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Obeying God Will Make You Wise

Article by

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When our children were small, our days consisted of almost constant instructions and routines.

Naptime came after lunch. Beds had to be made, and teeth had to be brushed, and hair had to meet with a comb before school. Snacks were for snack time, not for grazing. We prayed and sang our way through the days of getting things out and learning to put things away. We read books before bedtime and learned verses in the mornings. I can hardly think of a moment when instruction wasn't on my tongue. "Put your boots in the closet, please!" "Markers are for paper, not for tables!" "Food stays on your plate!" "Go outside and ride your bikes until supper!"

Our rules and routines were not forever statutes — many of them have changed or the need for them has expired — but they were particularly helpful in the season of babies, toddlers, and early school years. As parents, the rules made perfect sense. They were for the good of our children, not for ill. We were not some dictatorial spoil sports; rather, we put up boundaries so that our children could flourish.

Laws of Love

Instructions and boundaries were genuine (and imperfect) expressions of our love for them. When we require children to do chores and study and practice instruments, we require the activities that make for faithful, wise adults. And so it is with God.

God's commands are expressions of love. When God brought his people out of Egypt, for instance, he had a lot of instructions for them. After reminding them of these instructions, Moses told them,

See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples. (Deuteronomy 4:5-6)

The obedience of the Israelites would *be* their wisdom and understanding. Obedience would set them apart as wise in the world, and over time it would teach them wisdom. And yet, all through the wilderness, God's people refused to keep and do his commandments, often going their own way, because they believed they knew better than God what was in their best interest.

Who Knows Better Than God?

Believing ourselves wise apart from obedience to God is the great sin of the human heart. It is the essence of pride. When we declare that we are wiser than God by judging and weighing his commands to see if they suit us, or to gauge whether or not we think they are wise, we are hardening the wet cement of foolishness. But when we, by faith, receive and obey his commands, our hearts and minds are taught wisdom. His instructions become our wisdom and understanding. Consider Eve's folly.

The serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they

knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. (Genesis 3:4-7)

Eve's folly was in exercising her own judgment apart from obedience to God. She took it upon herself to evaluate the wisdom or folly of God's rule. She assessed the tree's fruit using her own wisdom: it was good for food, it was a delight to the eyes, and, in an irony, it was desired to make one wise. Eve, in her own wisdom, sought the path of wisdom through forbidden fruit, forsaking the instructions of her Creator — instructions that would have led her to true wisdom.

Because *I* Said So

If you're anything like me, though, you might be wondering to yourself, "If Eve isn't supposed to use her own judgment to judge the rightness of something, then what is the basis of her obeying someone else? Are you saying she should have just blindly obeyed others?" No, she should not have *blindly* obeyed *others*. With eyes beholding her Creator, she should have fully obeyed *her Lord* — the one who made the heavens and the earth, the one in whom is all wisdom and knowledge, the one who made her, knew her, and cared for her.

We see this dynamic in a godly Christian home. When children kick back against a bit of instruction coming from the mouth of their father or mother, saying, "Why should I do *that*?" the truest statement a loving parent can say back is, "Because *I* said so." That doesn't mean that they should say nothing else, or that the parent is perfect, or that every single thing a parent requires of his child is as good as it possibly could be. What it *does* mean is that children should obey because the source of the instruction is coming from a father or mother who loves them, is older and wiser than they are, and has their best interest in mind.

Children don't obey because they fully understand all the reasons behind screen-time limits or bedtime routines — they obey because of *who* is requiring it. And the more they learn to obey their parents with gladness and trust, the more they come to see the wisdom of their instructions. So it is for us with God.

Obedience of Faith

The Christian life is one of supernaturally substituted discernment. Christians, by the work of the Holy Spirit, acknowledge that we, in ourselves, do not know what's best for us.

When Jesus went to the cross, he became our substitute — he was punished for our sake and in our place. He who knew no sin became sin for us, “so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). But that substitution goes further. Through the folly of the cross, Christ became wisdom for us (1 Corinthians 1:30). He endured the foolishness of the cross, so that God might destroy the wisdom of the wise, thwart the discernment of the discerning, and make us truly wise in Christ (1 Corinthians 1:19; 2:16). Jesus commands, “Believe in God; believe also in me” (John 14:1). How do we obey such a command? How do we incline our ear to this instruction? How do we do differently than Eve did when she decided to use her own judgment in place of God's? We do it by “the obedience of faith” (Romans 16:26). God gives the free gift of faith (John 3:7-8), the supernatural ability to believe, and that faith produces our obedience to his commands. John Piper says of the obedience of faith,

That is the ultimate goal of the gospel: the gospel awakens and strengthens faith that leads to conformity to Christ, which displays the glory of God. . . . If there is any people group on planet earth where faith in Jesus Christ is not producing conformity to Jesus Christ, God's aim for the gospel is not complete. (“Command of God”)

Real faith produces real obedience, our conformity to Christ, and then, through that obedience, we grow in understanding and discernment. We see the loving wisdom in what he has commanded.

How Obedience Produces Wisdom

Faith-filled obedience beholds the Command-Giver in all his righteousness, goodness, sovereignty, and power, and trusts that the words coming from his mouth are better than any

coming from ours — even if we don't understand them. Through that faith-filled obedience, we learn to substitute the perfect judgment and instructions and wisdom of God for our own sickly sense of things.

When I was growing up, my parents required us to clean up the kitchen after supper. If I started to complain about the jobs that needed to be done, my dad always said the same thing to me: "You don't have to do the dishes, Abigail; you get to." "You don't have to wipe down the counters, Abigail; you get to. Aren't you thankful that we have food to eat and a kitchen to clean?" So, I would groan a little inwardly and obey my dad.

As I grew older and continued to (imperfectly) obey and do what he required, I noticed that his attitude of "get to" rather than "have to" extended to every area of his life. On Thursday evenings, he would pay bills. I remember one evening asking him if he disliked getting so many bills in the mail, since it seemed like it was the only mail we got. He said to me, "No. I'm so thankful that I get to pay the bills." He said the same thing when paying taxes. And getting up in the middle of the night as an on-call doctor. And cleaning out his workbench in the deep recesses of our cellar.

Even as a teenager, my eyes were opened to the wisdom of my parents requiring me to clean up after supper. Through obedience, I came to know the wisdom of a "get to" attitude over a begrudging "have to" attitude. It was made clear not merely through the commands themselves, but through witnessing and experiencing wisdom through obedience.

As we increase in our obedience to God — in whom all the riches of wisdom and knowledge reside — God is pleased to grow our wisdom and understanding, so that all that he commands increasingly makes sense to us. As that happens, not only will he be beautiful to us, but so will all his ways.

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