

QUESTION 105

Disobedience

Next we have to consider disobedience (*inobedientia*). And on this topic there are two questions: (1) Is disobedience a mortal sin? (2) Is disobedience the most serious of sins?

Article 1

Is disobedience a mortal sin?

It seems that disobedience is not a mortal sin:

Objection 1: As is clear from the definition from Ambrose cited above (q. 104, a. 2), every sin is an act of disobedience. Therefore, if every act of disobedience were a mortal sin, then every sin would be a mortal sin.

Objection 2: In *Moralia* 31 Gregory says that disobedience arises from vainglory (*inobedientia oritur ex inani gloria*). But vainglory is not a mortal sin. Therefore, neither is disobedience.

Objection 3: One is said to be disobedient when he does not fulfill the command of his superior. But many times superiors issue multiple commands that are such that it is hardly ever or never possible to fulfill all of them. Therefore, if disobedience were a mortal sin, it would follow that a man could not avoid committing a mortal sin—which is absurd. Therefore, disobedience is not a mortal sin.

But contrary to this: In Romans 1:30 and 2 Timothy 3:2, not obeying one's parents is counted among other mortal sins.

I respond: As was explained above (q. 24, a. 12 and q. 35, a. 3, and *ST* 1-2, q. 72, a. 5), a mortal sin is a sin that is contrary to charity, through which one's spiritual life exists. Now it is God and neighbor who are loved by charity. But as was explained above (q. 24, a. 12 and q. 104, a. 3), charity with respect to God requires that one obey His commandments. And so disobedience with respect to God's commands is a mortal sin in the sense that it is contrary to love of God (*quasi divinae dilectioni contrarium*).

Now it is included among God's precepts that one should obey his superiors. And so the disobedience by which one disobeys his superior's commands is likewise a mortal sin, in the sense that it is contrary to love of God—this according to Romans 13:2 (“He who resists those powers resists God's ordination”). In addition, it is contrary to love of neighbor, insofar as it withholds from a neighbor who is one's superior the obedience that is owed to him.

Reply to objection 1: The definition in question from Ambrose is given for mortal sin, which has the complete character of a sin. For a venial sin is not an instance of disobedience, since it lies *outside of* the command and is not *contrary to* the command.

Nor is every mortal sin an instance of disobedience properly speaking and in its own right (*proprie et per se loquendo*); instead, a sin is an instance of disobedience only when the individual *disdains* the command, since moral acts have their species from their end.

Reply to objection 2: Vainglory desires the manifestation of some excellence, and since it seems that a man's not being subject to the commands of another involves some sort of excellence, disobedience arises from vainglory. However, nothing prevents a mortal sin from arising from a venial sin, since a venial sin disposes one toward a mortal sin.

Reply to objection 3: No one is obligated to do the impossible. And so if a superior issues so many commands that his subject is unable to fulfill them, he is excused from sin. And so superiors should abstain from issuing a multiplicity of commands.

Article 2

Is disobedience the most serious of sins?

It seems that disobedience is the most serious of sins:

Objection 1: For 1 Kings 15:23 says, "... and not wanting to acquiesce is like the crime of idolatry." But as was established above (q. 94, a. 3), idolatry is the most serious sin. Therefore, disobedience is the most serious sin.

Objection 2: As was explained above (q. 14, a. 2), a sin that is said to be against the Holy Spirit is one through which the obstacles to sinning are removed. But through disobedience a man disdains a command that would especially keep the man from sinning. Therefore, disobedience is a sin against the Holy Spirit. And so it is the most serious sin.

Objection 3: In Romans 5:19 the Apostle says, "By the disobedience of one man, many were made sinners." But a cause seems to be more important than its effect. Therefore, disobedience seems to be a more serious sin than the other sins that are caused by it.

But contrary to this: It is more serious to disdain the one who gives the command than to disdain the command. But there are sins contrary to the very person of the one giving the command, as is clear in the case of blasphemy and homicide. Therefore, disobedience is not the most serious sin.

I respond: Not all instances of disobedience are equally sinful (*non omnis inobedientia est aequale peccatum*). For there are two ways in which one instance of disobedience is worse than another:

In one way, *from the side of the one who gives the command*. For even though a man ought to take great care to obey every superior, nonetheless, it is more fitting for a man to obey a higher power than to obey a lower power. An indication of this is that the command of a lower power is set aside if it is contrary to the command of a higher power. Hence, it follows that to the extent that the one who gives the command is higher, it is more serious to disobey him. And so disobeying God is more serious than disobeying a man.

Second, *from the side of what is commanded (ex parte praeceptorum)*. For one who issues commands does not equally desire everything he commands to be fulfilled, since everyone wills the end more, along with what is closer to the end. And so disobedience is more serious to the extent that the command that the individual neglects lies closer to the intention of the one who gives the command. And in the case of God's commands, it is clear that to the extent to which the command is given for something better, the individual's disobedience is more serious. For since God's will is in its own right directed toward the good, the better something is, the more God wants it to be realized. Hence, one who disobeys a precept having to do with love of God sins more seriously than one who disobeys a precept having to do with love of neighbor. By contrast, a man's will is not always directed toward what is better. And so when we are obligated by the mere command of a man, [disobedience] is a more serious sin not because a greater good is being neglected, but because what is neglected lies closer to the intention of the one giving the command.

So, then, one must correlate the diverse degrees of disobedience with diverse grades of sinfulness. For instance, an act of disobedience by which God's command is disdained is for that very reason a more serious sin of disobedience than a sin by which one sins against a man, as long as the disobedience against God in the latter sin is left out of consideration (I say this because whoever sins against his neighbor also acts against a command of God's). However, if he were to disdain God's command in a more important matter, it would be a still more serious sin. By contrast, an act of disobedience by which a man's command is disdained is less serious than an act of disobedience by which the man giving the command is himself disdained, since reverence for the command is supposed to proceed from reverence for the one giving the command. Similarly, a sin that directly involves contempt of God, e.g., blasphemy or something of this sort, is more serious—even if we mentally separate the disobedience from the

sin—than a sin by which God’s command alone is disdained.

Reply to objection 1: This comparison made by Samuel points to a *similarity* and not an *identity* (*illa comparatio Samuelis non est aequalitatis sed similitudinis*). For disobedience abounds in contempt for God in the way that idolatry does, though idolatry involves more contempt.

Reply to objection 2: Not every instance of disobedience is a sin against the Holy Spirit, but only those instances that include obstinance. For it is not the case that contempt of just anything at all which impedes sin constitutes a sin against the Holy Spirit. Otherwise, contempt for any good at all would be a sin against the Holy Spirit, since a man can be impeded from sinning by any sort of good. Instead, what makes for a sin against the Holy Spirit is contempt for those goods that lead *directly* to *repentance* and *the forgiveness of sins*.

Reply to objection 3: The first sin of the first parents, from which sin emanated to everyone, was not disobedience insofar as disobedience is a *specific* sin but instead was pride, from which the man proceeded to disobey. Hence, in the cited passage the Apostle seems to be taking disobedience in the sense in which disobedience is related *in general* to every sin (cf. q. 104, a. 2).