

# Truth for Today

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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## What should I do: Doing in Obedience

I remember, shortly after I began courting, a particular visit to my prospective "in-laws" home. I had been cooking some bacon for our lunch, but it caught in the frying pan, and filled the kitchen with smoke. Fortunately my mother-in-law was out at the time so that there was plenty of time to open all the windows, and spray the air freshener, give the pan a good wash, and return everything to good order. Yet as soon as she got back, her first question was "So what has been burning?" Just how did she know? Did they have spy cameras in those olden days or what?

It appears Hughes' men don't learn very fast because just recently our son borrowed the car to get to his Christian Union Bible Study. Next day, as he had not finished till late the night before, he couldn't understand it when we asked him who else he had had in the car. That passenger seat just out of position was all it took. Funny isn't it how we never really get away with things. Hardly ever with one another even. Never with God!

It was the sheep that did for Saul! This morning as we continue our studies looking at what I should do, we are going to consider the extremely challenging subject of obedience. By looking at four examples from the Bible, we will hopefully see why obedience is vital and why it is essential that it is total. You see with so many things it is possible to have degrees. For example, my father might give me £100 for my birthday – that would be generous. Or he could give me £500, and that would be even more so. On both occasions he would be generous but on the second he would have been much more so. I might invite the young people home for supper once a month, and that would be hospitable. I might do so every week and that would be more so.

However, when we come to the matter of doing in obedience the one crucial lesson we must learn, if nothing else today, is that we are either obedient, or we are disobedient. It really is all or nothing. It is just not possible to be quite obedient, or almost obedient. It is not possible to be too obedient. Perhaps, like me, you may feel that it is really difficult sometimes to be obedient. Well then, you are in good company as we look together at our four lessons on obedience.

### God and Saul.

Once the broadcast has finished, it would be profitable to read the whole of 1 Samuel 15, but for now we shall just pick out some verses: "Thus says the LORD of hosts ... 'Go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and do not spare them. But kill both man and woman, infant and nursing child, ox and sheep, camel and donkey'" (verses 2-3). "Then Samuel went to Saul, and Saul said to him, 'Blessed are you of the LORD! I have performed the commandment of the LORD.' But Samuel said, 'What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?' And Saul said, 'They have brought them from the Amalekites; for the people spared the best of the sheep and the oxen, to sacrifice to the LORD your God; and the rest we have utterly destroyed'" (verses 13-15).

Saul, as king of Israel, was given a very specific instruction. He was to utterly destroy Amalek. He might not have liked the idea, and we might find it difficult to understand, but there could have been no doubt as to what God had commanded. In fact, with the benefit of hindsight, we can see that the completion of this sort of command would have saved much bloodshed throughout the years, right into modern times. But that is not really the point. It is sufficient to say that God had said it and Saul had no choice but to obey, or not to obey. Yet when Samuel comes to visit he finds a victory celebration in full flow. Saul, no doubt with the full blessing of the people, had spared the best of the flocks, and the Amalekite King, Agag. In fact as we read down the chapter, we find the inventory of things spared growing and growing. Of course, as Saul saw it, at least some of that was going to be offered to God as a thanksgiving sacrifice.

No doubt in his own mind, Saul really believed the logic of his own words and truly believed that his sacrifices to God were something good. But Samuel had this devastating message from God to deliver to Saul: "Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He also has rejected you from being king" (verses 22-23). No amount of spiritual sacrificing and activity could cover over the gaping fact of the disobedience of Saul, and the people. For Saul, he learnt too late the lesson that only an exact carrying out of what God had said, to the letter, was

good enough. It was a lesson that would inexorably lead to his suicide on a battlefield of defeat at the hands of the Philistines.

But before we consider how this may apply to us today, let us look at our other three lessons.

### **God and Uzzah.**

Perhaps some twenty or so years later, and after the tragic death of Saul, David had become king. Rightly he decides to bring back the Ark of the Covenant, to Jerusalem. We pick up the story in 2 Samuel 6:3: "So they set the ark of God on a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill; and Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, drove the cart. And they brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill, accompanying the ark of God; and Ahio went before the ark. Then David and all the house of Israel played music before the LORD on all kinds of instruments of fir wood, on harps, on stringed instruments, on tambourines, on sistrums, and on cymbals. And when they came to Nachon's threshing floor, Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen had stumbled. Then the anger of the LORD was aroused against Uzzah, and God struck him there for his error; and he died there by the ark of God."

How absolutely still that particular worship service must have gone! Again, one cannot help but feel some sympathy for Uzzah. After all, what was he supposed to do? Let the ark of God fall to the ground? Surely that would have been dishonouring, so wasn't Uzzah doing a good thing? What Uzzah had to learn at the cost of his life, was that God was well able to take care of His own ark. What God had said in clear terms was that none, other than those who had been made ceremonially holy, could touch any of the parts of the ark. God did not need man to look after the ark; He was well able to do that for Himself. What He does require is that when He speaks we listen and we obey exactly what He says.

And before we get some notion that perhaps this may be God acting against those who were not truly in close relationship with Him, but that He has different standards for those who truly love Him, let us move directly to look at our third picture.

### **God and Moses.**

"Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 'Take the rod; you and your brother Aaron gather the congregation together. Speak to the rock before their eyes, and it will yield its water; thus you shall bring water for them out of the rock, and give drink to the congregation and their animals.' So Moses took the rod from before the LORD as He commanded him. And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock; and he said to them, 'Hear now, you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?' Then Moses lifted his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their animals drank. Then the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them'" (Numbers 20:7-12).

What a personal tragedy for Moses! I guess it would have been through tear filled eyes that years later he looked out over the Jordan, and saw, from a distance, the land that had been promised to Israel so long before. How much Moses must have longed to be a part of that great entry into the land. How great a part he had played in getting the Israelites that far. Here was Moses the greatest servant and prophet of God, yet even he had to learn that when God spoke, he had but to obey exactly. And what had God said? Speak to the rock! But in verse 11, no doubt exasperated by the hard heartedness of Israel, and provoked to anger, he strikes the rock twice. For sure, God was judging the sense of pride that his harsh words indicated also. But as far as actions were concerned, God had said speak, and Moses had struck. Just four little letters difference and yet a world of disobedience away from what Moses should have done. The result of his disobedience was the solemn pronouncement that he would never enter into the land that God had promised.

Dear listener, there is a lesson of vital importance for us to learn in all of this. God has not changed His standards. He still expects absolute obedience. And yet we live in a day when we think that we can re-interpret the word of God to make what it has to say more palatable to today's society. Before we, perhaps, get the idea that these examples were all very good for a God of fire and brimstone as revealed by the Old Testament, but that in the person of Jesus, we have a God of gentle grace revealed, and so those examples have nothing to say to us today, we have one more example to look at, and that from the Lord's own life!

### **God and Peter.**

So we read in the Gospel of Luke 5:1-8: "So it was, as the multitude pressed about Him to hear the word of God, that He stood by the Lake of Gennesaret, and saw two boats standing by the lake; but the fishermen had gone from them and were washing their nets. Then He got into one of the boats, which was Simon's, and asked him to put out a little

from the land. And He sat down and taught the multitudes from the boat. When He had stopped speaking, He said to Simon, 'Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.' But Simon answered and said to Him, 'Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing; nevertheless at Your word I will let down the net.' And when they had done this, they caught a great number of fish, and their net was breaking. So they signalled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!'"

I have often thought that in this episode Jesus was about to call these disciples to full time following. So to ensure that their families were financially cared for He provided this miraculous catch of fish. Having finished speaking to the multitudes, He commands Peter to cast out into the deep, and to let down his nets i.e. more than one of them. Peter had been fishing all night and caught nothing. Naturally speaking, if he had been going to catch fish, it would have been at night. However, because the Lord had told him, Peter sets out and lets down his net – but just the one! It is immediately full to breaking. In fact, he then calls his partners to come and help. They are also caught up in the bother that Peter's disobedience had got him into! If only Peter had obeyed and let down the nets, no doubt they would all have been filled, but not to breaking. Peter probably thought that nothing was going to happen so he would save himself a whole lot of work by just letting down the one net. So even in blessing us, God demands absolute obedience from us.

Having looked at four individuals who thought they knew better than God, we must see what we can learn from them, so as not to repeat their mistakes. Nothing can be clearer than the fact that God expects total obedience to the letter. Even what we would see as almost doing what He has said is disobedience. There may well be times when we do not understand the reasons why God has said something. This is of no matter. As clay in the potter's hand, we need not understand what God intends but we must do exactly as He says. Now we have only one source to turn to, to establish what He would say to us, and that is His unchangeable word – the Bible. Undoubtedly God speaks to us through His Spirit and through others so that we may know His particular will for a particular occasion. However, we may have difficulty in knowing whether it is truly God speaking to us on those sorts of occasions. Indeed, it may well just be our own desires shouting to be heard. However, there can be no doubt about what God has said in His word.

This then places us all under three responsibilities. Firstly, we need to read it! Listening to others speak about the word of God is all very well, but inevitably, some of what is said may not be quite right. It may even be downright wrong! There is no substitute for consistently reading the Bible daily for ourselves. Nor is ignorance any defence. It would be no good my saying to the traffic police that I didn't know what the speed limit was, so it would be unfair to give me a speeding ticket. Nor is it any good saying that I don't agree with the limit. Similarly we cannot use ignorance of the whole word of God as an excuse for not obeying its truth. Secondly, we need to understand what it has to say. Perhaps, like me, you have read a part of the Bible and thought, "I didn't understand much of that!" Well, we need to make such passages a matter of prayer and study, persisting until we have an answer. When we were at school, we didn't grasp everything first time.

That's why we did homework and revision! We should treat the word of God no differently. It takes a lifetime of learning, but requires consistent commitment to study to make progress. Thirdly, having read and studied, we just need to do. If we are honest with ourselves, very often it is not that we do not know what the word of God says, nor even how it applies to a particular situation. What really causes us difficulty is that we do know what we should do, but do not like the answer. It does not fit in with what we want or our current views of society.

As we draw to a close this morning I want to ask some very direct questions of each one of us. Firstly, am I sure that the way I am living my personal life is fully in accordance with how the life of the believer should be lived, as revealed in the word of God? As we have seen, this means that every area of my life is under His control. Am I doing the job He wants me to do? Are my emotions those that honour Him? Do I love every other believer in just the same way as He has loved us? If not, and there are many other questions we ought to ask of ourselves, then I am living in disobedience.

Secondly, is my family life ordered in accordance with the plan laid out in the Bible? In the beginning, God made male and female in His image. Both were necessary for a true representation of all that God is. But He did not make them the same. Each has unique and important roles within the family to fulfil. In ordering our family life, we need to have a clear understanding of these roles, and what the Bible does and does not say about how we should behave within the family. The breakdown of the family and consequently society as a whole bears solemn testimony to the fact that man, in general, is living in disobedience to God. Tragically, instead of society adopting the beneficial biblical standards that God sets out, Christians are increasingly adopting the harmful standards that the world is practising.

Thirdly, and finally, am I sure that the things that I do in my spiritual life, are in accordance with what the Bible teaches? Over two thousand years, Christianity has developed, sometimes for the very best of reasons, all sorts of systems and practices that do not actually agree with what the Bible teaches. So this morning, before you go to

church, ask yourself this question: "Does the church I am going to really teach and practise fully all that the Bible teaches?"

Now I know that all churches could do better, particularly in putting into practice what they believe, but for example, if the church I attend believes that there are four members of the Godhead, then if I am to do in obedience, I cannot continue to go there! Each one of us is responsible, not to one another, but to our Master, to really get this right. If through the centuries, all believers had only taught what the Bible said then there would only be one church today, albeit meeting in many different locations. The vast number of denominations etc. bears awful testimony to the fact that we have not been obedient to His word alone, in terms of our corporate spiritual life. But think of it! Christian unity could happen almost overnight, if all believers were to simply live out just what the Bible says. All it requires is that in this sphere, as in every other sphere of our lives, we do all in obedience to His word.

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