

Sunday September 25, 2022
Lesson 4: From Obedience to Freedom
Scripture: Deuteronomy 30: 15-20

Context:

This fall we continue our series titled “Freedom.” Our first unit is titled “Rescue” and ends today as we look at a part of the Exodus story and how God liberated the Israelites to enter the Promised Land. Through the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, we discover how God equipped and directed the people to live. Today’s lesson explores how freedom entails obedience to God.

Today’s lesson comes from the book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy is the fifth and final book of the Torah/Pentateuch; its name (with Greek origins), means “second law” and succinctly summarizes its contents.¹ The book is little narrative and as a literary genre is a farewell address, in which a noble leader speaks to their constituents shortly before their death.² This noble leader is Moses who has shown the people the way to the Promised Land. Even though he will not see it, he urges the people by rhetoric to remember the journey there and what they are called to do as the people of God.

Chapter thirty comes as Moses is wrapping up his speech and he has laid out the laws and their history. The core of Deuteronomy is the law code found in chapters 12-26, and deals with a variety of topics including religious ceremonies and ritual purity, civil and criminal law, and the conduct of war.³ This long list includes many of the law codes found throughout the earlier books of the Pentateuch as they help give structure to the Israelites as they enter the land.

Moses does not mince words on how following these laws should play out in their life together. He reminds them of where the laws come from and the fact these laws stem from a love of the Lord. This will help them to be the people of God, formed by covenant.

This final speech will be used not only by Moses, but also by a group known as the Deuteronomists. The Deuteronomists were the group responsible for organizing the writings of the Israelites probably around the mid-eighth century when the kingdom had split, and the prophets were arising to warn the people.⁴ The words of Moses helped them to piece the story together of God’s people and connections were made on how Israel had broken down. The people were called to get back to their roots, to stop the division, and to remember the freedom given to them in obedience.

¹ Coogan, Michael D., ed., *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 177.

² Ibid., 178.

³ Ibid., 180.

⁴ Ibid., 185.

Application

Have you ever thought of placing freedom and obedience together? For most Americans, this is quite the leap. When we think of freedom, we imagine nothing constraining us. We believe authorities may exist and yet our opinions and thoughts can trump those if they test our independence. Rarely do we think of obedience supplementing freedom because obedience conjures up a power higher than us. Yet as people of faith, freedom and obedience go hand in hand with one another.

All of us at some point or another has probably struggled with authority. And in some cases, it might be a good thing. Bullies and negligent individuals can make life difficult and cause unnecessary strife and harm. Sometimes those in authority should be reminded of the great respect and trust given unto them.

Yet there are other times when authority reminds us of the responsibilities and the promises we have made. As Christians, we believe in the mighty God who holds us accountable for how we live and treat those around us. And for the most part, God does not ask us to do things which are extreme for us. These words in Deuteronomy all center around loving God and loving those around us, seeking the boundaries God gives us to do life with one another.

The unusual part about God though is how God gives us the freedom to respond to this obedience. It's a great thing for us because even when we do not obey, God isn't posturing with a giant thunderbolt watching us to cross one of the lines and then zap us. No, God allows us to cross the line and then figure out the consequences on our own. God will not forsake us and yet God isn't willing to clean up our mess either. There's a reason we have the saying, "You've made your bed, now lie in it."

All the time we see how we practice freedom and obedience. Or at least we learn what happens when we separate the two and try to justify things. For example, we are completely free to say whatever we want in our society. I can tell you how ugly your new hat looks, or I can gossip about what my neighbor is doing in their backyard. There's no law against those things. Yet should I be surprised when someone attacks my new shoes, or I hear an ugly rumor about something I have supposedly said or done? Our freedom does allow us to do certain things and the consequences may or may not show up.

With freedom and obedience though, we learn how they can prevent those things which cause us to stumble or get in our own way. Because we are free in Christ, we do not have to state every opinion and we do not have to do things which hurt others because society deems this the way to get ahead. We are given the chance to practice obedience in surrendering our thoughts and behaviors to God and being transformed.

In the past several months, I have watched how freedom and obedience can be a tedious and yet rewarding journey. Our society often loves to tell us we need to have an opinion, to make declarations on things, to condemn others, and to do whatever makes us feel instant gratification. It can be tempting to jump in the fray and have the freedom to say and do whatever we want, not considering our vows, our promises, or our relationships with others. And we may very well get away with our poor behavior and not feel one consequence on the surface.

And yet in the past several months, I also had the chance to teach and preach on

covenant and the words of the minor prophets. Time and time again, God reminds us to do things like to focus on the covenant we have made and not get caught up in the wrongdoings of others. The words of the prophets which may decry the powers of the world, also speak of hope to the everyday people reminding them of how God will restore and redeem them even in the face of calamity.

I exhale a deep sigh of relief. I am given the opportunity to be free in Christ, to be obedient to what God calls me to do, and to surrender my life to serving God, wherever it may take me. I do not have to break my vows, demean others, or play political or social games. I can be who the Lord made me to be.

How do you think freedom and obedience go hand in hand with one another? Why does God want us to follow the vows we make? What happens when we disobey God and then blame others for our wrongdoing? Who exemplifies a life of obedience to you? How have you felt obedience and freedom guide you in your walk with the Lord?

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