

Sermon: Your Turn – "Obedience"

I dug around a bit on the internet trying to confirm this story I got from Randy, my preaching partner, but I came up empty. So I'm just going to have to ask you to trust him – which is hard, considering some of you don't even think he exists. I talk a lot about Randy, and very few of you have ever seen him. So some guys around here think he is my imaginary friend... Maybe ...

Anyway, Randy told me a story about Larry Burkett, a great Christian teacher who died a few years ago. Burkett got a phone call from a Chinese preacher who was in the United States raising money to buy Bibles for Christians in China. He says, when he first met the guy what struck him was his clothes. The Chinese man was a little guy, about 5'3", maybe 100 pounds, wearing a suit made for a man 6ft tall and 200 pounds. He looked a little odd. In broken English, the Chinese man began to tell his story.

He had served as a Colonel in the Chinese army under Chairman MaoTse Tung. When Mao took control of China in 1949 he gave orders that many of those who might be a threat to communism be executed. People with ties to the west, people with advanced education, Christians were executed. The numbers are staggering. Well, this guy's job was to lead a team that hunted down and "eliminated" these "threats."

In his travels he came into contact with a group of people living in a northern province of China that had been led to Christ through the ministry of an incredible Christian named Watchman Nee. Some of you may have read his books. Well this community was more prosperous than most, so he began to question some of the people. One guy he approached was pushing a wheelbarrow full of manure out to the fields. He asked the guy who the mayor of the town was. You see, frequently they would kill the mayor first, then the others would fall in line. The man said, "I am." He said, "You can't be the mayor; mayors don't push wheelbarrows of manure to the fields." The man said, "They do here. We're Christians, and with Christians, the leaders serve."

Anyway, eventually this soldier was led to the Lord by these remarkable Christians. And when he was saved, he was determined to share Jesus when he returned to Beijing. That didn't work out so well. They called him a traitor – the highest ranking communist to defect at that time. To get him to renounce Christ, they executed his family in front of him – his wife and six kids. He wouldn't back down. Instead of executing him, they put him in solitary confinement, totally naked, for 20 years. He still wouldn't back down. For 20 years the only people he saw were the guards who would beat him. And apparently he led an astonishingly high number of them to the Lord. Well, when Chairman Mao died, he was released from prison, and he immediately began preaching Jesus.

After listening to the man's story, Larry Burkett asked him this question: "What is it about America that has impressed you?" "What is it about our country than has impressed you most?" He said ... "What impresses me most about America is what you are able to accomplish without God." He said, "You have made God fit your convenience. He is not the God of the Bible I have studied." He said, "You have no grasp of what you are capable of doing when you really draw upon God's power for your life... because you have built a God to meet your convenience."

I was struck by the story, because I think there is something to it. It is amazing what our nation has built, without being particularly obedient to our God. And then we morph God into someone who stands behind what we have accomplished. But even more than that, I think it fits the church. It is amazing what our churches have been able to accomplish ... without God. Now that's a little strong, I know. Maybe I should put it like this: It is amazing what our churches have been able to accomplish ... without radical obedience to God. We have tried to follow God, but not too closely; we have tried to worship God, but not too unreservedly; we have tried to obey God, but not radically, not to the extremes. Is that too harsh? Which has resulted, I think, in a church that is for the most part unremarkable in communities that are for the most part unchanged. Boy, this sermon has started out dark, hasn't it! You got out of bed for this!

But here's the question for us today. Do you think God really expects us to obey him radically? When God tells us to do something, do you think he really expects us to do it? We listen to what Jesus said, we listen to what the apostles said, we study the Bible ... do you think God really expects us to live that way? How much obedience do you think is acceptable to God? Do you think he is good with 51 %? As long as we obey a little bit more than we disobey? Do you suppose that God kind of

y grades on a curve? 90% obedience is an A, you get a huge mansion in heaven. 80% obedience is a B, better than average, you get a condo. 70% is a C, you get an apartment in heaven. 60% is a D, you can pitch a tent, maybe. Below that ... well you won't need a jacket where you're going. Do you actually think that Jesus actually meant it when he said, "You must be perfect — just as your Father in heaven is perfect." (Matthew 5.48) That's a little over the top, don't you think? So, if you are a Christian ... Now if you are not a Christian, this question really doesn't matter to you, yet. But if you are a Christian, how much disobedience is acceptable to you? Or maybe the better question is, if you are a Christian, how much disobedience is acceptable to God?

And are there loopholes? Do we only have to obey if it is an explicit command, and only if we can't find any exceptions? It doesn't actually say "Don't lust," not in those words anyway; can I find a loophole? It doesn't actually say "Don't divorce," it just says that God hates it, and I can find some loopholes if I dig. It doesn't actually say, "Don't swear at all" ... Well actually it does, but it doesn't specify what words are excluded. It doesn't actually say give 10%, in the New Testament anyway, it just kind of implies that was the standard they followed. What if there is no explicit command? Does that mean I can choose to disobey?

What if it is just something ... Jesus would do? There's no command at all, just his example. Do I have to do something just because Jesus would do it if he was in my place? Do I really have to ask the question, What would Jesus do? I may be shaping these questions crudely, but I'll bet some of this stuff has crossed your mind. Does God really expect us to obey him?

Love one another, he says. Do unto others as you would have them do to you, he says. Love your enemies, he says. End your disputes quickly. Forgive in the same way you've been forgiven. Wash each other's feet. Bear each other's burdens. I could keep going. I actually found a website that listed 1050 commands in the New Testament. It was out of control. But does God really expect us to obey all that?

Well, I guess I could make this sermon really short and simple, but you guys would hate that. Does God really expect us to obey him? Well, the answer is ... Yeah. He really does. Listen to what the Bible says:-

- Jesus says, "Not everyone who calls out to me, (not everyone who mouths the words to me) 'Lord! Lord!' will enter the kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter." (Matthew 7.21) It's not just about belief, it's about obedience.
- Jesus says, "All who love me will do what I say. My Father will love them, and we will come and make our home with each of them. Anyone who doesn't love me will not obey me." That's pretty strong stuff. If we love, we obey, if we don't obey, we don't love. This obedience is big.
- Jesus' brother says, "Don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves." (James 1.22) I think a whole lot of us Christians are just fooling ourselves.
- The apostle John puts it like this, "If someone claims, 'I know God,' but doesn't obey God's commandments, that person is a liar... But those who obey God's word truly show how completely they love him." (1 John 2.4-5) This is about radical obedience.

And in the early church, Christians took this stuff seriously. They struggled with sin too, just like we do. But they didn't try to lower the bar. They didn't just shoot for 70% or 80% or 90% obedience. I think if that little Chinese guy had visited one of the early Christian churches he would have been dazzled, because they were trying to obey God in a world where obeying God was hard.

- God told them to preach Jesus. That wasn't just embarrassing for them, that was dangerous. They were preaching Jesus to people who could throw them naked into solitary confinement for 20 years after killing their wife and kids. But they still preached Jesus, and the church spread like a wildfire, because they practiced a ... radical obedience.
- God told them to take care of each other, financially. That wasn't easy, the early church was poor. There were very few people who had any extra at all. But one guy back then put it like this: "Christians live in poverty, but enrich many; they are totally destitute, but possess an abundance of everything." (Diognetus) And that blew their minds. We practiced a radical obedience.
- God told them to live lives of moral purity in a world that was a cesspool morally. That wasn't easy. But the way they lived preached Jesus even more powerfully than their words. One guy wrote, "They marry like all other men and they beget children; but they do not cast away their offspring. They have their meals in common, but not their wives." (Diognetus) We practiced a radical obedience, and it was so powerful!

Here's the deal... Actually here are two deals. Here's the first deal: it Sometimes obeying God is easy. But radical obedience is measured when it's hard. It's not difficult to obey God when we agree with him. It's not difficult to obey God when it costs very little. But radical obedience is measured when we don't understand him, and when it costs a lot.

And here's the second deal: Grudging obedience doesn't count. That one's really hard, and maybe a bit overstated. But it doesn't build any favor with God to obey him out of duty, or because we're afraid not to. They did a study one time on some college guys. They asked these boys if they would rape their date if there would be no punishment. No angry dads, no angry cops, would you rape your date if there were no consequences. Some of them admitted they would. Others said, maybe not rape, but we'd push them a lot further than they wanted to go. Here's the question: were these "restrained rapists" good kids. When one of these kids went on a date and

treated his girl well because he was afraid not to, was he a good kid? The answer is: No. He's law abiding, but he's not good. Because if he was good, he wouldn't hurt his girl. Goodness comes from the inside; it's not forced upon us... When we obey God out of duty, when we obey God out of fear – we are law abiding, but we are not good. Radical obedience comes from the inside. Radical obedience means doing life God's way because it's right, with a reckless abandon, no matter what it costs.

Radical obedience is measured when it's hard. And radical obedience is not grudging. So... how are you doing, in your obedience to God? How are you doing with this stuff personally? How are we doing with this stuff as a church family? Guys, Capital City is a great church. Over the past 15 years, when most churches have been in decline, we have grown, a lot. At our age, 50 years old, an age when most churches are in decline, we have grown, a lot. We have grown from about 265 in attendance back in the mid-90s to over 700 today. And our influence in this community has grown as well. Most anybody who has watched us would call this church a success story, one of the strongest churches in Frankfort. And we genuinely believe that our best years are in front of us... It is simply amazing what we have been able to build ... without radical obedience to our God.

Our sister church, where Randy preaches, is in the middle of a capital campaign. They are exactly where we were a couple years ago — they are out of room and they need a new sanctuary. So they are calling their campaign 30,000 reasons — for the 30,000 people in their county who do not have a serious church home. We have 37,500 of the same reasons here in Franklin County. Here's what Randy told his church family next week. He said, if we were radically obedient to God, we wouldn't need this capital campaign. Let me just read what he told his people, this is from his sermon last week. He said, "I'm going to speak the truth, in love." He said, "If we were obedient, if we were a community of believers who give as the Scriptures say we should give, we wouldn't need this campaign to raise \$2 million. If every family here gave 10% of their income, how would that affect our ability to do ministry? He said, "Listen, this is a good church, a church full of good people. Over the last 10 years most churches in America have been in decline; we have bucked the trend. In a day when

most churches are struggling, we've been thriving. By most any measure (he said) First Capital (that's the name of their church), by most any measure First Capital has been a success story." And then he said, "It's amazing what we have accomplished ... without being fully obedient to God!" He said, "I'm not suggesting God hasn't been in it; don't hear me say that the Spirit hasn't been active, using us. What I'm saying is this, imagine what we would have done if we were radically obedient to God."

Randy crunched the numbers for First Capital, Corydon, Indiana, I crunched the numbers for Capital City, Frankfort, Kentucky. According to Angela, we have 722 family units. 722 families call Capital City home, it seems. At least they want name badges. If we were radically obedient to God there would be no empty chairs in this place. According to the

Census Bureau the median family income in Franklin County in 2009 was \$45,619. If this church family was radically obedient to the tithe, our income this year would exceed \$3 million (our current budget is about \$1.2 million). If this church family was radically obedient to the New Testament standard of proportional giving, our income would exceed that. Guys, we wouldn't need our capital campaign either. We'd pay off this building in 2 years and invest in ministry in ways that would blow your mind.

I'm not telling you this church isn't generous. It's way more generous than most — we give around 3.5%, the average I think is about 2.5%. But the reality is, it is simply amazing what we American Christians have built without being radically obedient to our God. Did you know that we Americans spend as much on our pets as we do on our churches; that we spend 1 % times as much on weight loss as we do on our churches? If you really want to assess the heart, follow the checkbook.

But this sermon isn't about money, it's about radical obedience, and the difference it can make. Just think about it here at the church. If we were radically obedient to God, we would never need to recruit another volunteer. Chris would have all the teachers he needs with our children, Matt would have a line of people ready to help him when he gets here in a couple of weeks to work with our youth, Mike would have people ready to

help him as he takes over discipleship. If we were radically obedient to God, we would have teams of people all over this community loving on people in the name of Jesus. If we were radically obedient to God, this place would be jam packed, and we would be multiplying our worship services. Do you buy that? Would you want that?

But it's not just about church.

- What if we were radically obedient to God in our homes. I can tell you this: if both partners in a marriage were radically obedient to God at home there would be no more divorce. It would so radically alter our marriages that we wouldn't even dream of divorce. Do you buy that? Would you want that?
- What if we were radically obedient to God at work, and we did our work as God commands, "as for God, not as for men." Our work ethic would be amazing. The way we treated our colleagues, the way we treated our customers — dazzling. Employers would come looking for our people. Do you buy that? Would you want that?
- What if our youth and our singles were radically obedient to God. Who I date, how I date, who I marry — all that is conducted in a way that is God honoring first. There'd be no more teenage pregnancy. There'd be no more cohabitation without marriage, and all the unintended consequences that accompany it. Do you buy that? Would you want that?
- What if our seniors were radically obedient to God. Instead of retirement being all about me, now I'm free to serve my God in brand new ways. Do you think that would transform the way we finish? Do you think we might even see a whole gaggle of senior citizens spending a summer in Haiti, or somewhere else doing kingdom work? Would you want that?

Guys – just think about the differences radical obedience would make.

- There'd still be tough times, economically, but not nearly as many self-imposed by our fiscal misbehaviors. And no Christian in this family who was facing a hard time would be going it alone.

- Our time with God outside these walls would be so rich. We'd be spending quality time with God every day. We would do life with God.
- And our time with God inside these walls would be so much richer. Can you feel what worship would be like in the middle of a family radically obedient to God? Do you buy that it would be different? Would you want that? ...

Here's the bottom line, guys. I'm not asking of you anything extraordinary this morning. I'm just asking each of us to do a little soul searching. Are we trying to be radically obedient to our God – not 51 % obedient, not 70% C level, or 80% B level, or even 90%? Are we trying to be radically obedient to our God? And if not, why not? Do you really think it would make your life worse?

I'm not trying to teach you anything new this morning. I'm not trying to surprise you with something God wants you to do that you don't already know. For most of us, the issue isn't . not knowing, the issue is . not doing. I'm just challenging us to do a little soul-searching. Are we being obedient to what we already know God wants of us? Not mostly obedient; are we trying to be radically obedient to our God? And if not, why not?

Surely none of us would be so silly as to think that if we were radically obedient to God our life would suffer! It would be crazy to think that doing life God's way would diminish us! Guys, we settle for too little. I'm asking you, I'm challenging us, to go all in. Imagine what a difference it would make if we did!

Now I suspect that as I have been teaching this morning, some piece of God's will has been stuck in your craw. All of us have a place that flashes to mind when we are challenged to obey, because all of us have a place, or two, or three where we have chosen to be disobedient. What are you going to do with that piece this morning? What you usually do? Work up a little guilt, and then go out and do the same old? Or will this morning be different?

(1) God loves, with an incomprehensible, unconditional, unquenchable love. That's why we're here this morning: God loves.

(2) But we sin. And our sin corrupts what God loves. It started killing us in the Garden of Eden, and it's been killing us ever since.

(3) But God rescues. We don't have the strength or the goodness to defeat evil on our own. We don't have the ability to breathe life into what our sin has killed. But God can, and does, in Jesus.

(4) And then we choose. Last week we talked about belief, faith, and trust. This week I talked about obedience. That's our choosing God's path.

(5) And when we choose God in Christ, through faith, and through obedience, God restores. That's the work of the Holy Spirit inside us. He starts working to restore what God made us to be.

I'm going to close again with some words I stole from Rick Warren. He closed his Radicalis Declaration with these words: I hereby declare my supreme allegiance to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I say this: However, whenever, wherever, and whatever you ask me to do, my answer is yes. I want to be used by you in such a way that on that final day I'll hear you say, "Well done, good and faithful one." Can you say those words with me?