

Where Is God When Obedience Is Hard?

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Where Is God When Life Is Hard? Series

1 Samuel 13, 15

One of the things that I love to do is sit in a coffee shop and read a really good book. Some friends in the congregation bought me a mug a few years ago, which said something like, "I've always imagined Paradise would be an enormous library." For some of you, that probably sounds like a description of hell. But for me, that would certainly be a step toward heaven. Anyway, I was in one of my favorite coffee shops recently and I read their sign. It said: How to create your own beverage. Here are the steps you have to go through. First, choose your drink. What is it? A latte? A mocha? Hot or iced? caf or decaf? Add a syrup. Vanilla? Caramel? Hazelnut? Peppermint? Sugar Free or other syrups. Choose your size. Tall, Double Tall, Grande, Vente. Add espresso. Choose your milk. Whole? Low Fat? Non-Fat? Silk Soy? Organic? Extra Foamy? Wet? Dry? With Whipped Cream? It struck me again how much of a virtue choice is in America.

I have this peculiar fascination with these warehouse sized stores like Sam's Club. I always ask Marlene if I can go shopping there. I really enjoy seeing what a 10-pound can of tuna looks like in case I ever wanted to buy something like that. Oh, so that's how you would sell five gallons of olives.

Choice is one of the most precious held virtues in America today. And of course, as Americans we haven't limited choice to consumer choices like what cell phone plan are you going to use, how many any-time minutes, how many nighttime, weekend minutes. We've taken this virtue of choice and we've now covered the field including moral education. Now, there are some good things happening in public schools concerning character formation, teaching kids responsibility and respect for others. But one of the places that Americans have intruded the word "choice" concerns moral decisions.

I want to read to you from a manual for training educators concerning how to communicate values to children. Here's a little dialogue from an education training manual. The teacher says: So some of you think its best to be honest on tests. Is that right? Some heads nod affirmatively. And some of you think dishonesty is all right. A few hesitant slight nods. And I guess some of you are not certain? Heads nod.

Ginger: Does that mean we can decide for ourselves whether we should be honest on tests here?

Teacher: No, that means you can decide on the value. I personally value honesty; and although you may choose to be dishonest, I shall insist that we be honest on tests here. In other areas of your life, you may have more freedom to be dishonest, but one can't do anything at any time and in this class I shall expect honesty on tests.

Ginger: But then how can we decide for ourselves? Aren't you telling us what to value?

Sam: Sure, you are telling us what we should do and believe in.

Teacher: Not exactly. I don't mean to tell you what you should value. That's up to you. But I do mean that in this class, not elsewhere necessarily, you have to be honest on tests or suffer certain consequences. I merely mean that I cannot give tests without the rule of honesty. All of you who choose dishonesty as a value may not practice here. That's all I'm saying. Are there any questions?

Well, it is not hard to extrapolate from this choice of values a statement something like:

- You may steal in other stores, but I shall insist and expect that you will be honest in my store.
- You are not to be a racist or a rapist in my class, but elsewhere that's up to you.

Choice is a virtue in America. It trumps almost every other value.

Self-expression is a virtue. Let's look at some Olympic athletes. We've had some really wonderful representatives in these Olympics. People have shown great respect not only to our country and flag, but to other athletes and to God. We also have those athletes who view the Olympics simply as another platform for self-expression. And of course, who is it that gets to do color commentary for most sports shows in America? It is the outrageous person, the obnoxious person, the one who has capital "P" personality.

While we value self-expression in choice, we also value being true to ourselves. Even if being true to ourselves shatters commitments and other people's lives. Like the New Jersey Governor's recent declaration that in order for him to be true to himself, he must acknowledge that he's a gay American and he's been carrying on a gay adulterous affair and that essentially his marriage and his vows were a fraud.

One thing that always gives me perspective on this time in history is my continual reading of old books. I've been reading St. Francis de Sales book called "The Introduction to the Devout Life." Some of you who come from a Roman Catholic background have probably heard the name de Sales. We have a de Sales High School here. St. Francis lived in the latter half of the 16th century and beginning

of the 17th century. What is really striking as you read his extremely accessible book; it is not one of these old books that is just like eating shredded wheat, it's good for you, but you hate it. It is actually a very enjoyable book to read.

But one of the things that strikes you is what is in his table of contents. He addresses issues that never would be addressed in the 21st century. For example, Francis, in talking about what it means to be devoted to Christ, spends four chapters discussing the danger of amusement. Here in this country, we amuse ourselves to death. Francis spends several chapters talking about modesty in dress. There's a subject that's almost never addressed any longer in contemporary churches or anywhere else. Men and women, what would it mean for you to be modest in your dress so that you do not cause other people stumble, or draw undue attention to your body?

And one of the virtues that Francis discusses, which is almost entirely absent from discussion in America today, whether in schools or homes, in the broader society is the virtue of obedience. Creativity, yes. Self-expression, yes. Choice, yes. Authenticity, yes. Being true to myself, yes. Obedience?

A very dear friend and family member now is a principal of a local public school. He recently told me: Rich, at my public school parents want the benefits of a well-regulated, obedient student body so long as you don't enforce obedience with their children. They want other children held accountable. They want other children to be peaceful and quiet and listen to the rules. Just don't do it with their child.

Any discussion of obedience today is almost off limits. You mean I'm going to have to bring myself under some one else's authority? That sounds restrictive. That sounds authoritarian. And yet, you cannot be a biblical Christian in any meaningful sense without embracing this virtue of obedience. The word "obey" is used several hundred times in the Bible. Synonyms like listen, or hear, are used several hundred more times in the Bible.

As I finish this series that I've titled "Where is God When Life is Hard?" I want to talk about this neglected virtue of obedience. I've called today's talk, "Where is God When Obedience Is Hard? Let's pray.

1 Samuel 13:5-14

Then Philistines assembled to fight Israel, with three thousand chariots, six thousand charioteers, and soldiers as numerous as the sand on the seashore. They went up and camped at Micmash, east of Beth Aven. When the men of Israel saw that their situation was critical and that their army was hard pressed, they hid in caves and thickets, among the rocks and in pits and cisterns. Some Hebrews even crossed the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead. Saul remained at Gilgal, and all the troops with him were quaking with fear. He waited seven days, the time set by

Samuel; but Samuel did not come to Gilgal, and Saul's men began to scatter. So he said, "Bring me the burnt offering and the fellowship offerings." And Saul offered up the burnt offering. Just as he finished making the offering, Samuel arrived, and Saul went out to greet him. "What have you done?" asked Samuel. Saul replied, "When I saw that the men were scattering, and that you did not come at the set time, and that the Philistines were assembling at Micmash, I thought, now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the Lord's favor. So I felt compelled to offer the burnt offering." "You acted foolishly," Samuel said. "You have not kept the command the Lord your God gave you; if you had, he would have established your kingdom over Israel for all time. But now your kingdom will not endure; the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people because you have not kept the Lord's command."

This passage speaks to us about authority and obedience. Who should we obey? Why should we obey? Apparently, the prophet Samuel had issued a command to King Saul to wait seven days for Samuel to return and Samuel would offer the sacrifices required by God. When Samuel was delayed, Saul began making the sacrifices himself.

Now, to understand what the big deal was here, you need to understand that ancient Israel was a theocracy. Ancient Israel was not a republic or a democracy where individuals got to choose or vote on what the law was. Israel did not have petition drives in which moral issues would be placed on the November ballot for an up or down vote. Ancient Israel was not a libertarian society in which everyone essentially got to do what was right in their own eyes. Ancient Israel was a theocracy. That meant the Lord God, who reveals himself by the name "Yahweh" was the King of Israel. God's Word was the law of the land. Everyone including the king was subject to the commands of the Lord.

This made Israel unique among the nations. In other nations of that day, the kings or in Egypt the Pharaoh's were considered divine and their word was law. But Israel never deified their kings. The king was a servant of God and along with every other human being; he was required to submit himself in obedience to the Word of God.

Well, how did ancient Israel know what God commanded? God sent specially appointed prophets to announce his Word. Now, this also was a difference between ancient Israel and America today. In ancient Israel, to reject the prophets' revelation was to reject God himself. The prophets' words were to be strictly obeyed. And because the prophets in ancient Israel had so much authority, they carried a heavy responsibility. If the prophet misled the people, or spoke out of their own minds and not out of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the prophets were stoned. If you are taking notes, you might want to jot down Deuteronomy 13.

Understand that this is not the case today. In the New Testament era, apostles were appointed by Jesus to take the place of Old Testament prophets. To reject the words of the apostles, to say: That's just what Paul thought; that's just what Peter thought; that's just what Matthew wrote; I disagree, I choose to have a different value, to reject the words of the apostles is to reject the Word of God today.

In the New Testament, prophets' words are not to be strictly obeyed. We don't say today: Well, a prophet said it, so I'm bound to do it. In the New Testament the prophets' words are to be tested, to be sifted, to be weighed, to be prayed over. Someone today says: Well, I have a prophetic word for you, "God wants you to marry me." I have a prophetic word for you, "God wants you to go to Africa to be a missionary." "God is calling you to give such and such a sum of money." You say, "Well, thank you. I need to weigh that. I need to sift that. I need to pray over that."

In fact, the best way to understand prophecy today is to say that prophecy today is an invitation to pray. Prophecy today is more like, "Hey, listen up. God may be saying something to you in a certain area. I think he's inviting you to pray about missions. Or to pray about leading a small group, or to deal with this issue from your past. But you need to weigh it out before the Lord. It is perfectly acceptable to say: Thanks, but what you're saying is not what I'm hearing from God.

Getting back to the story, we find Saul disobeying a clear command from God. He did not wait for the prophet Samuel to offer the sacrifices. He offered them himself. He blurred the line between God's authority and his own human authority. He usurped the role that exclusively belongs to God's prophets and priests.

When we talk about obedience, we need to immediately talk about right and wrong use of authority. Saul abused authority.

Let me ask you a personal question before we look at the issue of obedience. Is there any place in your life where you have been blurring the line between God's authority and your authority? This happens all the time in families. Parents or spouses, in anger, take over the role of God in a family member's life. And they become super controlling. You may not spend a quarter without my permission because you have had bad spending habits. I will become the Holy Spirit in your life. I will convict you of your sin. I will strictly monitor you in every single area of life.

The usurpation of authority can happen in highly controlled churches. The pastor or elder or a home church leader can begin to monitor and regulate individual decisions that God leaves up to people's own consciences. God invites people to have an intimate relationship with himself through the Holy Spirit. Like Saul,

we sometimes usurp authority from the Holy Spirit and we try to be the Holy Spirit in other people's lives. Friend, are you usurping God's role at all in someone else's life? Are you trying to regulate anyone and probably getting really frustrated by it instead of leaving that person to God and his conviction?

God was testing Saul's obedience. How was he testing him?

1 Samuel 13:11

"What have you done?" asked Samuel. Saul replied, "When I saw that the men were scattering, and that you did not come at the set time, and that the Philistines were assembling at Micmash, I thought, 'Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the Lord's favor,' so I felt compelled to offer the burnt offering."

Obey, even if God is not working on your schedule.

Here is the first principle of obedience. Obey even if God is not working on your schedule.

Why was Saul so severely condemned by the prophet Samuel? Because Saul held the view that I cannot wait for the Lord to act on my behalf, I must make things happen by myself. Saul had this tremendous character failing of always taking things into his own hands when things looked like they wouldn't work out according to the promise of God. Saul is a prototype in scripture of relying on the arm of the flesh – my own plans, my own control, my own understanding, my own activity, rather relying on God.

You know, trust in God is a big thing for the Lord. This is a huge issue for God. He really, really counts trust in him to be important. Hebrews 11:6 says, "without faith it is impossible to please God. For whoever would obtain anything from God must believe he exists and that he rewards those that seek him."

God wants you to believe with all your heart that he is good and wishes to be good to you. God wants you to believe with all your heart that he is not a thief, that he does not want to rip off your life, that God's plans for your life are absolutely best and God's will is designed ultimately to bless you and not to curse you. God wants you to believe with all your heart that if you obey him, God will hold up his end of the bargain concerning you.

It may not turn out to be the way you envisioned your life to be; it may not be your dream for your life; but God will fulfill his plan and dream for your life, if you obey him. He wants people who can be put in pressurized situations, who can be unhappy, who can be, in fact, miserable and yet who will wait on God rather than try to make something happen themselves by disobeying the Word of God.

This happens all the time.

In so many areas of life, we feel pressured to make something happen because God does not seem to be working according to our schedules. I see it in ministry all the time. The church is in decline. We seem to be losing momentum. Let's not wait for God to stir people by the power of the Holy Spirit. Let's do another building campaign. Let's do another revival meeting. Let's get people jazzed in this new activity or program. Let's make something happen even though it is not Spirit led.

Waiting for God to work is a test. It is a test of your trust in him. Perhaps you've been treated unfairly. You've been slandered. You've been lied about. Can you wait for God's judgment, or must you take matters into our own hands? Romans 12:17-19 says:

Romans 12:17-19

Do not repay evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: It is mine to avenge; I will repay, says the Lord.

But many of us, upon being attacked or injured, are unable to wait for the intervention of God. I better sue and I better sue it now. I better start calling around and make sure I've got all my ducks lined up, make sure I have all the alliances I need at work.

Let me continue to apply this and then move on. Do you know God well enough to be able to trust his timing in your life? Or do you typically feel that you have to make something happen on your own? This is a huge test for those of you who are single to wait on God's timing regarding bringing someone along who shares your Christian commitment, who shares your Christian values, who shares your calling. It is a huge test when you are 30 years old or you are 35 years old. Your biological clock is ticking. I've talked with people who have very honestly said: "I have kept myself sexually pure and the fact is no one wants to date me, even Christian men. I'm beginning to wonder whether I've been a fool for not compromising."

I get regular letters and have had regular conversations with people who know that I'm Jewish and a believer in Jesus. They say to me: "Well, I'm dating a Jewish man (I'm dating a Jewish woman), and I just wonder how we can work this out in terms of marriage." I always ask the same question: "Well, what is the nature of your relationship to Jesus?"

"Oh, I'm a Christian. I believe in Jesus."

"Does your belief in Jesus include submission to his will?" With a little less certainty, "yes."

My follow up question is always: “Well, what do you think that Jesus’ will is for your life?”

“Well, I don’t know about that, but Alan is really fun and very bright. We get along great.”

It often takes a long looping conversation before the person even realizes that there is an obedience issue here. What does Christ want for you in your marriage? Have you asked that question?

Perhaps you are struggling with your job. Do you trust God enough to open up another job for you or to give you contentment or perseverance in your present job? Or do you have to make something happen in an illegal, or illicit way – through lying on a resume, or bending certain kinds of statements, making an opening for yourself where God does not seem to be making an opening for you. Do you have to compromise your standards? Do you have to take a job that you have at least a shadow over your conscience about? Working for a person who will require you to be involved in unethical business, or who will require you to be involved in questionable behavior. Or will you trust God that if you are obedient, he can make a way for you in your present situation?

For those of you who are married to someone who is not a follower of Jesus, or you have a family member who is not yet a follower of Christ, can you trust God with your mate’s salvation, or with your child’s salvation, or your parent’s salvation, or must you take control over this? Must you say: “I will not wait on the Lord. I’m going to be a totally self-righteous prig. I’m going to push and prod and nag my husband into going to church and getting right with God.” Must you try to produce a premature baby? “I’m going to write a long accusatory letter to my parents, pointing out to them all of their religious errors, why they raised me the wrong way, how stupid their beliefs have been their whole lives.”

Obey, even if God is not working on your schedule.

Obey, even if you are afraid of what someone else might think. Look at verse 11:

1 Samuel 13:11

“What have you done,” asked Samuel. Saul replied, “When I saw that the men were scattering, and that you did not come at the set time, and that the Philistines were assembling at Micmash, I thought, ‘Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the Lord’s favor.’ So I felt compelled to offer the burnt offering.”

The Bible regularly calls attention to a sin that we barely pay attention to in the church today. It is called “the fear of man.” Proverbs 29:25 says:

Proverbs 29:25

Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe.

Fearing people is a trap. It is a trap that restricts your freedom. I've noticed, especially among upper middle class, and upper class people, that there is a surprising lack of simple obedience to God because of fear of what other people will think. Well if I go out and in a clear way declare my allegiance to Jesus Christ, that's going to make other people in my office, or my country club, or on the United Way committee, or on this board of trustees feel uneasy and uncomfortable. So I will be disobedient to my Lord Jesus Christ. I will do what he tells me not to do. I will hide my light under a bushel basket because I am afraid of the reaction of others. That was Saul's problem. It was the fear of man.

Friends, can I ask you a personal question? Is the "fear of man" a problem in your life? Are you afraid of declaring clearly to your parents that your commitment to Christ means that some of their dreams for your life won't be fulfilled because those dreams are not what Christ has for you? Or have you avoided that discussion entirely? Or are you compromising the call that God has on your life? Is your freedom to fully obey Christ being restrained right now because of the fear of man?

You know, I believe that there is one major reason that the gospel has not spread more extensively to places like Cuba and Afghanistan and Iran and China. Brother Andrew wrote a fantastic book that really is inspiring, especially if you are a young adult. It is called *God Smuggler*. Brother Andrew is simply an ordinary guy who decided to follow God's call on his life and in obedience he smuggled Bibles into closed countries. For years he smuggled Bibles behind the Iron Curtain in Eastern Europe and Russia. For years he smuggled Bibles into China and the Arabian Peninsula.

I love what Brother Andrew says about fear and its effect on the spread of the gospel. He was telling a story about two women who went to Cuba and brought Bibles there. Andrew writes: "Iron, bamboo, and sugar cane curtains, closed borders, dictators, terrorists—these are not the real obstacles that keep us from serving our suffering sisters and brothers, or spreading the gospel to where the message has not been heard. The biggest obstacles lie in our own hearts—fear, doubt, selfishness, materialism, complacency, the unwillingness to risk suffering, and a host of other excuses."

What keeps you from being radical in your commitment to Christ?

Let's continue on with the story of Saul because God keeps testing King Saul's obedience. We read in 1 Samuel 15:1-11:

1 Samuel 15:1-11

Samuel said to Saul, "I am the one the Lord sent to anoint you king over his people Israel; so listen now to the message from the Lord. This is what the Lord Almighty says: I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt. Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys. So Saul summoned the men and mustered them at Telaim—two hundred thousand foot soldiers and ten thousand men from Judah. Saul went to the city of Amalek and set an ambush in the ravine. Then he said to the Kenites, Go away, leave the Amalekites so that I do not destroy you along with them; for you showed kindness to all the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt. So the Kenites moved away from the Amalekites.

Then Saul attacked the Amalekites all the way from Havilah to Shur, to the east of Egypt. He took Agag king of the Amalekites alive, and all his people he totally destroyed with the sword. But Saul and the army spared Agag and the best of the sheep and cattle, the fat calves and lambs—everything that was good. These they were unwilling to destroy completely, but everything that was despised and weak they totally destroyed. Then the word of the Lord came to Samuel: I am grieved that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions. Samuel was troubled, and he cried out to the Lord all that night.

It is clear that the issue here is an obedience test presented to Saul by the Lord. In verse 1 Samuel says:

1 Samuel 15:1

I am the one the Lord sent to anoint you king over his people Israel; so listen now to the message from the Lord.

And then in verse 9 that you see that the sin Saul committed was his unwillingness to destroy completely the Amalekites. We read in verse 9:

1 Samuel 15:9

...These they were unwilling to destroy completely.

There was this unwillingness. The issue was one of the will. And if you look up the Hebrew word "unwillingness" it always suggests disobedience.

And then, of course, the Lord tells us that the issue was one of obedience when he says to Samuel in verse 11:

1 Samuel 15:11

I am grieved that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions.

Friends, I believe that you and I are regularly being faced with obedience tests. Will you say yes to Jesus even if you don't know how things can turn out positively by you saying yes? "Will you trust me on this," the Lord is asking? "Will you follow me and fully obey me, even though you can't see right now, and can't understand how obeying me will turn out well for you."

In summer camps they often play a game where they will blindfold one of the kids and have them run through the woods completely blindfolded. They have to listen to a camp counselor's direction to turn left here; turn right there. Sometimes you'll see one of the kids trotting right along trusting that the counselor will give them directions at the appropriate time and won't allow them to smack into a tree. But you also see other kids shuffling their feet, struggling with the exercise. Some kids tear off their blindfolds entirely saying essentially: "I can't move forward unless I see where I'm going."

The Christian life often requires us to move forward, sometimes to run forward in obedience, even when we are forced to run blind. Jesus Christ sometimes will demand from you something that feels illogical, or counter-cultural or unsafe. Just becoming a Christian in the 21st century is counter-cultural. But the Bible is filled with examples of people who had to step out blindly in obedience to God and then they got to see this extraordinary result. The Bible is filled with stories of people who were put in absolutely impossible situations and who saw wonderful things happen and who must have had the tape playing over and over again in their minds: No way! You can't do that. The situation will never work out for you. But situations did work out because they obeyed God.

Joseph, you are a Jewish slave. No way could you become second in command of all Egypt and save an entire nation and your own people. You can't do that.

Moses, no way can you part the Red Sea. You're going to drown.

David, you are a teenage shepherd. You can't kill the giant Goliath with just a few pebbles.

Jonah, the Ninevites are crazy. They'll kill you. You can't preach to them and expect them to move into repentance.

Friend, however you see yourself, God desires to accomplish amazing things through your life simply through your obedience to Christ. Simply by saying yes to Jesus God will be able to do amazing things through you. Your health problems are not the issue. Your age is not the issue. Your income is not the issue. Your education is not the issue. There is one issue that matters chiefly to God – obedience to him.

Well, I just don't see how it would be paid for. I don't see how we're going to get the resource for this particular project. I don't see what God would have me drain my bank account and have me give that money away to some activity of the kingdom. That would leave me vulnerable. I don't see how this could work out positively. I don't see how I could possibly be used to launch this ministry.

God, you keep saying over and over to me again that that's what you want. You keep telling me to minister to people who are trapped in sexual addictions. God, you keep speaking to me over and over again that you want something launched to care for boys who have no dads, who have no male role models.

You just can't see how things will turn out positively.

Many of you have had the opportunity to see the wonderful movie "Pay It Forward." The movie is about a young boy named Trevor. He doesn't have a dad and is being raised by his single mom, who is working two jobs trying to make ends meet. Trevor is looking for meaning in life. He has a teacher who has some physical scars on his face and deeper emotional scars. The teacher makes the same speech every year to his students about how he wants each student to change the world. Trevor takes him up on it. Let's watch this film clip.

VIDEO – Pay It Forward

You have no idea of the positive outcomes that could occur simply by one simple statement to God: yes.

I read to you in the past the story of a Sunday School teacher in the 19th century who felt like God spoke to him and said: Make sure that every single boy in your teenage Sunday School class knows me. So he made it his business to visit each boy in his home or workplace. He found one of his students working in his uncle's shoe store. He went back into a storeroom and knelt down with him. That boy received Christ. The boy's name was Dwight Moody.

D.L. Moody became a great evangelist. At one of his meetings a man named Wilbur Chapman came to Christ. And he became a great evangelist and pastor in the late 19th century. And during one of Wilbur Chapman's meetings in Chicago, a baseball player came to his meeting and got saved. The baseball player's name was Billy Sunday. He became a great evangelist. And at one of his meetings in the early 20th century a man by the name of Mordecai Hamm came to Christ. He became a national evangelist.

One day Mordecai Hamm in the 1930's was holding some meetings. Some men gathered in a North Carolina field and prayed: God, do something in this evangelistic meeting tonight that will touch the world from this town, from this little place, from this farm field. God, do something that will reach the world for Christ.

That evening at that meeting a teenage boy walked forward and gave his life to Christ. That boy's name was Billy Graham.

Because that one Sunday school teacher back in 1850's said yes to Jesus Christ, I will go and talk with every child in my Sunday School class, it has mattered for millions and millions of people.

On the flip side, obey even if you don't see the negative consequences. Follow God even if you can't see why obeying God is such a big deal. You say: Well, what's the big deal if Saul killed all the Amalekites or not? In fact, it seems rather cruel to me. I don't know why the Lord required this of Saul. It actually seems to me that Saul was being more merciful than God. And the Lord was reprimanding him for being kind.

Friend, we have no idea what the consequences are for disobeying the Lord. Only the Lord can see the future. I'm unhappy in my marriage. We haven't been getting along in years. What's the big deal if I leave this marriage? Even if to do so technically violates God's will in the moment. We can't see the impact on our sons and our daughters, on our witness to the world around us. We can't even judge the impact of our disobedience on ourselves. Only God knows the awful consequences that can result from allowing even a small sin to be unchecked in our lives.

What's so bad about having a little unchecked bitterness? What's so bad about having a little unchecked pride? How can a little unchecked spending habit become a major problem? Obey God even if you cannot see the negative consequences.

Do you know that about 500 years after this event in 1 Sam. 15 one of the descendents of Agag, this king that Saul didn't want to put to death, one of his descendents came to a position of dangerous power. The man's name was Haman. And Haman, the descendent of the Amalekites and Agag threatened, like Hitler, to destroy all of the Jewish people. You can read the story of Haman in the book of Esther.

But my point is that from the perspective of Saul, he had no ability whatever to look 500 years down line and see the consequences that would be brought upon untold thousands of Jewish people from his single act of disobedience. I want to tell you, friend, that you and I have no ability whatever to predict the consequences of any one of our sins.

Listen up now. You and I have the choice of whether or not we're going to sin. But we have no choice, and no power over the consequences of our sin. We continually deceive ourselves into believing when I sin, I control the consequences. We cannot.

I often express this in terms of a person whose standing by the side of a pond with a rock in his hand. That person is weighing whether to throw the rock into the pond or not. That's a choice. But having decided to throw the rock into the pond, how big the ripples are. How far the ripple effect of your sins go is totally out of your hands and is totally given into the hands of God. When you choose to have sex outside of the boundaries of marriage, when you choose to not forgive, when you choose to lie, when you choose to fail in an obedience test, the consequences are out of your hand. Obedience is a big deal to God because only he can see the consequences.

You say: "Rich, can't I always ask God to forgive me?"

Absolutely. We can always ask God to forgive us.

"Well, why can't I just sin then and escape the consequences?"

One of the consequences of sin and the deliberate choice to sin is that we become harder and harder. You cannot sin and at the same time choose to remain soft to God. When we sin a little part of us dies, a little part of us gets calloused and hardened. I don't know and you don't know when our sin will make us so calloused and hardened that we entirely lose our intimacy and connection with God all together.

Obey, even if you can't see the consequences.

Obey, even if less than full obedience seems good enough to you. Look at verse 13:

1 Samuel 15:13

When Samuel reached him, Saul said, "The Lord bless you! I have carried out the Lord's instructions." But Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is the lowing of cattle that I hear?"

And two times Saul says:

1 Samuel 15:20

But I did obey the Lord, Saul said. I went on the mission the Lord assigned me.

I have no idea whether Saul was pretending or whether he had become so dull to the voice of God that he really didn't know if he was obeying the Lord or disobeying the Lord. It is certainly possible for a person to get so far out that they may begin to believe that God is pleased with less than full obedience.

- I've given 8% of my income, that's pretty close to a tithe.
- I tithe just on my income, but I never tithe on any inheritance I receive.

- Our church is doing this ministry all for you, God. The fact that we have to abuse people along the way, the fact that we have to manipulate, the fact that we're harsh, the fact that we step on people, is okay. This ministry is all for you, God. Look at the good fruit.

I ask myself: How must our less than full obedience sound to the ears of God? I did obey. I carried out your instructions.

How many churches have fallen into this trap? We've got this ministry going. We're reaching all these different people. It's all for you, Lord. Lord, you must be pleased because things are getting bigger and bigger. But you see the pastor unraveling spiritually and emotionally. He's screaming at staff. There is all this unhealth. But I did obey.

And so you have this incredibly sarcastic remark from Samuel as he tries to pierce the callous of Saul's conscience. He says:

Well, if you did obey, what then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears? What is the lowing of the cattle that I hear?

It's really pretty funny. Saul said: I did what the Lord told me to do in terms of sacrificing all the animals. I did it all. I fully obeyed. All the animals are dead. And in the background you hear, "Moooo...Moooo....Bahhhh...Bahhh." All the sheep and all the cows are doing their whole barnyard routine.

Friend, there is something or someone who is always crying out against the disobedient person even while they protest their innocence. Is something always crying out against them? It says in Genesis 4:10:

Genesis 4:10

The blood of Abel cried out from the ground...

Abel's blood was pleading to God for justice against his murderous brother, Cain. There is always something crying out against the disobedient person.

Let me ask you a question. Is there anything crying out against you? Even while you protest your innocence and say, "I've obeyed the Lord," is there anyone or anything that would be protesting before God and saying: "NO, you aren't as clean as you seem?"

The apostle James writes regarding the wealthy:

James 5:3-4

Your silver and your gold cry out against you. The wages you have withheld from your workmen is all evidence against you.

Let me ask you, is there anything that cries out against you and points the finger and says, "You're guilty." It could be a bank account that you've been hoarding. Or an estate that you've been fighting over with your family. The Lord says: "I've given you so much. But I didn't give it to you to hoard. I don't want you to be a lake that is stopped up. I want you to be a river. I want you to lose your wealth by giving it away."

Maybe there is something in your house right now that should not be in your house, if you are a follower of Christ and it is crying out to heaven against you and saying: Guilty. Maybe it is something on your computer, something on videotape, something in one of your drawers, or closet, or cupboards, that ought not to be in your house, follower of Christ and it is crying out against you. You need to go home and throw it in the trash, or erase it from your computer.

Maybe there is a person you've hurt and their wounding is crying out against you because you haven't apologized. You've never gone and reconciled yourself to them. Maybe a child's hurt is crying out against you. Your spouse's pain is crying out against you. Perhaps it is a person who has been neglected in your family. Maybe you have an older relative in a nursing home whose loneliness is crying out against you. Maybe it is a storeowner or an employer that you stole from and you need to confess that you stole from them. You need to make reparations. You need to repay.

Maybe it is your parents, who you fail to call. Or a boyfriend or girlfriend you insensitively dumped. Perhaps you did callously rip the heart out of an old boyfriend or girlfriend or an ex-spouse during your breakup. And despite your justifications and how they acted toward you, their pain is still crying out against you. Is there an employee you treated unjustly? Their cries of justice of appeal to God against you.

Obey even if less than full obedience seems good enough to you.

And finally, obey even if authentic repentance costs you everything. We read:

1 Samuel 15:24

Then Saul said to Samuel, "I have sinned. I violated the Lord's command and your instructions. I was afraid of the people and so I gave in to them. Now I beg you, forgive my sin and come back with me, so that I may worship the Lord." But Samuel said to him, "I will not go back with you. You have rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you as king over Israel."

1 Samuel 15:30

Saul replied, "I have sinned. But please honor me before the elders of my people and before Israel; come back with me, so that I may worship the Lord your God."

Do you know what phony repentance is? Phony repentance is only concerned about the consequences of being caught or being found out. “Okay, you’ve got me,” Saul says. “You’ve got me. I sinned. All right, let’s deal with the consequences quickly and let’s make sure that the consequences won’t be so severe that I won’t be able to hold onto the kingdom.”

“I don’t like the consequences. You say you are going to leave me, wife, because of the way I’ve been treating you? Let me shed my crocodile tears and tell you how sorry I am for this terrible thing you are upset about. I’m sorry for screaming at you. I’m so sorry for the last time I abused you. I’m so sorry for running around on you. It will never happen again. Don’t expose me. Don’t let anyone know about it.”

Phony repentance is always concerned about the consequences that will be meted out for disobedience. And you know that a person is offering phony repentance when their focus is on how can I continue to preserve my place and my ministry and my image and my façade of respectability that I have built? Phony repentance is always concerned about public perception and who knows what and damage control.

True repentance does not care about damage control. True repentance does not sit around and worry about who knows what, when and how. True repentance says, what I care most deeply about is my relationship to Jesus Christ. I sinned. My first concern is not how I can minimize the consequences. That’s up to the Lord. It is up to the Lord and his mercy regarding how far he lets the ripples go. My first concern is how can I get right with God? How can I deal with the internal rot that I’ve allowed into my life? How can my relationship with Jesus be restored so that it is my deepest desire to obey him fully?

We are not asked to never make a mistake, friends. We are asked that when we make mistakes, when we disobey, when we sin, to obey God through true repentance. “I want to be right with you, God, not just look right. I want internal righteousness, not just external, an appearance of acceptability. I want to be a good man or woman and not just look good or look respectable. God I want to repent down to my toes, even if it costs me everything.”

Obedience to God – this is a virtue that will set you apart from everyone else in the world. Let’s pray.

Where Is God When Obedience Is Hard?

Rich Nathan

August 28-29, 2004

Where Is God When Life Is Hard? Series

1 Samuel 13, 15

I. Obedience: The Neglected Virtue

II. Obedience: Misused Authority

III. Obey, Even If...

- A. God is not working on your schedule. (1 Samuel 13:5-12)
- B. You are afraid what someone else might think. (1 Samuel 13:11)
- C. You don't know how things can turn out positively. (1 Samuel 15:1-11)
- D. You don't see the negative consequences.
- E. Less than full obedience seems good enough for you. (1 Samuel 15:13-14)
- F. Authentic repentance costs you everything. (1 Samuel 15:24, 25, 30, 31)