing and planting. Determined to get a rise out of this man who ought by now to be packing his bags, the reporter continued prodding and poking, till in exasperation he could contain himself no longer. In an arrogant voice that betrayed his identity, the reporter blurted out, "Well, Dr. Jordan, you got two of them PhD's and you've put fourteen years into this Farm, and there's nothing left of it all. Tell me, Doc', just how successful do you think you've been in the end?!"

Finally, Clarence stopped hoeing. Straightening his back, he turned toward the reporter, and with a gaze that could've melted ice, he said quietly but firmly, "I think we've been about as successful as the Cross, sir. You see, I don't think you really understand us. What we are about around here is not success; it's faithfulness. We're staying. Good day."<sup>1</sup>

Have you ever heard of a little organization called Habitat for Humanity? Since its inception, Habitat has helped 59 million people to build or improve a place to call home. Habitat for Humanity is just one of the outgrowths – the harvests, as it were – of the ministry of Koinonia Farm and the Christian vision of one disciple who refused to give up... who kept choosing obedience over expedience... when the work became wearying and the results were, admittedly, not what he'd hoped for. Whether it is in farming, or marriage, or parenthood, or our ministry and mission anywhere else, one philosopher summed up the truth this way: **The essential thing in heaven and earth is that there should be a long obedience in the same direction; there thereby results, and has always resulted, in something which makes life worth living.**<sup>2</sup>

When I think of long obedience, I can't help but think of Mike Cofield, a Christian youthworker in North Carolina, who spent hour upon hour answering the cynical questions of a teenager, bitter about the losses in his life and contemptuous of the Christian faith in a God who really cares. How little practical reason that youthworker ever had to expect his efforts to bear any fruit. And yet how I wish he could be here today to see that same individual, no longer a teenager, standing on this platform, amazed by the harvest I've now gotten to be part of over 40 years of my own hoeing and planting. And how I thank God for inspiring that youthworker's faithfulness.

Where did Clarence Jordan, Mike Cofield, Becky Stanley, Mama Maggie Gobran, or so many other impactful people we could name, get the strength to persevere in doing

good when the results seem so dubious and the weariness sets in? Where might you? And then I picture a lone figure walking day after day through clamoring crowds; healing and teaching those who hardly appreciated the gift they'd been given; standing silent before a stacked jury; clenching his teeth at the lash of the whip; gazing from a cross at a jeering world gone mad. I know how easy it would have been for him to give it all up; to figure the human race was not worth his time, and that the harvest would never come. And I fall on my knees in awe before for Christ's long obedience to his Father's gracious purpose. I ask God's power to face the challenges of this week with a long obedience too. And as you go forth into the field this day, I wonder, will you?

Let us pray...

Dear Lord, you know as noone else could know, those particular fields of our lives where we have grown tired of working. It may just be that you are calling us to make a change – to shake the dust from our feet and move on. But it may also be that the change you are calling for is in our character. If that be the case, strengthen the resolve of each one of us to serve without expecting immediate reward; to work without demanding obvious results; to plant without needing to reap in our sense of “the proper time.” Give us that spirit of faithfulness we meet in Jesus Christ, through whose power, in due season, the Harvest always comes. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Story paraphrased from Tim Hansel's Holy Sweat.

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche – as quoted in Eugene Peterson's book, A Long Obedience.