

## OBEDIENCE

By Raymond White

It's tempting to think of obedience as a kill-joy principle, that it is merely God's way of interfering with our fun and our free agency.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Obedience is in fact a fun maximizer. It is simply the principle that doing things the right way has the best results.

For instance, if you get into a roller coaster, there is this simple rule: don't get out of the car while it is moving. Now you might complain about such a restrictive rule, and wish to increase your fun by getting out of the car. But the result will be "splat!"

We have rules for reasons. God gave us commandments for reasons, and those reasons are to keep us safe and improve our lives.

***1 Kings 8:61** Let your heart therefore be perfect with the LORD our God, to walk in his statutes, and to keep his commandments, as at this day.*

God never gave a commandment that wasn't for our own good. And so life, or God, imposes rules on us which are generally not much more than common sense. And if we submit ourselves to common sense, in other words obey, life works better.

Here are some bible stories that underscore the value of simple obedience.

### [1] THE MAN OF GOD

Here is a story about a good man, a prophet, who came to a bad end because he disobeyed God. But he did not disobey God intentionally, he was tricked into it which makes his tragic end even that much more tragic.

***1 Kings 13:1** And, behold, there came a man of God out of Judah by the word of the LORD unto Bethel: and Jeroboam stood by the altar to burn incense. **:2** And he cried against the altar in the word of the LORD, and said, O altar, alter, thus saith the LORD; Behold, a child shall be born unto the house of David, Josiah by name; and upon thee shall he offer the priests of the high places that burn incense upon them*

This is a true prophet of the true God and you should read the entire story. But let's continue. I'll tell you just an abbreviated version to get to the point quickly.

***1 Kings 13:7** And the king [Jeroboam] said unto the man of God, Come home with me, and refresh thyself, and I will give thee a reward. **:8** And the man of God said unto the king, If thou wilt give me half thine house, I will not go in with thee, neither will I eat bread, nor drink water, in this place. **:9** For so it was charged me by the word of the LORD, saying, Eat no bread, nor drink water, nor turn again by the same way that thou camest. **:10** So he went another way...*

So far so good. This prophet had been warned by God to not hang around Jeroboam or anyone in the place. He was warned to get out of there as quickly as possible.

But then, on his way out, he met someone.

*1 Kings 13:11 Now there dwelt an old prophet in Bethel; and his sons came and told him all the works that the man of God had done that day in Bethel... :13 And he said to his sons, Saddle me an ass. So they saddled him the ass: and he rode thereon. :14 And he went after the man of God, and found him... :15 Then he said unto him, Come home with me, and eat bread. :16 And he said, I may not return with thee, nor go in with thee: neither will I eat bread nor drink water with thee in this place. :17 For it was said unto me by the word of the LORD, Thou shalt eat no bread nor drink no water there...*

Still so far so good. The man of God understands to take God's commandment literally. It's not just Jeroboam that this man of God was to avoid, it's the entire place. For him, the place was cursed. But now, the enticement.

*1 Kings 13:18 He [the old prophet] said unto him [the man of God], I am a prophet also as thou art; and an angel spake unto me by the word of the LORD, saying, Bring him back with thee into thine house, that he may eat bread and drink water. But he lied unto him. :19 So he went back with him, and did eat bread in his house, and drank water. :23 And when he was gone, a lion met him by the way, and slew him... :30 And he [the old prophet] laid his carcase in his own grave; and they mourned over him, saying, Alas, my brother!*

So the young prophet died because he took bad advice from an old prophet. The old prophet was so racked with guilt that he buried him in his own grave and arranged to be buried with him.

Now, was it fair for God to send a lion to kill this young man of God? My answer is: What does fairness have to do with it? He had received good advice from someone who knew, namely God, to not linger in that place. It was dangerous for him. He chose, on the bad advice, to linger and he paid for that mistake with his life.

The lesson from this story is that motive doesn't matter. You can have a very good reason to disobey, but the consequences are the same, fairness notwithstanding..

One man jumps off a cliff, and another falls off while sleep walking. One intended to die the other had no such intentions. But intentions are irrelevant, both are just as dead. The second might complain, "That's not fair. I was not trying to die like the other fellow, it was an accident, so the universe should not hold me accountable." Sorry, but the universe does. If you're prone to sleep walking, don't camp near a cliff.

An alcoholic might complain, "I cannot help my drinking compulsion so I shouldn't have to die of liver disease. The universe should give me a pass." Sorry. The universe won't give you a pass. If you drink excessively, you'll die. That your compulsion is irresistible and therefore unfair is beside the point.

A homosexual makes the same complaint, "I was born with this sexual passion so it's unfair to penalize me with AIDS." I won't argue; it is unfair. But he will die anyway.

Disobedience exacts its price and neither intent nor fairness has anything to do with it. It is cause and effect. One behavior gets one result, another behavior gets another result. Don't like it? I don't care. Obey or die. That's the deal, the *only* deal the universe has to offer. Excuses, explanations, pleading, demanding, political bickering — none of those count. Obedience counts.

We need to stop thinking of God like we're playing a game with him, like we win or we lose. Life is not a game with judges, it is a reality with consequences.

## [2] NAAMAN

Here is another story, one that demonstrates that doing the smart thing counts for a lot, regardless of the motive. There is the thought that doing the right thing for the wrong reason doesn't count. This story argues against that.

The story is about Naaman, a leper who, when seeking a cure, was told by a prophet to do a simple thing. And instead of being grateful, it made him mad.

*2 Kings 5:11 But Naaman was wroth, and went away, and said, Behold, I thought, He will surely come out to me, and stand, and call on the name of the LORD his God, and strike his hand over the place, and recover the leper. :12 Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? May I not wash in them, and be clean? So he turned and went ways in a rage. :13 And his servants came near, and spake unto him, and said, My father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldest thou not have done it? How much rather then, when he saith to thee, Wash, and be clean? :14 Then went he down, and dipped himself seven times in Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God: and his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.*

We often give too much credit to intent. I know the scriptures place great stock on doing the right thing for the right reason, but sometimes doing the right thing regardless of the reason is what gets the job done. Often it's just the doing that counts, whatever the reason, as Naaman learned.

## [3] THE PRODIGAL SON PARABLE

Consider the return of the prodigal son (*Luke 15:11-24*). No one credits the prodigal for being well motivated — he returned home because he was starving — but he gets the blessing anyway, just because he went home. His father never hassled him about his motivation, the father didn't much care why his son had returned, he was just glad to have him back. Reluctant obedience is obedience none-the-less.

## [4] THE TWO SONS PARABLE

And then there's the parable of the two sons.

**Matthew 21:28** *But what think ye? A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work today in my vineyard. :29 He answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented, and went. :30 And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir: and went not. :31 Whither of the twain did the will of his father? They say unto him, the first...*

The message of this parable was so obvious that not even the chief priests could misunderstand it. The question Jesus posed to them was not which of the two brothers was the better motivated, which had better intent, which was the more sincere, which had more enthusiasm, but which *did* the will of the father. All of those other things, frankly, are much overrated. Doing is what counts.

### [5] JOHANAN

In this next story, we have a man who was determined to obey God then changed his mind because fear overcame him. His name was Johanan, and he was a hero.

Gedaliah the governor had been assassinated by Ishmael (**Jeremiah 41:2**) and Ishmael had taken captives. It was Johanan who stepped up to the plate and pursued Ishmael and delivered the captives.

But then Johanan had a dilemma: he did not know how the Babylonians would react to the Gedaliah's assassination. Would the Babylonians come and kill them all as a reprisal, or not?

To get an answer to that question, Johanan does the sensible thing: he turned to the prophet Jeremiah for advice.

**Jeremiah 42:6** *Whether it be good, or whether it be evil, we will obey the voice of the LORD our God...*

That's a good start. The advice that Jeremiah gave them was surprisingly reassuring when you consider all the bad stuff Jeremiah had prophesied that came true.

**Jeremiah 42:10** *If ye will still abide in this land, then I will build you, and not pull you down, and I will plant you, and not pluck you up: for I repent me of the evil that I have done unto you. :11 Be not afraid of the king of Babylon, of whom ye are afraid; be not afraid of him, saith the LORD: for I am with you to save you, and to deliver you from his hand.*

That was exactly the news they were wanting to hear, that they were safe to stay put. And God continued with a warning —

**Jeremiah 42:13** *But if ye say, We will not dwell in this land, neither obey the voice of the LORD your God, :14 Saying, No; but we will go into the land of Egypt, where we shall see no war... :16 Then it shall come to pass, that the sword, which ye feared, shall overtake you there in the land of Egypt...and there ye shall die.*

God was adamant — stay and live, or go and die.

These were good people, seeking God's advice and help, and they received exactly the good news they were hoping for. The problem was, when they received it, they didn't believe it. The news was too good so it just couldn't be true.

*Jeremiah 43:2 Then spake...Johanah...Thou speaketh falsely: the LORD our God hath not sent thee to say, Go not into Egypt to sojourn there. :4 So Johanah... obeyed not the voice of the LORD, to dwell in the land of Judah. :7 So they came into the land of Egypt...*

So they made exactly the wrong decision. They were safe, life was good, but because of their fear they moved themselves out of the place of safety and directly into harm's way.

While they were in Egypt, Nebuchadnezzar turned his gun-sights on Egypt. The Babylonians invaded and conquered Egypt and overthrew Pharaoh Hophra thus ending the longest running dynasty in the history of the world.

The tragedy is the Babylonians had no quarrel with the Jews. Nebuchadnezzar had already conquered them and had they remained in their homeland, they would have been safe and just fine.

## [6] CONCLUSION

There's no accounting for human stupidity. Some people just seem determined to do exactly that thing which will harm them the most.

Obedience to God and obedience to common sense are not that much different. Except that there are times when we need more than common sense and good judgment, we also need spiritual insight. That, we call revelation. And when God speaks, we really should listen, and obey.