

Man's Sacred Duty of Obedience

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It is the teaching of Scripture that man, due to his creation as God's covenant friend, is confronted with the moral duty of being subject at all times to God and His holy commandments. Scripture teaches that although man has rebelled against this demand of obedience, the demand still confronts him. Even though man says "no" to the divine command, even though he tries to substitute something else for obedience, God continues to say, "Obey my commandments." It is also the testimony of Scripture that the children of God are restored to obedience in Jesus Christ, for "though He were a Son, yet learned He obedience by the things which He suffered; and being made perfect, He became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey Him."

The consideration of I Samuel 15:22-23 will help us to understand what obedience is and how it must be practiced: "And Samuel said, 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."

These words were spoken by the prophet Samuel to Saul the king of Israel. God has given Saul the commandment to utterly destroy the Amalekites, to slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass. This destruction was to be total because the Amalekites (children of Esau) had harassed the children of Israel as they journeyed from Egypt to Canaan. This was the righteous judgment of God upon a wicked nation, and nothing might be spared! However, this did not seem good to Saul. Although he killed all the people and the poor animals, he kept the king of the Amalekites alive as well as the good animals. These he will use to get himself great honor among the people. He will parade Agag through the streets as a reminder of the great victory he has given them, and he will give the spoil to the people so they will love him!

The evil intent of Saul's heart the Lord reveals to Samuel. And when he questions him as to the meaning of the bleating of the sheep and the lowing of the oxen which he hears, Saul responds that not he, but the people have done this thing; and even that is not so bad, but the people will use all these fine animals to sacrifice to the Lord! And when he is reprimanded for his actions, he insists that he has obeyed the voice of the Lord! Speaking through Samuel, God has this to say about the acts of Saul: first, God calls his activity rebellion, which is simply the refusal of a person to heed the words of someone in authority over him. God has the right to demand of Saul what He would because He is God, and further because He had made Saul king of Israel exactly in order to reveal His kingship and authority in the midst of His people. But Saul does not understand this being a faithless, carnal man. He viewed his kingship not as an office of sacred duty, but as a position in which he could enrich and enhance himself. That rebellion is compared to "witchcraft or divination", the pretension that a person has received wisdom from another source than God, so that a person does something other than that which God has told him to do! Rebellion is as witchcraft!

Saul's sin is also called stubbornness, which implies that a person persists in a sinful way, even when the evil of his has been pointed out to him. This applies to Saul in two ways here: this is not the first run-in that Saul has had with Samuel. A short time before he grew weary of waiting for Samuel before a battle, he himself made a sacrifice to God, something a king was not allowed to do. The result was that Samuel tells him that the kingdom would not continue in his line, with his seed. And here the king persists in a sinful way. Secondly, he is stubborn because even when he is caught red-handed with Agag and the animals, when his sin is explained to him, he insists that he is right. "I have obeyed the voice of the Lord!" Stubbornness is an iniquity and idolatry. Stubbornness partakes of the sin of worshipping idols. And do you know something? When a person is stubborn the strange god he worships is himself! He will not listen to God or His Word or His servants. He will only listen to himself, and thus he makes of himself a god!

Samuel has very sharp words for this situation. "Does the Lord delight in sacrifices as much as in obedience? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams." The point is that the Lord is satisfied with nothing less than perfect obedience from the heart! (Read Is.1:10-15) It is true that God had instituted sacrifice in Israel, and when they were brought in faith, in obedience, and in love, they were very beautiful

for they spoke of the blood of atonement to come! But when they were brought with a heart that was far from God, with an attitude that was proud and haughty, then they were an abomination to God and He will not receive them, God demands obedience from the heart outward, and without this inner obedience of the heart all man ever does is sin.

This incident from the life of Saul is of great practical significance to us. As with Saul, we are also confronted with specific commands from God. We are told to be “holy even as He is holy,” we are told to “purify ourselves.” God tells us to put away every sin, cleanse our hearts, and live in complete submission to His Word. And His Word touches all our life: our marriage and family relationships, our covenant obligations, our stewardship, our daily labors, the internal life of our souls that no one else can know. And often times we reveal that we are altogether too much like this man Saul. We pride ourselves on our external obedience: we go to church, we give our gifts, we don’t go to wicked dances and the theater, we have a good name in the community. But let us remember that Saul killed the refuse and the vile too. He put away certain things, that was not his sin. His sin was that he kept certain other things, and isn’t that also what we do? We put away several evil practices while we cleave mightily to several others, in the vain hope that this will please God! So that our sin is that we do not submit ourselves completely to the will of God.

There are two points that must be made in this connection yet. Like Saul, we know how to make excuses when our sins have been exposed. When confronted with the educational demands of the covenant, both in the home and in the Christian day school, we can so easily say that we are too busy to give our children the proper guidance, or the Christian schools are not convenient or are too expensive. When a certain kind of work would take us away from the life and activity of the church, or when a certain work would demand of us that we join a godless labor union, we can say, “We have to have a job,” as if that comes as a surprise to God. When a church departs from the truth and denies the vital doctrines of the Scriptures, there are many children of God who try to justify their membership there by saying they can do more good there, attempting to correct the errors. On and on, we know how to make excuses.

The other point is that if a person does not set himself manfully to the task of perfect obedience to God, he soon begins to make deals with God. Do you ever try to make deals with God? This is how it goes: we think, if God will allow me to have this or this, then I will give up some other thing which is clearly wrong. When we are young, we say there are many things I want to do (and I know they are not right), but later on, when I’m older, then I’ll be a good Christian. Or we say to God when we are really in a jam in life, “If God will get me out of this, then I’ll be good!” But then the danger passes, and we are the same, sinful individuals. We try, in all this, to get God to be satisfied with something less than perfect obedience. The very attempt is sinful, and it never, never prospers.

We must learn obedience, and that obedience is primary in the child of God’s life. The key to a successful and happy life lies in the possession of true obedience. To be without it is to die, but to practice it leads to a life that is free from want and care and fear. As Moses wrote: “Set your hearts unto all the words which I testify among you this day, which ye shall command your children to observe to do, all the words of this law, for it is not a vain thing for you; because it is your life.” (Duet. 32:46) Disobedience is certain death while obedience from the heart is eternal life.

There are three things that we must know in order to practice Biblical obedience. The first is that we must know, and be personally convinced, that no one is obedient in himself. We are all born children of disobedience. Unless a person believes that, he will never apply himself to the learning of obedience for he thinks he has it already. Secondly, we must see in our Lord Jesus Christ amazing, perfect obedience. He came to do not His own will, but the will of Him that sent Him. All the way from Bethlehem to Calvary, He did what God gave Him to do, even though He was tempted and the way was extremely difficult. But in our place He endured faithful to the end, and He was raised and exalted with a Mediator’s glory!

And therefore finally, we must also see our obedience in Him. Working with His mighty Spirit in our hearts, Jesus changes our hard, obdurate wills into conformity with His perfect will, He creates in us hearts that love righteousness and purity, He leads us day by day in the pathway of child-like obedience so that we forsake the world and its rebellion. This, then is the conclusion of the matter: “Fear God and keep His commandments; for this is the whole duty of man.” (Ecc.12:13)