

GOD COMMANDS OBEDIENCE

Ezra 7:1-10

God gives us (humans) commandments which we are to obey. In general, obedience to God's commandments will lead to or result in certain (usually favorable) outcomes while disobedience leads to or results in other (usually unfavorable) outcomes. In other words, there are consequences (positive and negative) related to or even directly tied to our response to God's commandments. For example in Proverbs 4:4 we find "He taught me also, and said unto me, Let thine heart retain my words: keep my commandments, and live." Does that mean that God commands obedience?

What did Jesus tell His disciples with regard to keeping His commandments? The "proof" text in this regard is found in John 14:15 where we find these words "If you love Me, keep my commandments." The Greek word translated as 'keep' is never rendered as 'obey' in the KJV and (in common usage) is typically used in the sense of 'taking care of' or 'guarding something by giving it your attention.'

The word "obey" typically comes from Greek words related to "trusting in or having confidence in someone" or "listening to or paying attention to someone or something with an intent to take action." Based on these usages, we can make a strong argument that genuine "obedience" is inextricably connected to taking care of and trusting in Godly precepts to the extent that it directly or indirectly impacts our behavior. We would be remiss if we did not point out that the proper motivation for such genuine obedience is the love we have for God.

Is there another connection between love and commandments? There is; and it is found in the words of Jesus as He answered a question posed by those who were attempting to test him as to the orthodoxy of what He believed. The question was "what is the greatest or most important commandment?" We are very familiar with the answer of "'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." (Matt 22:37-40)

Does this mean that we should be asking the question "does God command us to 'love'?" That should immediately raise the question of "can love be commanded or legislated?" Apparently, that is exactly what Jesus did as recorded in the Gospel accounts and we also find this very same "commandment" coming from Moses in Deuteronomy 30:16. "I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways."

Howard Kainz (retired Professor of Philosophy, Marquette University) makes the following point. "But how can love ever be commanded? How can it be a duty? If it is a duty, doesn't this detract from its worth? Isn't love something that happens spontaneously when we are confronted with something or someone that is immensely good and attractive? It almost seems that the commandment to love is a command to do the impossible." That should cause us to ask the question, "Did Jesus tell us to do something that is humanly impossible?" The answer is "Absolutely, Yes!" In fact, we could make the argument that everything about our salvation is humanly impossible. That is why we can't save ourselves. That is why there is no salvation in keeping the law. That is why we find Paul telling us that "it is God Who is working in you, both to will and to do of His good pleasure." That is why we must be born again and why we need the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

How can we apply these truths to our lives so that it makes an eternal difference to us? I recently read a comparison by Bill Bright (founder of Campus Crusade for Christ) on this

difference.

At a high school graduation recently, one student was heard to make these remarks: "Yeah, I finally made it. It's a good thing, too. If I had blown it, my parents would have killed me!" In contrast, during the ceremony one of the student speakers, an oriental girl who was a foreign exchange student declared through her tears, "I want to express my deepest appreciation to my parents for loving me and for giving me the opportunity to get an education in this great land. I want to do everything I can to show them how much I love them and to make them proud of me."

Here we have the same outward result (graduation) with two vastly different motivations. It is not difficult to determine which one is more noble. Another example that Bill Bright used was related to the epitaph of Amaziah, a king of Israel. "He did what was right in the sight of the Lord, but not with a loyal heart" (2 Chronicles 25:2, NKJ). Obedience involves attitude, not merely outward actions. What is our motivation when we obey Christ? Do we serve Christ out of fear and self-serving ambition? Or is it from a loyal heart because we understand and appreciate God's love and what He has done for us?

At this point we might ask, "What does all this have to do with Ezra and his ministry in 457 B.C.?" As we explore the second half of the Book of Ezra, it will become clear as we see what he did and why he did it in comparison with what others did and what motivated them. It is only at the beginning of Chapter seven that we find Ezra mentioned in the account bearing his name.

Ezra's Heritage – 7:1-6

¹Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, *there went up* Ezra son of Seraiah, son of Azariah, son of Hilkiah, ²son of Shallum, son of Zadok, son of Ahitub, ³son of Amariah, son of Azariah, son of Meraioth, ⁴son of Zerariah, son of Uzzi, son of Bukki, ⁵son of Abishua, son of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the chief priest. ⁶This Ezra went up from Babylon, and he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all he requested because the hand of the LORD his God *was* upon him. Ezra 7:1-6 (NASB95)

These first few verses are given to us to identify this person named Ezra. How do we today normally describe a person? Typically, we start with what the person does or has done that is most significant during his life. This tends to present a wider range of choices for people our age who have retired and are no longer associated with job or career. Very rarely do we start with their ancestors unless the person is a young child or teenager and then we would only go back one or two generations to their parents or grandparents.

This way of describing people says a lot about our culture and what is important about people in the minds of most of us. We typically don't care a lot if a person was a direct descendant of some historical figure like George Washington or Thomas Jefferson because that influence on "the identity" or characteristics of the person is thought to be very weak. We have been taught that people are most influenced by their environment and their life experiences rather than by their DNA. This is a change that has evolved and grown stronger during the last one hundred years. I can remember my mother putting a lot of credence on the parentage of people in explaining their behavior.

It is very obvious that heritage or ancestral lineage was very important among the Israelites as we read the old Testament. This emphasis can be seen in that the first five verses of Chapter seven are mostly about Ezra's ancestors. Not only was he of the Tribe of Levy, he was a direct descendant of Aaron the original High Priest. People today might wonder why that would even matter and the answer is that this lineage addressed the authentication or the validity of his

ministry or what he would do in life. Ancestrally, he was qualified to be a religious leader.

Another significant part of a person's identity was what he accomplished in life. That is still true today. Ezra "went up to Jerusalem" is a summary statement of an important accomplishment in his life. That was followed by his qualifications or we might mention a person's training or education in identifying a person.

In Ezra's case, he was said to be "a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses." The importance of this being mentioned is an indication that the "written word" or the Scriptures were taking on a more significant role in the restored nation of Israel. Prior to this time, those people who had a prophetic ministry were seen as the "authority" with regard to "religious" matters. During Ezra's time, the person who was knowledgeable of the Scriptures began to have a lot of influence.

The final thing mentioned in Ezra's resume was his relationship with God. We see that the "hand of Jehovah was upon him." What would be the evidence that God's hand was upon Ezra? Could people look at him and tell? Was it something that he said? Was it a condition that was spiritually discerned? Was it because he was able to get the cooperation of others to assist him in what he was doing? Maybe it was a combination of all these things. We have probably seen people in ministry roles today and have either thought or said that it was obvious that God was blessing that person's ministry or some similar statement. What criteria do we use in making such an assessment?

Of all these "descriptors" used in this passage (ancestral lineage, accomplishments, skill qualifications, and relationship to God), which would be the most important in selecting a person to carry out an important job in the life of a nation? I would hope that we would say that the person's relationship with God in that God was actively guiding him would be the first priority and that ancestral lineage would be at the bottom of the list. What happens when we ignore the most important criterion? Just look around us in today's world. We wind up with chaos and senseless decisions being made that take us away from the values that can make a nation great.

Ezra's Journey – 7:7-9

⁷ Some of the sons of Israel and some of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers and the temple servants went up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes. ⁸ He came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. ⁹ For on the first of the first month he began to go up from Babylon; and on the first of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, because the good hand of his God was upon him. Ezra 7:7-9 (NASB95)

Now that we have Ezra identified, we can start to explore what he accomplished in his ministry in life which we have already mentioned that he went up to Jerusalem. It is obvious from these few verses that some people went with him and in the group we find several identifiable subgroups. The first is probably the broadest classification in that they were Israelite (mostly Jews) that we might call ordinary people of diverse backgrounds and skills. The next groups mentioned all have a specific relationship or something in common. That commonality was that all had the skills and background to provide leadership in the worship life of the nation. The specific mention of these skill groups gives us a clue as to the reason Ezra was making this transition in his life.

At this point in the narrative, we haven't been told why Ezra took a four-month-long trip with more than a thousand people some eighty years after Zerubbabel had led nearly fifty thousand people from Babylon back to Judah. The very next verse sheds light on WHY.

Ezra's Goal – 7:10

¹⁰ For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel. Ezra 7:10 (NASB95)

Ezra's objective had an end result of seeing the precepts of the word of God put into action in Israel. There were three requirements that needed to be done for the end result to be achieved. The first was that he needed to seek out and study what the word of God actually said. All of us have the capability to do that. We have access to God's word and also access to many and varied opinions as to the possible meanings of the written word and how it applies to lives of people today.

It is one thing to read about something and to understand the message, but to actually apply it to life in practical everyday situations gives us better insight and wisdom into what the word teaches us and how it actually works. Without this wisdom and insight, it is difficult to really communicate and share with others what we have learned regarding the word of God.

We wind up speculating about the cause and effect of why Ezra had "prepared his heart" or "determined in his heart" to seek and study God's word. Was this just a personal "improvement" objective that he thought would be a good idea or was he motivated by hearing about what was happening and not happening in Israel since the original group had return eight decades before?

According to Larry Richards in *The Teacher's Commentary*,
In Ezra's day, . . . Times had been difficult in Judah. To reconstruct the agricultural base for their economy, the people had scattered from Jerusalem and had built smaller communities throughout the land. Even the Levites, dedicated to temple service, had built homes and cleared land. The walls of Jerusalem had not been rebuilt, and the people had begun to intermarry with the pagans of the land. This last act was a serious breach of Old Testament Law, which insisted that God's people maintain a separate identity. This was a very practical law: history demonstrates over and over again that when the Israelites intermarried with pagans, the sure outcome was the introduction of idolatry.

The bottom line was that God was working in the life of Ezra to get him prepared for an important work of reformation to help get the "restored Israel" back on the right track. Because Ezra was obedient to God's direction in his life, God's "good hand" was upon him and he was able to accomplish the work God had for him. That might beg the question "Was God's hand upon him because he had resolved to study God's word, obey it, and teach it" or "did he resolve to do these things because God's hand was upon him?" The answer is YES! God is the initiator and as we respond positively to Him, then life changing things happen. As James wrote in 4:8, "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you."

The above verses do not give us a lot of detail about the actual journey back. The group was much smaller than the group that went with Zerubbabel. There were about fifteen hundred people and when they were ready to leave, Ezra put a hold on things because they did not have the "right" skill sets among those going back. The missing people were the Levites. In Ezra 8:10 there were already camped at the river Ahava and when the lack of Levites was discovered, Ezra sent people out to the leaders in various communities to encourage those who were qualified to be singers, gatekeeper, and temple servants to join those making the trip back to Judah.

This should be a lesson for us today: If we have a job to do, it is necessary to put the right people in positions of responsibility. If we fail to do that, then we wind up with bureaucratic bumbling, confusion and chaos. Unfortunately, that is what we have come to expect from those in our civil government.

Ezra was entrusted by the Persian king to take back many of the vessels of the temple that Nebuchadnezzar had taken prior to destroying the temple so they could be again used in the

temple in Jerusalem. He was also given a lot of silver and gold to cover expenses and oil, grain, and salt for temple sacrifices. Why did Artaxerxes do that?

There is a revealing statement in the decree issued by Artaxerxes in 7:23 which reads:

²³ “Whatever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be done with zeal for the house of the God of heaven, so that there will not be wrath against the kingdom of the king and his sons. Ezra 7:23 (NASB95)

So what was the motivation for the king to be so accommodating to Ezra? It was clearly to avoid having bad things happen to himself or his sons. He was obviously aware of the experiences of previous kings who had defied the God of the Hebrews and he was trying to do what he thought would be pleasing to Jehovah. It is also obvious that his “service” to God was from fear and self-serving ambition.

Do you think that fear and ambition were motivating Ezra? As Ezra had studied God’s word, he grew to know Him and appreciate God’s providential care for the people of Israel and we would be safe in saying that Ezra’s motivation was from a loyal heart because he understood and appreciated God’s love and what He has done for his people.

Because of all the valuable things that Ezra’s group was taking back to Jerusalem, the king was willing to send armed troops to provide protection. In chapter eight of this account we see these verses regarding Ezra’s response to that offer and these give us some insight into his trust in God.

²¹ Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God to seek from Him a safe journey for us, our little ones, and all our possessions. ²² For I was ashamed to request from the king troops and horsemen to protect us from the enemy on the way, because we had said to the king, “The hand of our God is favorably disposed to all those who seek Him, but His power and His anger are against all those who forsake Him.” ²³ So we fasted and sought our God concerning this *matter*, and He listened to our entreaty. Ezra 8:21-23 (NASB95)

Ezra was obedient for the right reasons and he really did trust in the Lord with all his heart and did not lean on his own understanding. We also see that he did acknowledge God in his ways as he put his understanding of the word of God into practice. The outcome of such “obedience” was a successful and safe journey.