

“TO OBEY IS BETTER THAN SACRIFICE”

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on November 27, 1960 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

We live in an age in which there is much evidence that respect for law and authority is declining. Ours is a day in which juvenile delinquency has taken on national proportions, with teen-age gangs constituting a real problem in many of the major cities. Ours is a day in which not only the number of crimes, but also the percentage of criminal activity, has increased. Not only in America, but throughout the world, there seems to be a climate of rebellion against constituted authority. Witness the students' riots in many foreign countries. The rough treatment that the President of the United States received in Argentina, and the chaos occasioned by student riots in Japan are concrete evidences of a spirit of rebellion and anarchy.

King Saul

It seems appropriate, for these and other reasons, to spend some time in studying the important theme of obedience. God's word, in both Old and New Testaments, places strong emphasis upon this theme. One of the finest passages in all of the scriptures is that found in the story of Saul, as recorded in I Samuel 15: 22-23, "Hath Jehovah as great delight in burnt-offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of Jehovah? 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 idolatry and teraphim."

These words come as the climax of the familiar story of Saul's disobedience of God's command concerning the Amalekites. Because this nation of people had been a thorn in Israel's side from the time that they blocked Israel's path toward the Promised Land, on down until the time of King Saul, God gave explicit directions that they should be completely destroyed. Neither human nor animal life was to be spared. However, when King Saul led his army successfully against King Agag and his hosts, he and the people decided that it would be a shame to destroy the good along with the bad. Accordingly, King Saul saved or spared King Agag, that he might bring him home as a trophy of triumph. Then, they spared "the best of the sheep, and of the oxen, and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was good." (I Samuel 15:9). Amazingly, when the prophet Samuel came to meet Saul on his triumphant return, Saul said, "I have performed the commandment of Jehovah." (I Samuel 15:13). Is it possible that Saul actually believed that he had obeyed God's commandment, while destroying only part of the Amalekites? Hardly, but sometimes we also deceive ourselves into thinking that the things that we do are acceptable to God, when they are condemned in God's word. It is so easy for man to explain away his own sins as merely innocent mistakes, and to consider himself a loyal subject of God, even while living in violation of God's will.

In any case, Samuel did not let Saul's statement go unchallenged. He asked, "What meaneth then this bleating of the sheep in mine ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?" (I Samuel 15:14). Saul explained that the best of the animals had been saved for sacrifices to God. It is in this conversation, at its climax, that Samuel said, "Hath Jehovah as great delight in burnt-offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of Jehovah? 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 idolatry and teraphim. Because thou has rejected the word of Jehovah, he hath also rejected thee from being king."

A Covenant God

A reading of the Old Testament indicates clearly the fundamental nature of obedience. Whenever man has been willing to obey God's commandments, he has been blessed. Whenever he has refused to follow God's directions, he has been punished. This is the unanimous story from the days of Adam and Eve on down till the end of the record. By their disobedience, the first pair started all the suffering and woe that the human race has fallen heir to. The tragic sufferings of individuals, as well as the tragic sufferings of Israel, have resulted from man's stubborn insistence upon going his own way. Over and over again, disobedience has been punished. In contrast, throughout this long period of Old Testament history, those who have been sensitive to God's commandments have been blessed. The Noahs, the Abrahams, the Josephs, the Daniels, and others of God's faithful ones have been exalted far beyond their fondest dreams.

God's system of working with his people was simply to give them a covenant, or set of commands, and to bless them as long as they remained true to the covenant. For example, just before giving the Law of Moses on Mt. Sinai, we find God's emphasis upon this idea of the covenant in these words, "And Moses went up unto God, and Jehovah called unto him out of the mountain, saying, Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel: Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bear you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be mine own possession from among all peoples: for all the earth is mine. And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel." (Exodus 19: 3-6). God is a covenant God, and those who are wise keep covenant with him.

In the opening chapter of Isaiah there is an appealing paragraph, "Come now, and let us reason together, saith Jehovah: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land; but if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword; for the mouth of Jehovah hath spoken it." (Isaiah 1:18-20).

Even Though A Son

The New Testament also places strong emphasis upon the importance of obedience to the will of God. No fact indicates more clearly the vital importance of obedience than the fact that our Lord was consistently obedient to his heavenly Father. For example, the Hebrew writer says, "Though he as a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became unto all them that obey him the author of eternal salvation." (Hebrews 5: 8-9). To the Philippians, Paul said of Christ, "And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, becoming obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross." (Philippians 2:8). During his earthly ministry Jesus himself said, I do always the things that are pleasing to him." (John 8:29). It was through his perfect obedience to the will of God that Christ achieved his perfection of life.

Obedience Is For All

Throughout the New Testament we constantly find passages emphasizing the importance of obedience. For example, Ephesians 6: 1-3 speaks to children in these words, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honor thy father and mother (which is the first commandment with promise), that it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth." Across the page in Ephesians 5: 22-23, Paul writes, "Wives, be in subjection unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife' as Christ also is the head of the church, being himself the saviour of the body." Employees are admonished to be obedient to their employers in these words, "Servants, be obedient unto them that according to the flesh are your masters, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; not in the way of eye service, as men-pleasers; but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart." (Ephesians 6: 5-6).

All Christians are to be in subjection to elders. Hebrews 13:17 suggests this, "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit to them: for they watch in behalf of your souls, as they that shall give account; that they may do this with joy, and not with grief, for this were unprofitable for you." All are to be in subjection to the government under which they live. Romans 13:1-2 makes this very plain, "Let every soul be in subjection to the higher powers: for there is no power but of God; and the powers that be are ordained of God. Therefore he that resisteth the power, withstandeth the ordinance of God: and they that withstand shall receive to themselves judgment." Jesus' own words are in full agreement with this, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's." (Mark 12: 17).

In whatever circumstance of life, on whatever level of existence' God's people are to be respectful of constituted authority. Children are to be obedient to parents; wives are to be in subjection to husbands; all Christians are to be in subjection to elders; and all Christians are to be obedient to rulers. Above all of these relationships, there is man's primary need of obedience to the laws of God. Peter and the apostles once said, "We must obey God rather than men." (Acts 5:29). With obedience to God as his first responsibility, the Christian is a law-abiding, dutiful, respectful, and obedient citizen. Anarchy, disobedience, and disrespect are foreign to the life of a Christian.

Did They Really Obey?

Out of the past there has been handed down a story that puts into clear focus what obedience actually implies. The story is of frontier days when the people were ever migrating westward. A farmer in Kentucky, finding it difficult to make a living on a hilly, wooded farm, made a survey trip to the new country of Oklahoma. There he found an ideal location for his family. Coming back to Kentucky, he drew a map of the farm which he had secured and gave instructions to his sons how he wanted the farm to be planted when they came to occupy their new home. His first suggestion was that there was a large low-lying field that would be ideal for corn. Then he described a rolling hill that would be ideal for wheat. Next, he marked a spot near the road which passed by the farm, suggesting it as the location where he wanted the barn to be built. A hundred yards or so above the road he marked a location for the house. Then, finally, he suggested the planting of an orchard on a hill on the back side of the farm.

In the course of time the father grew sick and died, before the family was able to move the new home. Eventually, however, the family did move and upon their arrival they drew out the old map and studied the directions that the father had made for planting the farm. As the boys walked over the ground they agreed that the low-lying land was good for corn and decided to plant corn there. They agreed that the rolling hillside would be ideal for wheat and made preparations to plant wheat there. They also liked the location for the barn and the location for the house and decided that there they should be built. However, when it came to the planting of the orchard there was serious disagreement. The hill on the back side of the farm did not seem quite right, so they changed that part of the plan, putting the orchard near the house.

Now, we ask the crucial question: did these sons obey their father in anything? At first one is inclined to say, "Yes." The correct answer, however, is "No." They agreed with their father's judgment about the best place for the corn, the wheat, the barn, and the

house. Then their judgment differed from his judgment, they went their own way. Those boys simply agreed with their father, but they did not obey him in anything.

Our Way or God's way

There are many people who think that they are obedient to God, whose lives are very much like the behavior of these sons. They agree with God that a great many things that are commanded in the Bible are good, and, therefore, accept them and live them in their lives. However, when their thinking disagrees with God's commands, they go their own way. Because they so often go the way that God directs in his book, they mistakenly think that they are very good and that they have obeyed God in "almost everything." The real test of obedience is simply this: When the way we want to go is different from the way that God commands, do we go God's way? Only then, can we say that we are obedient to God.

In the 20th century liberal theology is an illustration of what we have just been saying. Liberal theologians are often in agreement with the Lord's teachings. but sometimes when the teaching does not seem so appealing, they suggest that perhaps Paul was mistaken when he said so-and-so. They speak of sorting out the grit and the gravel from the meat and the milk of the Bible. They talk of finding the "kerygma" of the scriptures and leaving the out-worn, pre-scientific behind. What they are actually doing, however, is exalting their own reasoning, making it the final arbiter in all matters of difference. This is a dangerous, self-centered, man-centered view of religion. It is far from the humble obedience that the scriptures require.

Conclusion

It is well for us to remember Jesus' words, "Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 7:21). The words of James are in similar vein, "But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deluding your own selves." (James 1:22). The final message from the Lord that I would leave with you is found in words of John 14:15, "If ye love me, ye will keep my commandments."

This is the crux of the whole matter. If we love God enough, we will keep his commandments. Let us so think of the blessing that he has showered upon us, both temporal and spiritual, and the loving, tender care with which he constantly surrounds us, that out of appreciation for what he has done for us will we love him enough to do what he asks us to do. Our gratitude to God can be expressed only in loving, humble obedience to his will.