

## **Truths that are out of fashion Obedience**

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New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

“The bottom line in the Christian life is obedience and most people don't even like the word” (Charles Stanley).

“God's promises are all on condition of humble obedience” (Ellen G. White).

We continue our series on truths that are out of fashion today with the subject of obedience. Our society today is very much based upon the idea that self is sovereign. Nobody has the right to tell me what to do or think or believe. I am the sole adjudicator of what is right. None of us like being told what to do, and few of us like to do what we are told. We feel that it cramps us and stops us from being the very best version of ourselves and that is, in today's culture, the ultimate crime.

However, we will see today that the very opposite is true. The pathway to being the very best version of ourselves lies in obedience for in doing this we are being like Christ. That is always the right path to follow in life.

“For even Christ did not please Himself; but, as it is written, “The reproaches of those that reproached You fell on me.” For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope. Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus” (Romans 15:3-5).

And in Hebrews chapter 5:8-9 we read:

“Though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him.”

What incredible, eternal blessings have resulted from His obedience. His life was certainly not a wasted life of weak supineness.

However, before I hear cries of unfairness in that Jesus was the Son of God and so His example, whilst useful is impossible for us to follow, I would in this talk like to look at four examples of people who teach us about obedience. Two of these are negative examples, and we would do well to learn from their mistakes and avoid repeating them. Two of them are positive examples and leave us a fine pattern to follow.

## Saul

I can't help feeling that Saul is one of the most tragic stories we have in the Bible. I would have loved for him to be a better king for then his son Jonathan would have been king, and I would like to be named after a Bible king! It all started so well. In 1 Samuel 10:27 we read:

"But some rebels said, "How can this man save us?" So they despised him, and brought him no presents. But he held his peace."

Newly crowned, Saul might have been forgiven for feeling a little insecure on his throne. Faced with such a blatant rejection of his authority, he might have felt that making an example of these rebels would do him a lot of good. Instead, he exercised patience and self-control allowing God time to work.

In the next chapter we see further encouraging signs that Saul was destined to be a good king. The Ammonites were attacking the Israelites from the East and Saul gathered his forces to affect a rescue. Having accomplished this, some of his hot-headed advisors urged Saul to use his victory to punish those who had doubted him. Instead, we read in verse 13:

"But Saul said, "Not a man shall be put to death this day, for today the LORD has accomplished salvation in Israel.""

Admirable restraint from a promising monarch.

The key to understanding Saul's story comes in chapter 12. Samuel, the godly prophet in Israel gathered the people together and gave them, and the king a clear message from God. It contained the expectations of God and the blessings that would follow. So, in verse 14-15 we read:

"If you fear the LORD and serve Him and obey His voice, and do not rebel against the commandment of the LORD, then both you and the king who reigns over you will continue following the LORD, your God. However, if you do not obey the voice of the LORD, but rebel against the commandment of the LORD, then the hand of the LORD will be against you, as it was against your fathers."

Have you ever noticed that when God has something important to say He says it really plainly. There are parts of the Bible I find difficult to understand but this is not one of them. Nor should we feel that this was Old Testament times, and of course things are different now. Yes our blessing in Christ far exceeds anything that Saul and the people then could have known but God has not changed and His fundamental requirements from mankind do not change either. The message Samuel brought could not have been plainer. If the people obeyed, then God would bless them. If they did not, then they would find themselves at odds with God. That is not a good place to be and can never end well for us.

But let us move on with Saul's story. In the very next chapter, we find out why Saul was rejected as king and his royal line was to be ended. His family would suffer the consequences of his actions. What was it that was so bad that would lead to such devastating consequences? We need to read verses 8-14 of chapter 13 to find out.

"Then he waited seven days, according to the time set by Samuel. But Samuel did not come to Gilgal; and the people were scattered from him. So Saul said, "Bring a burnt offering and peace offerings here to me." And he offered the burnt offering. Now it happened, as soon as he had finished presenting the burnt offering, that Samuel came; and Saul went out to meet him, that he might greet him. And Samuel said, "What have

you done?" Saul said, "When I saw that the people were scattered from me, and that you did not come within the days appointed, and that the Philistines gathered together at Michmash, then I said, 'The Philistines will now come down on me at Gilgal, and I have not made supplication to the LORD.' Therefore I felt compelled, and offered a burnt offering." And Samuel said to Saul, "You have done foolishly. You have not kept the commandment of the LORD your God, which He commanded you. For now the LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. But now your kingdom shall not continue. The LORD has sought for Himself a man after His own heart, and the LORD has commanded him to be commander over His people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you."

One almost has to read this twice to understand what went so badly wrong. On the surface of things, Saul was acting wisely. Before rushing into battle, he waited for God to show him the right course of action. He waited for Samuel to come. As Samuel's arrival was delayed, Saul took it upon himself to offer a burnt offering to God, with the expectation that God would answer him and give direction. Instead, Samuel arrives and, in horror, informs Saul that his actions meant that he was unfit to be king. But what was so bad? It was not as if Saul had robbed a bank, committed adultery or taxed the poor until the pips squeaked.

Saul's great mistake was in trying to act as both king and priest. He should have known better as evidenced by Samuel's words:

"You have not kept the commandment of the LORD your God."

There is only One who can be both King and Priest and that is the Lord Jesus. God will allow no other to usurp His place.

In case we feel overly sorry for Saul we should continue his story at least a little further to chapter 15. There Saul was told to utterly defeat and destroy the Amalekites. As Sovereign, God has seen their behaviour and it was utterly repellent to Him. So, He chooses Saul to be the human instrument of His Divine judgement. Saul was to destroy them entirely, keeping nothing for himself. However, Saul chose to spare king Agag's life and that of some of the livestock. Samuel is again called upon to deliver the shattering verdict of God:

"Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD? Why did you swoop down on the spoil, and do evil in the sight of the LORD?" And Saul said to Samuel, "But I have obeyed the voice of the LORD, and gone on the mission on which the LORD sent me, and brought back Agag king of Amalekites; I have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. But the people took of the plunder, sheep and oxen, the best of the things which should have been utterly destroyed, to sacrifice to the LORD your God in Gilgal." So 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 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 15:19-23).

Disobedience to God was again Saul's downfall and in these words we see how seriously God takes it. It is as the sin of witchcraft. It is in effect saying that we know better than God! Interestingly, though we are not told here, others of the line of Agag may have survived. In the book of Esther, Haman is described as an Agagite. Perhaps this would explain his rabid hatred of

the Jewish people and his desire to exterminate them. The sins of one generation cast a long shadow across the centuries.

If we learn nothing else from the story of Saul, it is vital to learn that disobedience is not to be equated in our minds with doing what we would call really bad stuff. For Saul it had an outward form of religious activity and good living. Disobedience to the word of God is wrong however that may find expression in our actions. That really does drive us back to His word. I cannot know what He does and does not want me to do unless I know His word. Ignorance is no defence in law. Neither is it an excuse so far as God is concerned. His word has made plain what He wants me to do. I do not have a choice about this. He expects me to be obedient to His word!

### **Peter**

There is a fascinating incident right at the start of Peter's journey with the Lord Jesus. We can read about it in Luke 5:1-8:

“So it was, as the multitude pressed about Him to hear the word of God, that He stood by the Lake of Gennesaret, and saw two boats standing by the lake; but the fishermen had gone from them and were washing their nets. Then He got into one of the boats, which was Simon's, and asked him to put out a little from the land. And He sat down and taught the multitudes from the boat. When He had stopped speaking, He said to Simon, “Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.” But Simon answered and said to Him, “Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing; nevertheless at Your word I will let down the net.” And when they had done this, they caught a great number of fish, and their net was breaking. So they signalled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!””

As we looked at the life of Saul we saw that disobedience is not always manifested in gross immorality or criminal behaviour. I think the lesson we learn from Peter is that we are always the poorer for not being obedient, no matter how much we might sympathise with the disciples. Jesus had used the boat of Simon to speak to the crowds of people that had come to listen to him. Following this, Jesus instructed Peter to launch his boat and throw the nets (plural) into the sea. Now Peter had been fishing all night, without success. However, at the Lord's command he does respond. Sadly, he only throws one net (singular) into the sea. This disobedience almost ends in disaster. The net begins to break and even when Peter calls for assistance, the boats are almost swamped with so many fish. If only Peter had done exactly what the Lord had told him to do! God desires to bless us so much – far more than perhaps we are ready for. As Peter was soon to leave his life of fishing behind, maybe Jesus was freeing him from the financial burden of earning his living day-to-day with one final miraculous catch that would set him up for life. God is no man's debtor!

However, Peter, understandably tired after being up all night and somewhat discouraged from catching nothing was only prepared to go so far. Partial obedience is just a euphemism for disobedience. Not only did Peter suffer damage to his net that would need to be repaired before it could be used again, but possibly it limited the size of the catch that could otherwise have been much greater. I have to wonder how often in my life has my disobedience left the Holy Spirit unable to use me for His glory and my benefit. There may have been times when I was too tired, too discouraged, too busy to obey His voice and thus have missed out on His blessing.

Sadly, not only was Peter the poorer for his disobedience, but his partners were also put at risk. It may well be that my disobedience will affect the local church members who I fellowship with. Not

only for our own sakes, but also for the well being of the church, I need to be obedient to the Lord. He longs to bless, and He will still where there is obedience to Him today.

Now I would like to look at two more positive examples of obedience and how this brings great reward. The first we read about in 1 Kings 17:8-16:

“Then the word of the LORD came to [Elijah], saying, “Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. See, I have commanded a widow there to provide for you.” So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, indeed a widow was there gathering sticks. And he called to her and said, “Please bring me a little water in a cup, that I may drink.” And as she was going to get it, he called to her and said, “Please bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” So she said, “As the LORD your God lives, I do not have any bread, only a handful of flour in a bin, and a little oil in a jar; and see, I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.” And Elijah said to her, “Do not fear; go and do as you have said, but make me a small cake from it first, and bring it to me; and afterward make some for yourself and your son. For thus says the LORD God of Israel: ‘The bin of flour shall not be used up, nor shall the jar of oil run dry, until the day the LORD sends rain on the earth.’” So she went away and did according to the word of Elijah; and she and he and her household ate for many days. The bin of flour was not used up, nor did the jar of oil run dry, according to the word of the LORD which He spoke by Elijah.”

The key lesson to learn here is that obedience is costly. Common courtesy would lead the woman to offer Elijah, a complete stranger to her, a drink. The water from the well was free after all. However, when Elijah asked this widow woman to make him a bread cake as well then that became a wholly different matter. The hopelessness of her plight was laid bare as she admitted that she, and her son, were on the brink of starvation. She had only enough to make one last meal and then they would die. Instead of relieving her of the request, Elijah prioritises his request. You can make your last meal if that is your wish but make me my meal first! What a test of faith this was for the woman – a test she passed with flying colours! This woman had no reason to believe the stranger’s promise that for as long as the drought remained her resources would be sufficient. However, she obeys Elijah and finds to her wondering surprise that her oil and flour did not run dry. The resources of Elijah’s God were sufficient for her, and it appears from the rest of her story that there was a developing faith in her own heart also. The LORD did not remain just Elijah’s God!

We can see clearly from the three stories that we have considered so far that obedience to God is not only the right thing to do but also for our good. God loves to bless us, and we do not beggar ourselves as we follow Him in humble obedience. That is not to say, however, that obedience is either easy or cheap. It is not! There will be times when it will hurt to be obedient. The widow had no guarantees, other than the promise of a stranger, that her obedience would be for her benefit. There will be times when we are called to expend our resources, to give our time, to give ourselves at immense personal cost if we are to be obedient. Let us encourage ourselves with the example of the widow to put obedience before our own needs, even in extremis.

Our final example is found in John 4:47-54, and concerns a nobleman who came to Jesus on behalf of his dying son:

“When he heard that Jesus had come out of Judea into Galilee, he went to Him and implored Him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. Then Jesus said to him, “Unless you people

see signs and wonders, you will by no means believe.” The nobleman said to Him, “Sir, come down before my child dies!” Jesus said to him, “Go your way; your son lives.” So the man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him, and he went his way. And as he was now going down, his servants met him and told him, saying, “Your son lives!” Then he inquired of them the hour when he got better. And they said to him, “Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him.” So the father knew that it was at the same hour in which Jesus said to him, “Your son lives.” And he himself believed, and his whole household. This again is the second sign Jesus did when He had come out of Judea into Galilee.”

Obedience requires an act of faith in Him. The outward signs were not encouraging. Not only was the nobleman’s son dying but the Lord’s own words to the crowd were hardly encouraging, as He upbraids them for their desire for a sign to confirm His word. The nobleman left the Lord empty handed with his request that Jesus would come with him to heal his son unanswered. It was only after the nobleman had returned that his faith was vindicated – to the very hour that Jesus had spoken. Obedience would be so much easier if we could see and know for certain that it would work out well in the end. However, that would be no faith at all and we do need to understand that faith must be operative in our lives. One can hardly imagine the joy and the wonder in the father’s heart as he heard not only that his son had made a full recovery but it was also at the exact time that Jesus had told him to return for his son was well. How foolish he would have felt if by some petulant act of will he had forced Jesus to make that journey with him all the way back to his home, only to find his son already well again. I cannot help but wonder if there will be a time for regret in eternity that I missed out on the opportunity to be obedient and thus missed out on a blessing!

As we draw to a close, there are just two further exhortations I would like to make. First, it is a matter of profound concern to me that increasingly the matter of regularly remembering the Lord in His death has been relegated to a minor position in the life of the church. I think that Jesus’ specific request to “Remember Me” should carry more weight. I appreciate the argument that to celebrate His supper weekly may lead some to devalue it, or it becomes less special than it ought to be. However, I think that in making it less frequent than weekly is a mistake. There appears to be fairly solid evidence that the early church adopted this remembrance service on a weekly basis and so should we. Gospel work and teaching are both important, and on first inspection, the celebration of the Lord’s Supper may appear to be something that need not feature prominently. Obedience to His request should be sufficient reason for us though there are others. If I can make a plea to those who make decisions in the programmes of their church to establish the prominence of the Lord’s Supper in its own right. Don’t tag it on to the end of the main event. Don’t relegate it to every fifth Sunday in the month. Make it front and centre of the life of the church. And to all I would urge that we attend with hearts full of worship, prepared to say, “Thank You” to Him who “loved us and gave Himself for us” (Galatians 2:20).

Second, Jesus said: “if you love Me, keep My commandments” (John 14:15). We live in a sentimental age but words are cheap. Obedience is what matters. It mattered to His disciples. It matters to us today.

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk on Obedience in the series on Truths that are out of fashion, T1409.

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