

Loving=Obedience=Blessing (Deuteronomy 11:18-28; I John 5:1-5; John 15:9-17)

When I was a child, I remember frequently asking my mom and dad, "Do I have to? Do I really have to clean up my room? Do I really have to be nice to Johnny? Do I really have to do my homework?" As teenagers, we really rebel against obedience. We tell our friends, "I can't wait until I don't have to obey anyone!" And so, when we get married, we're not about to promise to even obey our spouse. We've taken the word "obey" out of our marriage vows. We long for promotions in the work place, so that we can give the orders and show others "how it ought to be done." We're rugged, independent Americans. We don't want to conform to anyone else's ideas or orders. We sing "Don't fence me in," and "I did it my way." We want hamburgers "our own way." Obedience just doesn't come naturally to us. And, so, even as adults, when someone tells us that we have to do something, the same question that we, as children, asked our parents comes to our minds--"Do I have to?"

Now, since willing obedience is such a rarity, it's really incredible that we're all here this morning. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that it's a miracle that we're here any Sunday morning! Our presence here must be a testimony to the amazing action of God in our lives! For, friends, when we gather, we largely come to hear our Heavenly Father speaking to us. And we all know that when God speaks to us from this book we call our Bible, he's usually talking to us about how important it is that we be obedient to him. On page after page, we find humans struggling with obedience, just as we do. On page after page, we find rebellious humans asking the Heavenly Father, "Ah, God, do I have to?" And on page after page, we hear God stressing that, yes, while it may not come naturally to us, our obedience to God is crucial.

Just think about how often the main purpose of a story in the Bible is to teach us obedience. God told Adam and Eve to not eat the fruit of one particular tree. But they disobeyed God, and as a result, they lost the beautiful and harmonious life God had given them in the Garden of Eden. On the other hand, Noah obeyed God, even though everyone thought he was crazy for building a boat on dry land, but because of his obedience to God, Noah ended up being a blessing to his own family and future generations. Similarly Abraham was a blessing to his own family and future generations because he was faithful or obedient to God. When God told him to leave his homeland and extended family and extensive property and journey into unknown territory, Abraham left it all behind him. Furthermore, even when God pushed the limits of Abraham's obedience by asking Abraham to

sacrifice his precious son Isaac, even when it was this tough to obey God, Abraham did not falter. He was a man determined to obey his God! While it's not clear whether God prevented Moses from entering the Promised Land because he killed the Egyptian or because he did not strike the rock exactly as God had told him to, either way, Moses was prevented from entering the Promised Land because of his disobedience to God. The Israelites had to wander for 40 years in the wilderness because they kept grumbling against God, not willingly trusting him. The entire evil generation that had not willingly obeyed God had die off. Thus, when their descendants finally stood on the threshold of the new land God was giving them, the new chance God was giving them, God wanted to encourage these new Israelites to not make the same mistake that Adam and Eve and the people of Noah's day and Moses and their grandparents and parents had made. So, speaking through Moses, God told them, "See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today; and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn from the way that I am commanding you today, to follow other gods that you have not known" (Deuteronomy 11:26-28). Couldn't be much clearer than this, could it? It all boiled down to obedience.

But, again, it's not just us rugged independent Americans who find obedience difficult; it's difficult for all humans. So God had to keep on teaching that lesson of obedience. Samson lost his power because he disobeyed God. He'd made a promise to God to not cut his hair, but he disobeyed God and his promise to God when he let Delilah cut this hair. King David lost his son because he disobeyed God by breaking one of God's 10 Commandments. Solomon lost his kingdom because he disobeyed God by breaking another of God's 10 Commandments. God sent prophet after prophet to remind the people of how important it was for them to obey God, but, nonetheless, the Israelites continued to do what they wanted to do instead of what God wanted them to do, and as a result were carried off into exile. The message of the exile is not that the Babylonians were militarily stronger than the Israelites but rather that the Israelites had disobeyed God by not living and worshiping as God had taught them.

And when we get to the pages of what we call the New Testament, the obedience theme continues. We find Mary, a young girl, being shocked by the revelation of the angel concerning her own life but, nonetheless, quietly, answering, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). And we find the angel telling Zechariah that his son, John the Baptist, would

"turn...the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:17). And we find Jesus. Certainly, the message of Jesus' life is that God sent Jesus precisely because it was so difficult for us to be faithful to him--God sent Jesus as an atonement for our disobedience--to offer up a perfect life of obedience. And yet, it's also clear that God sent Jesus to show us what a life of perfect obedience to him looks like, so that we could do a better job at being obedient ourselves. In Luke 2, we read that Jesus went with his parents to Nazareth "and was obedient to them." And in our gospel lesson for today, Jesus taught, "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). In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want" (Mark 14:36). In Philippians, the Apostle Paul made it clear that Jesus wasn't asking us to do anything he himself didn't do, for Jesus "humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death--even death on a cross." And the writer of I John drives the message home, by saying, "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome" (I John 5:2-3).

Friends, there are at least four reasons why our obedience to God is crucial. First, we should obey God because it is the right thing to do. It's the proper response of the creatures to the Creator. Obedience is the response of humility and trust and respect. As Camus wrote in The Rebel, "We must learn to be men and not try to be God ... be satisfied to be men."

Second, we should obey God because God not only knows us best, but he also loves us best. Since he knows us best and loves us best, it's a no-brainer. It only makes sense to obey him, right?

Third, we should obey God because it's the way that we show God that we love him. It's perhaps therefore the best way we can worship him. The great theologian Paul Tillich investigated the meaning of love. And he decided that all forms of love, however different and even contradictory they seem to be, are connected by a desire for unity with the object of love. When you love someone or something, in other words, you want to be connected to them. That's why people in love want to spend time together--want to be united with one another--want to get married. And if we really love God, we will want to be connected with

him, and we connect with him through obedience, aligning our wills with his.

Fourth, we should obey God because when we're connected to God through obedience, that connection with God blesses us. It blesses us by having God's life force, God's power and God's goodness, flow into us. C.S. Lewis wrote, "God has designed the human machine to run on Himself. He Himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on." Our lives are stronger, healthier, more joyful, more powerful when we're connected to God, our power source, through obedience.

Some years ago in the city of Belfast in Northern Ireland, the members of one of the large Presbyterian churches decided to undertake a religious census among some 2000 homes in their district. When the results were in, the pastor of the church found himself seated at his desk, confronted with a huge heap of reports, and he began to note the visitors' findings and especially any comments made by the visitors at the bottom of the page. One remark that occurred again and again was, "Used to be a Presbyterian; now belong nowhere." Or, "The children go to Sunday School, but the parents aren't interested." And then his eyes fell on one unusual comment at the foot of one of the pages which startled him. It read simply, "Presbyterian, but disconnected." "Disconnected." What a sad word. It conveys the idea that "the plug" has been pulled--that the man has lost his power source--his life source--and that he's now being left to die.

A woman asked her pastor. "Will you please tell me what your idea of obedience is?" Holding out a blank sheet of paper, the pastor replied, "It is to sign your name at the bottom of the blank sheet, and let God fill it in as God wills." He was right. You cannot make God the king of your life until you abdicate. The great philosopher Kierkegaard claimed, "To be fully obedient, we must hold onto nothing, and surrender ourselves totally to the promptings of God's Spirit."

Thanks be to God for the signs of his Spirit's work in our lives, signs such as our presence here today. May God help us continue to be open to the promptings of his Spirit, so that we not only obey his biblical commandments, but so that we also continually ask, "What is God calling me to be, to do? Where do I fit into his work? What is my place of fulfillment and usefulness? Where do my talents intersect with the needs of the world--the work of God?" And may God give us the courage to not be tempted by what we want or what the world says we should want. May God give us the courage to answer temptation, as did the early

Christians, by saying, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts).

I close with an illustration of obedience given Evelyn Underhill. She said a Christian should be like a sheepdog. When the shepherd wants the dog to do something, the dog lies down at the shepherd's feet, looks intently into the shepherd's eyes and listens without budging until he has understood clearly the mind of his master. Then he jumps to his feet, runs out to do it. Furthermore, at no moment does the dog stop wagging his tail! Isn't that beautiful? Reminds me of the song..."Trust and obey, for there is no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey." Amen.

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; May 17, 2009