

A Study of the Necessity of Careful Obedience to the Word of God

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Introduction

From almost the first page of the Bible, and certainly to the last, God's Word sets before us the necessity of obedience to God. This is so much so that we can say without fear of successful contradiction that the principal unrelenting theme of the Bible from beginning to end is that man must obey God or suffer dire consequences. At least some of these consequences relate to this life, but they especially relate to the life to come. Not only so, but God's choicest blessings for this life and the world to come are promised only to the obedient. If we miss the teaching of the Bible on obedience to God, we will thereby not only miss its dominant thrust but will miss both the greatest life on earth and Heaven as well.

Strong's Concordance indicates that the most common word in the Old Testament for obedience is *shama*.¹ *The Brown, Driver, and Briggs Hebrew Lexicon* indicates that its root meaning is to hear intelligently so as to listen, to yield.² The most common New Testament word for obedience is *hupakouo*, which, like *shama*, literally means to hear so as to do. Kittel says that this word is "...always to be thought of within the sphere of a religion which receives the divine Word by hearing and then translates it into action..."³ When we consult an English dictionary for a definition of *obedience* we learn that it means "...compliance with that which is required by authority, subjection to rightful restraint."⁴

To speak of obedience to God is to imply that God has a certain way for man to live. We must also necessarily infer that God has issued commands to men, some of which are positive requirements and others are prohibitions, by which He tells us how to live. Furthermore, it must follow that man is duty-bound to obey whatever commandments God has given to him. This obligation has inhered in the man-God relationship from the beginning and it will continue until time is no more. Men **ought** to obey God (Acts 5:29)!

In light of these facts it seems more than ironic that practically all of the so-called "believing world" and not a few brethren look down their "progressive" noses at those of us who would dare to say that the Gospel of Christ is spiritual law and we are bound to abide by it. They can neither understand nor tolerate those of us who insist on such things as keeping the commandments of Christ, emphasizing sound doctrine that must be defended as well as

proclaimed, advocating that men must fear God, and suggesting that God has a pattern for the church and for our daily lives that must be followed. The very mention of such is likely to provoke them into hurling *legalist, literalist, or commandment-keeper* our way. They have no ear for the Bible's message concerning obedience. The themes of these grievously mistaken folk are their perverted views of grace, freedom, mercy, and love. Forget about Divine law and commandments or human obedience and obligation because God's grace and mercy excludes one and all – to hear them tell it.

Such antinomian views find expression in the rejection of the God-given authority of elders in local congregations and contempt for authoritative, “book-chapter-verse” preaching. In a day such as ours when so many, even in the church, despise the very concept of submission or obedience to any authority – human or Divine – we could hardly spend our time more profitably than in a strong re-emphasis on what God says regarding this subject.

We will study this subject under three headings:

1. Principal passages on obedience in 1 Samuel
2. Other Scriptural passages on obedience
3. Some implications of true obedience

Principal Passages on Obedience in 1 Samuel

Two principal statements in 1 Samuel place tremendous emphasis on man's necessary obedience to God.

1 Samuel 12:14-15, 24-25: Samuel's Address at Saul's Enthronement

This passage is part of a remarkable address (which comprises all of 1 Samuel 12) by the prophet-priest-judge Samuel. Saul had just been formally enthroned as the King of Israel in a great gathering at Gilgal. Samuel delivered this memorable speech to his countrymen upon this important turning point in the history of the nation. He urged the people, “Now therefore stand still, that I may reason with you before the Lord...” (v. 7). A considerable portion of that about which Samuel reasoned with Saul and Israel had to do with their obligation to obey God. After reminding the people how God had brought their forefathers out of the cruel slavery of Egypt and had made them victorious over their enemies while they served Him, but how He had allowed their enemies to conquer them when they forgot Him, Samuel challenged them as follows:

If ye will fear the Lord, and serve him, and obey his voice, and not rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then shall both ye and also the king that reigneth over you

continue following the Lord your God: But if ye will not obey the voice of the Lord, but rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then shall the hand of the Lord be against you, as it was against your fathers.... Only fear the Lord, and serve him in truth with all your heart: for consider how great things he hath done for you. But if ye shall still do wickedly, ye shall be consumed, both ye and your king (vv. 14-15, 24-25).

Consider the following observations on these statements:

1. Samuel stressed obedience in no fewer than four different expressions in verses 14 and 24. To fear the Lord means to serve Him, which means to obey Him, which means not to rebel against His commandments. We must conclude that anyone who despises the concept of fearing God also despises the concept of obeying God, for these two statements constitute repetition of one principle.
2. Samuel made a conditional promise about God's blessings and obedience. **If** Saul and the people would obey God, **then** they would have His special blessings upon them. Obedience was (and is) the condition of God's choicest blessings, especially His spiritual blessings, all of which are in Christ (Eph. 1:3).
3. To disobey God, to rebel against the Lord's commandments, and to do wickedly are one and the same (vv. 13, 25). Thus, those who encourage disobedience of God's Word by ridiculing "commandment-keeping" are encouraging wickedness and rebellion against God.
4. Samuel said that God must be served "in truth with all your heart," just as the Lord said men must worship the Father "in spirit and truth" (John 4:23-24). That is, we must sincerely do what He says in both worship and service.
5. Samuel also gave a stern inspired warning concerning disobedience. It would bring great calamities upon Saul and the nation after the manner of those visited upon their forefathers for their disobedience and rebellion. What Samuel taught God's people on this somber occasion is still true today in principle: God is pleased and will abundantly bless us if we obey Him; He will withhold His blessings and even bring calamity, eternal calamity eventually, upon us if we disobey Him.

1 Samuel 15:22-23: Samuel's Rebuke of Saul's Disobedience

The famous setting of 1 Samuel 15 is God's decree to Saul through Samuel: Utterly destroy the Amalekites, not leaving a one of them alive and not keeping any spoils (vv. 1-3). After returning from this mission, having disobeyed God by sparing the king and the best of the flocks and herds (vv. 8-9), he had the audacity to boast to Samuel that he had "performed the commandment of the Lord" (v. 13). Samuel's reply was full of sarcasm, if not humor: "What meaneth then the bleating of the sheep in mine ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?" (v. 14). After asking Saul why he disobeyed God, Samuel then proceeded to expose Saul's blatant, inexcusable rebellion.

Saul excused his disobedience concerning the animals by blaming the people for wanting to spare them for the purpose of doing sacrifice to God (vv. 15, 21). He did not tell Samuel why he spared Agag, the king, but he seemed not to see in doing so the obvious incongruity with the command of God. Samuel's response to Saul's unfounded excuses was timeless in the principle it sets forth:

Hath 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 hearken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, he hath also rejected thee from being king (vv. 22-23).

Saul's response was to admit he had sinned (vv. 24-25, 30). Samuel then told the king that just as he had rejected the Word of God, so had God rejected him and would place another king over Israel (vv. 26, 28).

Consider some observations concerning Saul's disobedience:

1. Saul could not and did not plead that he had misunderstood God. God's Word that is essential to our pleasing Him and being rewarded by Him was (and is) understandable.
2. Saul tried to excuse his disobedience, but he had no excuse for disobeying God. Likewise, men are without excuse now.
3. Saul apparently thought that he was smarter than God and that he could improve upon God's commandment. Men are still doing the same. The pattern for the church as the Lord built it is too narrow and restrictive, so they "improve" upon it to suit themselves. Many brethren think the same way about the church and particularly about such issues as worship, church discipline, marriage, divorce, and remarriage, women preachers, fellowship with those who are not Christians and with brethren who are false teachers, and many other particulars.
4. Saul's disrespect for the commandment of God was a declaration of his lack of faith in God. When men reject the Word of God, they advertise their unbelief.
5. Saul lied to try to hide his disobedience. Conscious sin (which Saul's apparently was) multiplies sin. Each sin of this type tends to lead to additional sins to cover up its predecessors.
6. Disobedience to God cannot be hidden indefinitely. As in Saul's case, sooner or later, regardless of how loudly we protest, the sheep will bleat, and the cows will low. Sin, and the shame that it inevitably brings, must be exposed.
7. Saul feared and obeyed the wrong voice. He obeyed the voice of the people rather than the voice of God. The downfall of millions continues to be the desire to please and to be liked by other men, mostly the wrong ones. Ultimately, the only one we should fear is God who can sentence us to Hell (Mat. 10:28).
8. Outward sacrifice can never replace inner reverence.

9. Rebellion and stubbornness before the Word of God is equivalent to the worst kinds of evil. In fact, it is the worst kind of evil.
10. Saul's confession was insincere, as proved by his desire to be honored by the elders of the people when he had proved himself unworthy of honor (v. 30) and by his subsequent life of apostasy. To say, "I have sinned," is not equal to repentance, which involves deciding to cease the sin and behaving in harmony with that decision.
11. Just as Samuel had warned (12:15), when Saul rebelled against the commandment of the Lord, the hand of the Lord was against him. So is God's hand against all who rebel at His Word.

Other Scriptural Statements on Obedience

Space permits us to discuss only a few of the other principal passages on obedience because they are so profuse. The following are a fair representation of many others:

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14: Fear God and Keep His Commandments

A good statement with which to begin is Ecclesiastes 12:13-14:

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.

Solomon taught us here that when all is said and done, respect for and obedience to God is man's ultimate responsibility. The motivation herein stated for man's submission to God is his accountability to God—everything we do will be eventually revealed. The message is clear: fear and obey God and thereby do those good things, the revelation of which, at The Judgment, will not bring shame and condemnation. Those moderns—both within and without—who despise the concept of fearing God and keeping the commandments of God ought to tremble at this explicit passage that exposes their rebellious folly!

Matthew 7:21: Do the Will of the Heavenly Father

Our Lord concluded the Sermon on the Mount with a ringing challenge to obey God. The beginning verse of His concluding paragraph (Mat. 7:21-27) is the key to this emphatic section: "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven" (v. 21). In case anyone doubts which portion of the will of His Father one must keep, He made it abundantly clear: "Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: ...And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand" (vv. 24, 26). Notice the emphasis upon doing "these sayings of mine." Since the coming of the Christ

to this earth and His death, obedience to the Father is measured by obedience to His Son because He is the one through Whom God speaks (Mat. 17:5; Heb. 1:1-2). Notice that the disobedient are called “foolish” because their striving is in vain, useless—it will all come to naught. We may also observe that they are hopeless because they will suffer utter loss. The key by which men shall enter in to Heaven is labeled *obedience*.

John 14:15: Love and Obedience Are Inseparable

Jesus expressed the vital link between love and obedience in His great address of comfort to the apostles just before His death: “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15). He stated the same thing negatively in the same context: “He that loveth me not keepeth not my sayings: and the word which ye hear is not mine, but the Father's which sent me” (v. 24). John iterated the same principle: “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous” (1 John 5:3). The significance of John’s statement in the beginning of this verse is: “This is what it means to love God,” namely, keeping His commandments. Thus, love for and obedience to God cannot be separated. It is easy for anyone to claim to love God or His Son, but here we have the simple, never-failing test. One who loves God will not only obey Him, but He will find joy, rather than grief, in doing so. How dare any man complain that the commands of God through His Son are too demanding or harsh. Think of what God and Christ have done for us! They ask little of us by comparison, but what they ask of us they expect us to do, and we should do so with delight.

Acts 4:18-20; 5:29: Obedience to God Supersedes Obedience to Men

A powerful message on inspired apostolic understanding of the necessity of obedience is seen in the context of severe persecution in the beginning days of the church in Jerusalem. When Peter and John were arrested the first time and ordered by the Sanhedrin Court not to preach any more in the name of Christ, they promptly answered: “Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:18-20). Upon their release they went back to their work of preaching publicly (vv. 33). They were arrested a second time, from which imprisonment the Lord’s angel released them and told them to go once more and preach in the temple (5:17-20). Their third arrest involved more of the apostles for doing the very thing Peter and John had been forbidden to do at their first arrest—preach the Gospel (vv. 25-27). When reminded by the high priest that they had been commanded not to preach in the name of Jesus, the apostles answered, “We ought to [must, ASV] obey God rather than men” (v. 29). At these

defiant words, along with the charge by the apostles that this very council had murdered Jesus, some of them cried for their deaths (v. 33). They were eventually beaten and once more commanded not to preach the Gospel any more (v. 40). However, they refused to cease their work of teaching and preaching the Christ (v. 42). It was not that they did not understand the edict of the civil authorities. Neither did they fail to understand the grave risk they took by ignoring the order. They simply understood that the authority of the One Who had commanded them to preach the Gospel was greater than that of those who had commanded them to cease. Anytime a command of man clashes with a command of God, we must honor God's command at whatever sacrifice or risk. Such is the necessity of obedience to God.

James 1:22: God Blesses Doers, Not Mere Hearers, of His Word

James made a strong statement on the subject of obedience to God: "But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves" (Jam 1:22). There is some value in hearing, becoming acquainted with, and certainly in memorizing the Word of God. However, one is deceiving himself if he believes the great rewards and blessings of God's Word can be found in their mere hearing. The blessing comes at the doing rather than the hearing level (v. 25). It is good to learn and to understand that baptism is for the remission of sins and it is surely not harmful for one to memorize Acts 2:38. However, one may memorize this passage and even believe what it says and still die and go to Hell in the guilt of his alien sins if he never acts upon it. Thousands heard the apostles preach the Gospel on Pentecost, but only those who "gladly received" it to the point of obeying it received the promised blessing (v. 41). The forgiveness of one's sins through the blood of Christ, necessary to one's salvation, being added to the church, and eventually entering Heaven, will not be granted if one is not baptized. Thus, the real blessing is not in the mere hearing or learning, but in obeying what one hears and learns of the Gospel.

1 John 2:3-4: To Know God One Must Obey Him

We have already noticed one statement on obedience from John's first letter, but now we turn to another. In this one John did not spare any sensitive feelings of timid souls in making his point:

And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. (1 John 2:3-4).

Just as our claim to love God is vain if we do not obey Him (as seen above), so is our claim to know Him. We can know some things about His Word without obeying Him, but we

can never know God Himself without obeying Him. To “know” Him refers to an intimate relationship and fellowship, such as a son has with a father. To “know” him means to partake of the blessings and privileges that are peculiar to one who has submitted his will to the Divine will. To claim fellowship and an intimate relationship with God while refusing to obey Him is dishonest—such a claimant is a liar. James 1:22, just noticed, says that one who thinks he has God’s favor in spite of his disobedience deceives himself. 1 John 2:3–4 says that such a one also attempts to deceive others.

Revelation 22:14: To Enter Heaven One Must Obey God’s Commandments

The closing beatitude of the Bible is a ringing call to obedience: “Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life and may enter in through the gates into the city” (Rev. 22:14). John had just finished writing hundreds of words in the previous chapter and in the earlier part of this chapter in an effort to help us visualize the glory and splendor of the city of Heaven and to imagine the privileges and delights its residents would enjoy without interruption for eternity. He then told us how those who enter shall be able to do so. It will be those who keep the commandments of God who will have the right to eat of the restored tree of life, once forbidden Adam and Eve, but now made available in the eternal Eden. It will be those who keep the commandments of God who will be permitted to enter in through the gates and inhabit Heaven. Is obedience to God important? Is it necessary? If going to Heaven and missing Hell are important and necessary, then obedience to God is certainly so!

Some Implications of True Obedience

To speak of “true obedience” implies the possibility of pretended or only apparent obedience. However, there are various principles by which one can identify true obedience. Of course, a mere “pretended” or apparent obedience is not really obedience at all. I have already introduced some of these principles and implications, but they serve more detailed attention. What are some of the implications of true obedience to God?

A Command Must Be Known Before It Can Be Obeyed

The idea of obedience connotes compliance with that which has been commanded or required and of which one has knowledge. If one does not know what has been required, he cannot possibly comply with it. The whole point of Christ’s commission to preach the Gospel to the whole creation is so that men might know what His commands are and may believe and obey them if they choose (Mark 16:15–16). Now one may do a certain thing that happens to be a

requirement of God, but if he does not do it, knowing it is the requirement of God and doing it in order to comply with God's requirement, such does not constitute obedience. For example, Scriptural baptism requires immersion in water. A Hindu may be completely immersed in water during his pagan ritual bathing in the Ganges River, but there is no obedience to God in the act just because it is coincidental to a requirement of God. In other words, it is impossible to obey God "accidentally."

One Must Comply with the Purpose of God's Command

Where God has stated a purpose for a given requirement, it is necessary to understand the stated purpose and to comply with God's requirement with the intent to achieve that purpose. Partaking of the unleavened bread and the fruit of the vine each first day of the week is required of Christians. While the specified outward form of the supper (the time, and the elements, etc.) is important, more than merely the act of thus partaking is required. The purpose of the act is essential – the remembrance by the partaker of the sacrifice of the body and blood of the Christ on the cross (1 Cor. 11:24–25). To eat of this supper, observing correctly its outward form, is to offer vain ritual if the observer is unaware of its purpose. Worse still, one so doing thereby becomes guilty of the body and blood of the Lord and eats and drinks damnation unto himself (vv. 27, 29)!

This principle also relates to baptism. Many religious bodies respect the Scriptural requirements relating to the acceptable candidate (a penitent believer who has confessed his faith), action (immersion), and element (water) of baptism. However, while complying with these requirements, these denominations deny the Scriptural purpose or design of baptism (i.e., salvation and its equivalents [Mark. 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16; 1 Pet. 3:21; et al.]), teaching that forgiveness of sins is granted **before** baptism. Faithful Gospel preachers from the time of and including the apostles have consistently taught that a religious act of immersion in water called "baptism" is a mere washing of the body if the candidate has received faulty teaching.

This truth surely includes one who either does not understand or who knowing, denies the Christ-ordained purpose of the act. Now, sad to say, some brethren have come forth teaching that one need not know or believe the Scripturally specified design/purpose of baptism, yet might be Scripturally baptized as long as he does it to "obey Christ."⁵ I deny that one can possibly obey Christ in baptism while ignorant of or denying the very design of the act as specified in Scripture! The example of Paul in regard to the twelve "disciples" in Ephesus who had been immersed after receiving flawed teaching on baptism is instructive. He first

taught them properly and then took them to the water where they were actually (because Scripturally) baptized (their first dipping was obviously of no spiritual profit) (Acts 19:1-7). Likewise, anyone baptized either not knowing or not complying with the Scripturally stated purpose of baptism has not been baptized at all by New Testament definition. All such are in need of being convinced of that purpose and of being baptized understanding and complying with it.

Obedience Requires More than Mere Compliance with Outward Form

“Going through the motions” is not enough, even if the “motions” are authorized by Scripture. While this is related to the aforementioned point, it deserves separate treatment. One might pray loud and long with beautiful words and correct form and yet not be heard approvingly by God at all (Mat. 6:5). The outward forms of prayer and singing praises are insufficient to comply with God’s requirements for these acts of worship. We must sing and pray from proper motive and with comprehension (Mat. 6:5; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). Some people assemble regularly, give generously, and sing loudly, but live like reprobates. A Gospel preacher may faithfully and forcefully preach the Word, but by his moral impurities be exposed as a hollow hypocrite who failed to live up to the level of his preaching. One could even give all of his money to feed the poor and give his body to be burned and it would be for nought if done for the wrong reason (1 Cor. 13:3). There is more to obedience than outward fulfillment of commands. As in worship, so in all that we do to serve God, it must be done “in spirit” – with the proper attitude and motivation – as well (John 4:23-24). The right thought, impulse, motive must be present behind the act for obedience to occur.

Obedience Requires Adherence to the Specifics of God’s Commands

While correct motivation is necessary to obedience in any given case, this in no wise lessens the obligation to carefully follow the specific commands God has given us. Here is where many go astray. They become so concerned with attitude and motivation that they make these the ultimate tests of what pleases God, even if one ignores or rejects the actual command God has given. Cain was the first to do this (Gen. 4:3-7). So far as we know he had the right attitude and motivation in his offering, but he ignored what God commanded him to offer. Nadab and Abihu were doubtless sincere when they made the same damnable error (Lev. 10:1-2). Uzza was zealous for the ark of God and its safety when he reached out to keep it from falling off the ox cart, but he was struck dead because he sought not God “after the due order”

(1 Chr. 13:9-10; 15:13). The “due order” required that some of the Levites carry the ark when it was to be moved (v. 2; Deu. 10:8) and David and Uzza ignored this detail in their first attempt at moving the ark. Numerous other such examples can be found in the Old Testament.

Some are quite willing to agree that strict obedience was required under the law of Moses, but since we live under grace through Christ, they aver that we do not have to be so careful about the “details” of what Christ teaches. Some even argue that we are not under any spiritual law at all since the death of Christ. Others believe that if one is sincere God will accept his service, regardless of how much it may conflict with God’s revealed will. However, they did not learn this from the New Testament. Saul of Tarsus was undoubtedly sincere when he was persecuting the church (Acts 23:1), but this did not cause God to ignore his behavior. Cornelius was a deeply sincere religious man, but he still had to obey the commands of Christ in order to be saved (Acts 10:1-2, 7, 33, 47-48; 11:14).

Hebrews 10:28-29 powerfully refutes this idea that we do not have to keep the “letter” of the law as long as we keep the “spirit” of the law (as liberals like to put it):

He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?

The argument is that if God was so exacting under the old, inferior law, how much more exacting He is under the new, superior law. A similar argument had already been made in Hebrews 2:2-3:

For if the word spoken by angels was stedfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompence of reward; How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him.

This passage uses an emphatic style of expression to make the point that we cannot escape God’s wrath if we think we can transgress and disobey God’s law for us under Christ. Among the many rebukes Jesus delivered against the Pharisees for their hypocrisy was that they tithed mint, anise, and cumin and neglected justice, mercy, and faith. However, He did not say that they could ignore the relatively small matter of tithing their herbs: “... [T]hese (justice, mercy, faith) ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other (tithing their herbs) undone” (Mat. 23:23b). We do not have the choice of following the right form or having the right motive in our service to God. We must have both; form is just as essential as motive.

“Selective” Obedience Is Not Obedience at All

There is an old story of a father in the early days of our nation who received a land grant on the frontier. Before moving his wife and young children there, he sent a grown son to begin developing the land. Having earlier examined the property, the father charted for the son just exactly where he wanted the well dug, the house built, and the barn located. At last, the son sent for the rest of the family. Upon arriving, the father saw that his son had dug the well and built the house just where he had specified. However, he also discovered that his son, disagreeing with him about the location of the barn, had built it in a different place, instead. At first glance one might think that the son was at least two-thirds obedient to his father, but upon closer examination we must conclude that he was not obedient at all. The fact of the matter is that, instead of obeying his father in the location of the well and the house, the son just happened to agree with his father concerning them. Had he disagreed about their location he would have changed them, too. There is no such thing as one’s being “two-thirds obedient.” One is either obedient or disobedient. “Selective” obedience is shown to be no obedience at all.

King Saul was an advocate of this philosophy. He was told to utterly destroy all of the Amalekites and their possessions, but he chose to exempt King Agag and the choicest flocks and herds. From Samuel’s rebuke of him it is clear that in the eyes of God he had not obeyed at all. The rich young ruler who came to Christ was willing to obey what Christ told him (“keep the commandments”) as long as he agreed with them and they demanded no sacrifice. However, when the Lord told him to do something with which he disagreed (give all that he had to the poor and follow Christ), he was unwilling to do so (Mat. 19:16-22). The act of offering sacrifices was no challenge to Abraham. The test of obedience came when God said, “Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering...” (Gen. 22:2). Abraham’s faith was demonstrated in the fact that he was not selective in his obedience (Jam. 2:21).

Many persons have strict standards of morality and believe in Christ, both of which God has commanded. However, the same God says that one must be baptized in order to be saved, but those morally upright believers reject Mark 16:16. It is at least suspicious that they really are not obedient in their morals and faith, but that they just agreed with what the Bible teaches on those points. Had they not agreed with them, they would have doubtless disregarded them just as they did baptism.

Some have done what the Bible teaches one to do in order to be saved, become a Christian, and be added to the church, but they totally disregard what the Lord teaches about not forsaking the assembly. Have they really been obedient at all? A Christian may never miss a worship or study assembly, which is God's will, but he closes his ears every time a word is preached or taught about one's financial responsibilities to the cause of Christ. Has this person been really obedient in any respect? Others who have obeyed the Gospel and who are apparently sound in doctrine and practice have approved the unscriptural marriage of a son or daughter. Addressing just such an occurrence, James wrote: "For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is become guilty of all" (Jam. 2:10).

We simply do not have the luxury of going through the New Testament as we do a supermarket, selecting only the things we desire while leaving other items on the shelves. Obedience requires us to submit to Christ in "...all things whatsoever he shall say unto you" (Acts 3:22). Christ said, "...Observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen" (Mat. 28:20).

It is one thing to disobey Christ unintentionally through ignorance or through a momentary weakness. Such a one will often be quick to repent and will begin obeying any command of which he was ignorant as soon as he learns of it. It is quite another thing to know what Christ requires, as did the rich young ruler, and refuse to do it. There is really no such thing as deliberate "selective" obedience because such does not constitute obedience.

Conclusion

God's dual promise through Moses to Israel of respective rewards and retributions related to obedience is His message to all men for all time:

Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse; A blessing, if ye obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you this day: And a curse, if ye will not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn aside out of the way which I command you this day, to go after other gods, which ye have not known. . . . And ye shall observe to do all the statutes and judgments which I set before you this day (Deu. 11:26-28, 32).

Those who minimize or even deny the necessity of careful obedience to God either do not understand or refuse to accept the nature of God and His grace. Obedience, rather than being excluded by grace, puts us in position to receive God's saving grace through the shed blood of His Son: "And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him" (Heb. 5:9). Without blush or apology, we boldly say with Paul: "Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much

more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phi. 2:12). If we refuse to obey the Word of Christ, we reject Christ Himself. That very disobedience will rise up to haunt and condemn us at The Judgment:

He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day (John 12:48).

Endnotes

1. James Strong, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance* (Nashville, TN: Crusade Bible Publishers, Inc., n.d.), p. 733 (*obey*) in combination with “Dictionary of the Hebrew Bible” addendum, p. 118.
2. Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs, eds., *The New Brown, Driver, and Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Lafayette, IN: Associated Publishers and Authors, Inc., 1981), pp. 1033–34.
3. Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1981), 1:223–24.
4. *Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language*, ed. William Allan Neilson (Springfield, MA: G. and C. Merriam Co., 1957), p. 1678.
5. Rubel Shelly, “What Are They Saying About Baptism?” in *The Ashwood Leaves* (Bulletin of the Ashwood Church of Christ, Nashville, TN), February 1, 1984

[**Note:** I wrote this MS for and I presented a digest of it orally at the 10th Annual Denton Lectures, hosted by the Pearl St. Church of Christ, Denton, TX, Nov. 10–14, 1991. I directed the lectureship and edited and published (Valid Pub., Inc.) the book of the lectures, *Studies in 1, 2 Samuel.*]

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