

# The Reader's Digest

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## Obedience

by

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**T**HAT lawlessness is rampant needs no long demonstration. Consider that in this country in the last 35 years we have lynched over 3,000 people, shooting them, hanging them, burning them, and sometimes distributing pieces of their charred bones for souvenirs. Imagine oneself in Tokio admonishing a Japanese about the cruel mistakes of Japan in Korea. "Yes, you are right," he answers. "We all have mistakes to regret. By the way, I have forgotten how many people you lynched in your own Christian country last year." Or consider our criminal record. In 1916—not an unusual year—Chicago with its two and a half millions had 20 more murders than the whole of Great Britain and Wales with their 38,000,000 people; New York had exactly six times as many culpable homicides as London. In 1818 there were in the United States 7,667 culpable homicides and 85 executions.

We have heard a great deal about the breakdown of the church, but no breakdown so threatens the foundations of social order as the collapse of our law. As ex-President Taft says, "it is a disgrace to our civilization," and "the prevalence of crime, which here is greatly in excess of that in European countries, is due largely to the failure of the law and its administration to bring criminals to justice."

The movies, our most popular recreation, are a weather vane showing the veritable debauch of public sentimentality expressing itself in silly exaltation of crime. The judge, the policeman come off badly in the plot. But the attractive murderers, the high-minded robbers, the noble crooks, the gracious courtesans!

Our most obvious lawlessness is the breaking of the prohibition laws. One may hate the liquor traffic, and yet may feel that had we gone on for a decade more with our local-option campaigns we should have been further on towards real temperance than we are now. Nevertheless prohibition is on the statute books, and no man can convincingly maintain that the majority of the people did not want it there. To say that is to picture our senators and representatives as men of such ideal virtues that in the face of a majority, at the risk of losing their seats, they insisted on passing the prohibitory laws. One who believes that must have the innocence

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of a child. The truth is that many votes were cast for prohibition, not because Congressmen believed in it themselves, but because they well knew that a majority of the people did.

The shame of the present situation is that the law is not being chiefly outraged by poor people; it is mainly the men of means, prestige and influence, who ought to know better. Obviously there has been a breakdown of authority in the state and the rise of a rampant and selfish individualism. On the courthouse in Worcester, Mass., appears the inscription: "Obedience to Law is Liberty." That truth is the foundation of our democratic experiment. No greater idea ever dawned on the political consciousness of the race—that not the king but the whole body of the people should make the laws, which then the whole body of the people would gladly obey. That idea, not a wild and wayward individualism, is the true basis of democracy, and the success of it demands loyalty, self-denying devotion and obedience.

We need to recognize that lawlessness is not simply a matter of physical violence. It is worth our while to listen to the excuse which the perpetrators of massacres in connection with strikes offer, even if we do not easily sympathize with it. "Millions of us," they say, "have nothing to fight with except our fists. The men above us do not need to fight with their fists because they have so many other instruments of warfare — money, influence, soldiers, lawyers, corporations that can control and evade law." Probably the most perilous lawlessness in this country now is in high circles. There was an old type of lawyer whose glory was that he honored the law. To see that it was respected and obeyed was his meat and drink. That kind of lawyer we still have with us; but, like weeds in an untended garden, another kind of lawyer has sprung up. His business is not to interpret the law but to evade it; not to tell us what it means but to make it mean something else; to show us the bypaths by which the highroad of legal honor may be escaped.

During the war, the Government could ask of us nothing too hard. We felt a heavy sense of social obligation. The nation never needed that devotion more than she needs it now. We are skirting dangerous precipices. We need a new baptism of social obligation, disciplined living, loyalty to the common good, obedience to law.

Our present lawlessness springs not simply from a breakdown of authority in the state, but from a breakdown of authority in the family. As another has put it, there is just as much authority in the family as there ever was, only the children exercise it. The family life of older generations often had in it elements which we are fortunate to have escaped. For example, a Quaker lady wrote in 1803:

"I have discovered in Timothy a worldly and evil spirit, having heard him imitate the unprofitable forms of the light folk of this town—even saying

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'Mr. Jones' to old Friend Thomas Jones, and though only 16 years old, he boldly and audaciously directed the woman who maketh his garments to alter their shape. These are bad signs, but I hope thee will prune away such sprouts of sin. . . . Rebecca was at meeting last First Day, with a red ribbon in her hat; this caused great excitement. Friends will deal with her, and try to uproot such evil spirit. Everybody is sorry on account of her Aunt Tabitha, who will not let even a red rose grow in her garden."

We would not care to go back to such "good old times." Yet in the best of these old homes there was a kind of spiritual authority which we shall lose at our peril. One morning my father, leaving the house, said to my mother: "You tell Harry that he can cut the grass today—if he feels like it." Then, after a few steps, he added: "Tell him that he would better feel like it." The first part of those directions has had altogether too exclusive control of the training of the younger generation. They could do their duty if they felt like it. It will be a sad day for our families and for the nation if we cannot recover that second emphasis: They would better feel like it!

Lawlessness has its source not simply in the breakdown of authority in state and family, but within the individual as well. Dwight L. Moody made famous his definition of character as "what a man is in the dark." What a man is in the dark, however, depends altogether on whether he has something inside his life whose right to command him he acknowledges and whose commands he obeys. Some men we trust absolutely; to know such men is life's most reassuring experience. As Emerson says: "The world is upheld by the veracity of good men; they make the earth wholesome." And always in such men, as the secret of their reliability, we find an inward sense of honor, sense of duty, sense of God, to which they would subscribe themselves, as our fathers signed their letters: "I am, sir, your most obedient servant."

Obedience is the core of character. The most tragic sight in the world is young men and women who do not discover that until it is too late. They begin with unspoiled characters and by lawless living they throw their chance away. They fail to see that it is far easier to keep character when you have it than to recover it when it is lost. In talk about character, there ought to be more emphasis on the sins that never have been committed, the impurities that have not yet stained the life, and on the greatness or the opportunity which belongs to a fine youth on that account. Sin has blinding power, and the grip of its habits is tremendous. Sin has blinding power, and eyes once perverted by it do not easily regain the grace of seeing straight. Sin has multiplying power, and each sin spawns other sins like fish in the sea until it seems impossible to be rid of them. Sin has hardening power; it callouses the soul until the spiritual touch which once



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would have roused us leaves us dead. To get out of sin, when once you are in it, is a terrific progress. So many sermons have been preached on the glory of the Prodigal's return; so few upon the glory of his chance before he went away.

Religion has an indispensable function to perform in this building of obedient character. We have made God very amiable, very approachable, even affectionately maternal, and we have often forgotten that whatever else God means, he represents moral order and proposes to be obeyed. He is no friend of undisciplined living.

The secret of all our material progress has lain in our discovery that the physical universe is a law-abiding system. And all high character depends on obedience to moral law, to duty. It is just here that we often miss the substance of Jesus' character. We are touched by his gentleness, pity, compassion, but the core of his character lies underneath. "I came down from heaven not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me." At the center of the Master's life was a tremendous obedience to the sovereign God.

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