

## **Jesus' Obedience: Was it Active or Passive? A Question from Romans 5:18-19**

Dave Harvey in his book *Rescuing Ambition* writes about the importance of Christ's obedience, noting that it is transferred to us and thus God sees Christ's obedience when he looks at us. But what is meant by "Christ's obedience?" While Harvey agrees that it includes his death on the cross, he spends the preponderance of his time talking about Christ's obedience during his life. He notes that this is referred to as the active obedience of Christ, which brings about Christ's substitutionary life. The death of Christ removes our sin penalty; the obedience of Christ during his life (including his death) gives righteousness. The theological underpinnings for Harvey's position is Ro 5:19. He argues that we need Christ's righteousness transferred to us in order for a holy God to accept us; this righteousness is Christ's obedient life and death. This is the "one man's obedience" in Ro 5:19.<sup>1</sup>

When talking about the obedience of Christ, scholars find it helpful to differentiate between Christ's active and passive obedience. "The active obedience of Jesus refers to his submission to and active conformity to the law of Moses...The passive obedience of Jesus Christ is something else. It refers to his submission to the cross."<sup>2</sup>

Which obedience was Paul referring to in Ro 5:19 when he wrote, "through the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous" (HCSB)? Some scholars believe it refers to the active obedience of Christ:

- As seen above, Harvey emphasized the former; his primary argument is that believers need lots of righteousness.
- Piper believes that it primarily refers to the entire life and ministry of Jesus; his argument is that it is impossible to identify one single act as Jesus' one act of righteousness. Even his death on the cross was really a series of events.<sup>3</sup>
- Grudem cites Ro 5:19 as evidence of Christ's active obedience, but doesn't exegete it.<sup>4</sup>
- Lloyd-Jones believes it refers to both, but doesn't really explain why.<sup>5</sup>

Other scholars believe it refers to the passive obedience of Christ:

- Boice believes that Christ's active obedience qualified him to perform the act of passive obedience, his death, and thus atone for sin and credit righteousness to believers.<sup>6</sup>
- MacArthur briefly mentions that obedience refers to Christ's suffering and death, but doesn't explain why.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dave Harvey, *Rescuing Ambition*, 50-55.

<sup>2</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Romans 5-8*, 605.

<sup>3</sup> John Piper, <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/adam-christ-and-justification-part-4>.

<sup>4</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 570.

<sup>5</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans 5*, 274-275.

<sup>6</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Romans 5-8*, 605.

<sup>7</sup> John MacArthur, *Romans 1-8*, 307.

- Moo allows that the text might refer to Christ's active obedience, but it seems rather to refer to his passive obedience because of the parallel to Adam's one act.<sup>8</sup>
- Walvoord explicitly states that the obedience refers to Christ's sacrificial death, noting the parallel between verses 18 and 19.<sup>9</sup>

Still others don't bring up the issue at all in their commentary on this text.<sup>10</sup>

I believe Ro 5:18-19 only refers to Christ's passive obedience, his death upon the cross. My arguments are based upon the grammar of these verses. My first argument is that "one righteous act" in 18 refers to just that, one righteous act. The Greek noun is defined as "a just deed in conformity to God's standard"<sup>11</sup> and as "an act which is in accordance with what God requires."<sup>12</sup> It is not defined as a set of right actions or a lifestyle of right actions. It is further modified by the numeric adjective one, which limits the number of acts to only one. Thus, the one righteous action can only refer to one action, Christ's death on the cross.

My second argument is from the parallel contrast between Adam and Christ in 18. As Adam had one trespass, so Christ had one righteous act. Adam's trespass was not a set of unrighteous actions or a lifestyle of unrighteous actions, but his one sin in eating the fruit in the garden. Thus, by parallel, the one righteous act of Christ can only refer to one action, Christ's death on the cross.

My third argument is the parallelism between verses 18 and 19. As many scholars note, verse 19 restates verse 18.<sup>13</sup> This literary device was common in Hebrew writing, especially Hebrew poetry, where a second verse elaborated upon the first by restating it in slightly different manner. Condemnation in 18 equates to being made sinners in 19; life-giving justification equates to being made righteous in 19. The one trespass of 18 equates to the one man's disobedience in 19, and the one righteous act of 18 equates to one man's obedience in 19. Thus the one man's obedience can only refer to one action, Christ's death on the cross.<sup>14</sup>

Does this invalidate Harvey's chapter? No, not really. All agree that Christ was righteous, and that his righteousness is transferred to us; it's just that this righteousness comes from his passive obedience, his death on the cross, not his active obedience. As Php 2:8 says, "He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross."

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<sup>8</sup> Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 344.

<sup>9</sup> John Walvoord, *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 2:460.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Mounce, *Romans (NAC)*, 145; D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary*, 5:12-21.

<sup>11</sup> James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains*, DBLG 1468.

<sup>12</sup> Johannes Louw, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 1:743.

<sup>13</sup> Particularly Piper, Moo, and Walvoord.

<sup>14</sup> One objection to this argument might be Paul's choice of a connecting conjunction. "For" (*gar*) is often a marker of reason (William Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 189); as such, the second clause gives the reason why the first clause is true and could be translated as because. While this is true, this is not the only meaning of this Greek word; it can also be a marker of clarification (Arndt), further explaining the previous clause.