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YOURS OBEDIENTLY?!

Today's Text: Matt. 21: 28-32

Extracts:

[Jesus said to the chief priests and the elders of the people who had questioned His authority to do what He did]: “**A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, ‘Son, go work today in my vineyard.’ He answered and said, ‘I will not,’ but afterward he regretted it and went. Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, ‘I go, sir,’ but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?’ They said to Him, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you” [Matt. 21: 28-32]**

*With a population of 4.8 million, Norway has the third highest income tax among industrialized countries (2007OECD statistics), behind Denmark and New Zealand.¹ In Transparency International's **Global Corruption Report 2009**, Norway ranks among the least corrupt in the world, ahead of USA and most fellow European countries. Recently, under a law designed to safeguard the country's long tradition of transparency, the tax authorities published online the “skattelliste” or “tax list” of all income tax payers for 2008. It lists the incomes earned and taxes paid by all Norwegians, from the unknown to the famous.*

Some people have criticized the exercise as violating people's secrecy. However, some others believe that the disclosure enables the curious to know the extent to which people's secret actions match their public conduct. As one knowledgeable commentator on Scandinavian economics put it, “This is how you make sure that you're being legitimate in the eyes of the community.”

Norway's transparency standard can be likened to an “obedience index” that measures the extent to which we do what God has commanded us to do. Can you imagine your score on such an index if God were this moment to publish for all to see the obedience indices of all believers? Shall we see hypocrisy or total obedience? Today's study will enable you to know your score!

¹ Story based on the following sources: Ian MacDougall, “Norway publishes all tax returns online,” *theStar.com*, Oct. 22, 2009; <http://www.thestar.com/news/world/article/714269--norway-publishes-all-tax-returns-online> and *The Global Corruption Report 2009*, Transparency International, http://www.transparency.org/publications/gcr/gcr_2009#summary

1. Background: Yours obediently?

In the Bible passage [**Matt. 21: 28-32**], Jesus told the chief priests and elders of the people a parable to illustrate the principle of obedience. A father had two sons. He came to the first son and asked him to go and work in his vineyard. He said that he would not go. However, he later regretted his refusal and changed his mind by going to work in his father's vineyard. The man went to his second son and made the same request to him. The young man gladly accepted, saying, "I go, sir," but he did not go! Jesus asked His listeners, "Which of the two did the will of his father?" They answered, "The first." He was the one who obeyed his father's will by going to work in his vineyard.

The parable illustrates our own relationship with God. Of all of God's creations, only man was made in His image and likeness [**Gen. 1: 27**]. Man is the only creature given the freewill to choose between good and evil [**Gen. 2: 16-17**]. The word of God says, "What is man that You are so mindful of him, or the son of man that You take care of him?" [**Ps. 8: 6; Heb. 2: 6**]. It is all because *God needs human cooperation for Him to do what He wants to do on earth*. That is why the whole duty of man on earth is to fear God and keep His commandments [**Ecc. 12: 13**]. *He measures human obedience by the extent to which we are surrendered to His will*. That is His "Obedience Index." The first son in the parable demonstrated "obedience" while the second son scored "no obedience." Which of those two sons are you? Let us find out.

2. Your score on the Obedience Index

Most believers are anxious to obey God because that is the key to receiving His blessings [**Deut. 28: 1-2**]. However, we cannot impress Him because what we may consider to be righteousness in our sight is but filthy rags before Him [**Is. 64: 6**]. That is why you should consider yourself privileged when He calls you to do something for Him. What has He asked you lately to do for Him?

Our *response* to God's call can fall into one of the following categories, among others:

- a) *The Rebel: I will go only if I am forced!*

Some people know that they are living in disobedience but they find it difficult or unable to give it up. For example, God may be calling them into a ministry or to give up a life of sin. No matter what you say or preach to them, they either bide their time or simply refuse to act. It is as if they are waiting for disaster to happen to them to serve as a hook to their jaw to bring them to the bleeding side of Calvary. That can be called the *Jonah Model of Obedience*.

Jonah was a prophet. The word of God came to him, saying, “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me” [Jon. 1: 1-2]. Instead of going to Nineveh, Jonah fled in the opposite direction to Joppa and bought a one-way ticket on a ship to take him to Tarshish, “from the presence of the Lord.” God sent a mighty storm after that ship which almost broke up. The mariners threw everything on board into the sea and yet the tempest did not abate. They then cast lots that fell on Jonah. After realising who he was (and at his request), they threw him into the sea that suddenly became calm. God prepared a great fish that swallowed Jonah, and he was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights [vv. 3- 17]! It was while there that he repented and prayed for deliverance! The fish vomited him ashore [Jon. 2: 1-10]. God repeated His order for him to go to Nineveh and this time, “Jonah arose and went there *in accordance to the word of the Lord*” [Jon. 3: 1-3].

That exciting career that you cannot give up can be terminated unexpectedly. That immoral relationship that you are enjoying so much could become embarrassing to you and your family when the media expose it. Why should you wait for a major personal emergency (such as barrenness, economic hardship or terminal illness) to drive you back to God?

b) *The Hypocrite: I am going just to impress others*

Some people make a public show of their piety or reverence for God and His word. However, when you dig a little deeper into their private lives, you may find that things are not what they seem. Such people pay more attention to rituals than what they represent. They respect the letters of the law but minimize or ignore their essence. This is the *Pharisee Model of Obedience* that is built on hypocrisy.

The son who respectfully agreed to go to his father’s vineyard but did not go was a hypocrite. Jesus likened his hypocrisy to that of the chief priests and elders of the people who rejected John’s ministry of repentance that was embraced by tax collectors and harlots [Matt. 21: 31-32]. The Jewish leaders looked down on tax collectors that they saw as corrupt and harlots as sexually immoral. Therefore, they did not want anything to do with them. For example, when Jesus once passed through Jericho, He chose to have dinner with Zacchaeus, “a chief tax collector” that “was rich.” The leaders complained, saying, “He has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner.” Jesus replied them, “Today, salvation has come to this house because he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost” [Lk 19: 1-10].

Many believers profess to have received Christ but it is mere lip service. They draw near to God with their mouths and honour Him with their lips but their hearts are far from Him [Is. 29: 13; Matt. 15: 8]. They behave like the Pharisee who went to the temple to pray. Instead of admitting his sinful state and asking for God's forgiveness, he prayed thus, "God, I thank You that I am not like other men- extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector (praying afar off). I fast twice a week; I give alms of all I possess" [Lk 18: 11-12]! Analyze what you say about fellow worshippers in your congregation and you will realize how self-righteous and judgmental you are. You will find that you are not any different from that Pharisee. Those who do such things are far from obeying God's word. They are hypocrites.

c) *The Gold-digger- I am not going until I am induced!*

Some believers do a cost-benefit analysis of doing what God commands them to do before making up their minds. Usually, no one can see where God is taking them. However, they want to see short-term benefits of giving up their current status for the unknown. This is the *King Saul Model of Obedience*.

Saul was looking for his father's lost donkeys when he came across Samuel the prophet who told him that God had chosen him to be the first king of Israel. [1 Sam. 9: 1-17]. Soon after the prophet had poured anointing oil on Saul's head, the Spirit of God came upon him and he began to prophesy [1 Sam. 10: 1-11]! But when it came to waiting for just seven days for Samuel to come and offer a burnt sacrifice before Israel's battle with the Philistines, Saul could not wait. He went ahead to make an unlawful sacrifice. When Samuel came and saw what Saul had done, he said to him, "You have done foolishly. *You have not kept the commandments of the Lord, your God...* For now the Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel forever, but now your kingdom shall not continue" [1 Sam. 13: 1-14].

Some people come to church and behave as if their pastor owes them comfort or blessings as inducements for them to remain. They complain about everything. They never learn to pray for themselves or others or even contribute to the growth of their place of worship. Such worshippers are gold-diggers, mere fans of Christ but not part of His team. You cannot put your hand on the plow, still looking back, and expect to be fit for the kingdom of God [Lk 9: 62].

d) *The Skeptic: I am not going until I am convinced!*

Some believers have no problem doing the will of God but they first want to be convinced. They will not accept anything they hear or see on its face

value until they can prove it beyond reasonable doubt. Such people are called skeptics and they exhibit the *Thomas Model of Obedience*.

You will recall that when the risen Christ first showed Himself to His disciples, Thomas, one of the twelve was not there. His colleagues told him that they had seen the resurrected Saviour. He refused to believe, saying, “Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.” Eight days later, Jesus returned and invited Thomas to satisfy himself that He is the Christ. Thomas answered, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” [**Jn 20: 24-29**].

Skepticism is okay if it is borne out of a desire to understand than a search for evidence to discredit. Moses [**Ex. Chaps 3-4**] and Gideon [**Judg. Chaps 6-7**] were at first skeptical to their calling but after God had convinced them, they did exploits for Him. Paul was skeptical of Christ as the Messiah but after his encounter with Him on the road to Damascus [**Acts 9: 1-20**], he became convinced and wound up as the most effective ambassador of Christ, especially among the Gentiles.

e) *The Faithful: I will go because God said so!*

The word of God says that we walk by faith, not by sight [**2 Cor. 5: 7**]. Some believers literally do so! Their position is that if God has spoken, then they can put it in the bank. They will not question it like the skeptic nor analyze what is in there for them, like the gold-digger. Their minds are so transformed to God’s ways that they know when He is speaking to them. For example, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego told king Nebuchadnezzar who had asked them to renounce God and bow before his gold image, “We have no need to answer you in this matter. If that is the case, *our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up*” [**Dan. 3: 16-18**]. That is the *Joshua Model of Obedience* at work. It is an example of complete and total obedience.

After the death of Moses, it was Joshua that God used to lead the children of Israel into the Promised Land. As they came near the highly fortified city of Jericho, God gave Joshua specific instructions on how to take that city: march around it once everyday for six days; on the seventh day, march around it seven times and let the priests blow the trumpets; the city wall will fall down flat and every man should go straight before him [**Josh. 6: 1-5**]. Joshua did as he was commanded and that was how they

captured that fortified city. Joshua never questioned the logic of the military strategy or the physically exhausting ordeal of walking on the last day at seven times the speed of doing so the previous six days, at a time the men of war would have been most tired! Obedience is better than sacrifice. They were faithful to the minutest detail and it pleased God. He does not expect any less from you!

3. Conclusion: Yours obediently!

From the forgoing, we can conclude that the obedient child of God is not the person that is self-righteous but the sinner who repents and returns to the path of righteousness through faith in Christ Jesus. God has promised the backslidden, “Return, you backsliding children, and I will heal your backsliding” [Jer. 3: 22]. He will not remain angry forever but “only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the Lord, your God” [vv. 12, 13].

How do you rate on God’s Obedience Index? You are in:²

- Total Disobedience when you completely reject the truth of God’s word and disobey Him, as Adam and Eve did in the Garden of Eden;
- Partial Obedience when you may think you have actually obeyed but it is not so in the eyes of God. You do so when (a) you use wrong means for right ends, such as Abraham’s son by Hagar ; or (b) you do the right thing for the wrong reason, such as setting up an evangelistic ministry that God has not called you to do; or (c) you make the wrong turn in the right place, such as the five foolish virgins that went looking for oil after reaching the wedding banquet [Matt. 25: 1-13].
- Total Obedience when you faithfully do it as God has commanded, just as the disciples tarried in Jerusalem until the outpouring on them of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Sunday as promised by Jesus. Before that day, “they all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brethren” [Acts 1: 12-14].

Anything less than total obedience is no obedience at all. God can choose somebody else to do it if you fail or are not available. For example, David replaced Saul as king of Israel and Matthias took the place of Judas Iscariot among the apostles [Acts 1: 21- 26]. So, sign your next knee-mail, to God with “Yours obediently!”

² “Obedience: The Fine Print of Blessings,” *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 3 No. 35: 15 Dec. 2002; pp 3-4; http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_3/PDFs/ObediencethefineprintofBlessings.pdf