I. Introduction

Once there was a Protestant minister who arranged for his church service to be broadcast live on a local cable channel. The highlight of the show was his sermon, and he wanted to make a very good impression. His subject was the will of God, and all went well until the very end. When he was signaled that there were just 15 seconds left, and that he should bring his remarks to a close, the minister knew he had to make a powerful statement—but under the pressure of the moment, he said the exact opposite of what he intended. The words that came out of his mouth were “The most important thing is to live in loving disobedience to the will of God.” Realizing what he had just said, the minister felt terrible; he had meant to say “loving obedience,” but the show was over, and nothing could be done.

When he went home, the minister’s wife, who had been watching the show, tried to console him. “There, there, dear, it’s all right; you were just speaking out of your personal experience.” That really didn’t make the minister feel any better—but in thinking about it, he realized that, in a round-about way, his wife was right. Many times he had gone ahead and done things his way, without bothering to seek God’s guidance or to ask himself if that really was what the Lord wanted (Sunday Sermon Treasury, Vol. II, #678). This is an easy trap for any of us to fall into: assuming our will is automatically God’s will, or acting as if the fact that we’re basically good and loving persons means we don’t have to pay much attention to God’s commands. This, of course, is not true. Following Jesus requires both love and obedience.

II. Development

As we see in today’s readings, true faith consists of both loving God and neighbor, and obeying God and legitimate authority. In last week’s 1st Reading from the Acts of the Apostles, seven men were chosen and ordained as deacons by the apostles. Today we see that one of the seven, Philip, made converts among the Samaritans. However, Philip didn’t have—or did he claim to have—authority to act on his own apart from the Church leaders. When the apostles in Jerusalem heard of his success, Peter and John came to confirm it—and Philip and his converts were subject to the two apostles. In the same way, Jesus desires us to live loving lives—but also to be subject to legitimate Church authority. St. Peter tells us in the 2nd Reading to venerate the Lord in our hearts—that is, to live out our faith wholeheartedly, letting it touch every aspect of our lives. If others ask about this faith, we are to speak gently and respectfully; just as Jesus loved and respected everyone, so must we. Love and obedience go together; in the Gospel Our Lord very clearly says, “Whoever has My commandments and observes them is the one who loves Me.” If we obey Jesus without love, we are little more than slaves, and our faith is just a matter of going through the motions. On the other hand, if we try to love Jesus in a sentimental way while ignoring His commandments, we’re fooling ourselves; our so-called faith is merely a cheap attempt to
feel good without making any commitments. That leads nowhere and will not bring us closer to God. Humble obedience and true love go hand-in-hand.

III. Conclusion

A man once had a dream in which he saw an angel carrying a flaming torch in one hand and a bucket of water in the other. He asked what these were for, and the angel explained, “With this torch I’m going to burn down the mansions of Heaven, and with the water I’m going to extinguish the fires of hell. Then we’ll see who really loves God.” When the man awakened and thought about the dream, he realized what the angel was saying: many people obey God only because they expect a reward for doing so, or because they fear they’ll be punished if they don’t (Link, Illustrated Sunday Homilies, Year A, Series I, p. 41). The only good reason for obeying God, however, is love.

Love and obedience go together; it’s a mistake to separate the two—but sometimes people try to do so. For instance, almost every priest has heard the question, “Father, if I do this certain action, is it a mortal sin, or only a venial sin?”—as if being only a lesser sin somehow makes it all right. That question makes no sense; if we really love God, we won’t want to do anything that might offend Him, whether in a big way or a little way.

We mustn’t be legalistic, as in thinking, “By being here for most of the Mass, I’m obeying the Third Commandment—so it’s all right for me to leave church early, even though I don’t really need to or have a good reason to do so.” No, it isn’t all right—it’s disrespectful to God, and an unloving thing to do. At the other extreme, there are those who say, “I’m a good person, and I try to love God—so I don’t need to go to church at all or watch Mass on TV—I can pray on my own,” or “God knows that I don’t deliberately hurt anyone, so I can ignore the Church’s moral teachings if they’re too hard or inconvenient.” That attitude is also wrong. God gave us commandments to follow, and being “nice persons” doesn’t give us the right to ignore them.

We must try to do what’s right for the right reason: not out of fear of punishment, nor out of a desire for reward, but out of love for God and neighbor. Being Jesus’ followers means loving Him and obeying Him, and He promises eternal life to those who live in loving obedience to His Father’s will.