

Doctrine & Covenants Lesson 3 Notes: Obedience

For I am the Lord thy God, and ye shall obey my voice...

D&C 132: 53

*Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse;
A blessing, if ye obey the commandments of the Lord your God,
which I command you this day:*

*And a curse, if ye will not obey the commandments of the Lord your
God, but turn aside out of the way which I command you this day,
to go after other gods,*

Deuteronomy 11:26-28

THE FIRST LAW OF HEAVEN

It was the prophet Joseph Smith who said, "Obedience is the first law of heaven."¹ This seems reasonable to us; it conforms to the experience we have in our lives. Until a child is willing to obey, it is hard to teach him anything. A teacher must get control of her classroom at the beginning of the school year or learning cannot take place. Thus the first covenant we make with God is simple. We promise to obey.

Certain relationships are marked by the necessity of obedience. The teacher—student relationship is one. Parent—child is the first relationship we encounter that requires obedience, and God puts his own seal upon it in the fifth commandment, promising that those who honor their parents will live long in the land. A servant to his master, an employee to his boss, a subject to a king or vassal to his sovereign—these are all examples of relationships that demand obedience from the lower to the higher. They are also types of man's primary duty towards the God who created this world and gave man life. Abraham 3:25 makes plain the purpose of mortality: "And we will prove them here-with, to see if they will do all things whatsoever the Lord their God shall command them." Life is a test of obedience.

This test is not for the benefit of God. God does not demand unquestioning obedience in the way that Pharaoh did of his slaves, to aggrandize himself. (Remember that Pharaoh is a type for Satan in the O.T.) Rather God wants us to obey for *our* good. Note the pleading sound in the voice of Deuteronomy 5:29 "O that there were such an heart in them, that they would fear me, and keep all my commandments always, that it might be well with them, and with their children for ever!" God wants our obedience because it the path to all the blessings—incredible blessings—that he longs to pour out on our heads because he loves us!

SAMUEL AND SAUL

A well-known story in the Old Testament gives a cautionary tale of human rationalization. Saul received specific instructions from God's prophet, Samuel, that the army was to destroy the population of an enemy nation, the Amalakites. These people had once attacked the nation of Israel when they were weak, having just come out of Egypt. They attacked from the rear--the stragglers, children, the aged and slow--without mercy. God intends to judge this cruel nation through Saul, utterly wiping them out, even down

¹ Journal of Discourses, Volume 16, p 248.

to their flocks and herds. Saul almost² keeps the command to do this. He wipes out all but their king, Agag, and he kills all but the best animals.

Samuel, coming to the scene of the battle, immediately demands to know what is the sound of “bleating in my ears!?” In other words, “If you have obeyed, why do I still hear sheep?” Samuel is not impressed with Saul’s explanation of offering the best of the enemy’s flocks as a sacrifice to God (how exactly would it be Saul’s sacrifice if it didn’t cost him anything?). Then the king backpedals and says that it was the people’s idea and they made him do it. (“I feared the people.”) This leads to Samuel’s famous statement that “Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.”(1 Sam 15:22) The consequences to Saul are terrible. God rejects him as King.

God cannot use a man whose commitment to obey God is so easily undone by self-interest or fear of man. The first qualification God looks for is “fear of the Lord.” Like a child who knows exactly what will happen if he hits his little brother, God’s children must know that there are consequences to disobedience that will be applied with certainty and impartiality. Without being able to act in this fear of the Lord, a man is useless to God. He has become a “law unto himself.”

DOCTRINE AND COVENANTS INSIGHTS

The Doctrine and Covenants contains its own account of rationalizing away the Lord’s command. It is in the form of a parable in D&C 101:43-62. The Lord of the vineyard gives specific commands that his servants begin to fulfill, but soon fall to second-guessing. Is the Lord aware of all the extenuating factors? Why work so hard and spend so much money in peacetime? Is this really needed? Note that they “consulted for a long time, saying among themselves, ‘What need hath my Lord of this tower?’” At the end of the parable the enemy comes by night and scatters the unprepared servants.

We are implicitly advised to search our own hearts for such second-guessing. Do we think Lord doesn’t fully understand our particular situation? Do we assume the Lord wants us to *fully understand* and “*be on board*” with his commandments before we obey them? Do we “consult for a long time” before obeying instructions from the prophet? Do we care more about what friends think than what God thinks? When we begin to rationalize we lose our precious and protective “fear of the Lord.”

There is a word for the proper reaction to a command of God. That word is “hearken.” One definition of this word is “obedient regard.” To hearken is to actively listen (read the Ensign, attend Stake and General conference, attend church, read the scriptures, etc.) and quickly obey. This is the note on which the parable of D&C 101 ends. After the Lord rebukes his servants for their failure, he gives them a second chance and a new commandment. The first question of his servant shows how hard it is to break old habits. “When shall these things be?” he asks his Lord, perhaps wanting to know how much time he has to get his assignment done. “When I will,” answers the Lord—a polite way of saying, “None of your business. Now go to work.” Whereupon the servant “went straightway, and did all things whatsoever his lord commanded him.” To hearken is to “go straightway and do all things whatsoever our Lord commands us.”

LEARNING THROUGH THE THINGS THAT WE SUFFER

In a panic over a call from the police that her seventeen-year old son had just crashed their car into a tree, one sister tried to think of all the things she could do to fix the situation. Then she bowed her head in silent prayer and heard a voice in her mind say, “Let him have this experience.” Learning through suffering is part of being human.

² We commonly repeat the saying, “If you *almost* keep the commandment, you *almost* get the blessing.” But there is better scriptural backup for this variation: “If you *almost* keep the commandment, you have *not* kept the commandment and you get the curse that goes with disobedience.” See Deuteronomy 11:26-28 and Deuteronomy, Chapter 28, for the blessings *and* cursings attached to the laws of God.

We are going to make mistakes and the consequences of those mistakes are going to teach us. Such things do not mean we are failing at life. They mean we are taking the course. Life, in its own way, is as messy as a grade school classroom. We will fail, learn and try again. And sometimes, the Teacher will administer punishment commensurate with the severity of a mistake that comes from stubbornness or disobedience.

We seriously underestimate our Father if we make the mistake of thinking that God only does “positive” things. Surely he would *never* raise his voice, threaten or *spank* a ‘child of God’, this reasoning goes.³ But scripture is plain that “my people must needs be chastened until they learn obedience, if it must needs be, by the things which they suffer.” (D&C 105:6) He says he prefers calling on people by the voice of the prophets, by the ministering of angels and by “my own voice.” (D&C 43:25) If, however, people will not listen, then he continues to try and reach through their shell of indifference with his “voice of earthquakes, and voice of famine and pestilences of every kind, etc.”

Hebrews 5:8 says of Christ, “though he were a son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered.” This is a difficult concept to grasp. Our own suffering has taught us because we have broken laws, suffered the consequences, and resolved to repent and never do THAT again. We know that Christ did suffer because of others. They rejected him, scorned him, spat on him, whipped him and eventually crucified him. But how did that teach him obedience? He was perfectly obedient whatever others did to him. We can safely assume that the will of Jesus, the son, was the same as the will of his Father. So in what way did he *learn* obedience?

Christ was totally obedient in his nature, but until he had the experience of mortality, he had never suffered in a direct physical way for his obedience. To fulfill the atonement He was asked to obey a command that, for the first time, he didn't want to obey. This was the only time when the father's will and Jesus' will were not identical. He prayed, “Let this cup pass from me...nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt.” (Matt 26:39) Having been through this experience, he became a high priest who can be “touched with the feeling of our infirmities.” (Hebrews 4:15) He can understand us, comfort us and give us courage in those experiences when we must obey laws we don't want to obey—that make us cry, “Let this cup pass from me!” By the power in the atonement we can learn to say like Jesus, “Nevertheless, not my will but thine be done.”

ESCAPING THE SCOURGES

Jesus suffered pain in this life even though he was perfect. Will we have to suffer? Yes. All men and women suffer. But there are many sufferings that come to the wicked that can be avoided by staying on the strait and narrow path of obedience. There are “scourges” coming in the last days that are specifically connected to wickedness. Zion, or God's people as a whole, “shall escape if she *observe to do all things whatsoever I have commanded her.*” (D&C 97:25) The word *scourge* combines the meanings of pestilence and plague with punishment. The saints are protected from many of the diseases of this day by obedience to the word of wisdom and the law of chastity. Many saints can attest to miraculous protection experienced when they were faithfully doing their duty.

What other promises do we have for our obedience? One that gives us comfort was spoken by the Savior to his disciples just before he died. He said, “These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33) And again, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you.” (John 14:27) We are told right up front that obedience is not a free pass, a guaranteed outcome of good fortune during mortality. But there is something that it does guarantee. Peace,

³ By the way, this theory, applied to human parenting, has produced more self-centered brats, than does administering firm limits and clearly expressed consequences, including “negative” ones when needed.

which is a certitude that the faith that sustains us will be rewarded in God's time.

Those who are disobedient and rebellious may heap up fame and riches and live in ease, but these earthly rewards always have an end. Without the fulfilled promises of the Lord there will be weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. The Savior's faithful servants however, will receive his approbation: "Well done thou good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of the Lord."

All of us want to hear those words. So just how obedient do we have to be to hear them? It is not a trivial question because obedience, for those trying to live by every word of God, is NOT EASY. Still, it is *required*. There is no way around it. A few scriptures come to mind. "There is a law irrevocably decreed before the foundation of the world, and when we receive any blessing from God, it is by obedience to that law upon which it is predicated." (D&C 130:20-21) "Be not deceived, God is not mocked. For whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." (Gal. 6:7) And as the Children of Israel covenanted, "It shall be our righteousness, if we observe to do all these commandments before the Lord our God, as he hath commanded us." (Deuteronomy 6:25)

These scriptures define the Spiritual Accounting Principles. They represent the justice of God, and that justice is absolute. God cannot override his justice because of love for his children. Mercy cannot rob justice. A broken law requires a punishment. This is part of every law. There is a blessing and a cursing (unpleasant consequence) affixed to all laws of God.

The Accounting Principle Scriptures are not a comforting set of doctrines. Those who are honest realize that they themselves stand condemned by them. Who lives all of God's laws perfectly enough to be justified by law alone? Those who understand the gospel simply as a list of laws they must obey, fall into three groups. First are those who are new to the whole thing ('I'm so excited about joining this church. I'm going to do it all! Bring on the commandments!')

The second group are the Mormon Pharisees. Like the Pharisees in Jesus' day, this group judges their standing with God based on how much better they are than others. They want to make sure that compared with other members of the church, they are getting an A++ in this life. This way of life leads to self-deception and image polishing. Also to collecting degrees, accomplishments, callings and awards, as well as expensive lifestyle trappings to prove that he or she is on the right track. It can also lead to spiritual snobbery—looking for things that give one an edge in the "race" for exaltation. Do I have an important pedigree in the church or can I, or my children, marry into one? Do I get important callings? Do I have impressive talents that garner recognition and awards? Can I take obedience to the next level? Remember the Pharisees of Jesus day who paid tithes of their "mint and cumin"? It is a serious mistake to think that we are developing a Spiritual Resume that will impress the Lord.

The third group makes the flip-side mistake of the Pharisees. They are convinced that it is impossible for them to attain exaltation if these Spiritual Accounting Principles are applied to them. "Who am I?" they ask. "I'm not descended from anyone important. I have no talents, and an unimpressive job." Perhaps such saints have been through a divorce or have wayward children. Perhaps they have never married and feel this means they have failed. Perhaps they struggle with same-sex attraction and feel no one who struggles with such things has a hope of exaltation. Perhaps there are serious sins in their past, that though repented of, they feel have sullied their record permanently. They compare themselves with others, a similar mistake as the second group. And so our third group gives up. They may go through the motions but in their hearts they think they don't have what it takes. Depression and anxiety are often associated with the spirit of fear that accompanies these sad saints.

Here is what is wrong with all three lines of faulty reasoning. They are based upon the arm of flesh. They are based upon what man can do. And he cannot do

enough.⁴ But who can deny that these scriptures are there and that the justice of God operates upon us? We cannot. Satan knows and takes full advantage of it.⁵ That is why he is called the Accuser of the Brethren. He is well versed in all the curses and blessings attached to God's laws and is determined to get every pound of flesh coming from those who have broken any law, no matter how small. When we stand before the bar of God, he will have the records before him as well, and will be a very effective prosecuting attorney. We may have been able to fool ourselves, but we will not fool a heavenly court using the rationalizations that we so easily swallowed.

What then is our hope? We begin with baptismal covenants. This links us to our Hope, Jesus Christ our Savior. After making covenants with him we begin trying to obey. Our first covenants with Christ are like the first rungs on a ladder. We all essentially begin in the "first group," determined to obey God's laws. And rarely do we begin without enthusiasm and great hopes. Conversion is a mountain top experience. We see vistas before us of new possibility. This is often the stage in the scriptures when God will give a person a new name, indicating a new vision of enlarged potential. Each new convert is enthusiastic, even excited to show the Lord what he or she can do.

And what do we learn from our early enthusiastic attempts at obedience? We learn that we're not going to get it right the first time, and that we have to keep trying when we fail. Eventually we learn that we didn't know the half of it; there are even *higher*, harder laws. We learn that there are other rungs on Jacob's ladder⁶. And most humbling of all we learn that the appetites and fleshly weakness that came with our older, birth name, the name of our natural man, have not magically disappeared. They keep popping up like whack-a-moles in some carnival game. How is it that our weakness for food, or gossip or the Sports Illustrated Swim Suit edition is still here?

And we learn another hard thing. The gospel gets progressively harder. Though we know that "Thou shalt not commit adultery," eventually we become aware that this is not enough; we must get lust out of our *heart* as well. We learn early that we must not steal, but eventually we learn that we must not even lust after things we don't have. We know we must not murder. Then we learn that God also expects us to, not only control our anger, but *love* our enemies and pray for those who spitefully use us. Wow! The Law of the Gospel as taught in the Sermon on the Mount or its Book of Mormon equivalent, certainly ups the ante on our obedience. Living the gospel gets ever harder and more restrictive, demanding more and more disciplining of our unruly flesh.

Whether suddenly, or as a slow dawning realization, we come face to face with an inescapable fact. A law, in and of itself, does not provide us with the necessary inward power to live it. Laws are just there, carved in stone. In fact, the square, exact, sharp edged altar of sacrifice of the Old Testament is a good symbol for the law. It is demanding and its demands are sharp and exacting. As Cecil B. DeMille said while working on the movie *The Ten Commandments*, we do not break the Ten Commandments so much as break ourselves upon them.

If after trying honestly, patiently and faithfully to keep all God's commandments, we have not become a Pharisee or given up completely, we will have become something else—we will have become a beggar. This is King Benjamin's way of describing what happens to the man or woman of Christ who tries his best to live all God's laws and finds himself wanting or lacking the power to do so. This is exactly where God wants us. This progression is taught beautifully in the temple but it is not possible in this forum to talk of

⁴ We have not mentioned the Spiritual Evolutionists—those who admit it seems highly unlikely that a mere mortal could get from here (regular Saint) to there (Exaltation and Godhood) in any normal time frame, but since we have eons and eons, we'll get there eventually by a long series of small steps, just like evolution took us from one celled creatures to man. This has a neatness that comes from its symmetry with the supposed principles of the natural world, but the trouble is that it is completely unscriptural. See 1 Jn. 3:2. There are no scriptures supporting this proposition.

⁵ See the vignette about "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe."

⁶ The ladder Jacob saw going up to heaven in a dream. (Genesis 28:12) This ladder represents "the House of God."

the specific teachings there. One can however, see the patterns in life that correspond to temple symbols and make the connection in one's own mind. A person who arrives at the point in their life of prayerfully coming before the Lord as a beggar, will find their cup filled with the Spirit of the Lord, which then enables them to pour out these received blessings into the lives of others in service truly done in the name of the Savior. Such saints will be doing his work in the earth, blessing where he would bless if he were walking in our path. After realizing our need and humbling ourselves as the beggars that we truly are, we will then be able to act in the name of the Son of God, equipped by his spirit, which supplies us with all our need out of the riches of his storehouse in Christ.

So why is it so impossible to do the right thing without the enabling power of Christ? Why do we end up coming as beggars to the throne of grace? Why don't we obey all the time, every time? To answer these questions explains why each of us needs covenants with Jesus Christ to enable us to live a righteous life.

ANTI-OBEDIENCE FORCES

We are spirit beings in physical bodies. We learn God's commandments and we enter the waters of baptism making solemn covenants to obey these laws. But as much as our spirit wants to obey, we need to understand how our body feels about the whole obedience thing. Our physical bodies are telestial at this point, "natural" as the Book of Mormon puts it, part of a fallen world. Obedience to laws that require discipline and self-denial? Our bodies are not interested. Our flesh wants what it wants when it wants it. On fast day, our flesh is just plain hungry. Of course, we don't let our flesh have its way. We fast anyway. But our stomach still growls. That is why the scriptures are very clear about the source of our "obedience problem." It is our body that gets us in trouble.

As Lehi taught his boys, "And now, my sons, I would that ye should look to the great Mediator, and hearken unto his great commandments; and be faithful unto his words, and choose eternal life, according to the will of his Holy Spirit; And not choose eternal death, according to the will of the flesh and the evil which is therein, which giveth the spirit of the devil power to captivate, to bring you down to hell, that he may reign over you in his own kingdom." (2 Nephi 2:28-29) If we are going to be obedient to God, we are going to have to choose the will of the Spirit over the will of our own flesh.

As the comic strip Pogo put it, "We have met the enemy, and he is us!" Our bodies are not motivated by celestial impulses, but by rather ordinary human appetites and lusts. These appetites and impulses are the source of human bondage. All men are in bondage to Satan through their flesh in one way or another until freed through the atonement of Jesus Christ. That is why the Book of Mormon emphasizes coming out of bondage so much and why the central metaphor of the Old Testament is the story of God bringing the nation of Israel out of bondage in Egypt and into the promised land. This same story needs to happen to us all.

But even after our deliverance from this bondage through baptism and rebirth into a covenant relationship with Jesus Christ, having his Spirit within us always, the desires and appetites of the flesh do not disappear. We are expected to obey and choose the way of the spirit in spite of these appetites. The more we obey, the stronger our spirit becomes. This trains our bodies and our spirits to work together with the Spirit of the Lord, leading us on an upward path toward consecration. Notice that the root of disciple and discipline is the same. The process of becoming consecrated to the Lord begins with obedience and ends in greater obedience. Obedience is the training regime prescribed by the Master Trainer. Obedience is the first law of heaven, as well as the last. Through it we learn to tell ourselves 'no' so that we might tell the Lord 'yes.' Our strength in Christ grows as we obey, and we progress upward until we are filled with that charity which is the crown of virtues. Having been "faithful and diligent in keeping the commandments of God" we will find ourselves "encircled in the arms of [Christ's] love." (D&C 6:20)