

**FUNCTIONAL DISOBEDIENCE:  
WHEN OUR ACTIONS DO NOT MATCH OUR ASSIGNMENT**

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**A. BACKGROUND**

***James 1:22–25 — New Living Translation***

*“But don’t just listen to God’s word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. For if you listen to the word and don’t obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like. But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don’t forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it.”*

As I prepared for this message, I found myself doing some personal reflection. I have been fairly consistent with MAGH. I have attended the prayers, listened to the teachings and received messages that have stirred my spirit. There have been mornings when the Word has challenged me, encouraged me and left me feeling ready to face the day.

However, James raises a more uncomfortable question. It is not simply whether I heard the Word, enjoyed the message or felt spiritually encouraged. The question is: ***when the Lord challenged me, did I actually respond?***

When I examine myself honestly, the answer has not always been yes. Sometimes I have not acted at all. Sometimes I have obeyed partially. At other times, I have taken something God was pressing upon my heart and placed it into a spiritual “to do later” folder.

James warns that it is possible to hear the Word repeatedly and still deceive ourselves. We may mistake conviction for obedience, agreement for action, and spiritual emotion for spiritual transformation. We may leave the presence of God feeling moved while remaining unchanged in the very area He addressed.

This message therefore begins with a personal question:

***Has the Word merely moved me emotionally, or has it moved me into action?***

Because the evidence that I have truly received the Word is not simply that I remember what was preached. It is that my life begins to respond to what God has said.

**B. JONAH: DIRECT DISOBEDIENCE — WHEN WE RUN FROM WHAT GOD HAS SAID**

***Jonah 1:1–3:***

*The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.” But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord.*

- Jonah’s disobedience began when his personal feelings became more authoritative than God’s instruction. God’s command was not unclear. Jonah knew where he had been sent, what he was required to do and why he had been sent. His difficulty was not a lack of understanding but an unwillingness to accept an assignment that conflicted with his

emotions, preferences and personal judgment. Direct disobedience often occurs when a man understands God's instruction but does not agree with it.

- Jonah did not merely avoid Nineveh; he deliberately invested in the opposite direction. He travelled to Joppa, located a ship, paid the fare and boarded it. Disobedience required planning, movement and expenditure. This reveals that a man may be active, organised and committed while still moving away from God's will. Activity alone is not evidence of obedience. A man can be extremely busy while travelling in the wrong direction.
- Jonah's internal resistance eventually affected everyone travelling with him. The storm was connected to his refusal, but the sailors experienced its consequences. Although Jonah's disobedience was personal, its impact became communal. The decisions of a man rarely remain confined to him. His avoidance can affect his family, his relationships, his ministry, his workplace and the people whose lives are connected to his obedience.
- Jonah demonstrates the most recognisable form of rebellion: God says "Go," and the person deliberately moves elsewhere. Yet his story also exposes the emotional roots of disobedience. Jonah was not running because he doubted God's existence. He was running because he knew God's character and did not want Nineveh to receive mercy. His theology was correct, but his heart was resistant. It is possible to know God accurately while still refusing to represent Him obediently.

### **C. SAUL: SELECTIVE DISOBEDIENCE — WHEN WE EDIT WHAT GOD HAS SAID**

#### **1 Samuel 15:13–15:**

*When Samuel reached him, Saul said, "The Lord bless you! I have carried out the Lord's instructions."*

*But Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear?"*

*Saul answered, "The soldiers brought them from the Amalekites; they spared the best of the sheep and cattle to sacrifice to the Lord your God, but we totally destroyed the rest."*

- Saul's disobedience was more difficult to recognise because it was surrounded by genuine activity. Unlike Jonah, Saul did not travel away from the battlefield. He gathered the army, confronted the enemy and completed a substantial part of the assignment. From a distance, his actions appeared obedient. However, he treated God's command as something that could be adjusted according to human preference. Selective disobedience does not necessarily reject the assignment; it edits the parts that feel inconvenient, costly or unreasonable.
- Saul measured his obedience by how much he had done rather than by whether he had completed what God said. Because he destroyed much of Amalek, he believed he could declare, "I have carried out the Lord's instructions." However, partial compliance did not convert the remaining disobedience into obedience. God does not measure obedience by percentage. The presence of substantial activity does not excuse the deliberate preservation of what God instructed us to surrender.
- The livestock exposed what Saul's declaration attempted to conceal. Samuel's question, "What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears?" demonstrates that disobedience often leaves evidence. A man may explain his position, construct a spiritual narrative and declare that everything is well, but eventually the fruit of his decisions begins making

noise. What has been preserved contrary to God's instruction will often announce its presence.

- Saul then spiritualised his disobedience by claiming that the animals had been preserved for sacrifice. He attempted to give God religious activity instead of precise obedience. This led Samuel to declare that obedience is better than sacrifice. God was not rejecting worship; He was rejecting worship being used as compensation for rebellion. Religious activity cannot substitute for surrendered obedience. Prayer, sacrifice, service and public ministry cannot repay God for an instruction we have knowingly refused.

**1 Samuel 15:22:**

*"Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams."*

**D. THE THIRD SERVANT: FUNCTIONAL DISOBEDIENCE — WHEN WE DO NOTHING WITH WHAT GOD HAS ENTRUSTED**

**Matthew 25:24–27:**

*Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. "Master," he said, "I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you."*

*His master replied, "You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest."*

- The third servant's disobedience was not expressed through running away or altering an explicit instruction. His rebellion was inactivity. He remained connected to the master, retained possession of the master's property and eventually returned what he had received. From his perspective, he had avoided loss. From the master's perspective, he had failed the assignment because preservation was never the purpose of the entrustment.
- His fear produced a form of behaviour that appeared responsible. He buried the talent so that it would not be lost, stolen or exposed to risk. He could therefore present himself as careful rather than rebellious. Yet caution became disobedience because it prevented the talent from fulfilling its intended purpose. Wisdom protects what God values, but fear frequently preserves what God intended us to develop, invest or multiply.
- The servant's inactivity was connected to his distorted perception of the master. He described the master as harsh and unreasonable, and that belief became the justification for doing nothing. Our response to God is often shaped by how we perceive Him. When we view God primarily as someone waiting to punish failure, we become preoccupied with avoiding mistakes. However, when we understand Him as the One who entrusts, equips and expects fruit, obedience becomes an expression of faithful stewardship.
- The master did not accept fear as a sufficient explanation for inactivity. The servant said, "I was afraid," but the master still held him accountable for what he failed to do. Fear may

explain hesitation, but it does not automatically excuse prolonged disobedience. There comes a point where what began as uncertainty becomes a settled refusal to act. Functional disobedience occurs when delay becomes our normal posture and we continue functioning as though we have no assignment.

## **E. CONCLUSION**

- Jonah, Saul and the third servant demonstrate three different responses to divine authority. Jonah heard the command and ran in the opposite direction. Saul heard the command and adjusted it according to his own judgment. The third servant received an entrustment but allowed fear to produce inactivity. Jonah abandoned the assignment. Saul edited the assignment. The servant buried the assignment.
- Their external conduct was different, but the internal issue was the same. Each man allowed something within himself to become more authoritative than the person who had spoken. Jonah elevated his feelings. Saul elevated human opinion and personal judgment. The third servant elevated fear. Disobedience begins whenever our thoughts, feelings, preferences or fears are permitted to overrule clear instruction.
- Direct disobedience says, "I will not do what God has said." Selective disobedience says, "I will do the parts of God's instruction that agree with me." Functional disobedience says, "I have not refused God, but I have still not acted." One is obvious rebellion. One is modified obedience. The other is respectable inactivity.
- The danger is that selective and functional disobedience can exist beneath the appearance of spiritual health. Saul returned from battle declaring victory. The servant returned the master's property intact. Both could point to something they had done correctly. However, obedience is not determined merely by the absence of obvious rebellion. It is determined by whether our actions correspond with the intention and instruction of the One who sent us.
- Some men may recognise themselves in Jonah. God has made something clear, but they are actively travelling in the opposite direction. Others may recognise themselves in Saul. They are participating in the assignment, but they have quietly rewritten the terms. Others may recognise themselves in the third servant. They have not openly rejected God, but fear, delay and the desire for perfect conditions have kept them from moving.
- The question is therefore not simply, "Have I said no to God?" The more searching question is, "Does the way I am presently living demonstrate a genuine yes?" A man can avoid saying no while continuing to postpone his yes. He can remain around spiritual things, preserve what God has given him and maintain the appearance of responsibility while producing no movement towards the assignment.
- James confronts this deception directly:

*"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says."*  
—James 1:22

- Functional disobedience ends when our yes becomes visible. It ends when Jonah turns towards Nineveh, when Saul stops modifying the command, and when the servant removes the talent from the ground. Obedience is not merely agreement in the heart. It is the visible alignment of our conduct with the revealed will of God.

