

THE O IN ROPES: DOES OBEYING GOD MATTER?**PSALM 119:33-40**

Back in 1981 an unlikely movie entitled “Chariots of Fire” was awarded Best Picture at the annual Academy Awards. It tells the the story of Eric Liddell who was on the track team for Great Britain at the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris. He was assigned to run the 100 meter dash on a Sunday. But Liddell took something more seriously than competitive running. His relationship with God. He believed – as did many other conservative Christians of his day and age – that to compete athletically on a Sunday was a violation of one of the Ten Commandments – the one that commands us to keep the Sabbath Day holy. He didn’t believe he could compete on a Sunday and obey God at the same time. All efforts to persuade Liddell failed – even an appeal from the Prince of Wales, heir to the British throne. A British official finally said in frustration, “What a pity we couldn’t have persuaded him to run!” After a moment’s pause, his coach responded, “It would have been a pity if we had, because we would have separated him from the source of his speed.”

The KRBC definition of a disciple is contained in an acronym we refer to as ROPES. Following Jesus is all about learning the ropes. From time to time, we zero in on one of these five aspects of what it means to follow Jesus as His disciple. The R is for relationships. We become more like Jesus when we pursue intentionally a vertical relationship with God and horizontal relationships with others who want to be His disciples. The O is for obedience – the aspect of discipleship we will reflect on today. The P is for prayer – learning how to connect with God meaningfully in and through prayer. E is for evangelism. Because Jesus had a heart for spiritually lost people, we need to have a heart for spiritually lost people. We look for opportunities to build relationships with them and have faith conversations. The S stands for Scripture. We want to find new and meaningful ways to apply the Bible to our everyday lives.

So, does obeying God really matter? It did to Eric Liddell – even if his understanding of keeping the Sabbath Day holy seems a little odd and quaint to us almost 100 years later. The Bible makes an important connection between obeying God and having a relationship with God. Not many Americans today agree with that viewpoint. Most Americans think what matters is simply believing in a divine being of some kind. Any old god will do! God’s job is to create us, forgive our sins along the way, and then prepare Heaven for those of us who have tried really hard to be good in this life. God might have His standards and laws, but He doesn’t honestly expect us to obey them. What a ridiculous thought! Sadly, many American Christians are more in tune with our culture than they are with God. Many of us think knowing God begins and ends with a spiritual act or decision. We come forward at the end of a service. We pray a prayer to receive Jesus as our Lord and Savior. We get baptized. We join the church as members. The necessity of a spiritual transformation sounds odd to us, or legalistic, or just flat out undesirable. Yuck! Who wants to actually change? The old fashioned word is discipleship – believing in Jesus and what He’s done for us, to be sure, but also entering into a process where we gradually get conformed and transformed into someone who increasingly resembles Jesus Himself.

Don't get me wrong. We certainly believe around here that it's very important to make a conscious, personal decision to make Jesus the Savior and Lord of your life. But we also believe the reality of that decision – the evidence it's genuine - is found in your willingness to keep on obeying God in your everyday life – in your choices, your lifestyle, your relationships, and your attitudes, for example. The Bible makes it crystal clear to believe in God in any meaningful way is to obey God and to obey God is to believe in Him. You can't have one without the other. One place where the importance of obeying God is emphasized is in Psalm 119 – the longest single chapter in the entire Bible – 176 verses. Don't worry, I'm not going to read all 176 verses today! I'll just read v. 33-40 so we get a sample – a taste – of what the author says about obeying God in the entire psalm. **READ, p. 608.** Even though this psalm was written hundreds of years before Jesus walked the Earth, it's a wonderful picture of the heart attitude and desires of any genuine follower of Jesus. This is what it means to be Jesus' disciple! Let's observe four truths about obeying God which underline why obeying Him matters.

OBEYING GOD IS POSSIBLE.

That's not as obvious to everyone as it may sound. Many people give up before they even try! It's common to think that God is just too holy and too awesome to be obeyed. His standards are impossible to meet. People say, "We're only human. Why bother even trying to obey God?" But the guy who wrote this psalm assumed it was possible to obey God. "Teach me your decrees, O LORD; I will keep them to the end. Give me understanding and I will obey your instructions; I will put them into practice with all my heart." (Ps. 119:33-34 NLT) Apparently, obeying God is possible.

People who aren't followers of Jesus have little interest in obeying God or even trying. When David Letterman was hosting his late night talk show he would offer a tip to anyone planning to visit New York City. He said, "If you're planning to travel here, do yourself a favor. This is a lot of fun. Check into a Times Square hotel. Take the Bible out of the nightstand there, if it hasn't already been stolen, of course. And then open it up to the Ten Commandments and go look out the window of your hotel room. On a good day, you can check the commandments off as you see them being broken."

But even followers of Jesus think obeying God is next to impossible. But it is possible to obey God, because God Himself makes it possible. Yes, indeed we are sinful creatures. In fact, the Bible says we find it hard to resist many sins that are spiritually poisonous because we frankly kind of enjoy indulging in those sinful actions or attitudes. So, let's be honest about it. The only reason you or I can ever say, "Because obeying God matters, I will stop doing this or that" is because God has already said, "Because obeying Me matters, I will empower you to stop doing this or that."

Again, the author of Psalm 119 assumes this truth. He says to the Lord, "Teach me your decrees.... Give me understanding.... Make me walk along the path of your commands.... Give me an eagerness for your laws." (Ps. 119:33-36 NLT) He wanted to obey God, but he also recognized he couldn't do it in his own strength. He needed God's help to obey God. It's possible to obey God, because God makes it possible.

We find that same truth over in the New Testament, “Work hard to show the results of your salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear. For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him.” (Phil. 2:12-13). If it wasn’t possible to obey God, He wouldn’t ask you to do it. The more you learn how to cooperate with the Holy Spirit living in you, the more you will find yourself obeying God with consistency. Here’s a second observation about obeying God.

OBEYING GOD IS VOLITIONAL.

What does that mean? Volition is another word for your will. It has to do with making choices and decisions. Obeying God only ever happens when you make a decision or a choice to do something that you know pleases God. God will empower you to obey Him, but He doesn’t obey for you. You still have to choose to live in ways that honor Him. That’s where your will comes into the picture. The psalmist understood this fact well, “I will delight in your decrees and not forget your word.... I will keep on obeying your instructions forever and ever.... I will hurry, without delay, to obey your commands.” (Ps. 119:16, 44, 60 NLT)

Now, here’s an interesting fact of life. Some people consider themselves followers of Jesus who seem to care less about obeying God. They’re sexually active outside of marriage – not once in a moment of weakness, but repeatedly. They habitually tell lies. They handle and use money with a lack of integrity. They defend their own racist attitudes. They excuse their own violent, abusive tempers. They think everyone who is poor or disadvantaged deserves to be so. They think involvement in a local church and doing life together with other followers of Jesus is optional and occasional. They could care less about spiritually lost people and have absolutely no desire to point anyone to Jesus. The idea of discovering your spiritual gifts and actually finding a ministry to do with excellence and regularity that builds up the Kingdom of God in some way is an alien concept to them. Obeying God doesn’t just happen. Obeying God is very much a matter of your will, your choice, and your decision – sometimes a daily decision.

Jesus asked a searching question, “So why do you keep calling me “Lord, Lord!” when you don’t do what I say?” (Luke 6:46 NLT) Being a Christian is more than a one-time decision, a salvation prayer, or getting baptized. It means obeying the Lord. No, obeying the Lord doesn’t make you a Christian, it just proves you are one! It’s the evidence you’re truly a follower of Jesus. “But, Rick, we’ll continue to sin this side of Heaven, right?” Yes. “God doesn’t expect perfection, does He?” No. But God has every right to expect a genuine desire and effort to cooperate fully with the Holy Spirit. If you have no desire to obey Jesus and you make no effort to apply His teachings to your life, why should you consider yourself to be His follower? Desire and effort reveal a whole lot. Desire and effort point to the fact you’re truly a child of God. No desire and no effort also reveal the obvious. You’re not a child of God. Here’s a third truth.

OBEYING GOD IS DELIGHTFUL.

Garrison Keillor wrote one of the funniest books I've ever read entitled "Lake Woebegone Days." It's about growing up in a small town in Minnesota. In there he writes about having a tomato fight with his siblings. "Then I threw a tomato at my brother. We ducked down by the vines, heaving tomatoes at each other. My sister, who was a good person, said, 'You're going to get it.' She bent over and kept on picking. What a target! She was 17, a girl with big hips, and bending over, she looked like the side of a barn. I picked up a tomato so big it sat on the ground. It looked like it had sat there for a week. The underside was brown. Small white worms lived in it. It was very juicy. I had to handle it carefully to keep from spilling it on myself. I stood up and took aim, and went into the wind-up, when my mother at the kitchen door called my name in a sharp voice. I had to decide quickly. I decided. A rotten Big Boy tomato hitting the target is a memorable sound. Like a fat man doing a belly flop, and followed by a whoop and a yell from the tomatoe. She came after me faster than I knew she could run. She grabbed my shirt and was about to brain me when Mother yelled, 'Phyllis!' and my sister, who was a good person, obeyed and let me go and burst into tears. I guess she knew that the pleasure of obedience is pretty thin compared to the pleasure of hearing a rotten tomato hit someone in the rear end."

We laugh at the truth in that story! Sometimes the devil does a really effective job of convincing us there's far more pleasure, joy, and delight when we disobey God than when we obey Him? In real life, exactly the opposite is true. Now, true, some sin can be fun for a while until it blows up in your face and you have to live with its painful consequences. Let's face it. We don't often put those two words together: "obedience" and "delightful." Obedience and duty, for sure. Obedience and responsibility, absolutely. But obedience and delightful? But the psalmist says exactly that, "Make me walk along the path of your commands, for that is where my happiness is found.... How I delight in your commands! How I love them!... Your laws are my treasure; they are my heart's delight." (Ps. 119:35, 47, 111 NLT)

Obeying God is delightful because you're fulfilling the purpose for which God created you. You were made to have a relationship with God. When you live life in a way contrary to what you were designed to experience, you get misery as the result. The more you delight in obeying God, the more real fulfillment in life you experience. Obeying God is delightful because everything God commands you do is for your own good ultimately. The Bible says, "And the LORD our God commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear him so he can continue to bless us and preserve our lives, as he has done to this day." (Dt. 6:24 NLT) Is it always delightful to obey God? Of course not. Sometimes, it's very hard to do the right thing and obey God. We still have that old sin nature inside of us. We still want to do things that offend God and bring pain to ourselves and others. Obeying God can certainly cut across our own wishes, desires, or ambitions. Sometimes obeying God will be inconvenient and might turn other people against us. But we remember at the end of the day it's always better to obey God than to do our own thing. It's always better to obey God than to do what other people might think is right to do. Obeying God demands faith sometimes. We say, in effect, "God, it's really hard to obey You today, but I believe in the long run both You and I will be delighted if I just follow through and do what You want me to do."

Obeying God is delightful because it really isn't too hard to do. The Bible says, "Loving God means keeping his commandments, and his commandments are not burdensome." (1 Jo. 5:3 NLT) Jesus said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light." (Matt. 11:28-30 NLT) Don't think of God standing over you with a scowl ready to slap you when you mess up. He's gracious and compassionate beyond our imagination. He's delighted when we delight in Him. The command to obey God is simply a command to be happy and enjoy God to the full. The more you obey God, the more you will be delighted. A final observation.

OBEYING GOD IS BENEFICIAL.

How so? Obeying God provides protection in life. From what? Primarily from all the misery we bring on ourselves when we insist on living life in a way that displeases God. The psalmist said, "Turn my eyes from worthless things, and give me life through your word." (Ps. 119:37 NLT) Sin may look good at first and be fun in the moment, but it exacts a horrible price ultimately. It damages and eventually destroys relationships, self-respect, personal integrity, even physical health, and – most importantly – your relationship with God. The more you set your heart to obey God, the less you sin. The less you sin, the less you suffer. It's really kind of that simple.

Obeying God is beneficial because it can renew and refresh your life. The psalmist observed, "I will never forget your commandments, for by them you give me life.... LORD, how great is your mercy; let me be revived by following your regulations." (Ps. 119:93, 156 NLT) This side of Heaven itself, the best kind of life you can experience is the direct result of obeying God best you can. Obeying God is beneficial because it gives stability to your life. The psalmist said, "Those who love your instructions have great peace and do not stumble." (Ps. 119:165 NLT) You know, as I look around this room today I'm reminded that we don't have an absence of tragedy, heartache, problems, or pain in the lives of God's children. But when you set your heart to obey God, you just don't fall apart, you don't give up on God, and you don't get all sour and defeated. The Holy Spirit keeps on empowering you. You experience stability.

Obeying God is beneficial because it provides guidance to your life. The psalmist wrote, "Your word is a lamp to guide my feet and a light for my path." (Ps. 119:105 NLT) So you want to make good decisions and choices as you move through life? His guidance is given to those who obey Him. Wisdom emerges from an obedient relationship with God. When you keep on doing the right things in the right way long enough, God most certainly guides you in wonderful ways. Obeying God is beneficial because it results in true freedom in life. Consider what the psalmist learned, "I will walk in freedom, for I have devoted myself to your commandments." (Ps. 119:45 NLT) Nobody is just born free. We come into this world slaves to our own sinful nature. But when you become a follower of Jesus, the dictatorial power of sin is broken and you're free to choose to obey God and become what He intends for you to be. Spiritual freedom in this life is a kind of progressive, gradual thing. The more we obey God in

our everyday lives, the more liberated we become from all those attitudes and behaviors that had imprisoned us and made life miserable for us. Obeying God is beneficial because it protects, because it renews and refreshes, because it gives stability, because it provides guidance, and because it results in true freedom.

Anne Graham Lotz – the oldest daughter of Billy Graham – sometimes attends football games with her husband, Denny, at his alma mater, the University of North Carolina. Thousands of people cram the parking lots and the stadium so much so that it's hard for her to see where she's going. Sounds a little like game day at Ohio Stadium! It helps a lot in that situation that her husband, Denny, is 6'7". It simply means he can look over the crowd, take her by the hand, and lead them to their seats. Anne says, "The way I get from the car to my seat is just by holding his hand and following him closely through the crowd." She's observed that obeying the Lord is much the same. "I just try to follow the Lord faithfully step by step and day by day. Then years from now, I just want to look back and know that to the best of my ability I've been obedient to God's call on my life."

Does obeying God matter? Yes, more than we will ever know. Pursue it with all your heart. Obeying God is possible. Obeying God is volitional. Obeying God is delightful. Obeying God is beneficial.