

Lesson 24

Obey from the Heart

Introduction

What is obedience?

The simple answer is doing what someone in authority over you tells you to do. We obey God because God is God, and we are not. As Creator, He has the right to have us do what He wants us to do. But is that all there is to obedience? *Is spiritual obedience simply a matter of doing what God said?* Or is it based on a loving relationship of trust?

The answer is both. We obey because Jesus is King and has all authority, Matthew 28.18. We also obey because we love God, John 14.15. Our motivation not only comes from a steadfast refusal to rebel, but we are also driven out of deep affection for God. We would be wrong to assign simple answers to the concept of obedience. Rather it involves a complex, whole person response to God. Our religion must manifest itself through the demonstration of a life that has been impacted by God. Obedience is so much more than performing an action, it involves our mind, soul, heart, and body, Matthew 22.37-38.

How Israel Learned Obedience

Exodus 20 contains the listing of the ten commandments. In verses 8-10 the Sabbath is mentioned, God's Day. The people were to give the day to God by not working. This included every adult, child, servant, and foreigner in the nation. No livestock were to do any work. The expectations were clear and understandable. Verses 9-10 are authoritative. The concepts are easy to obey as long as one understands the definition of work.

Numbers 15 discloses the first violation of the Sabbath. A man was gathering firewood on the Sabbath. The man was brought to Moses, who inquired of God as to what to do. God said, *the man is to be put to death. The entire community is to stone him outside the camp*, 15.35. Violating the Sabbath carried a strict penalty. God wanted the entire nation to understand the essentiality of obedience to the Sabbath day command.

God was serious about His people observing His day ... focused on Him.

Jericho

Almost forty years after it was time for Israel to enter the promised land. The first city of conquest would be Jericho, which was *handed over* to Israel by God, Joshua 6.2. Beginning on a Sunday, the army of Israel was instructed to march in complete silence around Jericho once a day for six days. Seven priests were to accompany the army, carrying trumpets and the Ark of the Covenant. Beginning in Numbers 6.5 we find how Joshua was given clear instructions on how to carry out mission on the 7th day. On that day, the army, priests, and ark were to encircle the city seven times ... and then after a long trumpet blast shout. The wall fell and the soldiers arose to take the city.

Numbers 6.17-21 contains additional instructions. The soldiers were to take nothing from the city. Only Rahab and those in her house were allowed to be spared. Everyone else was to be killed. Silver, gold, bronze, and iron were all to be placed in the treasury of the Lord. Again, what is contained here in Numbers 6 are clear, explicit, and concise plans that God expected to be carried out. Any deviation in their actions would have resulted in defeat for the Israelites.

Have you ever considered that Jericho was taken on the Sabbath day? See Numbers 6.15. (The 7th day, Exodus 20.10, was the Sabbath.) Of all the days of the week, why would God command them to take these great actions on that day? What about the prohibitions against work spelled out in Exodus 20? Is God guilty of contradicting Himself here?

Obviously not, because obedience is more complex than we often make it out to be.

Why Jericho?

God did not choose Jericho as the first city of conquest without a purpose. Its inhabitants were not godly, moral individuals. They were extremely wicked, and the time had come for their judgment. God was not handing over the city because Israel earned it . . . they were given Jericho because of Canaan's wickedness and the promise made to Abraham in Genesis 12.1-3. The citizens of Jericho lived in an extremely fortified city. It's formidable city walls stood out for miles over the plains of the Jordan river valley. You may remember that the previous generation refused to enter the land because of their fear of walled cities, Numbers 13.28. Now, here they are 39 years later, and it is not happenstance that the first city they come up against is a walled city.

God was working here. The fall of Jericho would serve as a constant symbol that God would be with them as they ejected the Canaanites from their land. God brought the walls down. He did it on the Sabbath – so all the spoil went to Him. *God did it His way on His day*, which sent a powerful message: Israel was completely dependent on God for success. They could trust Him to fight their battles for them and thus do the impossible. Their marching around the city six days before and following His commands on the 7th day were a clear demonstration of that trust in His great power – not their own.

Obedience is a Complex Response of our Whole Person to God

Far more than our actions, it involves the interaction of respect, love, repentance, and trust in God. Actions without faith are meaningless. Actions without repentance are a waste of time. Our deeds for God not only involve the deed itself, but the mind and heart. Only God can look at our heart and see how these things interact. Only God knows the degree to which a person really loves and respects Him. Only God knows whether our repentance is genuine. Only God understands the true degree of trust we have in Him.

Obedience is a matter of building a personal relationship with God. We err when we reduce it down to a simple listing of dos and don'ts and then do just what we've been told. So then, how do we build a relationship with God? Our most common answer might be, "Obey Him." This again, is over-simplifying the matter. Ask any young bride how she plans on building a relationship with her new husband. Not one would answer, "Do all he tells me to do." No meaningful relationship was ever built on mere

obedience to commands. Our relationship with God involves far more than just a collection of do's and don'ts.

This does not mean commandment keeping is bad

Lest anyone be confused, we must understand that the commands God has given have a purpose. His laws are good. Romans 7.7 teaches how they restrain evil ... and commend good behavior. God's laws maintain order, justice, and decency. They provide us structure in our life and religious practices. But as we follow commands, it is important that we not merely do them, with no thought of the intention behind the action.

Some people do things in religion just because it is the way things have always been done. Did you know the US Standard gauge on railroads is 4ft., 8.5 inches? That seems like an odd measurement. Why this width? Because it is the same width used in England. Why is that way there? When the English were building their tramways, they used the same gauge as the wagons they built before that. Again, why 4ft., 8.5 inches? When the wagon builders began to produce them, someone measured wagon ruts left from Roman chariots. In other words, the US Standard gauge for railroads is the way it is because that's the way it's always been done. People blindly do things because they put little thought behind the action.

What's the point?

We need to broaden our perspective. God is not arbitrary. There are times He will ask us to do things that seem odd. Take a city by marching around it and blowing rams' horns seven times? Sing in worship without the use of instrumental music? Practice self-denial to help others? The list goes on and on. We must never forget the purpose behind God's command and our relationship with Him. Our hearts must be ruled by love, not law! We must look at the whole – not just the parts.

Jesus' Teaching in Matthew 7.21-24

We are no doubt familiar with Jesus' words:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in your name, drive out demons in your name, and do many miracles in your name?’ Then I will announce to them, ‘I never knew you. Depart from me, you lawbreakers!’ “Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock, Matthew 7.21-24.

See how those Jesus mentions did many actions in the name of Jesus but did not do the will of the Father. Note 7.24 and how Jesus stresses *hearing* and *acting* on His words. What words? The teachings He has just outlined in the Sermon on the Mount. It's not only about not murdering someone, not lying, or not committing adultery. It is about the need for respecting others, not lusting, being trustworthy, being kind to those who hurt you, not judging, and treating others the way you want to be treated.

In other words, our relationship with God is built on the purpose of personal transformation and commitment to spiritual growth.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your true worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed

by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God, Romans 12.1-2.

...take off your former way of life, the old self that is corrupted by deceitful desires, to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, the one created according to God's likeness in righteousness and purity of the truth, Ephesians 4.22-24.

So then, just as you have received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to walk in him, being rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, and overflowing with gratitude. Be careful that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit based on human tradition, based on the elements of the world, rather than Christ, Colossians 2.6-8.

All the activity mentioned above is done for a purpose, just like God had a purpose in giving Jericho in the way He did. That purpose was to build up complete faith and total trust in Him. The Christian's new walk and the personal transformation are the result of a new life with God ... coming out of our salvation ... not *for* our salvation. We build our relationship with God when we focus on His will, not ours.

Conclusion

We need to become as acquainted with Jesus as possible. When we are truly impacted by Him, it will change the way we live before God. We will realize that God is at work in us carrying out His purposes. He is constantly leading, feeding, healing, and changing our perspective. He takes on our preconceptions of things and challenges us with a better perspective. When we do this, our obedience will be far from ritualistic ... it will be a natural response of the heart that has completely submitted itself to God.

For Thought and Reflection

1. What is obedience?
2. Why did God give Israel the Sabbath? What were His intentions? Why is it significant that God had Israel take Jericho on the Sabbath?
3. How do we build a relationship with God?
4. As we obey God today, what must we keep in mind? Explain.