

# The Obedience Principle

Deuteronomy 4:1, 2

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*“And now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I am teaching you to perform, in order that you may live and go in and take possession of the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you. You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you” (4:1, 2).*

God’s purpose for man is unchanging. The history of God’s dealings with man is a history of His instruction and effort to get man to obey His commandments and thus be blessed. The way of obedience is the way of blessing. David wrote,

The lovingkindness of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children’s children, to those who keep His covenant, and who remember His precepts to do them (Psalms 103:17, 18).

Of all the principles of wise living, none is more basic than the principle of obedience. Only in obedience can man find life. To try to find fulfillment in life while disobeying God is like trying to start a fire with water. It will not work. Yet many try and wonder why they cannot find happiness in this life.

The principle of obedience was established when God gave specific instructions to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and it has continued through the ages. Obedience has been required in every age of God’s dealings with man. Obedience opens our lives to God’s blessings, while disobedience shuts off our lives to spiritual poverty. In our text, Moses urged Israel to pay strict attention and obey God’s law.

## **OBEDIENCE BRINGS PROSPERITY**

The first speech of Moses reaches a climax in chapter 4. The first three chapters dealt with God’s direct involvement in Israel’s history and how their past experience should have taught them the value of obeying God.

The introductory words, “And now,” refer to the previous remarks made by Moses. He seems to be saying, “Now in light of God’s glorious acts of deliverance, you should obey His statutes and judgments.”

Verse 1 states what has been called by many the “Deuteronomic Principle,” since Moses repeats it so often in the book.

The “Deuteronomic Principle” of obedience would insure life and entrance into and possession of the land. The principle of obedience is also found in 4:40; 5:32, 33; 6:1, 2, 17, 18, to mention a few verses. The principle is stated in its negative form in 4:25–28:

“When you become the father of children and children’s children and have remained long in the land, and act corruptly, . . . you shall surely perish quickly from the land where you are going over the Jordan to possess it. . . .”

What is meant by the principle of obedience? Webster defines “obedience”: “Compliance with command, prohibition, or known law . . . the performance of what is required or enjoined by authority; the command must be known to the person, and his compliance must be in consequence of it, or it is not obedience.” The general definition would be this: Obedience is compliance with the law of a positive authority and is a state of being governed and ruled.

Moses was commanding obedience to the statutes and judgments he was teaching them. By "statutes," Moses was referring to a group of permanent rules of conduct prescribed by proper authority, usually found in written form, for guiding the individual and society. The "judgments" are judicial decisions which will serve as future precedents for the guidance of judges in moral and civil matters. These two comprehend the whole law which was binding on the children of Israel.

God's law asserts authority over the whole man in both his private and public affairs. It asserts authority over the intellect, for it demands attention, investigation, and meditation; authority over the affections, for it demands reverence, esteem, and love; authority over the moral faculties, for it demands assent, response, and loyalty; authority over the active powers, for it requires execution, self-restraint, and steadfast service.

### **HEARING IS THE BASIS FOR OBEDIENCE**

The hearing must precede the doing; knowledge is to precede the practice of the law. Israel must first give diligence to listen, know, and understand God's statutes and judgments. Hearing God's Word is the basis for obedience.

Hearing and believing were so closely related that the Hebrew language uses the same word to convey both ideas. The verb "to hear" in Hebrew significantly denotes not any passive receiving of words into the mind, but the response of man's whole being. The Jews needed no psychological explanation for the doctrine of obedience; for them, hearing God's Word was equivalent to obeying it.

Moses' words were to be more than an informative lecture, for Israel had a moral and spiritual responsibility of obeying. No growth can take place until we first do that which we have learned. A failure to apply what has been taught will make future growth almost impossible. A child who refuses to learn the multiplication tables is not likely to become a mathematician, and a student who refuses to learn the alphabet of a foreign language is not likely to become a linguist.

Israel is to give strict attention not only to hearing but also to doing God's will. In verse 2,

Israel is told emphatically to "keep the commandments of the Lord your God." Again in verse 5, they are encouraged that they should do them in the land they were entering. And in verses 13 and 14, they are commanded to "perform" them in the land to which God was leading them.

This principle is found in both the Old and New Testaments, either directly or by inference (cf. Hebrews 5:8, 9). James enjoins the same principle on Christians in James 1:22-24:

But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was.

Someone has written: "Too many Christians use the 'dip and skip' method of Christian living. They dip into His promises and skip His commands." This type of living did not please God in the days of Moses, and it does not please Him now.

### **OBEDIENCE MEANS NO ADDITION OR SUBTRACTION**

The principle of obedience demands diligent attention to God's Word. "You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you" (4:2). The law was to be kept as a complete whole; nothing was to be taken from it or added to it, for it was a sacred deposit from the divine ruler of the universe. God's law was not to suffer amendment or abridgement through human legislation. Moses later reiterates the necessity of careful use of His commands in 12:32: "Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to nor take away from it."

Israel was to preserve the commands of Moses in their entirety. God's covenant with Israel was not to be altered or tampered with in any way. No addition to or diminishing from its commands was allowed.

Christ, as He Himself declared, came not to destroy the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17). The sin of the Pharisees, for which they were reprimanded by the Lord, was that they taught for doctrines the command-

ments of men and had “invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition” (Matthew 15:6).

This principle of adding to or subtracting from God’s laws is applicable to every generation. Solomon wrote to his son: “Every word of God is tested; He is a shield to those who take refuge in Him. Do not add to His words lest He reprove you, and you be proved a liar” (Proverbs 30:5, 6).

John wrote regarding the words of prophecy delivered in Revelation:

I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God shall add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book (Revelation 22:18, 19).

God’s law is perfect and complete (Psalms 19:7; 119:160; 2 Timothy 3:16, 17; James 1:25), supplying through Christ “everything pertaining to life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3).

The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple (Psalms 19:7).

But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man shall be blessed in what he does (James 1:25).

Its perfection cannot be improved upon. To add to or subtract from God’s Word is to mar that perfection and usurp the place of God as the giver of light and truth.

God’s Word must be preserved in its entirety in order that it may be obeyed in its entirety. Israel’s life and prosperity in the promised land depended on their ability to keep the statutes and judgments Moses was teaching in their entirety. One cannot change or add to any part of

the law without self-injury. God’s Word is destined to have permanence in human life, “For, ‘All flesh is like grass, and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls off, but the word of the Lord abides forever.’ . . .” (1 Peter 1:24, 25a).

The sum and substance of moral law is graven on the solid rock by the finger of God. As God’s children, our appeal must ever be to His Word.

## CONCLUSION

According to Earle West, David Lipscomb wrote regarding the principle of obedience:

Of what is good, man is an incompetent judge; so he must depend upon the teachings of his Maker, just as the child is utterly incompetent to determine what is good and must rely upon the parent to teach and guide it into good. That course in life which will bring true, permanent good to man will bring his eternal good. . . . No system of institution or practice, save submission to the will of God, can bring permanent happiness and prosperity to the human family on earth. “There is a way that seemeth right unto man; but the end thereof are the ways of death” (Proverbs 14:12; KJV). The principle of reward or blessing through obedience and punishment or curses through disobedience was never lost sight of. It was stamped on every page of God’s law. In every message revealing His will, the idea was presented that conformity to God’s will brings good: non-conformity brings evil.

No finer statement concerning obedience exists than that which came from Solomon’s pen. In his final analysis of life, he wrote:

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil (Ecclesiastes 12:13, 14; KJV).

At some point in life every person must be totally convinced that if he is to please God, it must be on *God’s* terms. That means doing *what* God wants the *way* God wants it done.