

## Wonder

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Title: **“Asceticism and the Military Environment”** Author: **Fr. Sean Levine**

Obedience. This is not a favored concept in our culture. Obedience connotes weakness, lack of self-motivation, and subservience in a civilization that idolizes self-sufficiency and personal freedom, and to suggest that salvation hinges upon obedience, rather than initiative and individual, personal pathways to God will often lead one into ridicule and even violent opposition. People do not like to obey, and they especially do not like the idea of obeying other people. Far more palatable in today’s American culture is the idea of getting to God however one “feel’s led by the Spirit,” or however one chooses from a vast array of options; like assembling a personal spiritual meal at a heavenly cafeteria. But rendering obedience to others in order to grow in grace and live the Gospel? No thanks.

In spite of all this, the venerable fathers and mothers of the Orthodox Church stand out as teachers of the efficacy of cutting off one’s own will through radical obedience. The fact that obedience comprises one of the key spiritual disciplines comes through in the writings and the personal histories of many ancient and contemporary monastics, and when I reflect on this in a military context, I immediately recognize that “obedience” and “discipline” appear together in most people’s minds when they think about the military life-style. The idea that so many men and women can simply sign over their freedoms and their lives to the government and allow people they do not know and have never seen to govern where they live, when they leave, what they wear, how they speak, when they wake up, how often they exercise, what they are to eat/drink, etc. seems foreign to so many folks living in the civilian world—even most Christians. With a certain sense of confused admiration, many civilians simply cannot fathom living under that level of self-surrender.

The soldiers with whom I work understand the discipline of obedience and the ascetic struggle to deny oneself for the sake of obedience to authority. They live every day under the command of others, and they have vowed to obey those commands—come what may. Although no soldier is obligated to obey an illegal order, all lawful orders are to be obeyed at once, without reservation, even in the face of personal danger. For this reason, soldiers get it. They grasp at once the Gospel’s call to the ascetic task of cutting off one’s own will for the sake of a cause larger than them. It may be just as difficult for soldiers to act upon this realization as it is for civilians, but it seems to me that they have a less difficult time understanding what obedience to the Gospel really entails. And let me hasten to add that these men and women are far from weak or subservient. Their strength comes through in their obedience. For a soldier, the idea of denying self daily, picking up one’s own cross, and following the example of Christ, who laid down his life for his friends, makes sense—it is what the soldier does every day.

Granted, not every soldier sees this connection. But those looking for authentic Christianity are suspicious of easy grace; they know better than that. The obedience they practice every day sets them up for obedience to the Gospel, and it is for this reason that St. Paul can make use of soldiering as an analogy for life in Christ.

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**Discussion Questions:**

Who are you obedient too? Do you take orders from anyone? Do you like being in obedience to people? Is it a key attribute of a Christian life?

Does obedience make us weak or strong? How is Christ obedient and what are the results of Him obeying the Father's will?

How is military service an analogy for a life lived in and for Christ?