

Reading: *Matthew* 1:18-25

Text: *Matthew* 1:25 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.

JOSEPH AND THE OBEDIENCE PROBLEM

Introduction: Poor Joseph, he just gets no respect. Imagine, you are a carpenter in your late twenties, engaged to a beautiful fourteen-year-old and are about to get married when you discover that your bride to be is pregnant. At that time engagement was quite formal. The couple were called man and wife, even though they were not co-habiting. To break the engagement was the same as getting a divorce. Joseph was going to quietly secure the proper papers so as not to embarrass Mary too much. The penalty for unfaithfulness was to be stoned to death, so the emphasis was on avoiding making a community scandal out of Mary's infidelity. Fortunately, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and explained the situation. Wonder of wonders, Joseph believed and "did as the angel of the Lord commanded him." While Joseph is mentioned only briefly in Luke, he is not mentioned in Mark and John at all. But, twice more he is noted in Matthew. He has a dream and is told by the angel to flee to Egypt and, sometime later, he has another dream in which the angel tells Joseph that it is safe to return to Israel. In both of those passages he is not given any words, it is simply noted that "Joseph obeyed."

Gaining Obedience: Obedience. That is the lesson of Joseph. There are several ways of obtaining someone's obedience. God obtained Joseph's obedience through *belief*. Joseph believed in God and did not question the appearance of the Lord's angel in his dream. Belief is the very best way to secure obedience. It means that values are shared between the order giver and the receiver of those orders. There is agreement about the usefulness or even necessity of doing what is asked. One may believe in a church, an organization, a nation or a family. If values are shared and the request is deemed to be legitimate, then obedience follows. In the *Old Testament* God's orders were many and very explicit, dealing with every aspect of daily existence. In the modern world our belief in God tends to provide us with the moral context for decisions. My belief in God shapes many of my opinions and even some of my behavior – but the only dietary law I seem to follow is to eat frequently and well. I don't think that obesity is what God had in mind when He gave dietary laws to the early tribes of Israelites!

If shared belief is the very best way to secure obedience, then the very worst way is *coercion*. Napoleon's chief minister, Talleyrand, is reputed to have told his militaristic boss that "you can do everything with bayonets, except sit on them." If you have superior force, you can make me do what you wish. But, as every parent has experienced at one time or another, as soon as you turn your back, I'm going to do what I please. Napoleon discovered that no matter how many Russians he killed he could not turn them into good Catholic Frenchmen. There might be a lesson for modern nations in that bit of history. Whether it is nation to nation relationships or interpersonal ones, coercion is always tempting and always contrary to Christian ethics. Humankind has made great strides in reducing coercion in interpersonal relationships, but exploitation in the workplace and violence in family life and male/female interactions, show that we have far to go before we have Jesus like behavior as the dominant social value.

While behavior based on pure belief and on pure coercion certainly exists, most of us, whether order givers or those who must obey, probably do so on the basis of more or less *passive acceptance*. It is a kind of moral cost-benefit analysis. I will not work weekends for X dollars. On the other hand, for X

plus 1, I will take on an occasional weekend job. Indeed, if you give me X plus 2, I will compete with others for the overtime! We are all prostitutes, just our rate of pay and anatomy varies. Fortunately, as we all know from reading the Gospels, Jesus doesn't mind working with prostitutes. So, as we do our moral cost-benefit analysis, how close to our Joseph ideal can we get?

The answer to that probably rests as much with who the order giver is as with our moral righteousness. Even children respond accordingly. Some parents use coercion, some appeal to common beliefs. For many there is a progression of responses. A good talking to comes first, followed by being grounded or even a spanking if the talking to didn't produce the desired effects. Of course, the child does some cost/benefit calculating as well. How much of a scolding are those cookies worth? Better yet, with the appropriate skills maybe I won't get caught at all. I might have been a noisy five-year-old, but I could lift and replace the heavy top to the cookie jar very quietly!

For adults dealing with the world of work, the skills and the cookie jar may look differently, but the moral dilemma is the same. When I worked for a university my department decided to add a legal assistants program. The Dean said good idea, go to the central administration in Tallahassee and follow their procedures. I made the call, was told to submit paperwork and to follow the procedures. I hung up the phone, called the university's government relations person to set up a meeting with our local state senator and made my pitch to the senator. Much to the chagrin of central administration I got a line item in the next state budget for my program. My disobedience produced the desired result and my only cost was a reprimand delivered with a wink and a nod. Organizations do not turn down increases in their budgets. And, no, I did not worry about my lack of morality in my disobedience.

My obedience to Godly commands has been more problematic. I am an expert at hearing God whisper in my ear, then developing a rationalization that allows me to do what I want to do anyway. That is a far cry from Joseph's ideal. That is simply sin, for fun and profit. Thank you God for the sacrament of forgiveness and reconciliation. So Joseph, the writers of the Gospels may have paid you little attention and given you few words to speak – but you gave humankind an immortal lesson: “He did as the angel of the Lord commanded him.” We should be so obedient! Amen.