

Free to Obey – Exodus 20.1-17

Team Talk 5

Introduction

(Recap and set up the theme for this week) We have been looking at the theme of freedom and the book of Exodus this term. We've covered being free from our pasts, free to serve, free from injustice and free from worry. This week's title is 'free to obey' – and we are going to be looking at the Ten Commandments, and the relationship between freedom and obedience.

(Definition) Obedience is about putting God's will above our own. It is doing what God wants, instead of what we want. It comes from the Latin word to listen carefully. It is about listening to God, and then responding to his voice, even if it is the last thing we want to do.

(Ten Commandments) The Ten Commandments are a list of 10 things that God wants us to do - ten ways to be obedient. They cover our relationship with God, our relationship with nature, our relationship with our parents, husbands and wives, and neighbours. They include rules on work and rest, sex, possessions, thoughts and actions. They show that obedience covers every area of our lives – because God wants us to be free in every area of our lives.

(Freedom and Obedience) However, obedience and keeping rules are not particularly associated with freedom. Rules can make us feel restricted and constrained. Obedience is often associated with timid children with their hair brushed neatly, their shirts tucked in, fearful of punishment if they put a foot wrong. Whereas freedom is associated with a life lived without rules, running free without constraints or fear of punishment.

(Example of freedom from rules) I remember the feeling of freedom on my last ever day of school, walking out the gates for the last time, knowing that I didn't have to be anywhere by any time the next day. I would not have to wear uniform again, or obey any of the school rules. I was free.

(Obedience leads to freedom) However, the Bible teaches that obedience and freedom are inseparable, for obedience brings freedom.

(A vision of life as it should be) The Ten Commandments were not designed to be restrictive, but to create freedom, for they are a revelation of what life lived in all its

fullness is meant to look like – a life where people know God intimately and love their neighbour, with harmonious families, and a good balance between rest and work, where people are content with what they have.

If everyone went around stealing and murdering and lying the whole time, the world would not feel like a free place. We would be terrified to leave our homes.

(The benefits of boundaries) The Ten Commandments create boundaries, and boundaries create freedom.

G. K. Chesterton tells the story of a playground built on the top of a cliff, with a wall around it, and the children playing freely, throwing themselves around the playground. Then they took away the wall, and the children stopped playing, but instead huddled together in the middle of the playground terrified. The wall of the playground had ensured that the children were free to play.

Boundaries create freedom by helping us to know where we stand. This is why we have rules at Safehaven, in order that our guests might feel safe and free from worry while they are with us.

(Free from being the people we were meant to be) And obedience is about becoming the people God meant us to be – with our relationships as God intended them to be – and this is freedom.

(Disobedience leads to slavery) Disobedience, on the other hand causes us to lose our freedom.

(In the Bible) In the creation story in Genesis God creates Adam and Eve and puts them in the garden of Eden, where they are free to do anything they want. There is only one restriction – not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. However, because Adam and Eve broke that one rule, they lost their freedom. And the more humanity sinned, the more they lost their freedom.

(In society) This is how societies work. If no-one does anything wrong you need hardly any laws. If people were never cruel to animals, there would be no laws against cruelty to animals. But as we find more and more ways to do wrong, we have to have more and more laws. Prison is clear example of disobedience leading to a loss of freedom.

(In our personal lives) But it's the same with our personal lives. Every time we do what is wrong, every time we sin, we lose a bit of our freedom. For Paul says, 'everyone who

sins, is a slave to sin.' Sin is addictive, and addictions are a restriction of our freedom. Paul says that he finds himself not doing what he wants to do, and doing what he doesn't want to do. We all can find ourselves trapped into habits we long to leave behind. We find we are not the people that we long to be deep down.

So obedience leads to freedom, and disobedience leads to a loss of freedom. But how can we ensure that we are obedient and so experience this freedom?

1. Make Obedience a response to God's grace

First of all, we need to make obedience a response to God's grace.

The Ten Commandments starts with a declaration of God's grace. 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.'

In other words God has freed the Israelites in order that they might be obedient. Obedience is not possible by our own efforts – it is made by what we receive from God.

(Jesus' obedience) We are only able to obey God because of what God has done for us – first of all through what Jesus did on the cross. The whole of the Old Testament is the story of a people who fail to keep God's commands. They continually disobey God and break his rules. Complete obedience is impossible for them.

And so God sent his Son Jesus into the world – and he was completely obedient. He loved God with all his heart and mind and soul and strength and loved his neighbour as himself. He kept the entire law. Whereas Adam, in the Garden of Eden, saw the fruit and said, not God's will, but my will be done, Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane, saw the cross and said, not my will, but your will be done.

(The Cross) And on the cross, Jesus took on our disobedience, and gave to us his obedience. We are made obedient by Christ's obedience, not our own efforts.

This removes all pressure and all burdens. For we don't have to strive for obedience and try desperately to keep all these rules. We have a spotless record, and our pasts are forgiven. All we need to do is receive Christ's obedience and the freedom that that brings.

Furthermore, obedience it is made possible by the gift of the Holy Spirit. Ezekiel writes that the Holy Spirit writes the law on our hearts. The Holy Spirit takes an external law, and makes it internal, transforming our desires and motivating us to obey.

So it by grace, by the work of Jesus and the work of the Spirit in our hearts, that obedience is possible. Grace liberates us to be obedient.

That's the first thing – make obedience a response to God's grace.

2. Make Obedience a Response to Love

Next, make obedience a response to God's love.

St Basil, a theologian from the 3rd century, said that there are three reasons someone might be obedient: fear of punishment, desire for a reward, and out of love. And we are called to obey out of love.

(Marriage vows) The previous chapter, which prepares the people of Israel for the Ten Commandments, shows us what is really going on between God and the Israelites. God says to them in verse 5, 'Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations you will be *my treasured possession*.'

Now, 'treasured possession' is the phrase a Jewish groom would call his bride. It is wedding language.

And the people respond to God by saying in verse 8, '*We will do* everything the LORD has said.' In other words, they say, 'I do.'

The Ten Commandments are like the vows of the wedding ceremony. They are the rules for living with God.

Raniero Cantalamessa, a Catholic theologian calls obedience, 'the nuptial 'yes' of the creature to the creator... the final union of the two wills.' Obedience is saying, 'I do' to God.

And marriage creates freedom. Marriage is a commitment, and it restricts our room to manoeuvre, but it also creates freedom, because you know where you stand and you know that you are loved.

(Personal example) I felt a huge amount of freedom when I married Tara – because it meant that no longer questioning whether the relationship was right, or worrying whether I might lose her, but could focus on enjoying the rest of our lives together.

(Obedience and love) Obedience brings freedom because it occurs in the context of our relationship with God. When we love someone we long to please them and to make them happy.

Augustine said, 'Love God and do what you want.' Because out of our love for God, flows a natural desire to obey.

(Personal example) You don't have to persuade me not to harm my wife, because I love her, and I don't want to do anything to hurt her. I want to keep all the vows I made on my wedding day, because I love her.

Love is the key to obedience and obedience is a loving response to God's love for us.

3. See the Potential of Obedience

So, first, make obedience a response to God's grace. Secondly, make obedience a response to God's love, and thirdly see the potential in obedience.

(Power of obedience) There is huge power in obedience. In the previous chapter God hints at why he is giving them the law – in order that they might be 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' God gave the Ten Commandments to Israel, not just for their benefit, but also in order that they might be a light to the gentiles, a people who bring goodness and peace and love to the world.

Obedience to God enables us to bring God's kingdom to the world.

(Obedience and authority) Obedience has power, because it gives us authority. Jesus had authority because he was obedient to his father, only saying what God gave him to say, and only doing what God gave him to do. And as a result everyone noticed the authority he had, in his teaching, but also over nature – calming storms and healing diseases. Through his obedience to God he had God's authority.

Being obedient to God gives us authority. If I act in obedience to Archie I have Archie's authority for that action; if a policeman acts in obedience to his superiors he has the full authority of the police force and the law of the land– in the same way, when we are obedient to God we have the full authority of God behind us.

(Obedience brings the kingdom) Obedience gives us authority; it also makes things happen.

God's work in the world comes through our obedience. The nation of Israel began when Abraham obeyed God's call to leave his home and go out to a new land. The people of Israel were set free from slavery when Moses responded to God's call to go down to that land and speak on their behalf. The Israelites were delivered from their enemies when various leaders responded to God's call to stand and fight. And Jesus came into the world when one young girl obediently responded to God's announcement that he was sending his son into the world.

Our obedience has power, because through it God does extraordinary things. And the more we obey, the more we put ourselves in God's hands for him to use us powerfully. Listening to God and obeying him can change the direction of our lives – it can send us off to China, or start a project for drug addicts.

Conclusion

Obedience is the key to freedom. When we have received Christ's obedience we become free from our pasts. When we receive the Holy Spirit we are free to be the people that deep down we long to be. Obedience draws us closer to God, as we commit to him. It gives us authority and the potential to make a difference.