



Obedience

vs. Willfulness

Obedience is freedom to be creative under the protection of divinely appointed authorities.

Obedience is a relationship between two “servants” who must both answer to God.

“Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.” —1 Peter 5:5



The alternative to obedience is not freedom, but tyranny.

“An evil man seeketh only rebellion: therefore a cruel messenger shall be sent against him.” —Proverbs 17:11

“How will you find good? It is not a thing of choice; it is a river that flows from the foot of the Invisible Throne and flows by the path of obedience.”

—George Eliott

Definition

The primary Hebrew word for *obey* is *shama*. It is a root word meaning “to hear intelligently, to listen, to consent, to give heed, to perceive by ear, to understand.”

The Greek word *hupakouo* expands the Hebrew meaning of *obey*. *Hupo* means “under, a place beneath, below,” and denotes an inferior position. *Akouo* means “to hear, to understand.” *Hupakouo* means “to hear, listen attentively; to heed or conform to a command or authority.”

A second Greek word for *obey* is *peitharchoo*, meaning “to be persuaded by a ruler, to submit to authority.” The disciples declared to the religious ruler who commanded them not to preach in the name of Jesus, “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

A word related to *obedience* is *submission*. The Greek word translated *submit* is *hupotasso*. It means “to subject oneself.” It is a voluntary action of one person to become subordinate to another.

Life and Death Choices

Obedience is not an optional quality. A lack of it results in personal destruction. “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, which ye have not known” (Deuteronomy 11:26–28).

“The eye that mocketh at his father, and despiseth to obey his mother, the ravens of the valley shall pick it out, and the young eagles shall eat it” (Proverbs 30:17). “He, that being often reproveth hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy” (Proverbs 29:1).

Ministers of God

All legitimate authority comes from God. He is the One Who sets up rulers and takes them down. (See Psalm 75:7.) Therefore, when we disobey a God-given authority, we experience God’s judgment.

“Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation” (Romans 13:1–2).

Three times in this passage, God-given authorities are defined as “ministers of God.” (See Romans

13:4–6.) Therefore, they carry out the will of God through authority entrusted to them.

Two Ways to Obey

Three military men were standing on the deck of an aircraft carrier. Suddenly their commanding officer spotted an approaching missile. He shouted to them to “drop.” Two of the men dropped to the deck. The third one looked around to see what the problem was. Just as he turned, the missile struck him, and he was killed. This account illustrates the two philosophies of obedience.

The Greek approach is to understand first and then obey. The soldier who turned around wanted to know *why* he should “drop”—and then he would decide whether or not to obey. The second approach is the Hebrew model—obey first, and then understand why. This is the method that God used in His training of Abraham when He asked him to leave his homeland and to offer up his son. On this basis also the Scriptures are written, so that every believer would obey God and then understand why.

The Hebrew approach to obedience presupposes a close relationship between the one giving the command and the one carrying it out. Jesus emphasized this when He said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27). Sheep will not follow a stranger, because they do not know the stranger’s voice.

The Motive of Obedience

Two words in Deuteronomy 11:1 are foundational to obedience: *love* and *keep*. “Therefore thou

shalt **love** the LORD thy God, and **keep** his charge, and his statutes, and his judgments, and his commandments, always.”

True obedience must be based on love. Therefore, Jesus said, “If ye **love** me, **keep** my commandments” (John 14:15). When we truly love the Lord, “his commandments are not grievous” (1 John 5:3).

To “keep” God’s commandments is to place them before our eyes with the intent of obeying them. In Deuteronomy 11:1, the Hebrew word translated *keep* is *shamar*, which means “to guard, to observe, to preserve.” God’s people were told to write out God’s commandments and keep them before their eyes so they would not forget them—even writing them on their doorposts so they would see them as they went out and came in.

The word *keepeth* is used in John 14:21: “He that hath my commandments, and **keepeth** them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him.” The Greek word for *keepeth* is *tereo*, meaning “to guard from loss or injury by keeping the eye upon.”

The best way to keep God’s commandments before our eyes is to follow the instruction of Deuteronomy 11:18: “Therefore shall ye lay up these my words in your heart and in your soul, and bind them for a sign upon your hand, that they may be as frontlets between your eyes.”

A third word that is basic to obedience is found in Deuteronomy 11:13: “And it shall come to pass, if ye shall **hearken** diligently unto my commandments which I command you this day, to love the LORD your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all



Wood ducks provide a profound illustration of obedience. Although the eggs are laid over an eleven-day period, they all hatch within a few minutes of each other in response to their mother’s call. Shortly thereafter, the mother stands at the base of the tree and calls out for the ducklings to jump. Those that obey find safety in nearby ponds. Those that disobey perish in the abandoned nest.



“Obedience is the one qualification for further vision.”

—G. Campbell Morgan



Obedience is affirming the truth that God gives direction and provision through those whom He has placed over our lives.

“Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well.” —I Peter 2:13–14



“Obedience to God’s will is the secret of spiritual knowledge and insight. It is not willingness to know, but willingness to do God’s will that brings certainty.”

—Eric Liddell

your soul.” The word *hearken* is *shama*, the same word translated *obey* in Deuteronomy 11:27.

How Obedience Relates to Wisdom

When God told Solomon to ask for whatever he wanted, Solomon asked for an understanding heart. “Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this thy so great a people?” (I Kings 3:9).

The Hebrew word for *understanding* in this verse is *shama*, the very same word used for *obey* and for *hearken*. God was pleased with Solomon’s request and said, “Because thou hast asked this thing, and hast not asked for thyself long life; neither hast asked riches for thyself, nor hast asked the life of thine enemies; but hast asked for thyself understanding [*biyn*] to discern judgment; Behold, I have done according to thy words: lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding [*biyn*] heart; so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee” (I Kings 3:11–12).

The understanding heart that God gave Solomon was not just a hearing (*shama*) heart, it was a *biyn* heart. A *biyn* heart involves a wide range of skills including the ability to separate mentally, to discern and distinguish, to be intelligent, to be prudent, to teach, to cause to understand.

How Obedience Avoids Tyranny and Bondage

Sometimes those in positions of authority misuse their power and should be reproved by those

who are over them. Other times, those under authority want to be free from all restrictions and rebel—only to find themselves in new relationships that are even more restrictive.

Defining Jurisdictions for Obedience

When there are conflicting commands between different authorities or when one authority tells us to do what we know is morally wrong, we must discern whether the one who is giving the command is operating within the proper jurisdiction. There are four possible areas of jurisdiction.

1. Parental jurisdiction

Parents are given jurisdiction by God to train up their children to reverence Him and do what is right. Sons and daughters are instructed to obey their parents in all areas. (See Ephesians 6:1–2.) However, if parents command their children to do things contrary to the laws of God or the laws of man, they are operating outside their jurisdiction.

2. Governmental jurisdiction

God ordained government to carry out His will in matters of justice. Rulers are to praise those who do well and punish those who do evil. (See Romans 13:3–4.) Because civil authorities derive their power from God, they will be judged if they violate the laws of God. Therefore, citizens are to make wise appeals to contest unwise or unjust laws.

3. Ecclesiastical jurisdiction

The heads of households are to voluntarily submit to the leadership of wise and Godly elders in the church. The elders are not to go beyond their jurisdiction by

instructing wives or children to disregard the guidance and wishes of the father, as long as his instruction is consistent with Scripture. (See Galatians 4:1–2.)

4. Vocational jurisdiction

Employees are to obey employers with wholehearted service. If an employer requires action that violates the Biblical convictions of an employee, the employee should make a wise appeal and, if the appeal is rejected, he should consider resigning. (See Acts 5:29 and Colossians 3:22–23.)

Personal Evaluation

How obedient are you?

1. Do you obey regardless of what you are told to do?

Obedience is based on what God says is true and right—no blind obedience; no surrender of personal responsibilities.

2. Do you ask for reasons when your request is denied?

Obedience is accepting “no” as the final answer—not asking challenging questions, making immediate appeals, or delaying discussions, but gaining only vital new information.

3. Do you immediately obey when given instructions?

Obedience is acting immediately on command—no delays, no objections, no excuses such as “Let me finish this first.”

4. Do you smile when you are told to do something?

Obedience is cheerfully responding to requests—

no frowns, no murmurs, no groans, no rolling of the eyes.

5. Do you ever give reasons why you cannot do a job?

Obedience is finding ways to overcome obstacles—no negative thinking, no failure to be creative, no “I can’t.”

6. Have you ever had to be reminded to do little tasks?

Obedience is fulfilling little commands as well as big ones—no excuses, no frustration, no reaction, no justification.

7. Do you ever have to redo a job you initially did the wrong way?

Obedience is following all the instructions the first time—no assuming, no guessing, no forgetting, no self-will.

8. Do you ever think that a job is “stupid”?

Obedience is doing jobs and understanding the reasons later—no mocking, no whining, no cynical questioning.

9. Do you ever ask one parent after the other said no?

Obedience is not pitting one authority against another—no scheming, no withholding of important facts, no repeat requests.

10. While working on chores, do you ever plan recreation?

Obedience is putting all your energies into a task—no halfhearted effort, no holding back energy, no daydreaming.



Obedience to a command that violates conscience is disobedience.

“Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men.” —Acts 5:29

When Jesus taught His disciples to pray, He gave them principles for making a wise appeal.

1. Protect authority’s reputation—

“Hallowed be thy name.”
(i.e., “I want to give a good report about you and your work.”)

2. Advance authority’s program—

“Thy kingdom come.”
(i.e., “I want to help you reach the goals that you have.”)

3. Honor authority’s position—

“Thy will be done.”
(i.e., “I want others to respect your authority as much as I do.”)

“Obedience is the fruit of faith; patience, the bloom on the fruit.” —Christina Rossetti