

# **Leadership Qualities: Obedience to God**

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Along with the costs of leadership come many opportunities – some positive, some negative. Many leaders have access to information or financial resources that they could use to their personal advantage. Others travel widely and almost anonymously, and have ample opportunity to compromise their purity. Still others may be tempted to use their position to unethically crush the competition – whether internal or external. Whether the temptation is about money, sex or power, many leaders sell themselves out. We read about the higher profile cases on the newspaper headlines every day.

## ***What's Your Price?***

The television show *Fear Factor* is based on the idea that everyone has a price. If the price is right, anyone will do anything at any given time – from eating live slugs to being placed in a glass coffin with thousands of snakes, worms and hissing cockroaches. Every week millions of viewers tune in to see if people just like them would be willing to conquer their fears for money. Quantifying revulsion has proven to be amusing and profitable for network television.

It's one thing to ask someone how much it would cost for them to wear a silly outfit in public or parachute out of an airplane or eat something gross. These things are morally neutral. But there are some things that shouldn't ever have a price – things like integrity, honesty, morality, our commitment to God and to our family. These things are not a game. Every leader should periodically ask, "Do I have a price? What would it take for me to compromise?"

It would be nice to think that followers of Christ do not have a price; that with an initial one-time commitment to Jesus comes a lifelong, resolute loyalty. And yet, it is not uncommon

to find people who claim to be Christians cheating on their taxes, padding their expense accounts and stealing from their workplace. A godly leader's commitment to God should be such that he or she will obey him no matter what he or she is offered to compromise. Unfortunately, Saul – the leader who had everything a nation would want – lacked such commitment. When the pressure was on, instead of obeying God's command to completely destroy the Amalekites, Saul spared the king and the best of the livestock (1 Samuel 15:9). That was Saul's price – a defeated king to gloat over and expanded wealth through owning animals, one of the major contemporary wealth indicators. Saul thought he could rationalize away God's clear instructions. But notice how the Lord responds:

Then the word of the Lord came to Samuel: "I am grieved that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions." Samuel was troubled, and he cried out to the Lord all that night.

Early in the morning Samuel got up and went to meet Saul, but he was told, "Saul has gone to Carmel. There he has set up a monument in his own honor."

1 Samuel 15:10-12

Many of the great characters in the Bible struggled with major character flaws. Moses wrestled with his anger, Solomon with narcissism, Samson with his lack of self-control. For King Saul, it was insecurity. He was more concerned about gaining honor and prestige in the eyes of men than in pleasing God. It is this insecurity that causes Saul to rationalize his rebellion:

When Samuel reached him, Saul said, "The Lord bless you! I have carried out the Lord's instructions."

But Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear?"

Saul answered, "The soldiers brought them from the Amalekites; they spared the best of the sheep and cattle to sacrifice to the Lord your God, but we totally destroyed the rest."

1 Samuel 15:13-15

Saul is layering lie upon lie upon lie. He said he had carried out the Lord's instructions. But he hadn't. Saul said it was the soldiers who had done the wrong thing. Maybe, but they were doing so with Saul's permission. It was his fault, not their sin. And then he has the gall to say, "We're saving these animals to sacrifice them. They're an offering to God, Samuel!" The animals weren't taken as offerings to God; they were taken to expand the king's wealth.

Finally, he makes this telling comment, "Samuel, we're going to give them to the Lord *your* God." From his heart, Saul speaks, and from his heart, he cannot speak of "the Lord *my* God." Saul's disobedience has led to lying; a lifetime of rebellion has killed Saul's relationship with a loving God.

It's always fascinating to hear people rationalize their disobedience. Perhaps the worst example is Moses' brother Aaron. Moses went up the mountain to get the law, and the people grew impatient. They became rebellious and wanted some idols so that they could worship:

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him."

Aaron answered them, "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me." So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt."

Exodus 32:1-4

When Moses came down from the mountain and saw what was going on, he asked his brother, "How did this happen? Where did this thing come from?"

Aaron answered, "You know how prone these people are to evil. They said to me, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.' So I told them, 'Whoever has any gold jewelry, take it off.' Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!"

Exodus 32:22-24

It's unbelievable the lengths to which people will go to rationalize their rebellion. "I just threw the gold in the fire, and out came this calf! What could I have done?" The idea is so preposterous. We want to grab Aaron by the collar and shake him, "Do you really expect Moses to buy that? How stupid do you think God is?" But before we get too puffed up with righteous indignation, perhaps we should examine some of our own rationalizations. Our excuses probably sound just as lame when they are spoken out loud. "But God wants me to be happy." "She just wasn't meeting my needs." "The Lord helps those who help themselves, doesn't he?" Try saying those at the foot of the cross and you'll hear how absurd they sound.

The Bible never says God wants you to be happy; he wants you to be holy. He wants you to be like Christ. That may lead to happiness ultimately, but it doesn't work the other way around. The quest for happiness will never lead to a life of holiness, but the quest for holiness leads to a life characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. These come as a byproduct of pursuing God above all else.

Saul tries to justify his sinful behavior by blaming the soldiers, but Samuel stops him short:

"Stop!" Samuel said to Saul. "Let me tell you what the Lord said to me last night."

"Tell me," Saul replied.

Samuel said, "Although you were once small in your own eyes, did you not become the head of the tribes of Israel? The Lord anointed you king over Israel. And he sent you on a mission, saying, 'Go and completely destroy those wicked people, the Amalekites; make war on them until you have wiped them out.' Why did you not obey the Lord? Why did you pounce on the plunder and do evil in the eyes of the Lord?"

"But I did obey the Lord," Saul said. "I went on the mission the Lord assigned me. I completely destroyed the Amalekites and brought back Agag their king. The soldiers took sheep and cattle from the plunder, the best of what was devoted to God, in order to sacrifice them to the Lord your God at Gilgal."

1 Samuel 15:16-21

Saul has, in his own mind, redefined the command God gave. He's changed it to fit with what he actually did. Saul says, "I *did* obey God. I did everything he told me to do. I went there. I destroyed everyone. I brought back the king. Isn't that what God told me to do?" When we rationalize, we can end up believing our own lies. Here is Samuel's response to Saul's lame excuse:

"Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance is like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has rejected you as king."

1 Samuel 15:22-23

As important as it is to perform the ritual correctly, Samuel says, it would be better to not do it at all than do it with a rebellious heart. It is not externalism that pleases God; it's the internal attitude and inclination of the heart. It is possible to perform religious activities and still be in rebellion against God. This is why religion has always been appealing to people. We can hide the true nature of our hearts behind religious activities. But if Christianity is a relationship, the old rules no longer apply. God doesn't want what is *ours*; he wants *us*. Why? Because when God has us, he also has what is ours.

So what is your price? What would it take for you to disobey God? Hopefully, your commitment is nonnegotiable. Such commitment is a crucial element in the character of a leader. If you ever find your commitment waning, reread the tragic story of Saul's disobedience to God and think through the tragic consequences of his failure.

### ***The Purpose of God's Commands***

A brief overview of Israel's history shows that the fundamental problem of God's covenant people was their repeated failure to obey God's commands. God always blessed their obedience,

but their habitual disobedience was the cause of their misery and their eventual downfall. Clearly, there is a basic principle here that applies to our own lives as well. In Deuteronomy 10:12-13, we find God's loving requirements for his people:

And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?

God's requirements in this passage relate to trust and the obedience that flows out of trust. Since our natural disposition is to trust in the visible rather than in what we can't see, we will engage in a spiritual conflict as long as we walk on this earth.

This conflict between the call to obedience and the lure of disobedience is well illustrated in the lives of the kings of Judah. Of the 42 kings of Israel, there were only nine of whom it was said that they did what was right in God's sight, and even they struggled with the issue of obedience. Six of the nine slipped into disobedience in the latter part of their lives. Whenever this slippage occurred, it happened because the kings decided to trust in something or someone other than the Lord.

In one sense, God's requirements of us are quite simple: fear him, walk in his ways, love him, serve him, obey his commands. All these things are facets of one thing: a growing personal relationship with the God who has already demonstrated his unflinching commitment to our best interests. Note well the stated purpose behind the commands in this passage: they are "for your own good."

God doesn't just give us a bunch of commands because he's interested in restricting our freedoms. He gives us his commands for our own good. In the book *Experiencing God*, the authors use the following illustration:

Suppose you had to cross a field that was full of land mines. A person who knew exactly where every one of them was buried offered to take you through it. Would you say to him, “I don’t want you to tell me what to do. I don’t want you to impose your ways on me”? I don’t know about you, but I would stay as close to that person as I could. I certainly would not go wandering off. His directions to me would preserve my life. He would say, “Don’t go that way, because that way will kill you. Go this way and you will live.”<sup>1</sup>

The more we realize in our thinking and experience that God always seeks our good, the more we will be willing to trust and obey him in what he asks us to do and to avoid. Trust and obedience are intricately bound together.

Eugene Peterson, in his book *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, tells about working on his lawnmower in his front yard one day. He wasn’t a very mechanically inclined person, but he was trying to get the blade off because it needed a new blade. It was all chewed up, dented and banged. He got the biggest wrench he could find and started working on the one nut that was holding the blade on. He worked and strained, but it wouldn’t budge. He got a four-foot pipe and stuck it on the end of the wrench to try to gain more leverage, but it would not budge. When that didn’t work, he actually picked up a rock and started banging on it. He was beginning to get emotionally involved in the process when a neighbor came over and said, “I used to have a mower like that; and seems to me I remember that the nut on that thing turns the opposite direction.”

So he got his wrench and his pipe extender and in a few minutes he had it off – because somebody came along and said, “You’re going the wrong way. That’s not the right direction to go.”<sup>2</sup> Sometimes it’s hard to be told we’re going the wrong way. But when we disobey God, that is precisely what we’re doing. We’re like Eugene Peterson banging, pushing, straining to get the nut off the wrong way. God doesn’t come along to make fun of us or shame us; he comes

alongside to say, “It’s not designed to turn that way.” He knows how we are designed. He is, after all, the architect of life. If anyone knows how things are supposed to work, it’s him.

Sometimes people say that they wish there was some sort of instruction manual for life. Well, there is. It’s called “The Bible.” Imagine if someone read the owner’s manual on their car and objected to the fact that it says, “Never put anything other than unleaded fuel in the car’s gas tank.” How strange it would seem to us if the person said, “Unleaded fuel only? They’re so narrow-minded and restrictive. Water is so much cheaper, and I can get it right out of my garden hose. These automobile manufacturers just want more money from me. I bet they’re in league with the oil companies!” We know that the reason the manual says “unleaded fuel only” is because that’s how the car was designed. To put water in the gas tank would damage the car. Likewise, to live outside of God’s will is detrimental to our well-being. It’s opposed to the way we were designed.

### ***Obedient and Loving It***

Even when God’s revealed will runs counter to our culture and counter to our intuition, it is not only the right way to live, it is the best way to live, the only sane way to live. We may run the risk of being considered out of step with society, but in the long run, obedience pays huge dividends. According to Scripture, a fundamental factor of the quality of this life and of the next is our response to God’s initiatives and claims on the choices we make. Response is unavoidable; we may ignore, resist or reject God’s initiatives and requirements, or we may respond in positive obedience. But as we respond in obedience to God’s loving commands, his word assures us: “This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3).

Despite appearances to the contrary, God's commands are not burdensome. The word the apostle John uses for "burdensome" literally means "heavy." This is not to imply that the commandments of God are easy to keep. Rather, it means that they do not impose an encumbrance when they are kept. Childbirth is a difficult and weighty process for any woman to go through, but it is not viewed as a burden. Most women rejoice when they are pregnant because, while it is difficult, pregnancy is primarily thought of as a blessing. So it is with the commandments of God. Far from being hardships, they are consistently beneficial, because obedience to God's will inevitably leads to divine blessing. In fact, it can be stated categorically that in the long run, disobedience to God always produces more pain than obedience to God. This is ironic, since the reason we usually disobey God is because we think that obedience will be more painful to us than following our own desires.

If God really is loving, the things he asks us to do are best for us. If God is sovereign, he alone can order our circumstances to bring about what is best for us. Thus, obedience is not burdensome if we are committed to the truths of God's goodness and sovereign purposes.

Jesus told his disciples that obedience to him was the clearest demonstration of their love for him:

If you love me, you will obey what I command.... If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me will not obey my teaching.

John 14:15, 23-24

Obedience flows out of love for God and leads to greater intimacy with him. Think about this for a minute. Have you ever regretted an act of obedience to God? Have you ever regretted an act of disobedience?

Disobedience to God will lead to a life of regret. So, why in the world do we wait? We often have this silly notion that somehow we'll wake up a very religious and spiritual person when we are a little older. But the reality is that as we get older we become more of the person we are now. The habits of today shape the person we will become. Habitual disobedience will make us more foolish and set in our ways and rebellious. And there is a scary "point of no return" that we can reach. Ann Spangler and Robert Wolgemuth pose an interesting question: "Think about the condition of your heart. Would you want God to harden it right now, that is, to set the attitude of your heart in stone for the rest of your life?"<sup>3</sup> Could it be that a person gets to the point where he's hardened his heart so much that God starts hardening it for him? Certainly that happened to the Egyptian Pharaoh in Exodus.

The more we know about God, the more we can trust him. The more we trust him, the more we love him. The more we love him, the more we will obey him. The more we obey him, the more we will learn about the trustworthiness of God. It becomes a cycle, an upward spiral, as opposed to the downward spiral of compromise and disobedience. We are either spiraling up or down, drawing nearer or moving away from God.

So I must ask myself, "To what degree are the choices I make based on right thinking (a biblical worldview), on wrong thinking (a temporal view of the world) or on emotions (the subjective tensions in my life)? Those are the three options. I can make decisions based upon right thinking, wrong thinking or emotions. Only the first option will result in good choices.

We have said that God doesn't want what is ours as much as he wants us. He knows that if we are surrendered to him, then everything we have is surrendered to him as well. Conversely, we might ask ourselves the question: "Do we really want God, or do we merely want his blessings?" If we seek God only for the good things he can give to us, we will miss out on the

relationship he invites us into. However, if we seek his face, we will have access to whatever is in his hand.

### ***The High Cost of Obedience***

If we are only concerned with obeying God as long as he blesses, what will we do when obedience to God is costly? If we do not see immediate blessing from obedience to God, why bother? All of us had *better* have an answer to that question before we find ourselves in the vise of a tough decision. Three young men in the Bible put their lives on the line rather than disobey God. We see why in Daniel 3:16-18:

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.”

If they had stopped with the first part (“He will rescue us from your hand”), what would have been the problem with that? Well, it demonstrates a lot of faith, but is that a biblical promise? Many times we pin our hopes to things God never promised. There will be times when we don’t know what the outcome will be. In Hebrews 11 we see several people of faith who were rescued from tremendous persecution. We also see others who were not delivered.

Most of what God requires is so obvious and beneficial to his followers that we do it without even thinking about it. It makes good sense to comply with God when he says, “Do not lie.” What kind of society would we have if everyone broke that command? It would be foolish to violate God’s will on truthfulness. But there are other commands that are not so obvious. It will require discipline, commitment and accountability to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Periodically a leader may find himself or herself backed into a corner. That’s

when it's crunch time: "Obey God and lose the deal," "Obey God and kill the chance for a promotion." For Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego it was, "Obey God and lose your life."

For these three young men – and for all of us – obedience at that level requires a clear conviction, a thought out resolution. At that level, obedience is never based on what's at stake, what's to be gained or lost. It is only based on what's *real*. To these three men the furnace was real. The threat on their life was real. The choice they faced was real. But, more importantly, so was the Sovereign God.

For Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, this issue was highly focused. Although two conflicting orders were given, the issue wasn't so much, "What was the order?" but "Who gave it?" For these three, the order of a king who could take their lives would never take precedence over the will of Almighty God. Their story of courage has inspired untold numbers of believers who have faced the fire – both literally and figuratively – over the centuries. Let their courage work its way into your life as well.

### ***The Gethsemane Mindset***

No one said this would be easy. There will be times when obedience to God means saying no to our personal desires. Jesus modeled such obedience in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

Matthew 26:39

This is the ultimate statement of obedience. What Jesus wanted at this moment was not in line with what his Father wanted. Following the Father's will led Jesus to an agonizing death and unimaginable separation from God. Jesus was fully aware of that, yet he still professed his conviction that God's will was best. This is precisely the opposite of Adam. Adam was in a

garden of his own, but he determined “My will, not yours.” In so doing, his garden became a desert. Here, the second Adam is in a garden at his moment of temptation, and he turned that garden into the entry to paradise, because of the choice he made to trust God.

Although no human will ever know the depth of suffering that Jesus faced in that quiet garden, his statement in this moment of decision should be every leader’s response to the Almighty God. Author Vernon Grounds helps us appreciate the mindset that enabled Jesus to obey his Father even when it meant going to the cross, when he calls this attitude of obedience “the Gethsemane mindset.”<sup>4</sup>

The Gethsemane mindset is the attitude of trustful self-surrender demonstrated by Jesus as he prayed to his Father, “Not as I will, but as you will.” It is the renunciation of our own human feelings, desires, hopes, dreams and ambitions so that God’s purposes may be accomplished. We develop this mindset as we follow Jesus’ example. We set our minds on doing the will of God, obeying him even though obedience involves denying self and surrendering anything that would interfere with the fulfillment of the divine purpose. We do this in the confidence that, as we follow our Lord’s example, we are going to experience, beyond loss and loneliness and pain, the joy and blessing and glory which mean unimaginable self-fulfillment.

Jesus Christ ultimately fulfilled his glorious purpose only through obedience to his Father. The ultimate test of any leader is his willingness to obey the same Father to whom Jesus entrusted himself.

Incidentally, in the Gospels there is never a command to self-denial without a promise of greater gain. God knows that we desire profit; he made us that way. His concern, then, is that what we pursue is worthy of our pursuit, that we not sell ourselves cheaply.

## *The Game of Life*

God invented the game of life. He constructed the cosmos and breathed life into the laws of physics. He designed the human psyche, so he knows how we're wired. Because he loves us so much, he gives us a rule book and begs us, "Please, don't try to change the rules. It will only result in your inability to make things work. It will lead to frustration and confusion."

Sometimes parents will let their children change the rules of a game or make them up as they go along. But when the child grows up and finds that things don't work that way, that rules cannot be altered or abandoned, the child can become embittered towards the parents who left him or her ill-equipped for life. Life has its rules, and God set them up. There is a glorious purpose to which we have been called. But this glorious purpose can only be achieved through a steadfast willingness to trust God enough to follow his rules, in spite of appearances to the contrary.

Joseph Stowell reminds us of the importance of "followership" when he writes:

I don't know whether kids still play Follow the Leader, but I can remember spending some of my wasted youth in the pursuit. Interestingly, I always wanted to be the leader. In fact, so did just about everyone else. The reason? The leader was always right, never caught off guard, and never embarrassed by having to imitate others. It is like playing Simon Sez: The leader always looks good, and the followers are the ones who stumble and can't quite keep up.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, getting older doesn't necessarily change our understanding of the difference between being a leader and a follower. As we get older, the stakes only get higher. But life is not a child's game, where the worst thing that can happen is looking silly or being made fun of. Eternity hangs in the balance. The outcome of our lives rises and falls based on whether we choose to determine our own destiny or follow someone far wiser and better equipped to lead. When it comes to the things that matter most in life, we have a tendency to resist yielding.

We're concerned that someone might think we're unable to figure out by ourselves that the nut screws the other way. We're afraid that someone might think we're unwise or weak.

But it is precisely in our weakness that God is strongest. And it is in our obedience to him that we are made strong.

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<sup>1</sup> Henry T. Blackaby & Claude V. King, *Experiencing God*. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994, 13.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000, 38.

<sup>3</sup> Ann Spangler and Robert Wolgemuth, *Men of the Bible*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002, 93.

<sup>4</sup> Vernon Grounds, *Radical Commitment*. Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1984, 42.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph M. Stowell, *Following Christ*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996, 14-15.