



## The Privilege of Obedience

SERIES: *Turning Point: Start Fresh/Stay the Course*

Why do you obey authority? Every day we all obey traffic lights, carry out the desires of our boss, complete homework assignments and follow the instructions on the box. We obey all sorts of authorities without even thinking about it. It's part of the unwritten code of life. But why?

At some point in the process of growing up, kids begin to ask this same question. You're on the way to church with a teenager in the back seat who had to wake up much earlier than she wanted. She asks the question: "Why are we doing this? My friends all get to sleep in until noon." Or you're at a restaurant and you want to lead your family in prayer before you eat and your kids roll their eyes and ask, "Why are we doing this? Why do we have embarrass ourselves this way?"

But it's not just kids who ask this question. Two full-grown adults fall in love and want to be together in a physical relationship. But circumstances don't allow them to get married right away. One of them insists they wait until they're married. The other says, "You have to be kidding. We're adults. Why should we obey some antiquated rules forbidding sex before marriage?" Or a married couple who is having trouble making ends meet is trying to figure out why they should still give a portion of their income to God's work. They're asking, Why obey?

Some of you are thinking, "Well that's easy. The reason we obey is because God says so." It's like the old saying "God said it. I believe it. That settles it." It sounds good, but I wonder if that's really enough. I wonder if when it comes to our relationship with God there are better reasons for obedience than that.

In Deuteronomy 4 Moses is finishing his first sermon to the people of Israel. They're on the border of the Promised Land. God is calling them to take possession of it. In the first three chapters he's reminded them of the failings of their fathers. They failed to trust the Lord and go into the land so they wandered around the wilderness 40 years until they all died. But he also reminded them of how God had cared for them and provided for them in the wilderness. He'd fought battles for them; they had every reason to trust him. But before they went into the Land Moses spoke to them about the kind of life God wanted them to live there; the kind of people he wanted them to be. He spoke about obedience.

### I. Moses calls the people to obedience.

The importance of obedience is all over this chapter. Moses begins in v.1, **"And now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I am teaching you to perform..."** And then in v.5, **"See, I have taught you statutes and judgments just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do thus in the land where you are**

**entering to possess it."** These statutes were contained in ten foundational commands which were part of the covenant God made with them. In vv.13,14 he says, **"He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone. And the LORD commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and judgments, that you might perform them in the land where you are going over to possess it."**

There is an emphasis in these verses on keeping God's word, God's commandments, God's statutes and judgments. They didn't come from Moses, they came from God. They weren't something you could tamper with or adjust or kind of play with. In v.2 he warns them, **"You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it..."** You don't mess around with God's word. You don't pick and choose which ones you're comfortable with. You don't rewrite them to make them fit your lifestyle.

God has given us his word just as he gave it to Israel. It's not something we have the luxury of playing around with. We have so-called scholars today who cut away major portions of the New Testament, trying to find what they consider the "genuine words of Jesus." That's playing fast and loose with God's word. But we can do the same thing when we create this false dichotomy between the Old and New Testaments. We say, "In the OT they had to keep the law. What a burden! But we're not under law. We're under grace. We don't have to obey." But that isn't what Jesus taught. Jesus said, **"I didn't come to abolish the law but to fulfill it."** And also, **"If you love me you will keep my commandments."** Paul wrote to Titus, **"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men..."** And look at what he says next: **"...instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age."** Did you see that? God's grace doesn't instruct us to be careless about how we live, but to live a godly life.

Jack Abramoff, the political lobbyist who was disgraced in a 2006 scandal, said this, "God sent me 1,000 hints that he didn't want me to keep doing what I was doing. But I didn't listen, so he set off a nuclear bomb." What's sad about that is he shouldn't have needed 1,000 hints. God's word is so clear. But some of us are still headed down a path where we're ignoring both the clear commands of Scripture and a lot of hints along the way. What will it take to get us to obey?

Maybe some reasons for obedience might help. In this chapter Moses gives us three reasons for obedience.

### II. Moses offers three reasons for obedience.

A. Obedience leads to an attractive life: The first

thing is that obedience leads to an attractive life. This comes out at the very beginning of this passage. In v.1 Moses says you're to obey these things **"so that you may live and go in and take possession of the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you."** You see, the law is designed to impart life. It isn't a list of burdensome rules. It's a blessing. It's a blessing just to know what God wants us to do. In order to appreciate this it might help to know how different Israel's faith was from the nations around them. Israel was surrounded by people who were totally in the dark about who God was and what he wanted. Listen to a Sumerian prayer from the 7th century B.C. It's called, *A Prayer to Any God*:

O (my) lord, many are my wrongs, great my sins,  
O my goddess, many are my wrongs, great my sins,  
O god, whoever you are, many are my wrongs, great my sins,  
O goddess, whoever you are, many are my wrongs,  
great my sins!

I do not know what wrong I have done,  
I do not know what sin I have committed,  
I do not know what abomination I have perpetrated,  
I do not know what taboo I have violated!

What a bummer to know there is a god or goddess up there but to have no idea what he or she wants! Can you imagine being married to someone and having no idea how to please them? Our God has revealed himself; he's told us what pleases him. That's a blessing.

It's also a blessing because life works better when you live it the way God intended you to live. That's what he means down in v.40 where he says to keep his statutes **"that it may go well with you and with your children after you..."** Things work better when you follow the directions. I have a new iPhone. The more I follow the directions, the more I'm able to enjoy it. If I don't follow the directions, it doesn't work very well. That's because the creator of that product knows best how it runs. It's no different with God. He's our Creator. He gives us directions for how to live life. Life works better when we follow them.

And one of the things that happens when we live the way God wants us to live is that people notice a difference. It's not just life; it's an attractive life. Look at vv.6-8, **"So keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the LORD our God whenever we call on Him? Or what great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as righteous as this whole law which I am setting before you today?"** The idea here is that people are watching and when they see the wisdom of how you're living your life and how God is so near and how you know right from wrong they'll be attracted to that. They'll want what you have.

From 1991 to 2007, Fuller Seminary conducted a survey of 750 Muslims who had become Christians. They represented 30 different countries. Here were a few of the most-cited reasons for conversion to the Christian faith: 1) Christians practiced what they preached. 2) Christians appeared to have loving marriages where women were

treated as equals. 3) Christian-to-Christian violence was less prominent than with Muslims. 4) The prayers of Christians had healed the disabled and delivered others from demonic powers. 5) Christians were confident of their forgiveness and salvation in a way Muslims never experienced.

All of those have to do with how believers lived their lives. People are watching us. If you're a person who has identified yourself as a believer, do you know people are watching you? Some of you are in work situations that are horrible. You work in a totally dysfunctional place. You work for people who are incompetent or unfair. All your colleagues know it. But how do you handle that? Do you grumble, complain and whine like everybody else? I love what Paul says about this in Phil 2, **"Do all things without grumbling or disputing; that you may prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world."** Do you see what he says? If you want to be a light in that situation, you have to be different. Don't grumble and argue. You know God is in charge of your life. This job doesn't define you. So you handle that situation differently. And when you do people will be attracted to that and they'll want what you have. This is another reason to obey: it leads to an attractive life.

**B. God is jealous:** The second reason we should obey may surprise you. We should obey because God is jealous. Right in the middle of this chapter in vv.9-24 Moses talks to them about the importance of the first two commandments. These commandments have to do idolatry: You shall have no other gods before you. You shall not make a graven image (an idol). Moses is trying to warn them against practicing idolatry when they go into the land. He reminds them of what happened at Mt. Sinai. Look at vv.15-19, **"So watch yourselves carefully, since you did not see any form on the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the fire, lest you act corruptly and make a graven image for yourselves in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the sky, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water below the earth. And beware, lest you lift up your eyes to heaven and see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, and be drawn away and worship them and serve them, those which the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven."** Finally, in v. 24 he says, **"For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God."**

Now when the Bible says God is a jealous God, what does it mean? It's easy to misunderstand this. I heard Oprah interviewed about some of her rather creative ideas about God. You know she's broken away from traditional ideas about God. Someone asked her how she came to this new understanding. She said that she was sitting in church and her pastor made a statement that God was jealous. She said at that very moment something just broke within her and she could no longer accept the God of the Christian faith. How could a good and loving God be jealous? She couldn't put that together.

What Oprah failed to understand is there are two kinds of jealousy. First, there is jealousy that's like envy. I want what you have; I'm angry at you because you have something I want. This is a very self-absorbed kind of jealousy, isn't it? But the other kind of jealousy is different. It's more like passion and it comes out of a commitment and a love for the other person. If you have a grown son or daughter who is making foolish choices, how do you feel? You feel passion, even anger, not just AT them but FOR them. This isn't envy; this is love. It's also very much like you would feel as a husband or a wife if your spouse becomes intimate with someone besides you. You feel passion, even anger. Why? Because you love them with a binding kind of love. If you felt nothing; if you were indifferent, would that be love? Anger isn't the opposite of love; hate is the opposite of love; and the ultimate form of hate is indifference. Do you want a god who is indifferent?

C.S. Lewis wrote, "You asked for a loving God; you have one...not a senile benevolence that drowsily wishes you to be happy in your own way, not the cold philanthropy of a conscientious magistrate, nor the care of a host who feels responsible for the care of his guests, but the consuming fire himself, the Love that made the worlds, persistent as the artist's love for his work...provident and venerable as a father's love for a child, jealous, inexorable, exacting as love between the sexes."

This helps us understand why Moses calls God a "consuming fire." Fire is a complex thing. It's beautiful; it brings light; it brings warmth; we're drawn to it. But at the same time, it's dangerous. You have to be careful. God is like that. He's complex. He's beautiful but dangerous. His love is complex. He wants our very best but he knows our best is found in him and so when we serve other gods he gets passionate about that; he gets angry, not just AT us but FOR us, and there's danger in that. It's hard for us to understand that because true love never really exists in this world in its perfect form. So even in the best relationships this jealousy is polluted by selfishness. But that's not true with God. God's love for us is pure. He's jealous for us because he knows what is best for us. He knows that our ultimate good is found in loving him above all else.

You see, what is idolatry, really? What is an idol in our lives? You saw how Moses made a long list of idols and you saw that they are all things that God himself has made: people, animals, sun, moon and stars. He even says in v.19 these are things "which the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven." God made them and he gave us these things to enjoy. But when you take these gifts from God and you bow down to them as if they're God then you become an idolator. An idol is any good thing we make into an ultimate thing. It can be our reputation, our family, our career, a relationship. How do you know when these things become an idol? How do you know when a good thing has become an ultimate thing in your life? Consider this: If a good thing in your life is threatened it will be hard for you. You'll struggle. But if an ultimate thing is threatened you'll totally freak out and have a hard time even going on. Or if you lose a good thing it will be really, really hard. You'll grieve; you'll be very sad. But if you lose an ultimate thing you'll despair even of life

itself. Here's another test: If someone gets between you and a good thing you'll be angry at them and it will be hard but you'll be able to forgive them. But if someone gets between you and an ultimate thing you'll never forgive them.

So when we make good things into ultimate things God's jealousy is aroused. His fire burns hot because of his love for us. That's another reason to obey, especially in this area of idolatry. Do you know what this really says? This says that disobedience is not just breaking of God's law; it's breaking God's heart. It's one thing to disobey an authority figure; that's bad. But it's so much worse to disobey someone who loves you as intensely as God does.

**C. God is unique:** This leads us to the third reason we should obey. In vv.25-31 Moses tells them what will happen if and when they fall into idolatry. He says, "You're going to get wiped out and taken into captivity. But when you're at an all time low you'll begin to seek me again with all your heart. And when you do that God will listen to you." The reason why is found in v.31, "**For the LORD your God is a compassionate God; He will not fail you nor destroy you nor forget the covenant with your fathers which He swore to them.**" So even after we chase after other gods, he won't forsake us. And this leads Moses into what are some of the most profound words in the Old Testament. In essence he asks in a kind of rhetorical way, "Is there any God like this? Is there any God who has revealed himself to be as gracious and compassionate as our God has been towards us?" Listen to what he says: "**Indeed, ask now concerning the former days which were before you, since the day that God created man on the earth, and inquire from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything been done like this great thing, or has anything been heard like it? Has any people heard the voice of God speaking from the midst of the fire, as you have heard it, and survived? Or has a god tried to go to take for himself a nation from within another nation by trials, by signs and wonders and by war and by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm and by great terrors, as the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? To you it was shown that you might know that the LORD, He is God; there is no other besides Him. Out of the heavens He let you hear His voice to discipline you; and on earth He let you see His great fire, and you heard His words from the midst of the fire. Because He loved your fathers, therefore He chose their descendants after them. And He personally brought you from Egypt by His great power, driving out from before you nations greater and mightier than you, to bring you in and to give you their land for an inheritance, as it is today. Know therefore today, and take it to your heart, that the LORD, He is God in heaven above and on the earth below; there is no other"** (vv.32-39).

Why obey? Because God is so unique. There is no other God who would ever do something like this. Think about this in relation to the what WE know about God. We could add a few lines to this, couldn't we? We could say, "Ask now concerning the former days which were before you, since the day that God created man on the earth, and inquire from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything ever been done like this great thing, or has anything been heard like it? Has there ever been a god who would send his Son, his only Son, into this filthy, sin-

infested world? Has there ever been a god willing to take upon himself the sin of the world; sin that was committed against him? Has there ever been a god who burst forth from the grave in resurrection power? Has there ever been a god who poured out his Spirit on a group of people and sent them into the world as his witnesses? Has there ever been a god who promised to one day return and create a new heavens and a new earth where there is no more crying or pain or death? Know therefore today, and take it to your heart, that the LORD, He is God in heaven above and on the earth below; there is no other."

## CONCLUSION

The idea here is who would NOT want to obey a God like this? It's not a "have to" but a "want to." It's not drudgery but delight. It's not an obligation but a privilege.

The Danish Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard tells the story about a king who fell in love with a peasant maiden. This king was the wealthiest, most respected, most powerful king in the entire region. No one dared oppose him or speak a word against him. But this king—as powerful and respected as he was—had a problem: How could he tell this maiden that he loved her? How could he know for sure that she loved him? The very fact that he was a king—rich, famous, and powerful—was a barrier.

He could lead an armed escort of knights to the door of her humble cottage, and he could demand, by his authority as king, that she marry him. But that wouldn't do. The king didn't want a fearful slave for a wife. He wanted someone who would love him, someone to share his life, someone who would be happy and eager to spend her days at his side. Or he could shower her with gifts and jewels and beautiful robes and—No, no, that wouldn't do either. He didn't want to buy her love. He wanted her to love him for himself, not for his gifts and his wealth. Somehow he had to find a way to win the maiden's love without overwhelming her, without destroying her free will. Somehow he had to make himself her equal.

So the king clothed himself in rags and went to her as a peasant. But the truly amazing thing is this: The king did not merely disguise himself as a poor man. He actually became poor! He loved this maiden so much that he renounced his throne, his wealth, and his kingly power to win her love!

This story is a beautiful parable of the story of Jesus. Jesus the King, the Creator, the source of Life, has come to earth—not in disguise, but truly as one of us. God himself became a poor, humble, limited human being, subject to hunger, pain, temptation, and death. He came because he loves us and he's come to win our love. It's not a burden to obey a God like that. It's a privilege!