

THE HEART OF OBEDIENCE

(All Scriptures are New American Standard Bible unless noted otherwise)

In Jesus' final conversation with His disciples, He left them with a simple charge:

"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Matthew 28:19-20

Three things: make disciples (followers of Jesus), baptize them (a visible expression of repentance and faith), and teach them to observe (obey) all that He commanded His disciples.

Obedience in the life of His followers is a big deal with Jesus. That creates a bit of confusion for a lot of people trying to grasp the connection between grace and works in this relationship with Him.

Sometimes we find ourselves obeying the Scriptures in order to feel like we stand in God's favor. Sometimes we do whatever we want because we are banking on grace covering anything we do wrong. In the New Testament, Jesus forgave the worst offenders and rejected the Pharisees, the professional rule-keepers of the day. We are not always sure of how we should view obedience.

We can't escape the importance of obedience in the Scriptures, so how do we learn it? A starting point is to look at the heart of disobedience. When we see how God regards disobedience, we get a better picture of the heart of obedience.

JEREMIAH 2:1-13 THE HEART OF DISOBEDIENCE

Jeremiah was a prophet to Judah (southern tribes of Israel) for 40 years. God sent him to call Judah to return to Him, to walk in obedience to Him.

2:1-2

Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, "Go and proclaim in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, 'Thus says the LORD, "I remember concerning you the devotion of your youth, the love of your betrothals, your following after Me in the wilderness, through a land not sown.'"'"

God chose Israel for relationship. Like a new marriage, it had a wonderful beginning. There was devotion, love, hope and excitement.

2:5-6

Thus says the LORD, "What injustice did your fathers find in Me, that they went far from Me and walked after emptiness and became empty? "And they did not say, 'Where is the LORD WHO brought us up out of the land of Egypt, who led us through the wilderness, through a land of deserts and of pits, through a land of drought and of deep darkness, through a land that no one crossed and where no man dwelt?'"

Over time, Judah rebelled against God. He became a second thought –they didn't even ask where He was, despite having safely led them for years. Notice God's question, "What injustice or fault did you find in Me?" Disobedience questions God's character; it is a charge against Him that He may not be who He says He is. This dismissal of God's character is a repeated theme by Old Testament prophets.

2:7

"And I brought you into the fruitful land, to eat its fruit and its good things. But you came and defiled My land, and My inheritance you made an abomination."

Judah's disobedience defiled, or spoiled, God's abundant blessings and care.

2:10-12

"For cross to the coastlands of Kittim and see, and send to Kedar and observe closely, And see if there has been such a thing as this! Has a nation changed gods, when they were not gods? But My people have changed their glory for that which does not profit. Be appalled, O heavens, at this, and shudder, be very desolate," declares the LORD.

God tells the people to check out other nations—Cyprus and Arabia. Those who follow empty idols (who can't talk, hear, act, protect, or lead) didn't even change gods; they refused to forsake them. Judah had God, the One who demonstrated His power to care, lead, feed, protect...and Judah changed their God. Incredible! Be appalled! Shocked that this would happen!

Again, in verses 10-12 God considers Judah's disobedience a charge against His character.

2:13

"For My people have committed two evils:

*They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters,
To hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water."*

The whole of Judah's disobedience is summarized in v13 – God calls it two evils.

1. They forsook God (the fountain of living water that sustained you)

Forsake – to abandon, leave. Disobedience is characterized as moving away from God.

They were defiant – note Jeremiah 2:20a, 2:31, 5:22-24, 6:16-17, 7:23-24

They said we will not serve, we will not listen, we will not submit (a stubborn heart). Another prophet called them a “stiff-necked people,” meaning they could not be turned from their ways.

2. To hew their own cisterns (broken cisterns!)

There was a lack of springs in Palestine, so people collected rain water in reservoirs called cisterns. Empty cisterns were sometimes used as prisons. Joseph was thrown into a pit by his brothers, most likely a dry cistern.



Cistern – hewn cavity. (BiblePlaces.com)

Picture the image God gives them – He was a fountain of living water, He met all their needs, but they wanted to dig their own cisterns to provide for themselves. They rejected His care for cracked, broken cisterns that could not sustain them as God did.

God speaks of pursuing things that will not satisfy or fulfill us. *Sin is what you do when your heart is not satisfied with God. No one sins out of duty. We sin because it holds some promise of happiness.* (John Piper)

Jeremiah 18:11c-12

"...Oh turn back, each of you from his evil way, and reform your ways and your deeds." "But they will say, 'It's hopeless! For we are going to follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart."

God asks the people of Judah to return and repent, but they declared, “We are going to follow our own plans.” Isn’t this the attitude that describes our intentional disobedience to God?

Other Old Testament prophets sound a similar tone—God is grieved by His people’s disobedience. Disobedience is more than the violation of particular laws; on some level it is an act of distancing ourselves from God. It is moving away from the One who has loved, saved, led, and protected us. God’s words carry the sound of sorrow. He contends, or pleads, with those who habitually disobey Him.

Disobedience is more than a violation of Biblical rules, is our personal declaration of independence. **The heart of disobedience is movement away from God.**

Though Jeremiah speaks to Judah as a nation of people, his description of disobedience mirrors an individual’s heart of disobedience. It is a movement away from God.

With the heart of disobedience as a background, consider what Jesus invites us to do.

MATTHEW 11:28–30 THE HEART OF OBEDIENCE

11:28

“Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.”

Jesus’ invites the weary to Himself. The context is the burdensome nature of the Pharisees’ law. This passage is often taught with the theme of “shifting our burdens to the Lord.” The Scriptures teach that Jesus carries our burdens; but it is not the point in this context.

Jesus called His 12 disciples in Matthew 9. His teaching took on a more deliberate message that differed from the Pharisees’ teaching about the Law. Those who submitted themselves to the Law given by Moses considered themselves disciples of the law, or disciples of Moses.

The Pharisees elevated themselves as the religious authority as they expanded the Mosaic Law from Ten Commandments into 365 prohibitions and 250 commandments. They wanted to be sure that nothing in the Ten Commandments was violated.

Consider the fourth commandment: *Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy* (Exodus 20:8). They assumed it meant no work on the Sabbath, so they expanded it with examples. No walking through a grain field on the Sabbath, because you could brush against the heads of the grain and they fall out, and therefore make you guilty of harvesting or work. If a bandage fell from a wound on your arm on the Sabbath, you couldn’t replace the bandage; it would be considered work. A woman could not look in the mirror on the Sabbath; she might see a gray hair and be tempted to pluck it out, a grievous act of work.

In Matthew 12, immediately following His call to the burdened in Matthew 11, Jesus and His disciples not only walked through a grain field, but they munched their way through it! The Pharisees pounced on Jesus for allowing it. He countered them with David’s actions in 1 Samuel 21 (taking bread from the Holy place in the tabernacle). Jesus proceeded to the Temple where He healed a man with a withered hand as He confronted the Pharisees over their Law-centered teaching. (Matthew 12:1-13)

Jesus charged the Pharisees with making the Law incredibly burdensome (Matthew 23:1-5). He invited those burdened by obeying the rules of the Pharisees to come to Him. Obedience to Jesus was different than what they knew under the Pharisees.

11:29

"Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls."

A common yoke was a heavy beam of wood shaped to fit an animal to pull a cart or farming implements.



Take My yoke upon you. Jesus uses the yoke as a symbol of submission or obedience. The yoke conveys an image of obedience, of walking in step with Him. His yoke (authority) is not burdensome.

11:29-30

"Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My load is light."

Learn from Me. A younger ox was usually paired with an older ox in the yoke. The younger ox would fight the yoke, which was often rough-hewn. It left him irritated and bloodied about the neck until he learned to follow the lead of the older, wiser, stronger ox. In like manner, we as believers fight against the yoke of Jesus, suffering the built-in consequences of sin until we learn to walk in obedience.

"Learn" is the Greek word "manthano," similar to "mathetes," from which we take the word "learner" or "disciple" in the New Testament. Jesus is inviting us to more than an accumulation of knowledge. This learning is defined by Gerhard Kittel: "Jesus does not seek to impart information but to awaken commitment to Himself." (Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, p. 494)

Jesus makes obedience a relational issue, not a rule-keeping issue.

For I am gentle (meek) and humble in heart. "Meek" means *power under control*. The word was used to describe a horse which had been broken to a harness. Jesus, broken to the harness or yoke, submitted to the will of the Father. He gave the ultimate demonstration of it in the Garden of Gethsemane before His crucifixion as He prayed, "Father, if Thou art willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Thine be done." (Luke 22:42) If Jesus submitted Himself to the will of God, would He ask anything less of us?

My yoke is easy, meaning good, useful, kind. **My load is light**, not burdensome service.

This is where we learn obedience, step by step in the yoke of Jesus, engaged with Him. It is learned in relationship with Him, not in the knowledge of rules. Where the heart of disobedience is movement away from God, the heart of obedience is movement toward God. Obedience is committing ourselves to the yoke of Jesus.

Two questions—

HAS THE CHRISTIAN LIFE BECOME BURDENOME?

When obedience is burdensome, when we are worn out following Jesus, something is wrong. We are probably living the Christian life in our own strength, either by trying to keep up an appearance or by working hard to earn something from God. When we have to know how much we need to do, how far we need to go or how much more approval we need from Him...there find little rest.

“Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand;”
(Romans 5:1-2)

Jesus has **already** borne the weight of presenting us justified before God. Work completed... walk in it.

Because He has already justified us (declared us righteous), we stand firmly in His grace. His invitation to learn from Him implies that we don’t have obedience down yet. We stand in His grace, totally forgiven, as He transforms us into the likeness of Christ WHILE we learn to walk with Him.

Ask God to reveal where you still feel the responsibility to earn God’s favor.

IS IT HARD TO ENTER THE YOKE?

We have to ask why it is hard to enter the yoke. When we are unwilling to enter the yoke, it doesn’t matter how many rules we keep. To avoid the yoke is to hold Jesus at arm’s length. As in Judah’s disobedience, our resistance to the yoke is a statement about God’s character – that He is not worthy of our worship, not trustworthy with our lives or not wise enough to make our decisions.

For every believer, the Christian life began through a relationship with Jesus; for many people it continued as a lifestyle of principles, doctrines and rules of behavior, not a friendship with Jesus. The Biblical principles, rules and doctrines are all right and true, but they can easily become a pattern of self-righteous obedience.

Why is it hard to enter the yoke? Because it requires that we walk in step with a Person. It is easier to sin against a rule or a book than against a Person. Submission in the yoke requires faith, a willingness to trust God. Our human nature pulls us to instead maintain control of our own lives, a position of either deception or arrogance. We cherish our independence.

Is there sin in my life that I have regarded as unforgiveable, therefore leaving me with a sense of unworthiness of the yoke? Sin robs us of confidence to pursue God. Is there sin in my life that I treasure, making me resistant to the yoke, the place where Jesus will ask me to give it up?

God’s contention with Israel in the Old Testament was not so much that they disobeyed Him , but that they did not respond when He called them back to Himself. His message was always one of forgiveness and restoration. We will readily find the same in the yoke.

Go back to Jeremiah 2:13. Why try to live the Christian life on your own when the world can only offer counterfeits. When Jesus asked Peter why he would follow Him, he replied, “Lord, to whom shall we go. You have the words of eternal life.” (John 6:68)

We will have battles with obedience for the rest of our lives – because sin still resides in us. He did not drop the Law, it just cannot save us. Rather, God calls us to confess our sins, embrace His grace and trust Him by submitting to His yoke.

Jesus presented obedience as a relational issue. He told His disciples in John 14:15, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.” Obedience is our response to a loving God Who sacrificed His Son that we might have life.

THE HEART OF DISOBEDIENCE IS MOVEMENT AWAY FROM GOD.

THE HEART OF OBEDIENCE IS MOVEMENT TOWARD GOD.