

St. Thomas Aquinas

The Summa Theologica

(Benziger Bros. edition, 1947)

Translated by

Fathers of the English Dominican Province

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OF OBEDIENCE (SIX ARTICLES)

We must now consider obedience, under which head there are six points of inquiry:

- [\(1\)](#) Whether one man is bound to obey another?
 - [\(2\)](#) Whether obedience is a special virtue?
 - [\(3\)](#) Of its comparison with other virtues;
 - [\(4\)](#) Whether God must be obeyed in all things?
 - [\(5\)](#) Whether subjects are bound to obey their superiors in all things?
 - [\(6\)](#) Whether the faithful are bound to obey the secular power?
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Whether one man is bound to obey another?

Objection 1: It seems that one man is not bound to obey another. For nothing should be done contrary to the divine ordinance. Now God has so ordered that man is ruled by his own counsel, according to Ecclus. 15:14, "God made man from the beginning, and left him in the hand of his own counsel." Therefore one man is not bound to obey another.

Objection 2: Further, if one man were bound to obey another, he would have to look upon the will of the person commanding him, as being his rule of conduct. Now God's will alone, which

Objection 3: Further, the more gratuitous the service the more is it acceptable. Now what a man does out of duty is not gratuitous. Therefore if a man were bound in duty to obey others in doing good deeds, for this very reason his good deeds would be rendered less acceptable through being done out of obedience. Therefore one man is not bound to obey another.

On the contrary, It is prescribed ([Heb. 13:17](#)): "Obey your prelates and be subject to them."

I answer that, Just as the actions of natural things proceed from natural powers, so do human actions proceed from the human will. In natural things it behooved the higher to move the lower to their actions by the excellence of the natural power bestowed on them by God: and so in human affairs also the higher must move the lower by their will in virtue of a divinely established authority. Now to move by reason and will is to command. Wherefore just as in virtue of the divinely established natural order the lower natural things need to be subject to the movement of the higher, so too in human affairs, in virtue of the order of natural and divine law, inferiors are bound to obey their superiors.

Reply to Objection 1: God left man in the hand of his own counsel, not as though it were lawful to him to do whatever he will, but because, unlike irrational creatures, he is not compelled by natural necessity to do what he ought to do, but is left the free choice proceeding from his own counsel. And just as he has to proceed on his own counsel in doing other things, so too has he in the point of obeying his superiors. For Gregory says (*Moral.* xxxv), "When we humbly give way to another's voice, we overcome ourselves in our own hearts."

Reply to Objection 2: The will of God is the first rule whereby all rational wills are regulated: and to this rule one will approaches more than another, according to a divinely appointed order. Hence the will of the one man who issues a command may be as a second rule to the will of this other man who obeys him.

Reply to Objection 3: A thing may be deemed gratuitous in two ways. In one way on the part of the deed itself, because, to wit, one is not bound to do it; in another way, on the part of the doer, because he does it of his own free will. Now a deed is rendered virtuous, praiseworthy and meritorious, chiefly according as it proceeds from the will. Wherefore although obedience be a duty, if one obey with a prompt will, one's merit is not for that reason diminished, especially before God, Who sees not only the outward deed, but also the inward will.

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Whether obedience is a special virtue?

Objection 1: It seems that obedience is not a special virtue. For disobedience is contrary to obedience. But disobedience is a general sin, because Ambrose says (*De Parad.* viii) that "sin is to disobey the divine law." Therefore obedience is not a special virtue.

[Donate bitcoin](#). St. Isidore [e-book library/forum](#) » [aquinas](#) » [english](#) » [summa](#) » [SS](#) » [SS104.html](#) It is not a theological virtue, since it is not comprised under faith, hope or charity. Nor is it a moral virtue, since it does not hold the mean between excess and deficiency, for the more obedient one is the more is one praised. Therefore obedience is not a special virtue.

Objection 3: Further, Gregory says (Moral. xxxv) that "obedience is the more meritorious and praiseworthy, the less it holds its own." But every special virtue is the more to be praised the more it holds its own, since virtue requires a man to exercise his will and choice, as stated in Ethic. ii, 4. Therefore obedience is not a special virtue.

Objection 4: Further, virtues differ in species according to their objects. Now the object of obedience would seem to be the command of a superior, of which, apparently, there are as many kinds as there are degrees of superiority. Therefore obedience is a general virtue, comprising many special virtues.

On the contrary, obedience is reckoned by some to be a part of justice, as stated above ([Question \[80\]](#)).

I answer that, A special virtue is assigned to all good deeds that have a special reason of praise: for it belongs properly to virtue to render a deed good. Now obedience to a superior is due in accordance with the divinely established order of things, as shown above ([Article \[1\]](#)), and therefore it is a good, since good consists in mode, species and order, as Augustine states (De Natura Boni iii) [*Cf. FP, [Question \[5\]](#), [Article \[5\]](#)]. Again, this act has a special aspect of praiseworthiness by reason of its object. For while subjects have many obligations towards their superiors, this one, that they are bound to obey their commands, stands out as special among the rest. Wherefore obedience is a special virtue, and its specific object is a command tacit or express, because the superior's will, however it become known, is a tacit precept, and a man's obedience seems to be all the more prompt, forasmuch as by obeying he forestalls the express command as soon as he understands his superior's will.

Reply to Objection 1: Nothing prevents the one same material object from admitting two special aspects to which two special virtues correspond: thus a soldier, by defending his king's fortress, fulfils both an act of fortitude, by facing the danger of death for a good end, and an act of justice, by rendering due service to his lord. Accordingly the aspect of precept, which obedience considers, occurs in acts of all virtues, but not in all acts of virtue, since not all acts of virtue are a matter of precept, as stated above ([FS, Question \[96\]](#), [Article \[3\]](#)). Moreover, certain things are sometimes a matter of precept, and pertain to no other virtue, such things for instance as are not evil except because they are forbidden. Wherefore, if obedience be taken in its proper sense, as considering formally and intentionally the aspect of precept, it will be a special virtue, and disobedience a special sin: because in this way it is requisite for obedience that one perform an act of justice or of some other virtue with the intention of fulfilling a precept; and for disobedience that one treat the precept with actual contempt. On the other hand, if obedience be taken in a wide sense for the performance of any action that may be a matter of precept, and disobedience for the omission of that action through any intention whatever, then obedience will be a general virtue, and disobedience a general sin.

Reply to Objection 2: Obedience is not a theological virtue, for its direct object is not God, but the precept of any superior, whether expressed or inferred, namely, a simple word of the superior, indicating his will, and which the obedient subject obeys promptly, according to Titus 3:1, "Admonish them to be subject to princes, and to obey at a word," etc.

excess and deficiency. Excess thereof is measured in respect, not of quantity, but of other circumstances, in so far as a man obeys either whom he ought not, or in matters wherein he ought not to obey, as we have stated above regarding religion ([Question \[92\]](#), [Article \[2\]](#)). We may also reply that as in justice, excess is in the person who retains another's property, and deficiency in the person who does not receive his due, according to the Philosopher (Ethic. v, 4), so too obedience observes the mean between excess on the part of him who fails to pay due obedience to his superior, since he exceeds in fulfilling his own will, and deficiency on the part of the superior, who does not receive obedience. Wherefore in this way obedience will be a mean between two forms of wickedness, as was stated above concerning justice ([Question \[58\]](#), [Article \[10\]](#)).

Reply to Objection 3: Obedience, like every virtue requires the will to be prompt towards its proper object, but not towards that which is repugnant to it. Now the proper object of obedience is a precept, and this proceeds from another's will. Wherefore obedience make a man's will prompt in fulfilling the will of another, the maker, namely, of the precept. If that which is prescribed to him is willed by him for its own sake apart from its being prescribed, as happens in agreeable matters, he tends towards it at once by his own will and seems to comply, not on account of the precept, but on account of his own will. But if that which is prescribed is nowise willed for its own sake, but, considered in itself, repugnant to his own will, as happens in disagreeable matters, then it is quite evident that it is not fulfilled except on account of the precept. Hence Gregory says (Moral. xxxv) that "obedience perishes or diminishes when it holds its own in agreeable matters," because, to wit, one's own will seems to tend principally, not to the accomplishment of the precept, but to the fulfilment of one's own desire; but that "it increases in disagreeable or difficult matters," because there one's own will tends to nothing beside the precept. Yet this must be understood as regards outward appearances: for, on the other hand, according to the judgment of God, Who searches the heart, it may happen that even in agreeable matters obedience, while holding its own, is nonetheless praiseworthy, provided the will of him that obeys tend no less devotedly [**Cf. Question [82], Article [2]*] to the fulfilment of the precept.

Reply to Objection 4: Reverence regards directly the person that excels: wherefore it admits a various species according to the various aspects of excellence. Obedience, on the other hand, regards the precept of the person that excels, and therefore admits of only one aspect. And since obedience is due to a person's precept on account of reverence to him, it follows that obedience to a man is of one species, though the causes from which it proceeds differ specifically.

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Whether obedience is the greatest of the virtues?

Objection 1: It seems that obedience is the greatest of the virtues. For it is written ([1 Kgs. 15:22](#)): "Obedience is better than sacrifices." Now the offering of sacrifices belongs to religion,

Objection 2: Further, Gregory says (Moral. xxxv) that "obedience is the only virtue that ingrafts virtues in the soul and protects them when ingrafted." Now the cause is greater than the effect. Therefore obedience is greater than all the virtues.

Objection 3: Further, Gregory says (Moral. xxxv) that "evil should never be done out of obedience: yet sometimes for the sake of obedience we should lay aside the good we are doing." Now one does not lay aside a thing except for something better. Therefore obedience, for whose sake the good of other virtues is set aside, is better than other virtues.

On the contrary, obedience deserves praise because it proceeds from charity: for Gregory says (Moral. xxxv) that "obedience should be practiced, not out of servile fear, but from a sense of charity, not through fear of punishment, but through love of justice." Therefore charity is a greater virtue than obedience.

I answer that, Just as sin consists in man contemning God and adhering to mutable things, so the merit of a virtuous act consists in man contemning created goods and adhering to God as his end. Now the end is greater than that which is directed to the end. Therefore if a man contemns created goods in order that he may adhere to God, his virtue derives greater praise from his adhering to God than from his contemning earthly things. And so those, namely the theological, virtues whereby he adheres to God in Himself, are greater than the moral virtues, whereby he holds in contempt some earthly thing in order to adhere to God.

Among the moral virtues, the greater the thing which a man contemns that he may adhere to God, the greater the virtue. Now there are three kinds of human goods that man may contemn for God's sake. The lowest of these are external goods, the goods of the body take the middle place, and the highest are the goods of the soul; and among these the chief, in a way, is the will, in so far as, by his will, man makes use of all other goods. Therefore, properly speaking, the virtue of obedience, whereby we contemn our own will for God's sake, is more praiseworthy than the other moral virtues, which contemn other goods for the sake of God.

Hence Gregory says (Moral. xxxv) that "obedience is rightly preferred to sacrifices, because by sacrifices another's body is slain whereas by obedience we slay our own will." Wherefore even any other acts of virtue are meritorious before God through being performed out of obedience to God's will. For were one to suffer even martyrdom, or to give all one's goods to the poor, unless one directed these things to the fulfilment of the divine will, which pertains directly to obedience, they could not be meritorious: as neither would they be if they were done without charity, which cannot exist apart from obedience. For it is written ([1 Jn. 2:4,5](#)): "He who saith that he knoweth God, and keepeth not His commandments, is a liar... but he that keepeth His word, in him in very deed the charity of God is perfected": and this because friends have the same likes and dislikes.

Reply to Objection 1: Obedience proceeds from reverence, which pays worship and honor to a superior, and in this respect it is contained under different virtues, although considered in itself, as regarding the aspect of precept, it is one special virtue. Accordingly, in so far as it proceeds from reverence for a superior, it is contained, in a way, under observance; while in so far as it proceeds from reverence for one's parents, it is contained under piety; and in so far as it proceeds from reverence for God, it comes under religion, and pertains to devotion, which is the principal act of religion. Wherefore from this point of view it is more praiseworthy to obey God than to offer sacrifice, as well as because, "in a sacrifice we slay another's body,

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case in which Samuel spoke, it would have been better for Saul to obey God than to offer in sacrifice the fat animals of the Amalekites against the commandment of God.

Reply to Objection 2: All acts of virtue, in so far as they come under a precept, belong to obedience. Wherefore according as acts of virtue act causally or dispositively towards their generation and preservation, obedience is said to ingraft and protect all virtues. And yet it does not follow that obedience takes precedence of all virtues absolutely, for two reasons. First, because though an act of virtue come under a precept, one may nevertheless perform that act of virtue without considering the aspect of precept. Consequently, if there be any virtue, whose object is naturally prior to the precept, that virtue is said to be naturally prior to obedience. Such a virtue is faith, whereby we come to know the sublime nature of divine authority, by reason of which the power to command is competent to God. Secondly, because infusion of grace and virtues may precede, even in point of time, all virtuous acts: and in this way obedience is not prior to all virtues, neither in point of time nor by nature.

Reply to Objection 3: There are two kinds of good. There is that to which we are bound of necessity, for instance to love God, and so forth: and by no means may such a good be set aside on account of obedience. But there is another good to which man is not bound of necessity, and this good we ought sometimes to set aside for the sake of obedience to which we are bound of necessity, since we ought not to do good by falling into sin. Yet as Gregory remarks (Moral. xxxv), "he who forbids his subjects any single good, must needs allow them many others, lest the souls of those who obey perish utterly from starvation, through being deprived of every good." Thus the loss of one good may be compensated by obedience and other goods.

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Whether God ought to be obeyed in all things?

Objection 1: It seems that God need not be obeyed in all things. For it is written ([Mt. 9:30,31](#)) that our Lord after healing the two blind men commanded them, saying: "See that no man know this. But they going out spread His fame abroad in all that country." Yet they are not blamed for so doing. Therefore it seems that we are not bound to obey God in all things.

Objection 2: Further, no one is bound to do anything contrary to virtue. Now we find that God commanded certain things contrary to virtue: thus He commanded Abraham to slay his innocent son ([Gn. 22](#)); and the Jews to steal the property of the Egyptians ([Ex. 11](#)), which things are contrary to justice; and Hosea to take to himself a woman who was an adulteress (Hosea 3), and this is contrary to chastity. Therefore God is not to be obeyed in all things.

Objection 3: Further, whoever obeys God conforms his will to the divine will even as to the thing willed. But we are not bound in all things to conform our will to the divine will as to the thing willed, as stated above ([FS, Question \[19\]](#), [Article \[10\]](#)). Therefore man is not bound to obey God in all things.

I answer that, As stated above ([Article \[1\]](#)), he who obeys is moved by the command of the person he obeys, just as natural things are moved by their motive causes. Now just a God is the first mover of all things that are moved naturally, so too is He the first mover of all wills, as shown above ([FS, Question \[9\]](#), [Article \[6\]](#)). Therefore just as all natural things are subject to the divine motion by a natural necessity so too all wills, by a kind of necessity of justice, are bound to obey the divine command.

Reply to Objection 1: Our Lord in telling the blind men to conceal the miracle had no intention of binding them with the force of a divine precept, but, as Gregory says (Moral. xix), "gave an example to His servants who follow Him that they might wish to hide their virtue and yet that it should be proclaimed against their will, in order that others might profit by their example."

Reply to Objection 2: Even as God does nothing contrary to nature (since "the nature of a thing is what God does therein," according to a gloss on Rm. 11), and yet does certain things contrary to the wonted course of nature; so to God can command nothing contrary to virtue since virtue and rectitude of human will consist chiefly in conformity with God's will and obedience to His command, although it be contrary to the wonted mode of virtue. Accordingly, then, the command given to Abraham to slay his innocent son was not contrary to justice, since God is the author of life and death. Nor again was it contrary to justice that He commanded the Jews to take things belonging to the Egyptians, because all things are His, and He gives them to whom He will. Nor was it contrary to chastity that Hosea was commanded to take an adulteress, because God Himself is the ordainer of human generation, and the right manner of intercourse with woman is that which He appoints. Hence it is evident that the persons aforesaid did not sin, either by obeying God or by willing to obey Him.

Reply to Objection 3: Though man is not always bound to will what God wills, yet he is always bound to will what God wills him to will. This comes to man's knowledge chiefly through God's command, wherefore man is bound to obey God's commands in all things.

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Whether subjects are bound to obey their superiors in all things?

Objection 1: It seems that subjects are bound to obey their superiors in all things. For the Apostle says (Col. 3:20): "Children, obey your parents in all things," and farther on (Col. 3:22): "Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh." Therefore in like manner other subjects are bound to obey their superiors in all things.

Objection 2: Further, superiors stand between God and their subjects, according to Dt. 5:5, "I was the mediator and stood between the Lord and you at that time, to show you His words." Now there is no going from extreme to extreme, except through that which stands between.

[Donate bitcoin](#). St. Isidore [e-book library/forum](#) » [aquinas](#) » [english](#) » [summa](#) » [SS](#) » [SS104.html](#) the Apostle says ([Gal. 4:14](#)): "You... received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus" and ([1 Thess. 2:13](#)): "When you had received of us the word of the hearing of God, you received it, not as the word of men, but, as it is indeed, the word of God." Therefore as man is bound to obey God in all things, so is he bound to obey his superiors.

Objection 3: Further, just as religious in making their profession take vows of chastity and poverty, so do they also vow obedience. Now a religious is bound to observe chastity and poverty in all things. Therefore he is also bound to obey in all things.

On the contrary, It is written ([Acts 5:29](#)): "We ought to obey God rather than men." Now sometimes the things commanded by a superior are against God. Therefore superiors are not to be obeyed in all things.

I answer that, As stated above ([Articles \[1\],4](#)), he who obeys is moved at the bidding of the person who commands him, by a certain necessity of justice, even as a natural thing is moved through the power of its mover by a natural necessity. That a natural thing be not moved by its mover, may happen in two ways. First, on account of a hindrance arising from the stronger power of some other mover; thus wood is not burnt by fire if a stronger force of water intervene. Secondly, through lack of order in the movable with regard to its mover, since, though it is subject to the latter's action in one respect, yet it is not subject thereto in every respect. Thus, a humor is sometimes subject to the action of heat, as regards being heated, but not as regards being dried up or consumed. In like manner there are two reasons, for which a subject may not be bound to obey his superior in all things. First on account of the command of a higher power. For as a gloss says on Rm. 13:2, "They that resist [Vulg.: 'He that resisteth'] the power, resist the ordinance of God" (cf. St. Augustine, De Verb. Dom. viii). "If a commissioner issue an order, are you to comply, if it is contrary to the bidding of the proconsul? Again if the proconsul command one thing, and the emperor another, will you hesitate, to disregard the former and serve the latter? Therefore if the emperor commands one thing and God another, you must disregard the former and obey God." Secondly, a subject is not bound to obey his superior if the latter command him to do something wherein he is not subject to him. For Seneca says (De Beneficiis iii): "It is wrong to suppose that slavery falls upon the whole man: for the better part of him is excepted." His body is subjected and assigned to his master but his soul is his own. Consequently in matters touching the internal movement of the will man is not bound to obey his fellow-man, but God alone.

Nevertheless man is bound to obey his fellow-man in things that have to be done externally by means of the body: and yet, since by nature all men are equal, he is not bound to obey another man in matters touching the nature of the body, for instance in those relating to the support of his body or the begetting of his children. Wherefore servants are not bound to obey their masters, nor children their parents, in the question of contracting marriage or of remaining in the state of virginity or the like. But in matters concerning the disposal of actions and human affairs, a subject is bound to obey his superior within the sphere of his authority; for instance a soldier must obey his general in matters relating to war, a servant his master in matters touching the execution of the duties of his service, a son his father in matters relating to the conduct of his life and the care of the household; and so forth.

Reply to Objection 1: When the Apostle says "in all things," he refers to matters within the sphere of a father's or master's authority.

Reply to Objection 2: Man is subject to God simply as regards all things, both internal and external, wherefore he is bound to obey Him in all things. On the other hand, inferiors are not

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respect of which the superior stands between God and his subjects, whereas in respect of other matters the subject is immediately under God, by Whom he is taught either by the natural or by the written law.

Reply to Objection 3: Religious profess obedience as to the regular mode of life, in respect of which they are subject to their superiors: wherefore they are bound to obey in those matters only which may belong to the regular mode of life, and this obedience suffices for salvation. If they be willing to obey even in other matters, this will belong to the superabundance of perfection; provided, however, such things be not contrary to God or to the rule they profess, for obedience in this case would be unlawful.

Accordingly we may distinguish a threefold obedience; one, sufficient for salvation, and consisting in obeying when one is bound to obey: secondly, perfect obedience, which obeys in all things lawful: thirdly, indiscreet obedience, which obeys even in matters unlawful.

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Whether Christians are bound to obey the secular powers?

Objection 1: It seems that Christians are not bound to obey the secular power. For a gloss on Mt. 17:25, "Then the children are free," says: "If in every kingdom the children of the king who holds sway over that kingdom are free, then the children of that King, under Whose sway are all kingdoms, should be free in every kingdom." Now Christians, by their faith in Christ, are made children of God, according to Jn. 1:12: "He gave them power to be made the sons of God, to them that believe in His name." Therefore they are not bound to obey the secular power.

Objection 2: Further, it is written ([Rm. 7:4](#)): "You... are become dead to the law by the body of Christ," and the law mentioned here is the divine law of the Old Testament. Now human law whereby men are subject to the secular power is of less account than the divine law of the Old Testament. Much more, therefore, since they have become members of Christ's body, are men freed from the law of subjection, whereby they were under the power of secular princes.

Objection 3: Further, men are not bound to obey robbers, who oppress them with violence. Now, Augustine says (De Civ. Dei iv): "Without justice, what else is a kingdom but a huge robbery?" Since therefore the authority of secular princes is frequently exercised with injustice, or owes its origin to some unjust usurpation, it seems that Christians ought not to obey secular princes.

On the contrary, It is written ([Titus 3:1](#)): "Admonish them to be subject to princes and powers," and ([1 Pt. 2:13,14](#)): "Be ye subject... to every human creature for God's sake: whether it be to the king as excelling, or to governors as sent by him."

I answer that, Faith in Christ is the origin and cause of justice, according to Rm. 3:22, "The justice of God by faith of Jesus Christ:" wherefore faith in Christ does not void the order of

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else the stability of human affairs would cease. Hence faith in Christ does not excuse the faithful from the obligation of obeying secular princes.

Reply to Objection 1: As stated above ([Article \[5\]](#)), subjection whereby one man is bound to another regards the body; not the soul, which retains its liberty. Now, in this state of life we are freed by the grace of Christ from defects of the soul, but not from defects of the body, as the Apostle declares by saying of himself ([Rm. 7:23](#)) that in his mind he served the law of God, but in his flesh the law of sin. Wherefore those that are made children of God by grace are free from the spiritual bondage of sin, but not from the bodily bondage, whereby they are held bound to earthly masters, as a gloss observes on 1 Tim. 6:1, "Whosoever are servants under the yoke," etc.

Reply to Objection 2: The Old Law was a figure of the New Testament, and therefore it had to cease on the advent of truth. And the comparison with human law does not stand because thereby one man is subject to another. Yet man is bound by divine law to obey his fellow-man.

Reply to Objection 3: Man is bound to obey secular princes in so far as this is required by order of justice. Wherefore if the prince's authority is not just but usurped, or if he commands what is unjust, his subjects are not bound to obey him, except perhaps accidentally, in order to avoid scandal or danger.