

# Obey

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**Sermon Series:**  
**Deuteronomy**

**Deuteronomy 6:16-25**

***Obedience is something that you want from your dog. It's not something you actually want to do.***

I should have listened to Pete. When we were reviewing the bulletin for this service, he asked me if I wanted “Obey” to remain the title of the sermon. I said, “Sure, that’s how it’s been announced and that’s the theme of the text.” If I had been thinking, I would have realized that the word “obey” carries about the same attraction as the phrase “root canal.” I did a wedding yesterday in which the bride insisted on making a vow to *submit* to the spiritual leadership of her husband. The place is still buzzing about *that* radical commitment. The baby boomer generation, my generation, made its reputation by tossing that word out on its ear. Obedience is something that you want from your dog. It’s not something *you* actually want to do.

When I was coaching crew in the eighties, our coaching staff took over from a coach who had no rules. Crew was a club sport and that coach thought that meant “party sport.” The entire crew team was banned from a hotel in Philadelphia because when the boys were told to come to dinner in ties, they did—*just* in ties. They didn’t want to be told what to do. Their obedience was literal and was, in fact, a statement of rebellion. And yet, the Bible is full of commands and the instruction to obey, to keep the commandments. How are we, a people who love personal freedom, supposed to submit ourselves to someone else’s authority? *Let us pray.*

*Lord God, we are a stubborn people. We admit it. And yet, we know that when we have listened to your voice, our lives have been significantly changed. So, in this moment of calm and quiet, we ask that by the power of your Holy Spirit, you would silence all voices but your own so that hearing your word, we*

*may actually do it, for our good and your glory. Amen.*

Let’s go back to that crew team. As our new coaching team came on board, we realized that there needed to be some order and discipline, not just for our reputation on the road but also for the sport itself. As you know, rowing requires the utmost of precision—everyone doing exactly the same thing at exactly the same time in exactly the same way. If they don’t, the boats look like crazy water bugs, going every which way.

We asked the student leadership to come up with a covenant for team behavior, both on and off the water. We coaches helped them edit it, and then we presented it to the parents, who immediately went crazy over one sentence that the students themselves had written. It was this: *Every rower will submit to the will of the boat.* One memorable response was, “My

child submits to no one!” (That explained a lot!) The kids explain-ed that if there wasn’t adherence to discipline, they would never win a race. Well, that changed the tone of the meeting—if “submitting to the will of the boat” could help you actually *win*, then by all means, submit!

How did we come to have such an aversion to the concept of obedience? As Americans, we do have roots in disobedience to the authorities of governments and state churches. But our deep distrust of submission and obedience came after World War II. We witnessed the Nuremberg trials and heard testimony of despicable acts of cruelty and genocide being done by ordinary citizens. The excuse? “I was just following orders.” So, following orders became a bad thing to do.

***The issue does NOT lie in whether one is an obedient person. The issue is about whom you obey. It is about whom you listen to.***

Exploring this phenomenon, research psychologist Stanley Milgram conducted a famous experiment at Yale. Many of you know about this—it's basic reading now for classes in psychology, sociology and political science. Milgram brought in volunteers and asked them to help subjects learn pairs of words. If the subject got the pairs wrong, the volunteers were supposed to shock the subject with electricity. Now, the subjects were actors and weren't really being shocked, but the volunteers didn't know that. When the subjects began to show pain at being shocked, volunteers were told to just keep going, even when they objected on moral grounds. A high number continued to inflict pain, against their internal wishes.

The Milgram experiment continues to be controversial on both scientific and ethical grounds. But, it was a defining event because of the incredible press coverage it received. For many, it helped to answer the question of what went wrong in Nazi Germany. According to Milgram, what was wrong was that people were *obedient*. Culturally, we began to think that non-conformity and resistance to authority would save us from becoming like Hitler's Germany.

Philosophers and psychologists began to assert—seriously—that obedience was the source of all evil and that disobedience itself was the source of civilization. Erich Fromm, author of *On Disobedience*, claimed that the real story of Genesis was that civilization began when Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. That kind of rebellion, says Fromm, is the source of all progress.

In the last half of the twentieth century, we became inundated with a new conventional wisdom that said to obey anything or anyone outside ourselves is to do evil—we can only depend on ourselves to create a good society, free from sanctioned murders and thefts.

Right. I don't blame you if you're confused. In all this talk of personal freedom from constraint, there seems to

be a general amnesia about the fact the morality the social scientists want to see as the marks of a good society—no killing, no stealing—actually came from a very familiar list of commands we are supposed to *obey*.

If we really think that it is *obedience* that causes civilizations to collapse, see what happens when no one has to obey traffic laws or tax laws. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky writes that if there is no God, then all things are permitted. Indeed. The beginning of our passage tells us that: *Do not put the Lord to the test as you did at Massah.*

If you go back to Exodus and read the story, you will find that there was a great rebellion and quarreling among the people. It was basically a lack of trust in God—a “What have you done for me lately” moment. Moses called the place Massah *and* Meribah. The place names mean “testing God,” that is, not obeying, and “quarrelling.”

Not submitting to God's authority led to arguments and chaos in the community. In the absence of a single authority, right and wrong were now subject to debate. “If there is no God, all things are permitted.”

We find a very different picture about obedience in the Bible. I am always encouraging you to go and read Psalm 119. Today would be a really good day to do that. While you are reading, make a list of all the words the Psalmist uses to describe his understanding of the law of God—words like delight, rejoice, long for, meditate on, believe in, *sweet*, wonderful and so on. You don't get the sense that the writer is being turned into an evil automaton. Instead, you see someone who is full of life and purpose, but don't take my word for it. Go read it for yourself. Then you will discover that there is an alternative to the Stanley Milgrams and Erich Fromms and all the others who command disobedience.

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***In scripture, obedience is all wrapped up in whom and what you hear—in whom and what you pay attention to.***

***It's interesting, but we soon realize that we receive God's promise of life in the act of obeying. It's not linear—I obey, then God blesses. It's simultaneous—while I am obeying, I am blessed by God.***

all wrapped up in whom and what you hear—in whom and what you pay attention to. There actually is no Hebrew word for *obey*. We say *obey*, but the Hebrew says: keep, guard, internalize, respect, protect. It is not about following orders because you fear the consequences. And so, the only response to the evil commands in Nazi Germany was not one of blind obedience to the voice of a madman. There were Christians in Germany who knew better. Their witness to us is in the *Declaration of Barmen*. Here is part of what they said: *Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.* We obey the voice of God our Redeemer.

To call God our Redeemer is to tell a story, and that is exactly what Deuteronomy does. In the passage we read today, we see that the people are called to keep, to obey the commandments of God. They are to do what is right. But at some point, the children will ask: *Why are we doing these things? Our friends aren't.*

That's when we tell them the story of how God has rescued us. The story for the Israelites, and us as well, begins with the mess in which we found ourselves. "We were once slaves in Egypt, but God brought us out with a mighty hand! You should have seen it!" Tom Long, professor of preaching at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, has a friend who used to tuck his little daughter into bed with this very Bible story: "We were once slaves in Egypt, but God brought us out with a mighty hand." One day, he overheard his daughter out in the backyard with a new friend, trying to get acquainted. She told her friend, "I don't know when this was, but we were once slaves in Egypt, but then we moved to Atlanta." That story had become her story, and that story is our story.

Have you ever told your children or any of the children in this church of how God has rescued you, of what Jesus has

done for you? Your story and the story of the whole people of God help the next generation to know why we do these things. They are less likely to give up on it, and they will expect God to do in their lives what He has done in yours. What a great gift of hope for those coming behind us. If we don't tell the story, then we will surely lose our way.

It's like the old joke about the annual family reunion where the recipe for baked ham was handed down from generation to generation. The first instruction was very clear: Before you do anything else, cut two inches off each end of the ham. The youngest girl wanted to know why. Her mom had done it that way and her mom before her, but neither could answer the question. So they went to great-grandma who said, "Well, that was the only way I could make it fit in my pan!" Without the story, the recipe didn't make any sense.

When we tell the story of God's great, saving love, we then know why we listen to God and no one else. We have experienced God's love, and we want to love in return. Back in the early eighties, I went to the Panama Canal Zone. I went jogging in what should be called not a rain forest but a steam forest. My jogging clothes were soaked through and through. I left them in the bathroom to dry and went out for a while. When I returned, Clara, the housekeeper, had washed, dried and neatly folded all my clothes. When I said that she didn't need to do that, she responded, "But I do. I have received kindness and so I give kindness." She gave kindness by doing willingly what most of us would do only if told to do it.

It would be enough to love, trust and obey God because of what he has done for us in the past. But God is so great in His love for us that He gives us further reasons for keeping the commandments. We don't just do it out of gratitude for what God has done in the past but also for what God will do in the present, as we obey Him. It's interesting, but we soon realize that we receive God's promise

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of life in the act of obeying. It's not linear—I obey, then God blesses. It's simultaneous—while I am obeying, I am blessed by God.

Remember *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*? There is one point at which Indy has to basically negotiate a deadly obstacle course in order to get to the Holy Grail, where he will get life-giving water to save his father's life. Now, if that weren't symbolism enough, here's the good stuff—he makes his way by following the instructions in his father's notebook. As he obeys the instructions in his father's book, he is able to survive each obstacle. The last obstacle is an infinite chasm that he must cross. His father's words tell him to just step out into the void. It seems impossible to obey that in the face of reality. But, his father's word has been trustworthy up to this point, so he does it. At the precise moment he steps off the edge, his foot comes down on an invisible stone bridge. He walks across. He is blessed *as* he obeys.

There are times when we feel that we are trying to negotiate insurmountable obstacles in our lives. It is in those times that we are most susceptible to all the voices clamoring for our attention, and we're not sure we're hearing God's voice or the voice that promises just to kiss and make it better. At a time like that, the prayer of obedience by Thomas Merton helps:

*My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may*

*seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.*

Friends, we were, all of us, once slaves in Egypt, but there came a day when God brought each and every one of us out. Deuteronomy tells that story and, after telling the story (you'll see this at the beginning of the chapter), it tells us to love God. Then, and only then, does it tell us to obey.

What does it mean to obey? Certainly, it is not following orders out of fear. It is simply this: To obey is to hear the voice of God because you love hearing the voice of the one who called you from death into life. *Let us pray.*

*O Lord, may we learn to love the sound of your voice and respond with lives that bring you delight as we heed your word and do what you say. We pray this in the name of the One who was completely obedient to your will for our sake, even Jesus our Lord. Amen.*

