

The Imperative of Obedience

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[Scripture quotations taken from the NASB](#)

In John 15:1-8 Jesus taught as He did many times by using an analogy from things in the natural world. To teach His disciples about spiritual fruitfulness on this occasion, He compared Himself to a vine, and men to branches.

Jesus spoke of two different categories of men in this passage: those who abide or remain in Him, and those who do not. Those who abide in Christ are believers, and it is only because we “abide in the Vine” that we are “branches” that can, and will indeed, bear fruit to the glory of God (John 15:8). In contrast, unbelievers do not abide in Christ, and therefore they are unable to bear fruit. In order for anyone to bear fruit to the glory of God, they must “abide in the Vine”, which is to say that they must be in union with Christ. In other words, they must be a believer.

A few verses later in John 15, Jesus said: “If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love.” (John 15:10). Here in John 15:10, and also in John 14:21-24, Jesus taught that men will demonstrate a genuine faith in Him by the fact that they walk in obedience to His commands.

The Apostle John also gave us this same teaching in 1 John 2:3-6 and 1 John 5:3-5. Believers will at times sin after they are saved, but the life of every believer will be characterized fundamentally by obedience and submission to God's word, in contrast to those of the world whose lives will be characterized fundamentally by sin and self-seeking.

Therefore, by our obedience to God's word we give evidence that we are genuine believers. And every genuine believer will bear fruit to the glory of God as a result of the fact that he "abides" in the Vine, in union with Christ. This fruit will be produced because by God's grace we have been called to faith in Christ (1 Peter 1:1-2, and many others), and by God's power we abide or remain in Christ (Philippians 1:6, 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24, 1 Peter 1:3-5).

The Consequences of Our Disobedience

Though God has called us to faith in His Son, and our lives will be fundamentally characterized by obedience and submission to His word, we as God's people sometimes sin by disobeying Him. As we saw in the previous chapter, Paul revealed his own struggle with sin in Romans 7, and he did so in order that we might understand the struggle against sin that every believer will experience.

When we yield to temptation and disobey God, we will bring His discipline or chastening upon ourselves, as we are admonished in Hebrews 12:4-13. Within this passage, we find this particularly strong admonition: "Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed." (Hebrews 12:12-13).

The implication here is that our failure to restore ourselves to obedience could result in that which is "lame" becoming disabled. In other words, as a result of our disobedience, the point could come where the opportunity for service in a particular capacity, and the eternal reward from that service, could be lost to us in some measure.

The strong admonition to restore ourselves to obedience that we see in Hebrews 12:12-13 is also demonstrated in another passage of Scripture. In

Jeremiah 18 we read that the word of the Lord came to the prophet telling him to go down to the potter's house, where He would give him His message.

When Jeremiah got there, he saw the potter working at the wheel. As he was watching the potter form a vessel, the prophet observed: "But the vessel that he was making of clay was spoiled in the hand of the potter; so he remade it into another vessel, as it pleased the potter to make." (Jeremiah 18:4). The Lord then told Jeremiah that His people Israel were like clay in His hands, and that He could do with them as the potter had done, and form a spoiled vessel into another vessel for a different purpose, as He sees fit.

Therefore as believers, let us be diligent to see that our lives as God's chosen vessels are not "spoiled" or marred by sin. If this does occur, even though our salvation itself is eternally secure and assured, we may be formed by the Potter into another vessel for some other place of service, as a consequence of our own sin. As a result, we may suffer the loss of blessings and rewards that we might have otherwise realized, had we not been disobedient.

When John wrote in Revelation 7:17 that God will wipe away every tear from our eyes, one can imagine that some of those tears could be for lost blessings which came about through our own disobedience to God and His word. The matter of obedience to God should be taken very seriously by all of us as believers. Although our salvation is eternally secure and certain, we may lose both temporal and eternal rewards as a result of our disobedience.

Building Upon the Foundation of Our Faith

In 1 Corinthians the Apostle Paul taught believers about the eternal reward or loss of reward that each of us will experience, depending upon our works. Paul wrote:

According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he

will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. (1 Corinthians 3:10-15)

We have only one time to pass through this life on earth, and as Paul taught, the works that we do during this time will be tested by fire to determine their quality. Therefore, let us diligently strive not to be among those whose works done in disobedience are burned up, because even though we ourselves will be saved, we will suffer the loss of reward. Rather let us be diligent to be among those whose works done in obedience to God stand the test of fire, and let us rejoice knowing that the time will come when we will receive our eternal blessing and reward for our obedience.

All men are servants of God and will serve His purposes in some capacity, even those who do not acknowledge Him (Isaiah 45:1-6, Romans 9:17-18, others). With this in mind, we will consider the two categories of servants that Jesus mentioned in Luke 12:35-48.

In this passage we see that Jesus admonished everyone present at that time to watch and be ready for service. Believers will be the servants who obey the Master's command. They will be the ones whom the Master finds waiting and watching for His return, as we read in Luke 12:35-38.

Other servants do not obey the Master's command. They engage in worldly, sinful indulgences, even beating their fellow servants, demonstrating a blatant lack of any love or concern for them. Jesus spoke of these servants in Luke 12:45-46, saying that the Master would ultimately cut them to pieces and assign them a place with the unbelievers.

We as believers, by the sovereign choice and grace of God are assured salvation, and we will escape the fate of those who are "cut to pieces" and assigned "a place with the unbelievers". However, we should be very careful to heed Jesus' warning in Luke 12:47-48.

In these verses Jesus taught that the servant who knows his master's will, but does not prepare himself or does not do what his master requires, will be beaten with many stripes. (Again, consider Hebrews 12:11). And Jesus also taught that the servant who is not aware of his master's will and does things deserving of punishment will be beaten with few stripes. Jesus concluded His teaching in this passage by saying that much will be required from the one who has been given much and entrusted with much.

The longer we walk with God, the more we will understand of His word and His will. And the more we know of God's word and what He requires of us, the greater responsibility we have to be obedient to what He has revealed to us. Let us therefore be diligent not to be among those servants who know our Master's will, but do not prepare ourselves or do not do what our Master wants, because there is a consequence for this, and as Jesus admonished us, we will be beaten with many stripes.

Such disobedience is not building upon the foundation of our faith in Christ with gold, silver and precious stones, as Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 3:12-15. Rather it is building with wood, hay and straw, which will not stand the test of fire and will result in lost blessings and rewards for the believer who builds in this way.

There are two ways in which we must be careful to obey God. The first is that we must be obedient to all that is taught in the Holy Bible, which is God's word. The second way that we must be careful to obey God comes when He reveals to us some special work or place of service that He has assigned for us. These special works or places of service will always be consistent with everything that is written in the Bible and will in no case violate any biblical principle.

When the time comes for us to serve God in some particular capacity as we know He has directed us, let us cleanse ourselves from wickedness in order to be useful in His service (2 Timothy 2:21), and let us also do whatever things are required in preparation for this particular work, as He leads us. Then, when the time comes, let us do what He has told us to do, so that we will not be among those servants who suffer His discipline and the loss of His rewards and blessings.

The Loss of God's Temporal Blessings

Not only are there warnings given to us in the Bible about the loss of eternal rewards for failing to obey God, but there are also accounts of the loss of temporal blessings when God's people put their own desires ahead of their obedience to Him. In the book of Haggai, we read of the lost material blessings experienced by the Jewish exiles who had returned from Babylon. God withheld these blessings from them because of their complacency in obeying Him in the matter of rebuilding His temple, which had been destroyed by the Babylonians decades earlier.

Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, conquered Jerusalem as foretold by the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 25:1-14), because the people of Judah and Jerusalem refused to turn from their evil ways. He led around ten thousand captives back to Babylon, leaving only the poorest of the people behind. Jehoiachin was king of Judah and reigned in Jerusalem at that time, and he also was taken captive and led to Babylon.

Nebuchadnezzar then appointed Mattaniah, Jehoiachin's uncle, to be king of Judah, and he changed his name to Zedekiah. Nine years later, Zedekiah rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar. So Nebuchadnezzar again led his army against Jerusalem, and after a two year siege he again captured the city. Once again captives were taken back to Babylon, and this time the walls of Jerusalem were broken down and the temple was destroyed (2 Kings 24, 25 and 2 Chronicles 36).

Decades later, Cyrus, king of Persia, conquered Babylon. The Lord spoke of Cyrus as His "shepherd" and "anointed", to accomplish all that He pleased for the sake of Israel, His chosen (Isaiah 44:28-45:6). God chose to use the pagan king of a pagan nation, Cyrus, king of Persia, to prevail against another pagan nation, Babylon, and in so doing He brought to an end the captivity of the Jews in Babylon at that time, fulfilling Jeremiah's prophecy of a seventy year Babylonian captivity (Jeremiah 25:11-12, 29:10).

In the first year of the reign of Cyrus over the Babylonians, he issued a proclamation allowing the return to Jerusalem of any Jewish captives who wished to return and rebuild the temple of the Lord (Ezra 1:1-4). Cyrus also restored the articles belonging to the temple that Nebuchadnezzar had carried off to Babylon when his army plundered and destroyed the temple years earlier. Much more can be read in the book of Ezra about the return of the exiles from Babylon and their efforts to rebuild the temple.

After two years of work, the foundation of the new temple had been completed, but opposition arose to their building at this point. The work was stopped for a time, until Darius became king of Persia. Darius supported the Jews in their efforts to rebuild the temple, and the work could have been resumed. However the Jews had become somewhat disinterested and disengaged in the rebuilding work, preferring rather to tend to their own personal pursuits. It was at this time that the Lord spoke to them through the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, telling the people that He had withheld His material blessings from them because they had not obeyed Him in completing the rebuilding of the temple, as He had commanded. Beginning in Haggai 1:7 we read:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, “Consider your ways! Go up to the mountains, bring wood and rebuild the temple, that I may be pleased with it and be glorified,” says the Lord. “You look for much, but behold, it comes to little; when you bring it home, I blow it away. Why?” declares the Lord of hosts, “Because of My house which lies desolate, while each of you runs to his own house. Therefore, because of you the sky has withheld its dew and the earth has withheld its produce. I called for a drought on the land, on the mountains, on the grain, on the new wine, on the oil, on what the ground produces, on men, on cattle, and on all the labor of your hands.” (Haggai 1:7-11)

After the Lord told the people that He had withheld material blessings from them because they had not obeyed Him in completing the rebuilding of the temple, He then told them to resume the work, assuring them that He was with them (Haggai 2:3-5). And as we see later in chapter 2, the Lord spoke through Haggai yet again, emphasizing to His people again that He had withheld material blessings from them because they had not obeyed Him in this matter. But then He assured them of the restoration of those lost blessings as they resumed the work that He had commanded them to do (Haggai 2:15-19).

In Conclusion

Much has been written in the Bible about sin, which is disobedience to, or transgressing the word of God. Sin ultimately results in death (Romans 6:23, James 1:13-15), and in this process of sin working death there are losses in the lives of those who sin.

The unbeliever suffers an eternity separated from God, and he receives the just punishment for his sins. Those of us who are believers in Christ are saved from that fate. But if we willfully participate in sin, to which we are no longer enslaved (Romans 6), and from which God has provided a way of escape for us (1 Corinthians 10:13), then we will suffer loss. Not only will we suffer the loss of temporal blessings which we might have realized had we not sinned, but we could also suffer the loss of eternal reward in Heaven, because works of disobedience will not stand the test of fire as Paul said, but will be burned up (1 Corinthians 3:12-15).

Therefore, as God’s people let us be diligent to obey Him in all that He has made known to us through His word. Let us not be as those whose works are burned up, and who are saved only as one escaping through the fire. Rather let us

be diligent to obey all that our God has commanded us to do, so that we will not suffer the loss of any blessing that He has for us, either here on earth or in Heaven.