

# Obey the Lord

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[0:00] Push it. I mentioned to somebody earlier, this is actually my third time.

! Once with Father Hayes, once with Father Hackendorf, and now tonight.! And other locations, but very much the same constituency. And I remember a lot of you from before.

And so, Carol and I are pleased to be here. It's much easier to come now. I'm going to have to drive to Malbany because we live in Sequoia. And so it's fairly easy, an hour away, and no state police.

So it worked out just fine. And Raymond told me that these talks are very, very strictly governed.

And I'm limited to 90 minutes.

So I want to get going. Go for it. Okay. And I'm going to cover the topic of obey.

[0:58] And I was thinking about obey. And one of the things I thought about was how much of our secular society, the world we live in, is organized around obeying.

And resorting to the internet, I determined that currently there are in the United States about 700,000 police officers.

And so we believe in obeying. And there's a slightly larger number of non-sworn people in the law agencies. And on top of that, there are 32,000 judges in the United States to meet out justice, everything from JP courts up to the Supreme Court.

And, in fact, the state of New York alone has 2,500 JPs. And I think they're not all for weddings.

And I've had occasion to meet some of those JPs over my life.

And they were always nice before they collected the fine. Although one time, the chancellor got me out by sending me a form. And I mailed in.

[2:08] You probably don't remember this. But you said, get this form. And I mailed it in. And they waived it. So I was always grateful for that. But on top of all those law enterprises, the church has canon law.

And there are Jewish courts abounding in every society. And we can think back even to the time of our Lord. One of the principal outfits that they had to contend with and deal with on a regular basis was the Sanhedrin, which was like a giant Jewish court.

And then if you want to go to countries nowadays who are having even more exciting law developments, you can go to places that have Sharia law. Sharia law.

The men are always in favor of Sharia law. And in fact, in England, the government now allows Sharia courts to exercise jurisdiction in certain areas of family life and inheritance and sort of local things without regard to English common law.

So that's quite a surprise thing. And so when we talk about obedience, we know that civil society is organized around compliance.

[3:25] But the call of God to us and the call of Christ in our lives is not to compliance, but to conversion.

And it's a very different thing. If we look back, we would say that we would know that the most common and universally used prayer among Jews is a Shema.

And here, O Israel, the Lord, our God is one. The Lord, our God is the only one. And so it's interesting in the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer that prevailed from 1979 until 2019.

If you used Rite 1, the traditional language 1, you got the English version, which had the summary of the law from St. Matthew's Gospel.

And here, O Lord, Jesus Christ said, you know, on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. We heard that for decades. But if you went to write two, there was a little change.

[4:38] In the penitential order, it began, Hear, O Israel, the Lord, our God is one. They took the Shema and translated it using the reference from St. Mark's Gospel.

A slight shift, but one that actually gave some continuity with centuries of Jewish prayer. And the Shema comes the closest that you could say to a Jewish creed.

Because it's the only theological statement about God that's absolutely binding everybody. The Lord, our God is one. And the Lord, our God is the only Lord.

The thing about God for the Jews was his singularity. Just one. Now, you know, the pagans around them probably felt bad for the Jews because they could only afford one God.

You know, and the Babylonians, they had lots of gods. They had surplus gods. They could have loaned them to them. And often did. Well, we come to that later. And the God of Israel had singularity in and wholeness.

[5:53] There was no need on the part of God for any ancillary thing, person, or circumstance to exist for God to have his own integrity.

And so, once we have a grasp of that, we can realize how generous and loving God is in the very act of creation. Because God did not make us because he was lonely.

God existed in the community of persons. We know from Revelation as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit from all eternity. And it could have been great to go on like that the rest of eternity.

But he chose to create us. And that sets a whole different framework. The other thing about the Shema is it reflects the thought processes that are common to Hebrew thinking.

As opposed to what we could call loosely Greek or Western thinking. And that is that in the Shema, in the Hebrew scriptures, the term to hear assumes obey.

[7:06] It assumes obey. Whereas in Western thinking, that's sort of a subject for mental activity. It's something to think about.

And, you know, I was thinking back. When you're raising kids. You know, when they're raising hell in the other room. You tell them to be quiet. And they keep it up.

You don't yell in saying, are you being disobedient? You don't say that. You say, didn't you hear me? Because hear implies that they're going to act on that.

And so, that exactly is the way that the Jews talked. And so, the whole process of attending to and understanding, submitting to and obeying is part of hearing.

And at the very end, I'll come back to that idea of hearing in a unique way that most of us are not familiar with. And so, obedience conveys an idea of willingness.

[8:09] Or as I often say in my sermons at church, agreeableness. Having to check ourselves to see if we have an agreeable spirit can be very revelatory.

Because sometimes we find out that underneath, in spite of our smiles, we're not very agreeable.

And I'm not talking about people personality-wise being disagreeable.

I'm thinking in terms of going along with God or even with other groups or people or individuals.

That agreeableness is where the real decisions are made.

And so, a lot of times, we may have sin in our lives or we may have failure in our lives or things that we repeatedly do wrong. But actually, the root cause is our agreeableness of letting God change us.

Because he never compels us. He always invites us. But he has a clear standard of what he wants.

And that's what we're called to. We're called to willingness and agreeableness to do this.

[9:11] And, you know, even Jesus lays it out, I think, in such a lovely way when he says, Take my yoke upon yourself. Now, that actually, we don't think about this.

But that's a very good deal. You know, you're going in the country and you see some of the Amish farming with their oxen. And one of the big things is to make sure that the yoke load is evenly distributed.

But when we take our yoke with Christ, he's the heavy lifter. It's never equal. He always bears more. Just as he bore our sins on Calvary's tree, so he bears the heavy load in our lives when we are with him.

And Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran martyr at the end of World War II, once just made a comment. But he said, Obedience is worth more than a hundred sermons.

Worth more than a hundred sermons. And, you know, I remember after I read that, I got thinking about, excuse me, I got reading about how people who are leaders or teachers in the church do more to, more damage than all the external persecution can do.

[10:33] And, you know, we can go back to years like, you know, Jim Baker and the PTL Club, or abusive priests that have brought disgrace on the church, or somebody as recently as Ravi

Zacharias, who was not only an exploiter of women, he was fundamentally a thief as well.

And all this marketed in the name of the gospel. And forcing people, probably some knowledge, but maybe even reluctance, to continue to collaborate and support his ministry, because they had become dependent on themselves.

And so you wind up with a reluctant collusion in advancing stuff that now brings massive disgrace on the Christian faith, raises vast suspicion, and makes people wonder if we're all nuts to stay in on this.

And so that kind of disobedience has terrible consequences. So it's not easy to obey. It is against the grain.

It's against the grain. I was thinking, well, who would we ask about this? We could start with Adam. You know, Adam said, yeah, I got this great garden here. It's terrific. And I'm happy here.

[11:48] And God comes at night. We walk together. It's great. And Eve is here. And Eve said, this is wonderful. I love it too. And she said, you know, she said, I was looking at that tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

And she said, and the serpent came along, and he was giving me counseling. And he said, we could really enjoy this fruit, and we would know the truth.

And we would be gods. You know, he said, let's just go for it. And so right from the beginning, and then I stumbled across this thing, an old quote from Walt Whitman.

I was seeing sort of a quintessential American who one time wrote down, how did that go? I'm trying to think. Resist much.

Obey little. I mean, you know, there's part of that in every American. You know, we are not the communal people the way they are in other societies.

[12:51] We like the rugged individualists. We'd all prefer to be a pioneer than a settler. Because that's sort of the goal. And a lot of times, Americans would like to get out there in the country and be 50 miles from their nearest neighbor and maybe 50 miles from their nearest God.

And so there's this thing that runs against the grain to obey. And yet, God calls us to a loving obedience, which is not the same as being an employee or being under a taskmaster.

It's like being under the Father who loves us so much. And that's what we're really called to. And when we begin to let that click. I remember one time when I was thinking about this stuff.

And all of a sudden, I got this really simple thing. It's actually served me very well all these years.

When I'm talking about something that's pending, I check to see if I'm using the word get or got.

Do I get to go to church? Or have I got to go to church? Do I get to take somebody out to dinner? Or do I got to take them out to dinner? And get and got tells us if we're operating in grace or under law.

[14:06] In both cases, we can obey. But one is with a spirit of agreeableness. And so I find that get and got just helps me immensely when I'm sorting through what's going on.

And so the whole thing, too. Do you use the Anglican Catechism here? If we'd like to. We did it in Sunday school last year.

Okay. Well, you know, I think everybody should have a copy of the Catechism. And there's some wonderful stuff here. Beginning especially on page 89. And you can all remember that later, I'm sure.

But on page 89, it begins on the commandments. And instead of saying obeying all the laws, of which there are many and the Bible is filled with them.

It talks about becoming more like Christ. Because the real goal is not compliance. But conversion, transformation, and sanctification.

[15:07] Because those are the things that bring joy to our lives in the very process of being agreeable to God's will in our lives.

It's utterly transformative. And so a lot of this stuff all occurs up here and in here. And sometimes there's a little lag between the two.

But this is an important thing. And so, you know, one philosopher once wrote that the road to holiness is the pathway of obedience. But what I thought of was the time, Terry Fulham.

Remember, Terry Fulham was a great leader in the charismatic renewal in our church. And Terry Fulham used to say to us over and over at conferences and retreats. That the fruits of the Holy Spirit are grown in the garden of obedience.

The fruits of the Holy Spirit are grown in the garden of obedience. And when we allow that to happen, then we understand that commitment to Jesus is a commitment to obey.

[16:10] Now, sometimes in the church, we get so desperate or anxious to draw people in that we actually don't tell them the truth. We don't tell them what the real expectations are.

You know, in the primitive church, they didn't get baptized and see how it worked out. Because when they started out, they baptized very freely.

Now, of course, it was easy to do that because the earliest prospects for conversion were, in fact, Jews. Who already believed in one God and one wife.

So it made it pretty simple. As they moved beyond the confines of the chosen people, they met other people who believed in many gods, and frequently many wives.

And they had to talk about changing their lifestyle to comport with life in Christ. And so, when they didn't, what they discovered was when persecutions came, in some places, there was a 90% defection rate.

[17:14] And that included the priests and the bishops. That included the priests and the bishops who under pressure said, Oh, a little incense. Who would mind that? Not God, certainly.

He's bigger-minded than that. And so, what happened was, as a result of this, the Christian church began what was called the catechumenum. That's where you get catechisms and instruction.

And so they began, they would meet with people every week and say, Well, you know, are you still going down and sacrificing to the pagan idol? Or, if your job was being a meat cutter at the pagan temple, which paid well, had you given up that job yet?

Because you couldn't be preparing sacrifices for idols and for demons and claim to follow Christ simultaneously. Or, if you were a prostitute, are you seeking other employment?

There's a whole lot of things that are incompatible being a Christian. And people need to make changes because how they really impacted society wasn't because they had perfected doctrines.

[18:25] That took a couple more centuries. What they did to change societies was they had transformed lives. And I had a friend of mine who worked in missions in Latin America.

And he said, You could always tell when the evangelicals came and when they were being effective. I said, How would you know that? He said, Bicycles. I said, Bicycles? What's that got to do with it? He said, When they get converted and they give their life to Christ, they stop drinking, they stop beating up their wives, and they start going to work.

And they need a bicycle to go to work. And he said, When you see the bicycles at the homes, you know there's a transformed life occurring in that household. And I think that the whole idea of changing society by us being changed, you know, it seems tediously slow.

But it's more lasting than just having some kind of a superficial thing. And I think what happens in America particularly, I'm sort of off topic, but I'll say this. One of the things that happens in America, I heard a talk by a Russian Orthodox Archbishop.

And he said, The problem we have, he was talking to a group of his priests, and the problem we have is in America, whether you're an Anglican, or a Lutheran, or a Catholic, or a Methodist, you're still a Baptist.

[19:54] And people's heads went up. He said, because, he said, Frontier religion is one of the ways that people think about God. And so they, they know the four steps, or they know the four spiritual laws, or they make their decision.

And he said, they have confused the beginning of the Christian life with the end of the Christian life. I think we see the same thing. That the real call in the scriptures is to continuing conversion.

What does Jesus say? Whoever perseveres to the end will be saved. It's not because I checked off the box that I made, that I made my, my commitment to Jesus.

That was the beginning. That was the enrollment. That was the first step. That wasn't the end of the journey. See the difference? And, and, when we think about this, instead of, you know, we've already achieved our right to heaven.

We've already achieved our right to heaven. I'll tell you, our, our disposition toward God is less agreeable. I, I, I knew a guy who baptized one of our churches.

[21:01] And, and, and, uh, he says the whole thing and at the baptism and it was great. The next week he was talking to a couple of guys at church. And I said, what are you going to do this week? And I said, ah, he said, my guns, my friends are coming in.

We're all going out and get drunk and find some girls. I said, well, you can't do that. He said, what do you mean you can't do that? He said, we just got baptized. Well, he said, nobody told me I couldn't do that because I got baptized.

See, no catechesis, no formation, no organizing around Jesus, just about checking the box. And so, we actually wind up trying to be, you know, legalistic about this and working against ourselves. So, Jesus, you see, wants, in fact, to be Lord of every part of us. He wants to be Lord of our inner life. He wants to be Lord of our family life.

He wants to be Lord of our church life. He wants to be Lord of our intellectual life. He wants to be Lord of our political life.

[22:05] He wants to be Lord of our emotional life. He wants to be Lord of our sexual life. He wants to be Lord of our broken life.

And he wants to be Lord of our afterlife. It's a big, full, encompassing plan that Christ has for our welfare, not just for this life, but for the world to come. And so what we have is that we hear the words of Jesus coming through in the gospel. Matthew and Luke both write about Luke says, we put records it. Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and not do what I tell you? Or as St. Matthew writes down the same thing, not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom, but the one does the will of my father.

Agreeableness. Now we all fail in our agreeableness. That's why we have the confession every Sunday during the service, because we all fail. But the freedom to fail is the freedom to become disciples. Failure is not the big F word for Christians, because we are in the forgiveness business. That's what's really important. And so disposition enables us to do that, enables us to develop a listening ear for God, a listening ear for God. And we listen to God in the scriptures, letters, and when we pray. And so we should be reading the Bible daily, and letting God speak to us, letting God speak to us. And a lot of times we say we're all in favor of the Bible, we just can't get to it. Because by the time I finish with my novels, and surfing the internet, and getting caught up on all the news, and checking all the postings on Facebook, how would I have time to read the Bible? I mean, I got all these other important things to do. Yet the Bible is the word of life for all of us, for all of us. And so I think we need to do that. You know, James says in that very first chapter of his epistle, he says, be quick to hear, to hear, hear the word of God. Slow to speak, slow to anger. And it's interesting that sometimes speaking too much can make us angry. Have you ever thought of it? Have you ever seen people whip themselves into a thing by just dwelling on it, and going over it? And pretty soon we're nutty. We're nutty. And it results in a kind of anger that doesn't help anything. And so James says, receive the word which is able to save your souls.

And then at the end he says, and so be a doer of the word, and not a hearer only. Be a doer of the word, and not a hearer only. And so, am I out of time already? I'm sorry. This will be more succinct. [25:08] Okay. And, you know, who are the people who really are the models of obedience and hearing? First of all, it's Jesus. It's Jesus himself, who in spite of being God, comes down to earth, not only in obedience to the Father's plan for our redemption, but Luke tells us he goes home, and he's subject to Mary and Joseph in Nazareth. Can you imagine being St. Joseph, and you're saying to this little kid, go over and get the lumber. I told you that. And then you're thinking in the back of your head, I just yelled at God. I mean, here, this is the humility of God, the humility of God that he accepts that status in the human family. And that meant that he was subject to people.

He went to the rabbinical school at the synagogue in town. I've often wondered, did Jesus always get a hundred? I have one. I don't know the theological answer to that, but I have wondered about that.

But he submitted himself over and over. You know, he tells Peter to go get the fish because they got to pay the temple tax. It's like, where do you get checked to yourself, isn't it? Here he is, God incarnate, obedient for us. And St. Paul will go on to say, he made himself obedient even unto death, death on a cross. We think about this in Lent. And every time we celebrate the Eucharist, we talk about that redeeming and atoning death that has saved all of us. And so this is what God has, how much he loves us. How much he loves us. There was a little commentary on the Apostles' Creed written by Cardinal Ratzinger, who later became Pope Benedict. And he had one line in there I could never forget. He says, in the incarnation, how close does God come to us? And the answer was, he comes close enough for us to kill him.

We look at the cross. That's the story of us and God. And yet he comes to rescue us. The people who were his enemies, he has come to rescue. And so we have then, the other two people are St. Paul and the Blessed Virgin Mary. They are the two key people in the New Testament in obedience. And, you know, we all read St. Paul a lot, so I'm going to cut to the quick and just talk briefly about the Blessed Virgin Mary, because she is a model of obedience in ways that escape us.

First of all, she's the only one who was present with Jesus, obviously from the incarnation when he took flesh in her womb through Calvary and the day of Pentecost, when Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit.

[28:07] She's the only one that covers both the Old Testament and the New Testament. And so secondly, that she not only bridges that, but Mary says, behold to the angel, I am the servant of the Lord.

Let it be to me according to your word. Fiat is the Latin word for let it be done. She is agreeable. She is agreeable to God working in her heart, to God coming to flesh in her womb. And so the angel says the power of the Most High will overshadow you. And so the thing is that in early Christian art, people said, well, how did God become flesh in Mary's womb? The Holy Spirit overshadowed her. And she said to me, according to thy word. The earliest Christian artists identified the organ, the organ of conception.

Now, in the 21st century, they would all get highly sexualized. And everybody would say, oh, well, there's the womb. The earliest Christians, when they spoke of Mary's openness to God and hearing his word and receiving him, it was her ear. And so in the ancient pictures, it shows the Holy Spirit coming over Mary with a ray coming toward her ear because she heard the word. She received the word and the word became flesh.

Now, most of us, that's just lost on us. But I found a picture, which I thought, I guess I didn't bring, but I intended to. I'm sorry. It was from a church altar in Germany or the Netherlands.

It showed the carving behind the altar. It was huge. It was huge. And it showed Mary at prayer. And see, later artists, later artists who intellectualized all this stuff instead of spiritualizing it, they have Mary reading out of a prayer book. Because this is the literary intellectual thing to do, is be reading prayers, right? But the ancient sketches showed Mary receiving the word through her ear and agreeing to God's plan for our redemption. Think about it. Think about it. The angels must have watched, and for a moment, the whole future of the human race hung on the agreeableness of a single Jewish girl.

[30:53] It's incredible. And then for a moment, God made flesh, existed as a single cell.

Very soon after that, of course. But this is the astonishment that God came to save us, and he did it in such a wonderful way. And so it's in the obedience of Jesus to his father.

It's in the obedience of Jesus to the call of God to be the mother of Christ that we are set free. And so, you know, in the early church, too, there were heresies, just like today.

And there were people called docetists who said that Jesus really only appeared to be a man. He wasn't really a man. And so if God appeared to be a man, that Mary's giving birth to Jesus on Christmas was only the birth of a human baby.

And it took Christians a couple centuries to work this out. And the Gnostics said, that's right, this is all very spiritual. They said, no, no, God became a man. He became one of us in every way except sin.

[32:08] And so we have, in fact, in the incarnation, the fullness of God's revelatory love for us that invites human cooperation and agreeableness with the will of God.

So I think if we can do anything and live, the thing that we can do is asking ourselves at night before we go to bed and when we come to church, am I agreeable to the will of God in my life?

Am I agreeable? And lots of times the choices we think we look at are not attractive. But Jesus probably thought the same thing when he took off his cross and had it on the path to Calvary.

It wasn't attractive. But because he was agreeable to saving the human race, he did it. And you think of Mary agreeing to all this and she goes along and sees her son, whom she knows is God, is God, being whipped and beaten, spat upon for us.

For the very people who hated him, he was giving his life. And so how agreeable am I, Lord, to your plan? How agreeable am I to carving out time, to reading your word, and listening to you when I pray?

[33:27] See, a lot of times we just talk God to death. If we just do nothing, he will speak in your hearts. He will speak in your hearts. Trouble is, we are so busy moving on to the next thing that we don't get to it.

So I'm going to quit there because I think that's enough. So let's say, are we going to sing a song? Yes, we're going to sing a song.