

“The Delight of Hearing and Doing”

Introduction: If you happened to open your pew Bible, or even your personal Bible, to follow along in our reading of the Gift of the Word this morning, you would most likely have seen a heading at the beginning of Dt. 4, put there by the editors, that reads something like this: “Obedience Commanded.” If you saw that, or having now just heard it, what is your reaction to that phrase? What’s the first thing it makes you think or feel? Is it, “oh goody, I can’t wait to read more” or is it along the lines of, “I know I’m going to fall short and I can see God’s finger wagging at me already!” or maybe it’s something like “follow these or else!” How do you feel about God’s commandments and about his summons to obey?

Often, I think, we can view God’s commands as something of a burden or noose around our neck. If we’re honest, we don’t like to be told, by anyone, what we have to do. Being motivated by fear may be effective in the short term, but it only takes us so far. But is that what we read here? What is the motivation for obedience that Moses shares with the Israelites as they are preparing to break camp and head out into the very challenging culture that awaits them in the Promised Land? What motivates our own obedience, especially in areas where we might struggle? What would make us delight to obey? Three reasons for such delight surface as we explore the teaching of Moses.

I. The God Who Delivers

A. First, we are loved by a God who delivers, who both searches for us when we are lost, and is able to rescue us when he finds us. Where do we find that truth in this text? It’s in the word “now.” “Now, Israel . . .” “Now” could easily be read “therefore.” It simply points back to all that has come before. And what has come before, as Moses has been parsing things out for this next generation of Israelites, is a reminder of how God had heard the cries of this people when they had been enslaved in Egypt, sought them out, and rescued them. “Now, in light of that rescue, here is what you should do,” is how Moses is going to continue.

B. The order is critical. Many (if not all) religions, as we have noted before, begin by telling people what they must do to earn the deity’s favor. Christianity begins with what God has done. The gospel, or good news, is not a set of instructions or a piece of good advice; it is the good news of what God himself has accomplished, for us, and for the world. In a few weeks, we’ll get to the Ten Commandments, when Moses begins to get specific about the Lord’s decrees and laws. Just notice for now how they begin: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Dt. 5:6). Then the commandments follow, not as a way to earn the LORD’s favor, but as a way to respond to his amazing grace, to what he has already done. Before anything is commanded, God has delivered. This has been God’s way from the beginning, ever since Adam and Eve decided it would be better to listen to the voice of a creature and not their Creator. God still went searching for them and sought them out, revealing that we are created and loved by a God who comes searching for us to rescue and deliver us. It is at the heart of his character

If you are having a struggle with obedience, either something in particular, or as an overall concept, it may help to spend some time going back to and reflecting on this aspect of the character of God, on the way that he has come searching for and has delivered you, and how you might respond to him.

II. The Life that is Truly Life

A. Second, by obeying God’s revealed will, by following the path he guides us in for right living (Ps. 23:3), we are led into the life that is truly life: “Now Israel, hear the decrees and

laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live . . .” Having rescued us, God cares what happens next to us. He wants us to live well and his law is designed to bring us life. That’s why we hear the psalmist delighting in God’s law, calling it more precious than gold and sweeter than honey because it refreshes the soul, makes the simple wise, gives joy to the heart and brings light to our eyes (Ps. 19:7-11, Call to Worship).

B. As a way to think about this, consider what life would be like if, say, the Ten Commandments were totally ignored. What kind of life would we have? It would be a life characterized by the pursuit, not of the Lord, but of the idols of money, sex, and power, a life in which adults worked 24/7 and kids constantly dishonored their parents, a life in which murder, infidelity, theft, dishonesty, and lusting after what others have would be the norm. Now, you might be thinking, that’s what life is basically like now! And I would say, “You’re makin’ my point!” God’s point, through his commands, is that he loves us too much to leave us with a gift that does not include instructions. Following them both protects us from sin and leads us to life, the life that is truly life, the life that is lived the way the Creator designed it to be lived.

C. To highlight this protective and life giving nature of God’s word, Moses speaks to its integrity, warning that nothing be added to it or subtracted from it (v. 2). Don’t treat it, in other words, like a cafeteria of options. But this, of course, has been the way many have treated God’s word for a long time. From the first century Pharisees who added their legalistic interpretations to it, like those things that they believed caused the Sabbath to be violated, to the Sadducees who eliminated from it anything they found unacceptable, ranging from angels to the resurrection, to those in the 21st c. who either believe God’s word says something like “don’t dance, don’t drink, don’t chew, or date girls that do” (or some variety thereof!) to those who take only what they like about Jesus and add it to a variety of things from other religions. That’s what idolatry is all about, something which we’ll see in a few weeks often plagued the Israelites. Idolatry, at its heart, is deciding for ourselves what is good, apart from God. And the comfortable thing about an idol, no matter what it is, is that it can’t speak; we are the ones who tell it what to do, we remain in control. Ultimately, this will not lead us to life but to death.

Illustration: To drive this point home, Moses reminds the people of a disastrous event that had happened a short time ago, and not that far from where they presently were. At a place named Baal Peor, some of the Israelites, thinking it not a big deal, engaged in pagan worship. “Might as well add a little bit of this to our spirituality,” they reasoned. So, as they were passing through the region of Moab, some of the Israelite men engaged with temple prostitutes as they took part in the worship of a pagan god named Baal. In an act of Judgment, God visited these fellows with a deadly plague, but those who had “held fast” (v. 3) to the LORD and his ways lived. The point is that hearing and doing the word of God leads to life; hearing and ignoring it will lead to death.

If you are struggling with obedience, can you trust the life-giving nature and promise of God’s revealed will? Could you pray the prayer Paul prays for the Colossian church that you might come to know more of what God desires of you, and live that way to both please him and have a fruitful life?

III. The Life that Shines in the World

A. There is one more motivation for obedience in these verses and that ties in most closely to our “breaking camp” theme of the fall and it is a missional motivation. We see it when Moses says: “Follow them so that you may live *and may go in and take possession of the land the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you.* A little further on, Moses fleshes this out a bit more: “Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations” (v. 6). This, of course, ties in with what we have touched on in the last few weeks, that Israel was rescued by God, not only for their own sake but for the sake of others, to be a light to the nations, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, and that this call has been extended to the church (1 Peter 2:9). As we live in accordance with God’s revealed will, the rightness, and even particularly the

social justice offered to the oppressed, will be clearly seen by others and even the nearness and presence of God will begin to shine through. They were blessed, we have been blessed, to be a blessing to others, to obey so that others can see God in us.

B. As a really tremendous example of this, I know I shared with some of you a few years ago the experience of Dr. Peter Kuzmic, professor of world missions at Gordon-Conwell who is also the founder, as well, of a seminary in his home country of Croatia. Peter recounted the time when, shortly after democracy had arrived in what was still the former Yugoslavia, he was sitting in his office in Osiek when the phone rang. On the other end of the line was a very well-known man in Croatia. Peter was surprised to be hearing from him because this fellow had been a leader in the communist system that had been in control of the country, and was still the chief editor of the most popular daily newspaper.

What surprised Peter most of all was that this man wanted to give Peter an entire page in his paper, in the weekend edition when the circulation was the highest, for ten consecutive weekends. And he wanted Peter to write about the Ten Commandments, one each week. Peter was so shocked he said the man, "I thought you comrades threw this stuff out a long time ago as a pre-scientific and irrelevant way of thinking. I thought that ethics and morals had no place in your worldview." There was a pause on the line and then the man said, "That was our mistake."

Then he went on to tell Peter that he had read the Ten that morning for the first time in his life because he had heard Peter speaking on them a few days earlier as an essential element in a stable and just society. "You know," the man admitted, "we first generation communists were idealists. We believed in the rule of human reason and didn't have any need for transcendence. But this is too important for the world. This is too important for democracy. This is too important for the new society. Please don't keep it locked up within the four walls of your churches and theological classrooms."

What this man saw as he looked at the church was a wise and understanding people whose God was near and who were working toward a more just and righteous society. "The church," Peter concludes in his article recounting this, "is God's transformative agent for our broken, philosophically confused, and morally disoriented world." [*Faith and Morality for a Failed Society*, an address given at a GCTS Mission's Week.]

If you're struggling with obedience, how's that as a motivation, how's that as a reason for delighting in the hearing and the doing of God's word?! Delighting in obedience to the revealed will of God is the key to both our life, and God's mission. May God so fill us with the knowledge of his will, through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that we may live for our sake, the sake of others, and the glory of God.