

DOES OBEDIENCE MATTER?

Does obedience matter? Sometimes you have to wonder if it does. When you look around and see others bending the rules or ignoring them altogether, obedience doesn't look that necessary.

This week I witnessed the sad reality of our blatant disregard for authority and obedience to it. Our road is being paved on Bergen Bay, something that we have longed for quite some time. The only inconvenience is that we have to park our vehicles a long way off while the road is worked on. We were told not to drive over our curbs as they cured but people still snuck back onto the road to park as close to home as they could.

Then one day the crew knocked on all the doors and said we should stay off the road altogether till after the weekend. People still parked on the road, drove on it and even tried to get back on their own driveways. My dog barked at them as if to say "are you crazy?" I barked at them from behind my window, tossing up my hands in resignation.

You see, the more we drive on the road and disregard the directions of the crew, the longer we have to wait for what we have all longed for – a paved road. We are prolonging the project by making the crew do their work over and over again. Then we complain that it's taking too long.

Obedience is only fashionable when it suits our own perceived goals. And yet if we could develop a habit of obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ on a daily basis we would see blessings we never thought possible. Through obedience to Christ we would even begin to recognize what he is doing in our lives, even in the insignificant things.

Does obedience matter? In Judges 6:25-35, our hero Gideon learned that to truly believe God a person must go beyond a personal, private faith, and live a public obedience. Our story reveals four aspects of obedience that are essential to a holy life.

1. Obedience means whole-hearted commitment

Prior to this episode we saw how Gideon was threshing wheat in winepress to remain hidden from Israel's enemies. The LORD approached him and gave him a great task – to rescue Israel. But first, Gideon needed to take care of some business at home. This is where we begin today.

The LORD tells Gideon to tear down his father's altar to the false god, Baal, and the Asherah pole that stands beside it. God even directs him to use his father's bulls to do it. The first bull was used to tear down the altar. Ironically, Gideon's father was likely fattening this bull to offer in sacrifice to Baal. The second bull, which was 7 years old, was to be burnt as a sacrifice to the LORD on a new altar Gideon would build. If you return to v. 1 of this chapter you will note that the Midianites had oppressed the Israelites for seven years. Now God was making a very poignant statement by having Gideon offer this seven-year old bull in sacrifice. Now God was saying the time has come to break the power of my enemies.

We heard last week that Gideon was not the coward we always thought he was. In fact, he was sensible in threshing in a hidden place so that he could feed his family. I won't dispute his sensibility, but Gideon was timid, there's no doubt. When God told him to break down the altar in his father's backyard, he did it at night, secretly.

This altar was no small thing. Recently archaeologists uncovered a similar altar that measured 26 feet square and almost five feet high. Its disappearance would be noticed. And apparently, Joash, Gideon's father, was the caretaker of this altar for the whole village. This is why it was in Gideon's backyard. So naturally there would be a fear that Gideon's father would be angry. Thus he did it at night. But, mark this, he still did it.

There are three conclusions we can make out of this action that God commanded: One is that Baal must go before Midian can be taken on; Two is that God's altar cannot be built until Baal's altar is destroyed; and Three, whenever we commit ourselves to obeying God over and against all other influences or powers in our life, the place to begin is our own backyard.

In our own backyards exist idols or obsessions or addictions, whatever you want to call them, that prevent God from using us as he desires. We cannot serve two masters. God desires whole-hearted commitment from us. He wants all of us, not just the Sunday morning part of us, or whatever is leftover. He wants all of us.

2. Obedience means facing opposition

The people of Ophrah were very religious in their devotion to Baal. It seems that our vices and sins usually get regular attention while our attention to Jesus is often sporadic. So it was that the people woke up and found their altar to Baal destroyed. In its place was a new altar with the wood from the Asherah pole used to burn the bull.

I don't know how they found out so quickly that Gideon did this but CSI could learn from them. Then we read, **"The men of the town demanded of Joash, 'Bring out your son. He must die, because he has broken down Baal's altar and cut down the Asherah pole beside it'"** (6:30).

This is so ironic. Here are these Israelites, people of Yahweh, who stood by and did nothing while the nation went after a false god. But now that Baal is insulted they want blood. Where was this zeal when people started sinning and going after Baal?

Obedience to the LORD means that we should expect opposition. Put positively, it means cutting away from the pack, going against the flow and going God's way. Gideon's fear was not without reason. He expected that when he obeyed God and tore down the altar to Baal, his father would be angry, his family would be angry and his community would be angry. Sometimes that's the choice we have to make. When we put away our idols and stand for the LORD, even our own family will fail to support our commitment.

Jesus said this would happen. Speaking to his disciples about claiming allegiance to Christ, Jesus said, **"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you"** (John 15:18-19). This is the natural outcome of following Jesus. We can expect that our friends and family who don't believe in Jesus will not understand our choice to be obedient.

Unfortunately, the Western church has become too sensitive to pain and refuses to face persecution for righteousness. We are afraid to stand for anything. Instead of being against anything, we are for everything. Why does Jesus say then that we will suffer for following him? Isn't that to be expected?

3. Obedience leads to transformation

The destruction of the altar did not have the ramifications Gideon feared. Remember that he feared his father's wrath, his family's rejection of him and possibly the town's lynching. What happened instead?

His father, Joash, has a change of heart in the most literal sense. Joash turns to the crowd and stuns them with logic. **"If Baal really is a god, he can defend himself when someone breaks down his altar"** (v. 31). Having disobeyed the LORD God they found themselves under Midian oppression and near starvation. That didn't seem to convince the people that they had offended the living God. Now as Baal is offended, Joash challenges them to see what Baal will do.

It is as if a light went on in Joash's head and heart. Suddenly, because of the stand that Gideon takes, Joash is awakened spiritually. Maybe the family needed someone to take the first step towards obedience. Maybe they needed an example to follow. Maybe you are the one in your family who needs to take a stand for Jesus and be obedient. Can you imagine the lights that would go on?

Gideon's stand has been repeated throughout history. John Knox, in 1548, was a prisoner on a French ship, chained to a rowing bench and lashed constantly by the guards. He was there because he

preached the word of God and opposed the Roman Catholic system. One day a lieutenant on the ship brought aboard a wooden image of the Virgin Mary and demanded that all the slaves kiss it. Knox refused and then had it pushed violently into his face. Knox grabbed it, threw it overboard and shouted, "Let Our Lady now save herself; she's light enough, let her learn to swim." Do you know what happened? For one thing, Knox was not struck down by divine anger. Two other things happened: Believers were never again forced to engage in RC practices, and people began to look to John Knox as their leader, and the Scottish Reformation was the result.

Perhaps your stand will not be as dramatic. But on the other hand, who knows what God is just waiting to do in and through your life when you choose to obey.

4. Obedience leads to spiritual empowerment

Because of Gideon's obedience he was converted from an introvert to a leader. His father Joash turned back to the living God. And, get this; the whole community was also converted from Baal to the LORD.

Of course not everyone was excited about this transformation. The Midianites and the Amalekites rose up in force against them. Now the hammer was going to fall. But then we read this: "Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon, and he blew a trumpet, summoning the Abiezrites to follow him" (6:34). Not only did the community rise up, other Israelite tribes prepared for battle too.

This is a very exciting verse. The Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon...in itself this is a powerful statement. But it literally means this: 'the Spirit of God clothed himself with Gideon.' The idea of this phrase is used elsewhere in the OT and pictures a warrior putting on his armor. Like putting on a glove, we might say. So we could say, 'The Spirit of the LORD put Gideon on like a glove.'

Howard Hendricks used to say to his seminary students, "Men, every morning I pray, 'Lord, here am I. I want to be your suit of clothes today. I want you to take me and use me. Lord, just walk around in me today.'" That's what this verse means. But the only way the Spirit can put us on as his clothing is if we are willing to be obedient to God, put away our idols and stand for him.

One of the major differences between Gideon's experience and ours is that the Spirit temporarily filled him, and we have the Holy Spirit permanently. Jesus promised, "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever" (John 14:16). The major similarity is that the Spirit cannot work in us if we are disobedient. Obedience leads to spiritual empowerment for the job Jesus has laid out for us.

Finally...

Obedience may be out of fashion where our culture is concerned but God still desires it in us. It may be cool to see how we bend the rules of life and get away with it, but like the Israelites we may be living in bondage and don't realize it. Freedom to do whatever you want loses its appeal when we become slaves to sin.

Perhaps then we ought to pray for revival, you may conclude. But A. W. Tozer said this, "Have you noticed how much praying for revival has been going on of late - and how little revival has resulted? I believe the problem is that we have been trying to substitute praying for obeying, and it simply will not work. To pray for revival while ignoring the plain precept laid down in Scripture is to waste a lot of words and get nothing for our trouble. Prayer will become effective when we stop using it as a substitute for obedience."

Obedience matters! For Gideon it led to victory over their enemies. For you and I obedience leads to spiritual victory and power to do more for God than we ever thought imaginable.

AMEN