

## The Insubordinate Son

We Christians contend that God is holy. I think that has become, for evangelicals, more of a slogan than a meaningful term. In Scripture, however, God isn't merely holy, He's *dangerously* holy. We should think, for example, about Nadab and Abihu in the Old Testament, and Ananias and Sapphira in the New. We should, but we don't. To us today those are just more Bible stories. We don't reflect on Scripture as we should, we don't apply it to our lives, and we don't let it shape our thinking. So this lesson looks at an obscure (to us) law in Torah because it will cause us to form a more godly and theologically correct worldview.

In Deuteronomy 21, there's a too-easily ignored paragraph on what God said to do with a rebellious, disobedient son: Kill him. Verses 18 to 21 have been sadly misunderstood (and even abused) by well-intentioned believers (as well as by unbelievers) for centuries, right up to the present. Let's understand that we're dealing here with a unique kind of Scripture. The ultimate Author of Scripture, after all, is God, who created language and communication. And so Scripture is beautiful, complex, and compelling, as well as revelational. Therefore, just as the narrative texts all have extensive theology embedded in them, so do certain of the laws of Torah, such as this one. This dramatically worded law is here to teach essential and necessary theology. It's here for a good reason; it's here for us.

We need to understand that what's in view here is not an episode of disobedience nor even repeated episodes of disobedience, but a spirit or attitude of contempt for one's parents, to the extent of defying their correction and discipline. It was not for being given to drink or to profligate lifestyle either that this law addressed, because the drinking and self-indulgent lifestyle were only expressions of an internal, inherent contempt for authority; they were manifestations of an intractable rebellious spirit. And let's say also that this particular law is not here primarily to be observed. And according to rabbinic sources, it never was, although in the centuries subsequent, there would have been innumerable instances where it might have been applied.

Most commentators correctly write that this law is an expansion of the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment, to honor one's father and mother. Two other laws in Torah deal with honoring parents (Exodus 21:15 and Leviticus 20:9). This Deuteronomic law not only also fulfills that same role, it goes further by making *any* rebelliousness a violation of the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment punishable by death. It makes the necessity of honoring one's parents a duty to God; in other words, rebelling against the authority of one's parents is really rebellion against God Himself.

Now, let's think what fundamental lesson this law teaches. Isn't it this: Disobedience is rebellion against authority to which one rightfully should be submissive, and that rebellion shows contempt for the authority, contempt that forfeits the right to live. The right to life is God's gift, and God is the ultimate authority. So this law essentially says that if we disobey God, not on occasion but as a willful attitude despite knowing what we should be doing to honor Him, we commit a capital crime against Him. This law thus imposes a heavy responsibility on humanity to obey God. Let's observe that in Scripture, we honor parents, or God, by acknowledging their inherent authority over us, and so obeying them. Disobedience manifests contempt, which is a capital crime.

We must now ask, What exactly is it about disobedience that's so heinous? It's this: God is good, infinitely good, which means that all His demands and standards are for our ultimate good. What's *not* good—as God determines good—is evil. God wants His beloved human creatures to flourish and so, in His infinitely perfect wisdom, He has given us laws and instructions that we're to follow. God is not an arbitrary authority, He is supremely good. When we rebel against Him, in ugly pride we finite creatures are saying, "My will, my idea of what's good, is better. I am my own god." And so, we necessarily choose something that's evil. This, by the way, is why, in our text, the law required the parents take their son to the elders: So that the elders could determine whether the parents' demands of the son were good and necessary, not merely arbitrary.

The first man, Adam, was as a son to God. So this Deuteronomic law reprises Adam's rebellion in Genesis 3. Although Torah was given to Israel, the text must mean that *all* humans are obliged to obey God. Adam's disobedience in the Garden resulted in death. All unbelievers throughout history, rejecting (or ignoring) God's righteous demands and will for His people, are under God's just penalty of death, physical death and spiritual death. Later in history, God

took the Israelites as a son to Himself. So this law here in Deuteronomy meant that the people of Israel were warned that dire consequences attended rebellion. If they were to rebel against God, death [exile] awaited. This law embeds the concept that God, who is holy, good and wise, lovingly establishes norms and standards by which we're to live and prosper and fulfill His creational purposes, and we honor Him by abiding by His rule. But if we prefer to go our own way and ignore His will, we show contempt for Him and will necessarily suffer for doing that. Notice how this passage ends, "all Israel will hear of it and be afraid." Fear? Yes, God is dangerously holy. He will punish deliberate and willful hate, resentment, or contempt.

I suspect that we, today, don't really know what authority means. The spirit of Western modernity is radically anti-authority, and it's inconceivable that that spirit hasn't also infected Christians. And we in the Church suppose that God's love and grace and our salvation supersede all else, so "authority" is nearly if not fully irrelevant. So, what is authority? It's the inherent right to make demands of others, with consequences for non-compliance. Justice requires submission to those in authority, although love and gratitude should powerfully motivate submission too. God is Creation's supreme ruling authority, and He has lovingly revealed His will for us. And He has clearly revealed to all humanity the consequences of not complying. But—*consider this carefully!*—to the Church, He has with-held revealing the consequences to believers of disobedience in the reasonable expectation that love and gratitude suffice. Israel's prophets gave that nation repeated, strident warnings about rebellion, but the Church has only a few, brief passages of warning here and there. Why? Because the Church has vastly greater revelation, privileges and enablement than Israel ever had.

The key to knowing God is obedience. We honor God by submitting to His authority over us. The Gospel offer of life is for those who take seriously God's demand of obedience and so to be subordinate to His rule, which is wise, good and just. All else is death. Jesus is the ultimate disobedient Son, having taken upon Himself the rebelliousness and sins of all humanity, and His atoning death fulfills this Deuteronomic law. But we are not therefore free to indulge ourselves in this life as we please. Justification means Christ's righteousness is imputed to us. Yes. But God nevertheless demands of us the holiness that comes from obedience.

Someone now will say, "That's Old Testament stuff you're pushing. Don't you know, we're under grace." And my response is, Wrong! In this passage, we read, "You must purge the evil from among you." That occurs 7 times in Deuteronomy. The Israelite nation was a corporate unity, in solidarity with each other and with God. One rebellious individual would contaminate the entire body. And so in 1 Corinthians, Paul repeats that same phrase, applying it to *the church*. The church, after all, is also a corporate unity, in solidarity with each other and with Jesus. That disobedient man in Chapter 5 was corrupting the entire local body, so Paul commanded that he be handed over to Satan. In this letter to the Corinthian believers, Paul was applying the Deuteronomic law of the insubordinate son to the Church, except that the man was not to be stoned to death but be excommunicated and given over to ghastly discipline. Let's not misunderstand the Gospel.

We too easily misconstrue grace and salvation. And we misunderstand the biblical fear of God. Grace and trust in Jesus do not mean that we're therefore free of God's demands. We have very great privileges, but with them come very great responsibilities, because in this moral cosmos the two are ineluctably joined. The grace extended to us in the Gospel doesn't void God's demands. Salvation means that we're going to be allowed into the presence of a holy God, so we ought to have the attitude of a loving son who desires to be like his father and strive to be, in the here-and-now, holy. God has absolute authority over us and He demands holiness, and we need to fear the dreadful consequences of deliberately ignoring His will for us. If we are indifferent to God's revealed demands, we either don't really know God or love Him, or we simply are proudly and selfishly presuming upon His goodness. May this daunting law in Deuteronomy motivate us to renewed zeal for the pursuit of holiness and for obedience to Jesus, our Savior. That's why this law is in the Bible.

A glorious existence awaits us who are in Christ. Obedience to Him now, regardless what sacrifice or loss it requires, will be overwhelmingly compensated in that future era. So let's commit to serving Jesus, to being loyal to Him, to expressing His life now, to exalting Him, now, while we have the opportunity. He, and He alone, is worthy.