

BEWARE WHOSE ORDERS YOU CARRY OUT!

Today's Text: Isaiah Chaps 36-37

Extracts:

Then *the king of Assyria sent the Rabshakeh with a great army from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem. ... Then the Rabshakeh said to them, "Say now to Hezekiah, 'Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria: What confidence is this in which you trust? I say you speak of having plans and power for war; but they are mere words. Now in whom do you trust, that you rebel against me?'" ... But they held their peace and answered him not a word; for the king's commandment was, 'Do not answer him.'* [Is. 36: 2,4-5,21]

*In the movie, **A Few Good Men** (1992), two young Marines were court martialed, accused of murdering a colleague. In their defence, they pleaded that they were merely obeying the orders of their Commandant, a Colonel who was highly connected to Washington. They claimed that the death was an accident because all they did was to obey orders against a colleague who was deemed to have broken "Code Red." Through their eloquent Navy lawyer, the Commandant owned up to giving the order. In the verdict, the two Marines were found not guilty of murder but dishonourably discharged from the military "for conduct unbecoming a United States Marine." The Commandant himself was arrested for murder!*

If carrying out this order had not backfired, the young soldiers would have continued to obey such orders, thinking that they were doing the right thing. However, what came out of the case is that the Commandant himself did not have the authority to ask his troops to do what he had ordered them to do. In the end, both the sender and the messenger were punished. How many of us have found ourselves in such a situation? We may think that we are obeying our teachers or parents or pastors or bosses or leaders and wind up with the short end of the stick, such as disgrace or loss of job or status or outright imprisonment. How then do we know what orders to carry out without disobeying higher authorities or offending God?

In today's study, we shall use the story of an Assyrian army officer, Rabshakeh, and the order from his king to attack Jerusalem. We shall learn some general principles that will help us to understand what to do when next we face a similar situation.

1. Source of orders: power or authority?

In most human organizations, such as home, school, church, government or business, there are hierarchies. A hierarchy is like a pyramid. The person occupying the highest position is at the apex. His/her immediate subordinates occupy the next rung and their subordinates at the next lower step and so on, until everybody in the system is accounted for. Believers are commanded to be subject to governing authorities (public or private) because “there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God” [Rom. 13: 1]. Therefore, when we disobey orders from those above us, such as parents, teachers, pastors, government leaders and people in similar positions, we expose ourselves to the risk of offending God. However, we do know that some of the orders that we may be asked to carry out are not *right*. How do we know what order is right? A helpful way to know is to identify the source of the order: *is it based on power or authority?*

Power can be defined as what you *can do* by virtue of occupying a specific position. For example, what a person was able to do when he was the Prime Minister, he may now not be able to do as Leader of the Opposition, even though it is the same person! The resources available are different. The circle of influence is different. Therefore, power is *de facto*, that is, based on incumbency. For example, as the Son of Man who had triumphed over Satan and *now holds* the keys of Hades and death [Rev. 1: 18], Jesus told His disciples while He was ascending to heaven, “All *power* is given unto Me in heaven and in earth” [Matt. 28: 18- KJV]. During His trial before Pilate, Jesus gave him the silent treatment. Then, Pilate asked Jesus, “Do You not know that I have *power to crucify You, and power to release You?*” [Jn 19: 10]. As the Roman Consul of the time, he had the ability to do so. He had the power.

However, that you have the power to do something does not mean that you have the *authority* to do so. Authority is the *right* that only laws or rules and regulations can confer on the power holder. S(he) cannot arrogate authority to himself/herself. For example, we know that in many countries today, political leaders are on trial for corruption. They used their positions of power to take out money from the public treasury that they did not have the *authority* to do. Therefore, their actions have been interpreted as *arbitrary* use or misuse of power for which they deserve to be punished.

Interestingly, the New King James Bible renders Matthew 28: 18 that we had earlier quoted above as follows: “All *authority* has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.” In other words, Jesus has *both the power and the authority to be the ruler of both heaven and earth!* Yet, look at how He exercises His power. When a paralytic man was brought before Him, and the scribes complained for hearing Him say to the sick man, “Your sins are forgiven you” Jesus replied, “the Son of Man has the *power* on earth to forgive sins” [Matt. 9: 6]. But, whilst He can forgive sins against the Father and the Son, He cannot forgive those against the

Holy Spirit [Matt. 12: 31-32]. That is because He does not have the authority! Jesus will judge the world and yet only God the Father knows the day and the hour of the return of Jesus [Matt. 24: 36]. When the chief priests and elders contested with Jesus about His teachings and miracles, they asked Him, “By what *authority* are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?” [Matt. 21: 23]. They raised such a question because the law at the time gave the leaders the authority and they feared that Jesus who occupied no priestly position in the temple was usurping their own authority!

We see from the above analysis that the role of authority is to act as a check on the arbitrary use of power. *Power intoxicates but authority humbles!* Only actions based on authority are likely to be right or please God, and those are the only orders that we are under legal or divine obligation to obey. However, let us qualify this. When Peter and John were brought before the Sanhedrin (the council of the rulers and elders of Israel), they were asked, “By what *power* or what name have you done this? (i.e., heal the lame man)?” The leaders had the position power and who were these little rascals to usurp such from them? They then ordered them never again to preach Jesus to the people. Peter replied, “Whether it is *right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge*” [Acts 4: 7, 19]. In other words, since God ordains all governing authorities, we should carry out *only legally binding orders that do not contradict the word of God*. To do less is to put ourselves at risk. The case that we are now going to consider will make this point clearer.

2. The Assyrian king’s orders exceeded his authority!

In his position as king of an expanding empire, the king of Assyria enjoyed enormous powers. His ambition was “to cut off not a few nations” while carving out chiefdoms for his generals [Is. 10: 7,8]. He had the military force to back up his boasts. He swallowed up all the other empires of the then known world—Egypt, Ethiopia, Samaria, etc. In an earlier invasion of Judah and Jerusalem [2 Kgs 18: 9-16], he had seized fortified cities and the king of Judah had had to strip the temple to appease the invaders. Not quite satisfied with that, he had now sent his general, Rabshekah, and a great army on a second invasion, with orders to take Jerusalem, the city of God [Is. 36: 2].

What the Assyrian king did not know was that his first invasion was successful *because* God had allowed it! In that attack, God used him as “the rod of My anger and the staff in whose hand is My indignation... against an ungodly nation and against the people of My wrath” [Is. 10: 5-6]. That was the authority that enabled him to defeat the people of God who had forsaken the true God to worship idols.

During the second invasion, the people of Judah had repented. Therefore, God’s mandate to the Assyrian king had expired. *This invasion was based on the king’s power and not on God’s authority*. It was bound to fail. Here are some of the key reasons why Rabshekah should not have obeyed the Assyrian king’s orders:

a) *The sender's intentions were wicked*

Judah did not pose any threat to Assyria. They did not have a credible army. Even in better times, they had run to a weaker king, the Pharaoh of Egypt, to help them against the Assyrians [Is. 36: 6, 8]. So, then, what was the underlying motive for this attack? It was largely to ridicule king Hezekiah and his God. Hear the words of Rabshekah [vv. 18-20]:

Beware lest Hezekiah persuade you, saying, "The Lord will deliver us." Has any one of the gods of the nations delivered its land from the hand of the king of Assyria?... Who among all the gods of these lands have delivered their countries from my hand, that the Lord should deliver Jerusalem from my hand?

Our bosses sometimes send us on errands that are couched in similar terms: "The Prime Minister wants it and he must have it!" "I am the Pastor/Founder of this congregation? Who can question my judgment around here?" "If we need your views, we shall tell you what to say!" "We are the supreme body of this association. We can do as we please and nobody can stop us!" Nobody is looking at the intentions of the persons giving the orders. Are their orders legitimate? Are the orders in line with the word of God?

b) *The messenger was equally wicked!*

Some times, a messenger can save the day by refusing to obey bad orders. For example, when the king of Egypt ordered Hebrew midwives to kill the newborn male children of Hebrew mothers, "the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the male children alive" [Ex. 1: 15-17]. In like manner, the centurion who led the soldiers that were taking Paul to Rome had orders to kill the prisoners if they tried to escape. During the shipwreck, the soldiers wanted to carry out their orders "but the centurion, wanting to save Paul, kept them from their purpose, and commanded that those who could swim should jump overboard first and get to land" [Acts 27: 42-43].

Rabshakeh did the direct opposite. He rubbed salt into Hezekiah's injury. First of all, he spoke in the local Aramaic language, not even in Hebrew, so that even the lowly educated folks would understand the insults against their king [Is. 36: 11]. Second, while he called the Assyrian king "great" [vv. 4,13] or "my master" [vv. 9, 12], he simply addressed the king of Judah as "Hezekiah" [v. 4]. He underrated the power and fighting ability of Hezekiah's army that would not even be able to raise enough number of riders for the horses that Assyria could donate to them! [v. 9]. Finally, he delivered a letter from the Assyrian king to King Hezekiah that

blasphemed God, saying, “Do not let your God in whom you trust deceive you, saying, ‘Jerusalem shall not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria’” [Is. 37: 8-13]. That letter was actually based on Rabshekah’s words when he spoke earlier to the common people by the upper pool in Jerusalem [Is. 36: 2, 7, 18-20]. In deed, if a ruler pays attention to lies, all his servants become wicked [Prov. 29: 12].

c) *Therefore, the messenger will not escape the repercussions!*

The Rabshakeh carried out his wicked king’s orders. When the king of Judah cried to God for deliverance, God sent word through the prophet Isaiah to King Hezekiah, saying, “Do not be afraid of the words which you have heard, with which the *servants* of the king of Assyria have blasphemed Me. *Surely*, I will send a spirit upon him, and he shall hear a rumour and return to his own land; and I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land” [Is. 37: 6-7].

Here, you see that God noted not only the action of the Assyrian king but also that of his servants led by Rabshekah. Therefore, both parties were under God’s hammer. God vowed to defend “this city and save it *for My own sake and for My servant David’s sake*” [v. 35]. That night, God sent an angel who killed 185, 000 Assyrian troops and I am sure that Rabshakeh was the first to die! The Assyrian king himself was killed by two of his sons while he was worshipping in the shrine of his idol at Nineveh [vv. 36-38].

3. Lessons: Know who is issuing the orders to you!

Each new day, we are under one pressure or the other to carry out the orders of our superiors. Some superiors may want us to misbehave or steal or cheat for them or for yourself! For example, one of the state governments in Nigeria recently clamped down on some parents who were encouraging their daughters into prostitution in Europe. In the office or places of worship, some supervisors or priests are sexually harassing their subordinates. Taxi drivers are under pressure from corrupt police officers to part with their hard earned money.

In some of such cases, it is relatively easy to resist or refuse to carry out evil orders because you can easily see that the motive is evil. However, for fear of losing their jobs or their lives, some people allow themselves to continue to be involved while dealing with a searing conscience. In some cases, you may have a problem on knowing what to do, especially if the orders are immoral but not illegitimate. For example, fornication and adultery are sins but not offences in most legal systems. With the exception of rape or incest, how do you fight off sexual temptations that peer pressure may be putting on you? ***The bottom line is to pay attention to the source of the orders that you are being pressurized to carry out. They can only come from two sources: God or the devil.***

Consider who is behind the following pressures that keep knocking at the consciousness of your mind:

- ❑ *Take the Bible with a pinch of salt. After all, there are other holy books.*
- ❑ *Jesus was a great religious leader, not the Son of God. Why should I make Him my Lord and Saviour?*
- ❑ *How can there be three distinct persons and you still call them one God?*
- ❑ *God will understand if you practise adultery or fornication or whatever*
- ❑ *Why should you pay tithes and offerings when you don't trust your pastor?*
- ❑ *Keep that grudge against your spouse or child or parents or boss or colleague even though they don't know they have offended you*
- ❑ *Why apologise to others you have offended? That's a weakness!*
- ❑ *Backbiting is harmless. After all, what of those murderers that they haven't caught?*
- ❑ *Why should I give my hard earned money to lazy people? Let them go and work!*

Obviously, those “orders” are from Satan whose sole aim is to prevent your salvation. You must run away from him before he runs you down!

With God, you are at least sure of how reliable is the source even if the order seems to contradict His word. For example, it was God who told Moses through the Ten Commandments not to make any graven image of *anything* in heaven, on earth or under the earth or bow before it [Ex. 20: 4]. Yet, when snakes bit the children of Israel in the wilderness, it was the same God who commanded Moses to make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole and “it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live” [Num. 21: 5-9]. Until Jesus explained the spiritual meaning of that event in the New Testament [Jn 3: 14-15], we have no evidence that Moses questioned the order. Instead, he obeyed. That is because he trusted its source. God *owns* all the power and exercises authority in accordance with His own purpose to give you the expected end-eternal life with Him.

Beware *whose* orders you carry out each new day!