

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Lessons from history: Ready to obey

Hello, I would like to read a few verses from the Old Testament to you before talking about our subject "Ready to obey".

"Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed [give attention] than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He also has rejected you from being king", 1 Samuel 15:22-23.

This week's talk is the second in the series of talks titled "Lessons from history". What can we learn about obedience from the actions of God's earthly people Israel? This is for me a truly difficult subject. Obedience or disobedience is very black and white. In a sense, we cannot be partially obedient. We can be quite loving, quite kind or quite pleasant, but we cannot really be quite obedient. Either we are obedient or we are disobedient! This was the problem with the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17), which the people of Israel were required to obey. Maybe they managed to keep five out of the ten, maybe they managed nine out of ten, but unless they were obedient to all the commandments all the time they had broken the law!

The matter of obedience or disobedience goes back to the very beginning. What was the heinous, dreadful, dastardly sin that caused Adam and Eve to be banished from the Garden of Eden? (see Genesis 3:24). That alienated mankind from God, that introduced sin, disease and death into the creation that God had previously called "very good" (Genesis 1:31) to wreak such havoc upon all of mankind. Surely it must have been a truly appalling act of unparalleled wickedness. So what did happen? God had made every provision for the blessing and well-being of mankind. It was truly a garden of delights, a paradise on earth. There was but one restriction, and the restriction was also for the good of Adam and Eve. "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die", Genesis 2:16-17.

You know what happened next. One simple commandment, one act of disobedience (Genesis 3:1-7); this is the act that has had such terrible consequences for every member of the human race. And indeed all of Creation. Disobedience! "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners", Romans 5:19. It is one thing for me to disobey you; it is another thing altogether for me to disobey God. To disregard what God has said. To act as if I know better than God. To place no value upon the fact that God has commanded something that should be done or should not be done.

As we look at a few examples from the Old Testament, the lesson we will learn is that total obedience was required from God's people in the past and no less is required of us today. In so many instances God gave instructions that had to be followed to the letter. It was not that God gave general directions and the Israelites were left to fill in the details.

First though, let's go back to the story of Adam and Eve to see how readily, how easily, we disobey. Adam and Eve had every reason to trust God. They lived in a perfect world; everything was good and pleasant; they didn't have to work to live, and the two of them could enjoy the beauty of creation with nothing whatsoever to spoil or mar it. They also had the wonderful experience of walking and talking with God in Eden (Genesis 3:8). Adam and Eve had experienced God's incomparable goodness towards them and yet they still disobeyed the one restriction He had placed upon them for their own good (Genesis 2:16-17). Why? We are no different to them; we all have within us a nature that rebels against God, a nature that instinctively disobeys Him. We are not robots, automatons that are programmed to blindly follow. No, God has given us a will, the freedom to choose. To choose to love God, obey God and follow God, or not, as the case may be.

One of the first lessons a toddler learns is that there are benefits from being obedient and consequences, (often painful!) from being disobedient. It is no different for us in our relationship with God, nor should it be. Shortly before Moses, who had led that great nation of Israel through the wilderness, died he said, "Behold, I set before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you today; and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn aside from the way which I

command you today” Deuteronomy 11:26-28. There would be a penalty for disobedience, but God is a God of love and our experience of Him should be such that our obedience to Him is a response of love and appreciation rather than a fear of the unhappy consequences of disobedience. God deserves to be trusted and obeyed! The chorus of a well-known hymn goes:

*“Trust and obey,
For there’s no other way,
To be happy in Jesus,
But to trust and obey”.*

(JH Sammis 1846-1919)

I want to go back now to a point I raised a little earlier. To what degree are we called to be obedient? Are there some areas where we are given just general guidance, and some matters in which we are given specific instructions? I think the answer is definitely ‘yes, there are’. Fifteen times in the book of Exodus we have the expression “... as the LORD had commanded Moses”, Exodus 39:1. Fourteen of these occur in the last two chapters alone! (Exodus 12:28; 39:1, 39:5, 39:7, 39:21, 39:26, 39:29, 39:31; 40:19, 40:21, 40:23, 40:25, 40:27, 40:29, 40:32) God had given detailed instruction as to how He wanted the Tabernacle or Tent of Meeting constructed. It was to be His dwelling place in the midst of the camp of the Children of Israel. It was the place where He could be approached and worshipped and nothing whatsoever was left to the imagination of the craftsmen who built the Tabernacle, no matter how skilled they might be.

Under the guidance of Moses, God’s instructions were followed to the letter. The people were obedient! And what a wonderful blessing resulted. When it was completed, we read, “Then the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle”, Exodus 40:34. It must have been a truly amazing experience for the nation! They had been obedient to God’s specific instructions and consequently enjoyed the manifestation of the glory of God very visibly among them. Which of us, as believers on the Lord Jesus, would not wish to know and enjoy the presence of God in such a way?

Do you suppose that all of this would have happened if the craftsmen responsible for the work had tinkered around with what God had said? What if Bezalel, the chief craftsman, had decided that he would prefer to use gold instead of silver for the sockets on which the boards rested that went around the Tabernacle? After all, the people had been so generous in their gifts that there was more than enough gold to enable him do so. Surely it would be an improvement! And we would still be able to read thirteen times, instead of fourteen times the phrase “... as the LORD had commanded Moses.” That still sounds pretty good doesn’t it? No, no, no!

God had a very good reason for specifying that silver was to be used for the sockets for the boards to stand on, and this would have been lost if Bezalel had interposed his own ideas. “And the silver of them that were numbered of the congregation was a hundred talents, and a thousand seven hundred and threescore and fifteen shekels, after the shekel of the sanctuary: a beka a head, that is, half a shekel, after the shekel of the sanctuary, for every one that passed over to them that were numbered, from twenty years old and upward”, Exodus 38:25-26.

“This is what everyone among those who are numbered shall give: half a shekel according to the shekel of the sanctuary (a shekel is twenty gerahs). The half-shekel shall be an offering to the LORD. Everyone included among those who are numbered, from twenty years old and above, shall give an offering to the LORD. The rich shall not give more and the poor shall not give less than half a shekel, when you give an offering to the LORD, to make atonement for yourselves. And you shall take the atonement money of the children of Israel, and shall appoint it for the service of the tabernacle of meeting, that it may be a memorial for the children of Israel before the LORD, to make atonement for yourselves”, Exodus 30:13-16.

Silver is often used as a figure of redemption in Scripture. In Exodus 30:15, we have the statement “The rich shall not give more and the poor shall not give less...”. To be numbered among God’s people the same price had to be paid, neither more nor less. For us as Christians, to be numbered among God’s people the same price had to be paid for each one of us. A price far greater than we could possibly pay, “... knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot”, 1 Peter 1:18-19. The boards which formed part of the Tabernacle or Dwelling place of God rested on sockets of silver. We also as believers form part of the House of God and we also rest upon “sockets of silver” in the sense that we only have a place there because we are redeemed by the precious blood of Christ. All this teaching would have been lost if Bezalel had substituted some other metal in place of the silver.

Sometimes our obedience is dependent on our understanding of what is required, but this is not the character of obedience that God requires from us. He expects us to obey regardless of our understanding and this is a hard lesson

for us to learn! It is not enough to follow instructions when we can see the reason for them. What must Abraham have thought when God instructed him to, "Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you", Genesis 22:2. Abraham couldn't possibly understand why God should ask such an incredible thing of him; every fibre of his being would rebel against doing this to anyone, let alone the son he loved so much! But Abraham obeyed, and God valued his obedience.

Little did Abraham know that two thousand years later God Himself would send His Son, the One He loved so much and allow Jesus to die a cruel death at Calvary to achieve God's purpose of blessing for you and me. In Abraham's obedience, we have a picture of what God Himself had in mind for redeeming and rescuing sinful creatures. The picture would be entirely spoiled if Abraham had argued or suggested alternative solutions. No, Abraham's obedience and his trust that God knew best enable this beautiful picture to be painted for us.

There are so many other incidences in the history of the children of Israel that underline this truth. The fall of Jericho is a case in point! (see Joshua 6:1-27) The instructions God gave to Joshua for the capture of Jericho appear absolutely bizarre! (Joshua 6:2-5) For six days the army of the Children of Israel were to march in silence around the city, following the ark of the covenant (Joshua 6:10). Seven priests went before the ark of the covenant and they were to blow constantly the ram's horns that they carried (Joshua 6:13). The rest of the people were to be silent. Maybe as they assembled in the camp the first day they did this there was great excitement, it was a new adventure! But they came back to the camp that evening and nothing had happened! I suspect that on the second day the army was slightly less enthusiastic when they got ready. The inhabitants of Jericho had almost certainly verbally abused them from the city walls, and they couldn't respond! When they got back to the camp there were not great tales to tell their wives and children of bravery and hard fighting. Maybe they felt a bit silly!

This went on for six days! It wasn't until the seventh day that the procedure changed. On this day they were instructed to march around Jericho seven times, still without speaking (Joshua 6:16). The citizens of Jericho must have been mocking and laughing at them, or maybe some became apprehensive, wondering what was going on. They would soon find out! As the army of Israel had circled the city for the seventh time that seventh day, the priests blew a final blast on the trumpets and the people gave a great shout and most of the city walls fell down (Joshua 6:20). The people had been obedient; God had kept His promise and Jericho was taken! God has plans for removing impossible problems and mighty enemies from before us, but He will do it His way! We are expected to be obedient.

Sadly a lesson in disobedience was also learnt at Jericho, although it was not until a little later that this became apparent. Joshua had given instruction that Jericho and everything in it was to be burnt to the ground (Joshua 6:24). Only the gold and silver and the vessels of bronze or iron were to be saved and deposited in the treasury of the house of the LORD (Joshua 6:20). There would be other occasions when the people would be allowed to keep the spoil for themselves, but not this time. A man called Achan had other ideas (Joshua 7:1), and what calamity his disobedience brought upon the nation!

That great city Jericho, which had stood as an obstacle to the children of Israel inhabiting the land had been taken easily, with little or no personal risk. Now a much smaller city called Ai was next in line for attack (Joshua 7:2-5). It was so small that only a tiny percentage of the army was sent against it but the people of Israel were roundly defeated, thirty six men were killed. It didn't make sense! The problem was one man's disobedience. Greedy Achan had stolen some gold and silver and some fine clothing from Jericho and hidden it in his tent (Joshua 7:1). He had disobeyed God. Minutes earlier Achan had witnessed the amazing spectacle of God's destruction of Jericho and he had then dared to disobey God's clear instruction! Achan, his family and the nation of Israel paid dearly for his disobedience (Joshua 7:18-25). Obedience nearly always comes with a price attached; however disobedience always comes with an even bigger price tag!

Do we struggle to see any connection with the disobedience of one man, and the suffering and death of those around him? I'm sure we do, but that is because we do not appreciate how seriously God's takes disobedience or how highly He prizes obedience. The Scripture I read at the beginning of this talk is taken from the response of Samuel the prophet to King Saul. Saul had been told to "Go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and do not spare them. But kill both man and woman, infant and nursing child, ox and sheep, camel and donkey", 1 Samuel 15:3-4. King Saul had taken 210,000 troops with him and attacked Amalek. Later, when he returned, Saul brought with him Agag, the King of Amalek and the best of Amalek's sheep and oxen with a view to sacrificing them to the LORD. It seemed like a very commendable idea, but it wasn't obedience!

This is when Samuel said, "Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed [give attention] than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He also has rejected you from being king", 1 Samuel 15:22-23. To hear God's Word and then to disregard or deliberately disobey that word is, in God's sight, like rebellion or witchcraft. It is that serious! Samuel went on to say that because

Saul had rejected God's Word, God in turn had rejected Saul from being King. Do you think that Saul felt he had "rejected" God's word? Saul actually said to Samuel the prophet, that, "I have performed the commandment of Jehovah", 1 Samuel 15:13. And also, "... I have obeyed the voice of the LORD, and gone on the mission on which the LORD sent me", 1 Samuel 15:20 (New King James Version). Saul genuinely thought that having done most of what God had commanded, he had been obedient. He hadn't; God was displeased with him and Saul lost his kingdom.

As Christians, we have received the gift of life through the death of our Lord Jesus Christ. No longer are we dependent on keeping the Commandments to obtain God's blessing. It was an impossible task. However, this in no way gives us liberty to disregard or redefine the instructions laid out in the Word of God. For instance, clear instruction is given in the Word of God regarding what constitutes marriage in the sight of God. It is the union of one man and one woman (Genesis 2:24). It goes all the way back to Adam and Eve at the beginning of the Bible and is restated in the New Testament (Matthew 19:5, Mark 10:7-8). In England, the Government is actively seeking to alter this definition. Do we have the courage to stand by what the Bible teaches? Obedience will always bring God's approval and blessing; disobedience will bring the reverse.

The same principle holds true to so many other areas of our lives that the Bible touches upon. Because we all have different personalities, likes and dislikes, we all have instructions that we are happy to obey and others that we try and overlook or forget. If you remember Woolworths, you will remember their trade mark "Pic 'n' mix" selection of sweets. Each of us could go along and choose just our favourite sweets and leave alone the ones we didn't like! Obedience to God's Word is not like this at all! God asks us to be obedient in everything! If we are, we are acknowledging that we can trust God and that His Word deserves to be honoured and obeyed. It is saying that although we can't often see the big picture, God can, and He can be relied upon completely.

It is helpful to turn away from the lessons of those in the Old Testament to the perfect example of Jesus. Even as a young lad, we read that He went back to Nazareth with Mary and Joseph and, "was obedient to them", Luke 2:51. Even more remarkably, in the Epistle to the Hebrews we read, "Though he were Son, he learned obedience from the things which he suffered", Hebrews 5:8.

Having come into this world from heaven, and become truly man, Jesus learnt that obedience involves suffering. Was He ever disobedient? Of course not, but now He was in this world where so much is opposed to God, and obedience to God was costly. Such was His devotion however to God, and such was the love of Jesus for you and me that He was prepared to die, rather than disobey God in any way whatsoever. "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross", Philippians 2:5-8 (New King James Version).

Praise God! "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous", Romans 5:19 (New King James Version). What an incredible universe of blessing and glory has been secured by the obedience of Jesus Christ! The challenge for those of us, who claim to follow Him, is to also be obedient. We do not know what benefits will accrue to others as a result, but we can be sure that we will enjoy God's approval and blessing ourselves.

I am very conscious that I have taken twenty minutes to say something that could be said in one. We all know it; few of us do it consistently. Trust and obey.

*"Trust and obey,
For there's no other way,
To be happy in Jesus,
But to trust and obey."*

(JH Sammis 1846-1919)

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