



Internet Porn, Magic Rings, and the Secret of Obedience

By Luke Gilkerson, *Internet Community Manager, Covenant Eyes*

The Internet is a marvelous invention that has many incredible benefits . . . and unfortunately many pitfalls. Web surfers can hide behind their computer screens and interact with the world in ways they would never think to do in real life. This feeling of invincibility has led to numerous problems online: from cyberbullying to predators, and from cybersex to pornography.

It all reminds me of the ancient myth of Gyges' Ring.

Gyges' Ring

Gyges of Lydia is a humble shepherd under the king's service. One day an earthquake opens up the mouth of a cave, and Gyges ventures inside. There he finds a tomb, and in the tomb a golden ring. Gyges takes the ring and soon discovers that by adjusting the clasp on the ring while wearing it, he will become invisible. Using his new power, he enters the palace of the king, seduces the queen, and together they assassinate the king and take over the kingdom.

Plato recounts this same story in *The Republic*, putting the story in the mouth of the character Glaucon. Glaucon's point is that even the most apparently moral person would use the cloak of invisibility to achieve selfish ends. Essentially, the idea is that deep down everyone is an egoist, motivated only by self-interest. The only reason people appear as good is because of social constraints that are upon them: the fear of being caught, the fear of appearing selfish, and the avoidance of punishment.

The Internet is a modern day Gyges' ring: it makes people invisible and anonymous, and thus holds out a formidable temptation for everyone to live as they please.

Would you use the ring?

Glaucon's argument is attractive because it is not much of an argument at all, but more of a thought experiment that is meant to have the reader ask, "What would I do if I had the ring?" The idea is that as long as all or most people say they would use the ring for selfish gain, Glaucon's point is made. Taken as a statement of fact, it is easy to accept: people are selfish.

While this may be a clever story to show how people are, it is not a good argument for how people should be. This would be categorized by philosophers as an *ad populum* fallacy: attempting to convince people of something by arousing the feeling and enthusiasms of the multitude. While it may be true that all or most people are selfish, it does not mean that we ought to be that way.

Enlightened Self-Interest

What's remarkable about the Bible is that it does not tell us that self-interest is wrong, but that our natural self-interest is misinformed and blinded. *Gyges problem isn't that he is hungry for power and pleasure, but that he simply doesn't know where real power and pleasure are*

found. Similarly, our problem is not that we want satisfaction, but that we believe that Internet porn is the fountain where our thirsts will be quenched.

CS Lewis said it best in his sermon, *The Weight of Glory*:

“The New Testament has lots to say about self-denial, but not about self-denial as an end in itself. We are told to deny ourselves and to take up our crosses in order that we may follow Christ; and nearly every description of what we shall ultimately find if we do so contains an appeal to desire. . . . Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

God offers us the ultimate pleasure of Himself, and when we see Him as truly beautiful, glorious, and pleasurable, we then see the mask ripped from the false pleasures of this world.

Take the Gyges’ Ring Test

When I discovered the world of Internet pornography, I was an easy target. I gave in and developed an addiction that was one of the hardest things I’ve ever experienced. But the addiction also showed me something . . .

The Internet became my own Gyges’ Ring: it revealed who I really was and what I really wanted. It revealed to me that what really fueled my moral engine. It showed me I was not a man after God’s heart as much as I was a man looking for cheap thrills, held back only by social norms and religious sentiments. Something in me needed to radically change.

Performance vs. Obedience

We need to be motivated to obedience, not to performance. These two are radically different activities, though they may look similar on the surface. Performance is when someone plays a part because it’s in the script, the written code, or the rules. Obedience is when someone submits and responds to another person.

There are many true followers of Christ who have developed the habit of performance: their lives are more about mimicking Christian social norms than they are about knowing God. Many Christians also suffer from acute double-mindedness: they sincerely seek to know God and yet simultaneously continue their pattern of outward performance. They feel the pull of the Spirit drawing them to Christ, but they also feel the pull of their sinful heart wanting to keep their “Christian” activities and convictions on the surface, in the realm of performance.

These Christians are exposed for what they are when Gyges’ ring is offered to them, when they have the opportunity to sin in secret.

Performance is merely another form of pride and control: we want to display Christian convictions so long as we don’t “sell out” to Jesus and become undying in our devotion to the living Christ. We enjoy the social benefits of a commitment to Christ, but we tell the Spirit, “*This far and no farther. Deep down I want my life to be mine, not Yours.*” This sin needs to be acknowledged, confessed to God and to our trusted Christian community, and hated as the evil it is.

That being said, real transformation will not happen simply because we have noticed that we are performing and not obeying. That acknowledgment is just the beginning, just the preparation for the real work that God will do.

Obedience is a Response

For much of my Christian life I spent a good deal of my time trying to muster up the passion to obey God. I read about the lives of great saints, both in the Bible and in church history, and tried to mimic their passion and fervor. I measured my spirituality by how much positive, obedient emotion I could drum up within my heart. This, I believe, was motivated by godly devotion, but was nonetheless a wrong direction.

Obedience is a response. Even the English word “obey” comes from a Latin word for “listen.” Obedience is not something I should try to motivate by looking within myself, but something that I do as a response of looking to God, of listening to Him.

Our initial response to hearing the gospel should set the tone for the whole of our Christian lives, for a life of obedience, not of performance. When we first heard the Good News about Jesus, we understood that the offer of salvation was entirely based on something wonderful that God did, not something we do. With conviction of our sin and a delight in God’s love and power displayed in Jesus, we responded with faith. Thus, the rest of our lives are to follow this pattern: God reveals Himself; we respond.

Obedience is a response to a person, to the incredible God who has revealed Himself in Christ. For some of us, the word “obedience” is tainted in our minds, denoting a concept of cold or stoic action; but it is anything but all of that. *Obedience is bringing a smile to the face of God*, fully pleasing Him by growing in intimacy and knowledge of Him, patiently enduring in faith amidst the pressures of the world, and joyfully giving thanks at all times to the One who has delivered us from the domain of darkness (Colossians 1:9-14).

This is more than performance: this is the integrity of passion.

The Practical Bit

So what are we to do if we desire a life of obedience? *We must not try to have a passion for God as much as we simply gaze upon God Himself and let that vision give us passion.*

We must be as Moses on Mt. Sinai: we must have a hunger to see God’s glory (Exodus 33:18). We must thirst for the same vision of God that filled the mind of Isaiah in the temple (Isaiah 6:1-8). We must have the hunger of the Greeks who came to Jerusalem for Passover: “We want to see Jesus” (John 12:21). We must have the desire and discipline of Mary of Bethany, who only desired to sit at the feet of Jesus and hear from Him (Luke 10:39). We must behold the mysteries of who He is, especially as He is revealed in His incarnation, the cross, the resurrection, and His second coming.

We cannot obey whom we do not know: only in knowing the living Christ are we changed. Then we are freed, not to live a life of performance, which is what the book of Hebrews calls “dead works” (9:14); instead, we are freed to serve the living God. No longer will we need to be motivated by simply performing to Christian social norms, but we can be free to live out a life of love and devotion to the One who died for us and rose again (2 Corinthians 5:15), whether in public or in secret. Our Father, who sees in secret, is eager to reward the one who earnestly seeks Him (Matthew 6:4,6,18; Hebrews 11:6).

Look on Him whom you have pierced (Zechariah 12:10), look at Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2), and gaze upon the crucified Christ, now risen, and search the mystery of His justice and love.