

God has a lot to say on the subject of obedience, but when we consider how He is described in the Old Testament, we usually connect it to an image of His terrible wrath. We must realize that though He demanded obedience from His chosen people, it is very clear that what He wanted most was a relationship with them.

One of the images that God uses to describe this is that of a shepherd. The shepherd passages found in 1 Samuel 17:32-37, John 10:1-24, Matthew 18:12-14, and Ezekiel 34:1-31 are given to us so that we can better understand the care that we all receive from the great Creator. We are all to take care of each other in the same way. The condemnation of the bad shepherds in some of those same passages is not so much of a knock on our leadership as it is a call for all of us to be a shepherd and caregiver every day.

The Good Shepherd is a Leader who has a personal relationship with the sheep. While Jesus was here on earth He showed Himself to be a gentle shepherd, who overlooked the sins of those who wanted to have a relationship with Him. His purpose is to care for, not condemn (John 3:16-17). He wants us all to be a part of His flock.

We are given many opportunities to learn about obedience during our lifetime. One of the greatest is what we learn as a parent seeking obedience from our own children. What better way to understand what God really wants from us?

One of the most powerful lessons in the story of the Prodigal Son is that God wants a relationship more than just obedience. He knows that if you truly establish a relationship then the type of obedience you want will follow. We all know the story (Luke 15:11-32). The important thing to note is that the Prodigal Son realized his need for mercy. He didn't ask for his relationship to be reinstated; he just wanted home, and when he returned his father ran to him and forgave him everything. The son knew he would find mercy, not necessarily complete restoration, but that at least he would be taken care of.

During the absence of this son, his older brother worked very hard to make the family farm productive. But he was fooled by the illusion of righteousness; he felt that he had "done his duty". He had steadfastly worked in the fields doing what his father instructed, but he did not really care for his brother, and was not glad that when he returned. He didn't seem very interested in making his father happy, either. Apparently, his main goal in life (like his younger brother) was to receive his inheritance, too. But he did not realize his own need for mercy, and for the relationships that we all need in our lives.

The father valued the relationships with the members of his family much more than the work produced by them. And though he struggled as he tried to have a good bond with both of his sons, it is very clear that he rejoiced greatly when the relationship bore good fruit.

We hear a lot about "tough love", and while I am sure that it has its place, I have seen it greatly misused. I'm not at all sure that "tough love" implemented at the cost of a relationship is worth very much. That relationship may be the only link you have with someone you love. A good relationship keeps the communication lines open. It is the lifeline that may someday be the only hope you have to reach them. You may not have your children acting exactly as you would wish, but to cut them off or "punish" them may cause a "disconnect" just as if they hung up the phone on you. Better keep the door open so that they feel that they can return home. The Prodigal Son was surely embarrassed by what he had done, but he knew that the trauma had been self-induced. He had confidence that he could come back to be with his father.

Many times we trade (or exchange) a valuable relationship for our own ego and goals (and how we want people, like our children, to behave). But would you rather have obedience or a relationship? Is it better to have people do it "your way" but who do not freely choose to be with you?

God wants a personal relationship with each one of us. Jesus did not come just to save the "righteous" (Matthew 9:10-13). He is like a (Good) teacher who tries to reach all of the students, not just the smart ones. I know that there is tremendous joy in converting a reluctant student into someone who loves learning. And there is "more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent." (Luke 15:7) God desires our relationship more than just the keeping of rules. And a good relationship produces a fertile field in which obedience can grow.

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