

TO OBEY IS BETTER THAN SACRIFICE

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Christians claim to believe in God. What does it mean when you say that you “believe” in God? You see, some words have become so overused that we don’t really know what we are talking about in the end. Say I am a non-Christian, how would you answer me if I were to ask you what it means to “believe in God”? I am afraid many Christians would not know how to explain this, simply because the word, “believe”, has been thrown around so freely that we don’t give it much thought. Have you ever thought of how you would express your belief in God in daily life? This is very important. Otherwise, we would be speaking of something that is devoid of content.

Let me use some simple examples to help us understand the Biblical meaning of “believe”.

To “obey” is the expression of “believe”

Do you trust banks? Would you put your trust in just any bank? I believe you wouldn’t trust some co-op, a bank of dubious origin, or a smaller-scale bank, would you? You trust banks, but not just any bank. You’d choose those of a larger scale, like Bank of China. If you trust the Bank of China, what would you do? — You’d entrust all your savings to the Bank of China.

Take another example. Imagine if you were sick, and the doctor tells you that you have to have surgery as soon as possible; would

you believe him? If you do, then what would you do next? — You would follow his suggestion, get on the operating table, and let him do what he needs to do. True belief must be followed by concrete action. Without putting it into action, belief cannot be shown, and eventually becomes unbelief. Hence, “to believe” is not a slogan without substance.

And again, if you say that you trust me; would you listen if I were to give you some suggestions? If you won't go along with my suggestions, then it means you don't trust me. If you trust someone, you would certainly be serious in doing whatever he says. So, it is impossible for “belief” to be empty. Real belief will produce trust and obedience. Just as you believe a certain bank, you would naturally be willing to entrust all your money to this bank. Likewise, if you trust a certain doctor, you would also entrust your life into his hands, and do all that he suggests without any reservations.

Why am I speaking on belief and obedience? — Because this has to do with the book of 1 Samuel which you have been studying. There are four characters discussed in 1 Samuel: Eli, Samuel, Saul, and David. Eli is contrasted with Samuel, and Saul with David. What is it about them that is contrasted? Do they believe in God? — Yes, all of them believed in God. Since they were all God-believing people, why did they turn out differently?

If Saul did not believe in God, God wouldn't have chosen him to be the king of Israel, would He? So, what was the difference between Saul and David? These two groups of people believed in God; yet Eli and Saul's faith did not produce a total trust and obedience towards God. Samuel, David, including Jonathan, on the

other hand, had actions to go along with their trust in God. I especially mention Jonathan because he was a person who truly believed in God. He understood God's will and that is why he chose to stand on David's side. He did this even though it would mean betraying his father, Saul, and losing the throne he was supposed to inherit. This man's faith is remarkable. He was a selfless, noteworthy man of faith whom we ought to imitate.

Our belief in God must be shown in obedience to Him. Obeying God is of utmost importance, but for many Christians, it is a very painful matter. As a result of not wanting to fully obey God, the "belief" of many Christians eventually turns into "unbelief". They become an "Eli" or a "Saul".

Let us turn to 1 Samuel 15:22-23 to see the importance of obedience.

²² And Samuel said, "Has the LORD as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, *and* to heed than the fat of rams. ²³ For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He has also rejected you from *being* king." (1Samuel 15:22-23 NAS)

To disobey God is idolatry

These two verses signify the end of the relationship between Saul and God. This person was one God delighted in — one who was

chosen by God. Yet, he ended up becoming a person who *rejected the word of God*. May we never become such a person, leaving God with no choice but to reject us!

Let me try to summarize the meaning of verses 22-23 in a nutshell: God values our attitude towards Him, and not our sacrifice. That is why He sees listening to Him and obeying Him as better than sacrifice. Offering sacrifice is not a religious ritual but an expression of our obedience to God. Without obedience to God's word, offering sacrifice becomes a meaningless religious ritual.

In God's eyes, rebellion and stubbornness are like divination and idolatry; and not heeding Him, not obeying Him, is rebellion and stubbornness. Therefore, in God's eyes, not heeding Him and not obeying Him are divination and idolatry!

Nowadays, we do not need to offer sacrifice like the Old Testament Israelites. In today's terms, perhaps "offering sacrifice" is somewhat equivalent to prayers, tithes, and participation in service to God. Note that it says here that when we do not heed Him and obey Him, our sacrifices are just like idolatry, because rebellion and stubbornness is as divination and idolatry. Is it reasonable to say this?

We have to think carefully about this statement because it is also directed at us. Many Christians are, in reality, practicing divination and idolatry within the church. Listen carefully — it wasn't a slip of the tongue and you heard it rightly: what many Christians are doing in the church is no different from idolatry and divination. Do you believe this?

What is divination? Do you practice divination? — I don't, and I guess you don't as well. Will you worship an idol? — I won't, and I suppose you won't either. If so, how can Christians possibly be worshipping idols and practicing divination?

On no account make use of powers in the spiritual realm

What is divination? Why do people worship idols? — Of course, it is to seek blessing and peace. Did you come to church seeking for blessing and peace? If so, what's the difference between you and the idol-worshippers?

Some people seek mediums to point them in the right direction when they are in trouble. Why do they do that? — Because they want to make use of power from the spiritual realm to avert disaster or to fulfill their own desires. Many mediums are fakes, but you have to be careful, because it doesn't mean that all mediums are fakes. Some mediums really have the power to communicate with the spiritual realm. Before coming to the Lord, I have seen and experienced it and I know quite a bit about this. If you should meet real mediums, you will be dealing with the spiritual realm.

Man, on account of being ignorant, is very bold; even to the extent of thinking of manipulating spiritual authorities into our service — helping us resolve our problems and fulfilling our desires. Why do so many people like to go to fortune-tellers? — Because they think that they can be pointed in the right direction and change their future for the better through the use of spiritual powers. Many like to know what the future holds, so as to arrange their lives

accordingly. Since we know that it is not humanly possible to have foreknowledge or to change the future, we try tapping into spiritual powers to get what we want.

Some people want to know about their fortunes in the marriage department, and so they go to a fortune-teller. These fortune-tellers will tell you what kind of marriage partner you ought to seek, or perhaps when and where you will meet your soulmate. Many businesspeople believe in divination, fortune-telling, and worshipping idols, because they want to get rich with the aid of spiritual powers. This is the psychology behind idol-worship. If Christians were to come to church with this kind of mentality, then what difference is there from those who practice divination and idol-worship?

Man, being ignorant, thinks that he can engage spiritual authorities for his service. But it has never occurred to him that if they are truly spiritual authorities, they wouldn't listen to him. Did you really think that these spiritual powers of darkness will be like servants at your bidding — ready at every beck and call, and dismissed with a wave of your hand? This is the mentality of ignorance and self-deception of those who practice idol-worship and divination.

Why offer sacrifice? Why donate to the temple? It is actually a kind of business transaction — if the spirits bless me, then I will give them some donation in return. If things don't work out at this temple, then try another one. You hear of some temple that seems to work for most people, then you go worship there, make a wish, and if the wish is fulfilled, then you offer a sacrifice in return. If the wish does not materialize, you stop all donations thereon. This is

more or less the same psychology behind making transactions and bribery.

This is why I say that idol-worshippers are very muddled in their thinking. They are not aware that spiritual powers of darkness cannot be used at will. Think about it — if the “god” you are worshipping is so powerful, who are you to order him around? Since he is so powerful, would he need a handout from you? Would he need a whole chicken from you as remuneration for his services? His powers are highly questionable if he needs your help to get by.

Offering sacrifice can become a transaction between Man and God. Many people like to go to the temple to draw lots, asking the heavens for divine direction, and if things work out, they will immediately offer sacrifices to the “god” as remuneration. This mentality is very similar to that of Christians when they pray to God — if our prayers come true, then we quickly put some money into the offering box; if our prayers don’t come true, then we start to loathe God. If this attitude doesn’t change, what you do in the church is no different from those who practice divination and idol-worship.

Therefore, the Bible is absolutely correct to say that without genuine obedience to God, what we do is divination and idol-worship. Offering sacrifice is not the same as obedience. Saul likes to offer sacrifice, and he is also very fond of inquiring from the priests what God’s will is, so as to be pointed in the right direction. Whenever he meets with difficulties, he will ask the priests to bring the Ark of the Covenant so as to inquire of God’s will. When things go well, he completely forgets about God. Obviously, he isn’t

really interested in obeying God. He just wants to make use of God to fortify his grip on power. This is the reason why God sees what Saul does as divination and idol-worship.

Saul eventually practiced sorcery because of his rebellion against God

Every word in the Bible is true. As Saul was stubborn and rebellious, not willing to repent and obey God, he eventually fell into the practice of sorcery. After Samuel's death, Saul was looking for God's direction so as to win a battle, so he found a seer to summon Samuel's spirit. Let us look at 1 Samuel 28:7-8:

⁷ Then Saul said to his servants, "Seek for me a woman who is a medium, that I may go to her and inquire of her." And his servants said to him, "Behold, there is a woman who is a medium at En-dor." ⁸ Then Saul disguised himself by putting on other clothes, and went, he and two men with him, and they came to the woman by night; and he said, "Conjure up for me, please, and bring up for me whom I shall name to you." (1Samuel 28:7-8 NAS)

Because of his disobedience, Saul's spiritual condition went from bad to worse; to the point of using a medium to conjure up Samuel, the prophet of God, so as to know God's will. Saul was so rebellious that he committed the mortal sin expressly forbidden by the Bible — sorcery. Most unexpectedly, the medium managed to summon Samuel's spirit:

Then Samuel said to Saul, “Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?” And Saul answered, “I am greatly distressed; for the Philistines are waging war against me, and God has departed from me and answers me no more, either through prophets or by dreams; therefore I have called you, that you may make known to me what I should do.” (1Samuel 28:15 NAS)

Did the medium really possess the power to summon Samuel, the servant of God? — Of course not, it was God’s doing. Since Saul was so desperate to seek out Samuel to inquire of God’s will, God purposely proclaimed His judgment on Saul through Samuel — Saul would die the very next day as he was always rebelling against God. Seeking the medium, practicing sorcery, was proof of Saul’s rebellion.

Saul admitted that he had reached the end of the rope since God had already departed from him. The reason God left him was his rebelliousness. Did Saul believe in God? — Of course, he did, that was why he sought Samuel so desperately, hoping to have God’s guidance through Samuel. Regrettably, all along, Saul was obeying God and offering sacrifices to God in a superficial manner; and it was his superficiality that showed his disdain for God.

Saul was constantly concerned about strengthening his grip on the throne. At every critical juncture, for example when it was time for war, he would quickly seek God’s counsel, wanting to know how to go about the war; when to engage in the war. He was most concerned about how to keep his hold on power, and not with doing God’s will. Now that Samuel was no longer around, and God had departed from him, he could only turn to the medium for help.

He was hoping to find Samuel through the medium, and then through Samuel, get to know God's will on how to win the battle. Saul obviously believed that God is mighty, but he only wanted to use God — not to obey Him and heed Him.

Take time to think about it — why did you believe in God? Why did you become a Christian? Was it because you heard that the God of the Bible is mightier, and therefore you were hoping for His help to avert disaster and to give you a few pointers? If this is the way you treat God, you are practicing divination and idol-worship. This kind of thinking is exactly like Saul's — to use God as a means to one's end. Little wonder that God did not use Saul to lead, help, and bless the Israelites.

A pastor's "Biblical Investment Theory"

Not long ago, I saw a little pop-up window in an English news website with the heading, "Pastor so-and-so discovered an investment secret in the Bible". Is there an investment secret in the Bible? — I didn't know that. I was very curious to have a look at the secret this person was said to have discovered.

The abstract of the article was not written by the author, but it strongly recommended this article. The author is an investment consultant — previously a pastor, but there was no explanation as to why he later became an investment consultant. Using a few verses from the Bible to establish his "Biblical Investment Theory", he urged Christians to manage their finances well. And how are they supposed to manage their finances? — By making investments. If you don't invest, then you are not a good steward,

because the money God has given you has not increased. He even tried to prove from the Bible that Solomon, Paul, and Jesus encouraged believers to make financial investments. For example, he used the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25 as an illustration. The master gave the third servant one talent, and that servant buried it into the ground without giving thought as to how he might invest it. When the master returned, he rebuked the servant, saying that he was a lazy and evil servant, and that if he didn't know how to make investments and do business, the least he could have done was to put the money in a bank to accrue interest. The author used this parable to prove that the Lord Jesus wants us to invest; and as his servants, woe to us if we don't invest our wealth well!

He went on further to say that Paul taught Christians not to be greedy because greed is the root of all evil (1 Timothy 6:10), but Paul did not say that you cannot invest. So long as you are not greedy, there is no problem with making investments. Thus, he used what Paul said in 1 Timothy 6:10 as evidence to encourage Christians to use their savings for investment purposes. Objectively speaking, it is true that we cannot equate "making investments" with "greed". The problem is — where do we draw the line? How far do we need to go for it to be counted as "greed"? I can only leave it to one's own conscience, because there is no clear, standard answer.

The author emphasized three things that ought to be taken note of before making an investment: (1) That it is not done out of greed; (2) That it is made after much prayer; (3) That a portion of the profit be given as offering to God.

These 3 suggestions sound reasonable, but the problem is — the entire article is geared towards using the words of the Bible to encourage investment. Even though he never says in the article, “I am an investment consultant, you are welcome to enquire about investment projects”, it is obvious that the purpose of the article is to advertise for himself. This particular article has appeared in many English news websites. But even if you say that it is a paid-for advertisement, the author clearly has a target audience — Christians. The author mentioned that he is currently serving in a church Bible study cell group and uses his gains from investments to support church work. He wants to use his identity as a Christian to gain the trust of other Christians so that they’d pick him as their investment consultant.

I discovered that the whole article is telling readers that God’s will is for Christians to make investments. Why did he stress on the need for prayer? — Of course, it is to seek God’s guidance to invest in the right portfolio. Why share your profit with the church? — Because it is an offering, a thanksgiving offering to God through which you can continue to receive blessings. I believe many Christians find his suggestions very acceptable. Besides, he is a Christian — you’d trust a Christian investment consultant more than a worldly consultant, right?

Flee from greed to keep from idols

I raised the above example to help you understand that Christians can still participate in divination and idolatry. I am not saying that Christians would really go to a temple to burn joss sticks and draw lots. The Bible emphasizes the Christian’s attitude towards God.

We can come to church for service, rain or shine, but is Yahweh God really your God? Or is He merely an idol you want to make use of? Are you looking to use His power to fulfill your own desires? Let us look at 1 John 5:21:

Little children, guard yourselves from idols. (1John 5:21 NAS)

The last sentence in the book of 1 John is very baffling. It is not a benediction but “guard yourselves from idols”. There is no mention of idols in the prior text, so why end with the reminder to “guard yourselves from idols”? Are there any idols within the church? I trust that most Christians would not go to temples to worship idols and offer sacrifices. We must understand that real idols are not those that have an external form, but those that are formed in your heart. Precisely because of this, Paul reminds Christians not to be greedy as greed will eventually lead you away from God to idolatry. For Paul, greed is the same as idolatry.

For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. (Ephesians 5:5 NAS)

Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry. (Colossians 3:5 NAS)

A concrete manifestation of greed is seen in the love for money, because wealth can temporarily satisfy and ease our endless greed. For this reason, everyone pursues after wealth. We see riches as our

master (idol), willingly and ungrudgingly slogging for him. If a Christian is also insatiably greedy, wealth will unconsciously become his idol, taking the place of Yahweh God. This is how an idol is formed in a Christian's heart.

The “Biblical Investment Theory” I mentioned earlier on, is very deceptive. On the surface, it seems like a very reasonable theory — it even has Bible verses to back it up, as if the Bible is advocating for believers to invest heavily. What message was the Lord Jesus trying to convey when he related the Parable of the Talents? Was he trying to encourage believers to participate more in financial investments? If this were true, then this parable can only be directed at rich Christians. For poor Christians who don't even have enough food to eat, this parable is totally irrelevant. Since this parable is for all Christians, the Lord Jesus' concern must be something spiritual. He wants us to use the grace and gifts from God well — to serve God, and not to be lazy and evil Christians.

Obedience is the way to blessing

This parable has absolutely nothing to do with financial investment. Perhaps this ex-pastor understood this parable to mean financial investment, that is why he switched to being an investment consultant so as to “help” believers to “serve” God through investing their money. From this we see that the consequence of misunderstanding the Bible is very serious. Let us look at one last verse:

“And in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.” (Genesis 22:18 NAS)

God said to Abraham that the nations of the earth shall be blessed through his descendant. Why? — “Because you have obeyed My voice.” Why is obedience so important? The reason is stated here: *the condition to whether your life can become a blessing to others, and whether God can use you to bless others, is your obedience.* Many Christians are just not willing to obey God’s word, that’s why they cannot become a blessing to others. Hopefully, we don’t become this kind of Christian.

Abraham was a very special man. He had Isaac when he was very old, and certainly Isaac meant a lot to him. You can say, Isaac was even more important to him than his very life. When God tested him, he obeyed without any reservation. Hence, God concluded with this statement in affirmation of Abraham’s perfect obedience. This also proves the totality of Abraham’s faith towards God.

As a matter of fact, God tested Abraham not because He wanted to know if Abraham would obey. He did so to prove to us that Abraham was a person who held nothing back from God. That is why Abraham is worthy of being called “the father of faith”. He is an example for us to follow. As a result of his obedience, God was happy to use Abraham and his descendant as per promise, to bless the nations. We, Chinese, have also been blessed on account of Abraham and his descendant, Jesus Christ.

Many Christians see obedience to God as an unpleasant duty. This is because they want to do things as they please. If you constantly

want to do things your way, why believe in God? If you believe in God and yet you still want your own way, then this “belief” is no different from idolatry — trying to make use of spiritual power for your own service, wanting God to obey you instead of you obeying God.

If you are a person who cares only for yourself, you actually don’t need to know or to believe in God. Live life as you wish; why bother with knowing God? Only when you realize that you are causing pain to people around you because of your sin, and that only God can change you, will you willingly come before God to repent and to entrust your life entirely to Him for Him to take charge and to lead you. This is real belief in God — this is what it means to be a Christian.

In the past, why did you sin? — Because you were always considering yourself, self-centered and self-seeking. You always insisted on your way, constantly unable to get along with others. Once you become a Christian, your life belongs to God, and you can’t live like this anymore. You must live according to God’s will.

Only those who obey God can call God his God. Otherwise, it is totally meaningless to refer to God as such. For example, what does it mean when you address so-and-so as Premier? Is this Premier for real? If he is truly Premier, then he has the authority to rule over you, and you have to obey what he says. We all know this, but when it comes to God, we don’t seem to know anything. Little wonder that the Lord Jesus warns us that not all who call him “Lord, lord” will enter the kingdom of heaven. Many Christians treat the Lord Jesus the same way — with their lips they profess

him to be lord, but don't obey his teachings nor imitate his obedience in doing God's will.

Is Yahweh God truly your God? Can He lead you to do what He sees as good in daily life? Can He use you to bring His blessing to others? Best not to call Him your God if you do not intend to obey God's command, because you are then worshipping an idol in your heart. Hence, the book of 1 John reminds us to guard ourselves against idols.

Respond to God promptly

In daily living, when you know that God is speaking to you through some things in the Bible, or you know that the inner conviction you have is from God, you have to promptly respond to Him. If you don't respond to God, He would be unable to lead you and use you; and therefore, your life cannot become a blessing to others. Observe yourself closely — whenever you obey God's command, be it in school, at work, or at home, you will have harmony in your relationship with others. Conversely, when you are unwilling to obey God's command, constantly focusing on yourself and insisting on your way, everything in your life goes awry. Besides being unable to bless others, you will eventually bring harm to yourself and to others.

God entrusted Israel to Saul, but on account of his rebelliousness, the country was in shambles. God gave Eli the priestly office. He did not fulfill his duty according to God's will, and eventually led the Israelites further and further away from God. Likewise, if you do not obey God's command, your relationship with your

colleagues, classmates, family, and church brethren will be in a mess. This is due to God being unable to use you to bless others.

Once, my wife told me that she was planning to meet up with some sisters in the church for a chat and to show concern for them. She mentioned two names and asked me which sister she ought to look up. I gave her a suggestion which she was agreeable to, but she didn't make an appointment with that sister then. Come Sunday morning, after we prayed, I told her not to meet up with either one of the sisters, but to meet up with another sister instead. I didn't know why there was this conviction in my heart, so all I could do was to relay my conviction to her.

It was only when my wife met this other sister that my wife came to know that something happened in the sister's family on Saturday night, which the sister didn't know how to resolve, and it was troubling her. After they finished talking, the sister felt helped and knew how to resolve the matter.

I raise this example to help you understand the importance of obeying God. If your heart is often quiet, and you pay attention to God's word — being sensitive to God's reminder — then God can use you to bless others. That sister was troubled by family matters, not knowing how to resolve things, or who she ought to talk to. So, when out of the blue, her spiritual teacher came to show her concern and to talk with her, she knew that it was not a coincidence. It was as if God knew her need, and sent her spiritual teacher to care for her, and to help her out of her confusion. She must have been greatly encouraged, and her faith towards God would have been strengthened as well. Imagine, if this sister was in trouble and you were insensitive to God's voice, or you didn't obey

God's reminder; naturally you wouldn't have been sensitive to her needs, and therefore wouldn't have been able to give her timely help and encouragement.

For this reason, I hope that we will all remember what God said to Abraham. I find this verse very encouraging. God blessed the nations through Abraham and his descendants (especially Jesus Christ), because they obeyed God's commandments. If we imitate them — especially Christ — in their obedience to God's commands, God will likewise use us to bless many, many people.

— End —