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To Obey Is Better

951-A

Series: God's Living Legends II

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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

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To Obey Is Better

Our Father and our God, once more we come into Your presence with thanksgiving and into Your courts with praise. We acknowledge, Father, that apart from You we have no reason for being, we have no strength with which to be, and we have no grace that would enable us to have spiritual life within us. Apart from You, Father, we have nothing.

But because of You, because of Your unspeakable love, because of the price You paid on Calvary to purchase us and give us life, we have all things in Christ. We have peace. We have victory amidst spiritual struggles, and we have laid up for us a home in eternity where moth and rust cannot corrupt and thieves cannot break through and steal.

And so, our heavenly Father, we would ask that You would accept the praise of our lips, the gratitude of our hearts for who You are, and what You have done. Our prayer, Father, is that Your sweet Spirit would enable us, in spite of the teacher, because of Your Word, to learn. Not only to gain information, Father, but to bring transformation, that we might become Christ-like as Christ gains control of our lives in ever increasing splendor from one degree of glory to another. We humble ourselves in Your presence and ask that the mind of Christ might be ours.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

If you are a parent or have ever been one, or a child or ever been one, perhaps you can relate to this story. It's a story about a hypothetical family called the Browns. If your name is Brown, don't be offended. It may be a true story for you. The Brown family was a typical family, but this was not a typical day. Timmy has just blown up the bedroom with his Magic Marvel Safe-for-Children Chemistry Set. It *was* safe for children; he wasn't hurt. The house was not so good.

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Maggie, meanwhile, was going out on a date that night, and as she scrambled frantically through her wardrobe which was slightly larger than a showroom at Lord and Taylor, you could hear her screaming at the top of her lungs, "I don't have a thing to wear! I can't go!"

Barbara, meanwhile, was on the telephone. Maybe Barbara was the telephone. It had been so long since anyone had seen her without this receiver in her ear, that the family had determined maybe she had a genetic flaw, and in reality, was a descendant of Ma Bell instead. In fact, her brother sent her name into Ripley's Believe It or Not as the first human to submerge herself for four straight days in a telephonic stupor without coming up for air. Rumor has it that Ripley tried to confirm it, but couldn't get the line. We don't know for sure.

Dad, meanwhile, was on a business trip in Washington. He had called collect because he lost his wallet at the airport, to tell Mom that he lost his best client as well. He was so tired it seems he referred to his client as Bosco. Bosco is the name of the Browns' pet schnauzer. He had a face and a haircut amazingly like this man, and in a moment of weakness he called the man Bosco. The problem is, the man knew Bosco.

So, it hadn't been a good day at the Browns' household. As Billy came zooming into the front door at a rate of speed that equipped him for the Olympics, his mom eager for a friendly face did what moms do that they're not supposed to with eight-year-old boys. She picked him up, planted a big kiss on him and told him she loved him. "I love you!" she said. You can just imagine how an eight-year-old boy would squirm with a greeting like that because he had bigger things in mind. Things like baseball gloves, baseball practice and the upcoming game with the Bay City Beavers.

"I love you, too, Mom," Billy said, "but I gotta go. It's time for baseball practice." As a parent you may be able to slightly relate to this issue. You see, this was the last straw. "Baseball!" she responded. "You promised to rake the leaves in the yard, before you ever pick up another baseball glove, remember?"

Billy did remember. It was a sickening promise he had

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made in a moment of sheer weakness. “Oh yeah, Mom. I’ll do it tomorrow,” Billy said. “Where’s my new softball?” With that, he made a U-turn and tried to run graciously down the hall and out the back door to baseball practice. Mom, however, the Great Interceptor, stood in his path.

“Young man, your baseball career is put on hold until the backyard looks like Mr. Clean spent the afternoon there. You don’t leave while I have leaves, got it?” With that, she marched the reluctant yard man into the tool shed where she arranged a trade which was acceptable to one of the parties. She traded that baseball glove for a garden rake. “You no leave till I’ve no leaves,” she repeated, and with that she headed back for the house and the assorted disasters that awaited her there.

About thirty minutes passed, and that sixth sense that only mothers have seemed to draw Betty Brown into the backyard to check on the status of her reluctant yard man. You guessed it, he was gone. In the middle of the yard was a pile of leaves the size of a hubcap. Apparently, he had lasted about three minutes and the call of the diamond was just more than he could bear.

The sun had gone down and it was reasonably quiet when the door finally opened and there stood little Billy Brown. His blue jeans told part of the story. He had obviously tried to slide into second base at the expense of the left leg of his already tattered denims. The rest of the story was told by Billy’s hands. There he stood, baseball cap awry, armed with a bouquet of long-stemmed roses. The story unfolded, and you can probably imagine, Little Billy, convinced he had done wrong, stayed until the end of the game. Then, filled with guilt, he traded his pride and joy baseball glove for enough money to ride his bicycle to the florist and buy his mom a bouquet of long-stemmed roses. “I’m sorry, Mom, but I just had to practice.” But I sold my glove to get you these flowers to show I’m sorry. I love you, Mom. Can I have some supper?”

You can imagine the stream of thoughts that flowed through Betty Brown’s mind. Her emotions were torn between honoring his thoughtfulness and blistering his backside. A third alternative seemed more appropriate. It came from a Bible passage she had read the week before. Her answer was this. “Yes, Billy, you may

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have some supper when you finish raking the leaves. And thank you for the flowers; they're lovely."

Billy was stunned. "I told you I love you," he shouted. "And Mom, I sacrificed for those flowers. They cost me my only glove." "I appreciate the flowers," she said once more, "but Billy, I didn't ask you for flowers. I asked you to rake the yard. It's going to be a little hard in the dark, but that's a choice you made when you chose to use the daylight to run from home for home runs. I know you sacrificed to show me you love me, but Billy, if you really want to demonstrate your love, to obey is better than sacrifice. Now, here's a flashlight! When you've finished the leaves, we'll have supper, and then I've got a little Bible story I'd like to read to you."

In case you haven't guessed, that Bible story just happened to be the same story you and I are going to look at this morning. It is found in I Samuel, chapter 15, and the title for today's study is, "To Obey Is Better."

In case you have forgotten, we have recently embarked on a look at the life of a man after God's own heart, a man named David. To prepare for that, we looked at the crowning of Israel's first king, a young man named Saul. And we determined that Saul had a couple of character flaws that surfaced at the very early stages of his exposure to leadership that indicated he probably would not make it as God's man. One of those flaws was his inability to face the music when he made a mistake. He had an incredible disease—some of you have heard of it—it's called "blamaphelia." Whenever he did something wrong, he found an excuse and someone else to blame it on, like his father, Adam, had before him.

Our story begins in Chapter 15 of I Samuel. Here our ruler is once again meeting with the Prophet Samuel getting his marching orders from God.

In verses 1-3, he gets all the specifics. Let's take a look at it. It will set the stage for what's to follow.

Samuel also said unto Saul, The LORD sent me to anoint you to be king over his people, over Israel: now therefore harken thou unto the voice of the words of the LORD. [In

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other words, Saul, this is in concrete. Pay attention.]

Thus saith the LORD of hosts, I remember that which Amalek did to Israel, how he laid wait for him in the way, when he came up from Egypt.

Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.

(I Samuel 15:1-3)

There are some key phrases I want you to underline, if you're in the underlining business. One of them is, therefore, listen. The second one is in verse 2, thus says the Lord. The third one is, I will, says God. The fourth one is in verse 3, go strike and destroy. The last one is, do not spare. Now I don't know about you, but there are some principles that seem very obvious to me that surface right away out of this passage, that might help us begin to get a little background.

1- When God gives instructions, every word is important. God never wastes His words. Have you ever thought of all God has to say to us and how He condensed it into one little Book? That little Book contains all of the canon of Scripture for all eternity. Everything everyone will ever need for any purpose, at any time, for all eternity, is found in that one Book! I don't know about you, but I have the gift of exaggeration and expansion. I can take a one-week lesson, as some of you know, and drag it out for years. If I had been writing the Bible, we would have needed a U-Haul just to bring the Scriptures back and forth each Sunday. But with God, every word is real; every word is important, and every word is necessary. Remember that as you begin to look at some of the things God has told you to do in Scripture.

2- The battle is not your problem; it's God's. Your problem and my problem is obedience. The Lord said, "I will take care of the enemy, guys. All I want you to do is go, strike, destroy. Got it? Go, strike, destroy. I will destroy. I will defeat the enemy." Saul missed that part. We will find that out momentarily.

3- Then finally, and remember this; God's method of warfare, both spiritual and national, I believe, are parallel in Scripture. They are three-fold. (a) Know who the enemy is. Israel has always

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done that. Know who your enemy is. (b) Always wait on God for His timing. They have missed on that a few times. (c) Leave no remnant. They will turn on you if you do.

Now, it's a principle that militarily, Israel has prospered by as a nation since it's rebirth until recently. And we, as a nation, have perhaps helped them to compromise that principle. Saul's instructions were clear and uncomplicated. He just had to do those three things. When I tell you, go. Know who the enemy is. Take no captives.

Then Saul summoned the people and numbered them in Telaim, 200,000 foot soldiers and 10,000 men of Judah.

And Saul came to the city of Amalek, and set an ambush in the valley.

And Saul said to the Kenites, "Go, depart, go down from among the Amalekites, lest I destroy you with them; for you showed kindness to all the sons of Israel when they came up from Egypt." So the Kenites departed from among the Amalekites.
(I Samuel 15:4-6 NASB)

Why were they spared? Think about it. It's another basic Biblical principle. God blesses those who bless Israel. God rescues those who rescue Israel. God looks with favor on the nation that looks with favor on Israel. Much of America's strength, much of America's power, much of America's status as a world leader is not what we think makes us great. Much of it is because we have aligned ourselves faithfully with the nation of Israel. The rest of the world doesn't like it and doesn't understand it, but the rest of the world isn't controlling our destiny, beloved. God is. And God will save in their hour of need the nations that embrace Israel as their ally, provided they do not do so in a way that forces Israel to compromise. You watch for that.

So Saul defeated the Amalekites, from Havilah as you go to Shur, which is east of Egypt. [So far, so good.]

And he captured Agag the king of the Amalekites alive, [uh-oh] and utterly destroyed all the people [sounds better] with the edge of the sword.

But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were not willing to destroy them utterly;

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but everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed. (I Samuel 15:7-9 NASB)

So, there you have the sin. God's program sounds pretty simple to me. Interestingly enough, Saul did not question God's instruction to eradicate the people; the men, the women, the children. He didn't argue with that. That wasn't his problem. It says they spared Agag. That was a no-no. Why would Saul do that? Maybe it was because he was another king, or there was the prospect of a handsome ransom. We don't know. But in utter defiance of God's orders, he spared the king.

Secondly, it says they spared all the choice animals. They destroyed all the useless ones with no moral reservations at all. But Saul's eyes turned green with envy at the thought of these choice sheep, oxen, and lambs. It seemed like such a small compromise. He was a king! Didn't he have the right to make a few exceptions? What a short memory he had. Now look at the sorrow.

Then the word of the LORD came to Samuel, saying,

“I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me, and has not carried out my commands.”
And Samuel was distressed and cried out to the LORD all night. (I Samuel 15:10,11 NASB)

Those two verses say an awful lot about God's response to rebellion, and the proper response of God's leadership to rebellion. God was grieved. His heart was broken. He was sorry He had relented and given Israel the king they clamored for. He was especially sorry he had given them the kind of king they clamored for. Saul was a big man physically; he was a small man spiritually, and God was grieved.

Not only was God grieved, God's man was grieved. Samuel saw Israel as a nation of sheep without a shepherd, and his heart broke. He cried out to God all night long. He said—you'll remember from our last lesson—“Far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you.” He didn't rejoice that they failed. His heart was broken. He was distressed. He was agitated. He did what Paul told us to do in Philippians 4. He prayed all night. That's the mark of a man of God. He knew how

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to pray. It doesn't say he knew how to say prayers. You can teach a robot to do that. He knew how to pray. He knew how to stay in the presence of God until he had the mind of God.

And Samuel rose early in the morning to meet Saul; and it was told Samuel, saying, "Saul came to Carmel and behold he set up a monument for himself, then turned and proceeded on down to Gilgal." (I Samuel 15:12 NASB)

What a neat guy! Here is our God-anointed, self-centered king, following the greatest act of disobedience in his short reign as leader, and he stops to build a monument to himself and his great victory before he goes on to receive the word of the Lord from the prophet of the Lord. First things first.

And Samuel came to Saul, [You can kind of picture this in your mind, can't you? Samuel walking up and Saul looks at him and says, "I've got to cover my tracks quick] and Saul said to him, [Hi!] "Blessed are you of the LORD! I have carried out the command of the LORD!" [I am a hero.] (I Samuel 15:13 NASB)

Here's our glad-handing, insensitive saint giving Samuel the same routine. "Here am I. I've been a good boy." I don't know how old Samuel was at this point. He was way up in years, but his hearing was very good. He not only heard the self-righteous bellowing that was coming from Saul, he heard some strange noise in the background. He not only knew what it was, he knew what it represented.

But Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?" (I Samuel 15:14 NASB)

"Saul, if you've carried out the command of the Lord as you say, why does it sound like supper time at the OK Corral?"

Now listen to Saul's sorry story in verse 15. I know you're about to condemn him like I did, but before you do that, think a little bit about your own responses to the Lord when you have not been totally obedient.

And Saul said [here's his defense], "They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and oxen, to sacrifice to the LORD your God; but the rest we utterly destroyed." (I Samuel 15:15 NASB)

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We were pretty good guys. The Word of God does not lie. And in verse 8 we read that it was Saul who spared Agag. In verse 9 we read it was Saul and the people who spared Agag and the best of the animals. So, if the Scripture doesn't lie then our guy, Mr. Saul, just told a big whopper.

Don't you love his use of the pronouns? "They" spared the best. "We" killed the rest. How do you like that? He uses the same incredible logic he used in chapter 13 to justify it. He said, "We only did it for God. We saved these super specimens of the animal kingdom so we could have something special to sacrifice to the Lord. We care enough to send the very best. Sure, we made a little tactical error, but gee whiz, Samuel, we did it to please the Lord. How can God get sore when we mean so well?"

It's not an uncommon response today. We violate principles and commandments stated in the Word of God, and then use God as a scapegoat. "The Lord told me to do it" or "I did it for the Lord's glory." Those are the kinds of excuses we make when we are violating known Scriptural principles and God does not like it. People borrow money and blame it on God. People steal their employer's time for "Christian" work and say it's for God's glory. People divorce their spouses and say, "God told me to." No. You never violate the Word of God for the purpose of glorifying God. Never! There's never a justifiable reason for making a decision contrary to Scripture and then trying to hang the motivation on God. God works within the parameters of His Word. Always. So often I hear people say, "I quit my job and I had no justification, but God told me to." "Well, how are you going to earn a living?" Well, I don't know. I'm going to do it by faith." Oh, really?

But the Bible says they who don't work shouldn't eat. So don't hang your slothfulness on God. There may be times when you are out of work and you have no control over it, and by faith you have to trust God to lead you. But God does not lead you to be lazy. Every word in His Word has a purpose. And every word He told Saul had a reason. He said, "You're not to spare anything." In verse 16, Saul gets his answer.

Then Samuel said to Saul, "Wait, [which means, whoa big boy, hush up for a minute and let me talk] and let me tell you what the LORD said to me last night." And he said to

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him, "Speak!" [Big of him.]

And Samuel said, "Is it not true, though you were little in your own eyes [you were nobody], you were made the head of the tribes of Israel? And the LORD anointed you king over Israel,

and the LORD sent you on a mission, and said, 'Go and utterly destroy the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are exterminated.'

Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD, but rushed upon the spoil and did what was evil in the sight of the LORD?"
(I Samuel 15:16-19 NASB)

Samuel says, "Saul, you were a nobody, and God made you somebody special. And when you became somebody special by grace, what gave you the right to think you were bigger than God?"

Then Saul said to Samuel, "I did obey the voice of the LORD, and went on the mission [ta-dum, ta-dum, ta-dum; you can hear the music swell in the background] on which the LORD sent me, and have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. [I'm a good guy!]

But the people [you can't trust those other guys] took some of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the choicest of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the LORD your God at Gilgal. [YOUR God.]
(I Samuel 15:20,21 NASB)

"Once again, I'm a hero. You just don't realize it. I did what God told me to." And he reiterates his good works as a substitute for obedience. Remember Billy? He said, "But Mom, I sold my best glove to get you these flowers. Why would you be sore?" "Lord, I went out and got those mean Amalekites for You, and I even brought You a bonus; something better than long-stemmed roses. I brought You a heathen king. Just what You've always wanted, Lord, a heathen king. These characters that work for me did bring in a few stray, four-legged friends, Lord, but we were going to give 'em to the church!!! You know, Lord, that shady business deal is okay. We're going to tithe on it. I know that job so dishonors you, Lord, but I'm going to give you the money."

And Samuel said, "Has the LORD as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices [in other words, in what you do for Him] As in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey

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is better than sacrifice, And to heed than the fat of rams.

For rebellion is as the sin of [witchcraft or] 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.”
(I Samuel 15:22,23 NASB)

Same song; second verse!

Let's go back to Betty Brown's harried household for a minute, and let's see what Samuel was saying. Billy Brown knew what was expected of him. He was to rake the leaves. It wasn't that he was operating without information. The issue was not what is right. The issue was, do I agree with what is right and am I willing to do it? Satan sold him a lie. The lie was "Hath Mom said...?" *What right does she have anyway? She's just trying to rob me of my fun. Isn't that a decision I should be able to make? I want to play ball. Besides I'll pacify her later with emotions, excuses or demonstrating my love. She'll go crazy if she knows I've sacrificed just to please her. She'll forget that little transgression. What's one little transgression anyway? I'm usually such a good boy!*

It's not a new product, is it? Satan manufactured it in Eden, and he has packaged it so well that we've bought it ever since. Billy bought it. Saul bought it. We buy it every time we justify partial obedience in the name of spirituality. We figure we can determine what's best for us no matter what the Word of God says. Then when we're caught red-handed, we look God in the eye and say, "Lord, I just did it for you. Here's a gift to show you how much I love you."

It's not a new thing. Churches violate basic biblical principles of finance all the time because "the Kingdom is at stake and we need the space for God." Beloved, God doesn't have a space problem. And if He doesn't provide the money to make the space available, then we don't have a problem either. Don't worry about doing God a favor. To obey is better.

Men with ministries violate principles of presumption in the name of faith. They go out and spend huge sums of money, and then to save God from embarrassment, they ask you to send in the money to pay for it. You either bail God out or He'll be in trouble. "Oh, by the way," they say, "we've already spent the money. It's up

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to you now but let's not embarrass God." But you're violating the Word of God when you do that. You're saying, "Sacrifice." God is saying, "No. Obey in the first place."

We, as individual Christians are the guiltiest, though. We violate principles of unequal yoking and then when things don't go well, we blame God for the outcome. Business men violate biblical principles of finance or relationships. God isn't fooled. It isn't that He doesn't appreciate what we give. It isn't that He doesn't appreciate our time. It isn't that He doesn't appreciate our sacrifice. But, beloved, to obey is better!

What God wants is men and women of honesty, integrity, and principle. Men and women who will take the Word for what it is—THE WORD OF GOD—and won't bend it, twist it, avoid it, or ignore it in the name of faith. God is not fooled by all of our frenzied activity or our empty works. We may be teaching, serving, working, or even witnessing, but that doesn't gloss over what He's looking for. He wants a pure heart. He wants men and women whose lives are clean from the inside out. Men and women who take the Word seriously and quietly, and just obey. Not because they want some kind of legalistic recognition. Not because they're being bombed from heaven if they don't. But because they love Him.

Yes, God appreciates the sacrifice of time, energy and money that we give to Him, but to be faithful is better. To be faithful on our knees is better. To be honest in our hearts is better. To be God's man or woman is more important than doing anything. It isn't that God isn't impressed with the hours we spend or the jobs we take at church or the tasks we perform at Christian organizations. He is. But that's no substitute for obedience. What God is looking for isn't activity in place of holiness. What He's saying is, "To obey is better."

How much better? Samuel just told us. He said, "Rebellion is the act of choosing to defy or compromise the will of God. Rebellion is the same to God as witchcraft." What's witchcraft? Witchcraft is the open worship of that which is satanic. Rebellion is the hidden worship of that which is satanic, because it says to God, "Don't tell me what to do," and if God isn't your Lord, then

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who is?

Some of us have had a clear word from God in the past about what He was calling us to do with our lives or ministries. And what sometimes happens is, because we don't want to do exactly what He has asked us to do, we get busy with alternative activities and figure, "God has got to be impressed. I'm at the church every day." I believe He's saying, "Wait a minute. To obey is better! I appreciate your activities, but..."

Finally, in verses 24-35 we read this sentence. Saul is told one more time, "Because you rejected the word of the Lord, He has rejected you from being king." If you are unwilling to do exactly what God says, your ministry will not last!

At the very end we see Saul partially repent. We see the sentence carried out against him and against Agag, as well.

And Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death;
for Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD regretted that
He had made Saul king over Israel. (1 Samuel 15:35)

When I read this the thought occurred to me, *I wonder how often the Lord is grieved that He has given me certain responsibilities in the Kingdom.* And then, seeing as I've gotten caught up in the limelight of acclaim, or the excitement of what seems to be fruitfulness, I begin to soft-peddle in my mind the importance of being faithful in the details of life. I mean, after all, look who I am. Right?

Do you understand? It happens to churches, too. They get so caught up in their "success story" they forget that God doesn't read the press releases. God is not impressed with their numbers. God is impressed with their holiness. God is awed only by their faithfulness. He is impressed by what they do, but to obey is better. God is saying, "Don't depart from the basics that made you what you are. Be faithful. Preach the Word, in season, out of season. Be not weary in well-doing."

Saul was an important man, there is no doubt about that. But he never got so important that he could compromise the will of God and get away with it. And neither will you or I.

You say, "By the way, what happened back at the Browns'?"

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house? Well, Billy's mother sat him down late that night, after all the leaves had been raked, incidentally, and said, "Now Billy, I want to read you a story from the Bible." And she read I Samuel, chapter 15. After she finished, she said, "Billy, now do you understand? God only asks you for one thing. Obedience. I only asked you for one thing. Obedience. Because, Billy, to obey is better."

Billy got the picture that night, and it literally changed the course of his life. Perhaps some of us need to get the picture, too, because the Scripture is so clear.

TO OBEY IS BETTER THAN SACRIFICE

To obey is better than sacrifice
To obey is better by far
For God isn't looking at what we've done
He's looking at who we are!

He's looking at whether or not we choose
As His children day after day
Knowing His will to do His will
In other words, just obey!

He's looking to see if we're willing
To stand on His precious Word
Regardless of what the world might say
And simply obey the Lord.

To obey is better than sacrifice
And we'll find when this life is through
That what pleased the heart of God the most
Were the times we just did what He told us to do!

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