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OBEDIENCE: THE FINE PRINT OF BLESSINGS

Today's text: Deut. 28: 1-14; Phil. 2: 1-11

Extracts:

1. **"And all these blessings shall come on thee and overtake thee, if thou shalt hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God"** [Deut. 28: 2]
2. **"Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus; ... and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted Him, and given Him a name which is above every name"** [Phil. 2: 5, 8-9]

*Recently, I saw a big bold poster in a men's clothing store, which read, "BUY ONE AND GET ONE FREE!" I was thrilled because I badly needed a new shirt. However, my son, Aluyah, has always warned me not to get carried away by such gimmicks until I have read the fine print, that is, the tiny note at the bottom of every advertisement. Usually, you need a magnifying glass to be able to read it! I needed one shirt and I had just enough money for it. When I looked very closely at the fine print at the bottom of the poster, this is what I saw: "offer subject to minimum purchase of \$200. Offer can be withdrawn at any time without notice." Nobody advised me to run away from that shop! But can you imagine how many shoppers could be "conned" by that poster? That is why in business law, there is a principle called *caveat emptor*, which means "buyer beware!"*

The numerous blessings that God has promised us are also couched like the poster above. For every promise, God puts a condition that we must fulfil in order to receive it. In the two extracts quoted above, obedience seems to ring through. God's promise of personal and national safety and prosperity to the people of Israel was hinged on obedience. The glory that Jesus enjoys today is because He obeyed His Father. Unfortunately, most of us do not read that fine print. So, when we then claim those blessings and they are not granted, we turn around to blame God or to even doubt His faithfulness. Why are the weapons fashioned against us by our enemies prospering? Why do we look forsaken and our children begging bread? How come all things are not working together for good for us? Why has God not supplied all our needs according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus? Such and many other doubts are weakening our faith in God and giving Satan and his agents a field day in our lives.

In today's lesson, we shall show how obedience is the key to obtaining God's promises. We shall demonstrate that God does not lie, and that if He promises, He will deliver.

1. Background

In the last few chapters of the book of Deuteronomy [27-33], Moses preaches his third sermon to the children of Israel. He has shifted the theme from a review of history to God's promises of blessings. Chapter 28 is a very powerful summary of what Moses had to say on the subject. He opened the discourse with a statement of the conditions for obtaining God's blessings as follows:

And it shall come to pass, if thou shalt hearken diligently unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe and to do all His commandments...[Deut. 28:1]

That reveals important aspects of obedience that we need to study more carefully.

a) *Hearken diligently*

There is the story of a country dweller that came to visit his friend in the city. The city dweller was showing his friend around the busy city centre. Suddenly, the rural dweller stopped his friend and said, "I can hear a bird chirping." The city dweller started laughing and teased his friend, "you mean with the din of human and vehicular traffic, all you can hear is a lone bird singing?" A few minutes later, it was the city dweller that went on his knees searching for something. When his friend asked what he was looking for, he said that he had heard a coin drop!

What is the lesson of that story? It is that careful and thorough listening has to be learned. It comes from serious and conscientious efforts until our ears get primed to pick the appropriate cues, no matter the noise in our surroundings. The rural dweller was raised in a setting where he had trained his ears to know the different sounds of birds and animals. The city dweller is an economic animal that needs money to make ends meet. In both cases, their needs/wants influenced what they trained themselves to hear. In like manner, we must train our ears to know when God is speaking to us.

If we need God's blessings, then we must diligently listen to His voice for, in the words of Jesus, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. *And I give unto them eternal life*" [Jn 10: 27-28]. You cannot hear whom you do not know and you cannot listen to whom you do not respect or fear. That is why "without faith it is impossible to please Him; for he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him" [Heb. 11:6]. Of course, "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" [Rom. 10:17]. *Therefore, an important first step to "hearken diligently" is to study the*

word of God with the same zeal and commitment that we put into our earthly pursuits.

b) *Observe and do*

It is not enough to merely know every verse of the Bible and yet not put it into practice. Otherwise, we would be like the hypocrites [Pharisees and scribes] to whom Jesus ascribed Isaiah's prophecy, which says, "This people honoureth Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me" [**Is. 29: 13; Mk 7: 6**]. *If obedience is not total, it is not obedience at all!*

2. What it means to obey

Let us look at three types of obedience: total disobedience, partial obedience and total obedience.

a) *Total disobedience*

This is a condition when we completely reject the truth of God's word and disobey Him. Adam and Eve were specifically warned that their blessing of physical immortality depended on not eating the forbidden fruit [**Gen. 2: 16-17**]. When Satan tempted them, they ate it and, instead of repenting, they began to shift blame [**Gen. 3: 12-13**]. For such outright disobedience, they were expelled from the Garden of Eden and mankind has become subject to physical death as a result [**vv. 19, 23-24**].

b) *Partial obedience*

In this case, we may believe that we have obeyed when actually we have not. Let us examine various ways by which we do this:

- We may use wrong means for right ends. For example, God promised Abraham that a son "out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir" [**Gen. 15: 4**]. After ten years and nothing happened, he and his wife, Sarah, thought to help God fulfil His word by getting Abraham to marry his wife's maid, Hagar, who bore him a son, Ishmael [**Gen. 16: 16**]. How do we know if that is not what postponed the fulfillment of God's promise by 14 years [when Isaac was finally born]? Moreover, look at the belligerent relations today between the descendants of Ishmael (the Arabs) and those of Isaac (the Jews).
- We may do the right thing at the right time but by the wrong person. Soon after Saul was anointed king over Israel, the Philistines gathered to attack him. However, before going to battle, the people of Israel were required to offer sacrifices to God, to be performed by the prophet Samuel, who set seven days before the

burnt offerings could be made. At the end of the seven days, Samuel did not show up and the Philistines began to press hard on Israel. Saul then went ahead and performed the sacrifice (a duty only meant for priests). Soon after, Samuel came only to be told that the king had usurped the priest's role. Samuel told the king, "thou hast done foolishly; *thou hast not kept the commandment of the Lord thy God.*" For that disobedience, Saul lost the throne to David [1 Sam. 13: 5-14].

- When we make a right turn in the wrong place. Sometimes, we are on track but we make the wrong turn either at the wrong place or time. In the Parable of the Ten Virgins, the five foolish virgins missed going in with the bridegroom because they went searching for oil for their lamps at the wrong time [Matt. 25: 1-13]. In the Parable of the Two Sons, their father wanted them to work in his vineyard on a particular day. The first one refused. Later, he repented and went. The second told his father he would go but did not. Jesus taught that it was the first, not the second who did the will of his father [Matt. 21: 28-31].

c) *Total obedience*

We do not have the grace to qualify obedience other than how God has specified it for us. Otherwise, we are carrying out the tradition of men [Is. 29:13]. When angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her that God had elected her to be the mother of Jesus, she said "behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word" [Lk 1: 34-38]. When Jesus was ascending to heaven, He told His disciples, "behold, I send the promise of My Father upon you: *but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high*" [Lk 24: 49]. See what they did soon after:

Then returned they unto Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is from Jerusalem a Sabbath day's journey. And when they were come in, they went up into an upper room, where abode both Peter and James and John and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon Zelotes, and Judas the brother of James. These 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].

Did you see anybody take time off to go look after personal or family business? In complete obedience, they waited for the blessing of Holy Spirit baptism. Are you then surprised that they were abundantly blessed some ten days later on the day of Pentecost? [Acts 2: 1-13].

3. Some examples

To illustrate the point that obedience is the fine print of blessings, let us look at some popular quotations among believers:

- a) *“Every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon, that have I given unto you” [Josh. 1:3]*

I have underlined the fine print in this blessing, “the sole of your foot.” In an earlier lesson, we saw that the “sole of your foot” is not the same thing as the “sole of your shoe” [Vol. 2, No. 27: 21 October 2001]! The foot is part of your body. The shoe is not. Therefore, what affects your foot affects your whole body [1 Cor. 12: 12-26], “and whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it” [v. 26]. Therefore, what “sole of your foot” are we talking about here?

First, our whole body is figurative of the body of Christ [1 Cor. 12: 27], and “all that will live godly in Christ shall suffer persecution” [2 Tim. 3:12]. Second, this body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, in which case “ye are bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s” [1 Cor. 6: 19-20]. Third, this body is the temple of the living God for “as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them, and I will be their God, and they shall be My people” [2 Cor. 6: 16].

It follows that the foot that God is talking about here is that of a believer who has put on the whole armour of God with “your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace” [Eph. 6: 11-18]. He is referring to the foot of “the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly” but whose “delight is in the law of the Lord; and in His law doth he meditate day and night” [Ps. 1:1-2]. Therefore, that blessing is not for trespassers, talebearers or wicked people because “there is no peace, saith my Lord, for the wicked” [Is. 57: 21].

- b) *“I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread” [Ps. 37:25]*

The fine print here is “the righteous.” We erroneously accept that the righteous person is the good-doer. That is a human perception. In the sight of God, the righteous person is the one who walks by faith, not by sight! Abraham is regarded as the father of true believers [Rom. 4: 11-25] and friend of God [2 Chron. 20:7]. When God brought him out to show him the stars, He assured him that his descendants would be as innumerable. “And he believed in the Lord; and *He counted it to him for righteousness*” [Gen. 15: 1-6]. Therefore, *that blessing is meant for those who believe in God and walk according to His road map!*

- c) “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose” [Rom. 8:28]

There are two conditions for reaping this blessing. First, we must love God “with all thy heart, and with all thy soul and with all thy mind.” This is said to be the first and great commandment. The second is to “love thy neighbour as thyself.” “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” [Matt. 22: 37-40]. It takes total obedience!

The second condition is to be called according to God’s purpose. We do not choose God; He chooses us [Matt. 9:38; Jn 15:16] for the five-fold ministry of the body of Christ, namely, apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers [Eph. 4: 11-12]. What if God calls us and we refuse just because of our love of earthly pursuits? Certainly, that blessing is not for the disobedient!

4. Conclusion

When you work for an organization that has no problem paying your wages regularly and on time, that grants you pay raises and promotion without your asking, that caters for your health and safety, that puts funds aside for your pension, I am sure that all you need to do is to concentrate on your duties and responsibilities. You will be so motivated to do only those things that will enhance the image and prestige of that organization. God is richer than any human organization, and when He opens “the windows of heaven and pour you out a blessing, there shall not be room enough to receive it” [Mal. 3: 10].

The Preacher has said, “let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: *fear God, and keep His commandments; for this is the whole duty of man*” [Eccl. 12: 13]. In that case, you should worry less about blessings and concentrate on doing your duty, namely obeying God in everything you do. Then, like Paul, you will be able to say all the time, “blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ” [Eph. 1: 3]. In deed, obedience is the fine print of blessings. Pay attention to the fine print and leave God with His window of blessings!