

July 6, 2014
Church Planting

Awkward Obedience
Acts 9:10-19

Opening words: Two weeks ago, I returned to my project of preaching through the Book of Acts. It will take me four summers to complete. Last summer, I preached through the first eight chapters. Those chapters focused on the original disciples. The next two summers, we will be looking at Paul's missionary journeys in chapters 12 through 28. That means this summer, we are going to be looking at chapters nine through eleven. During these chapters, Saul, later Paul, takes center stage. Today's story is no exception. Yet in this story, he is not a picture of authority, he is a picture of brokenness. God calls on one man, Ananias, to help him.

It is important that you know there are three men named Ananias in the New Testament. It is important that you identify the right one. The first Ananias is found in Acts 5:1-11. That Ananias was married to a woman by the name of Sapphira. They sold a piece of property and lied to church. They died for their sin. The second Ananias is found in Acts 23:1-5. He was the high priest in Jerusalem. The third Ananias, the one in this story, is simply described as a disciple. He is remembered as a man of great obedience. Without his obedience, the future of the church would have been altered. May God give you ears to hear this morning's scripture lesson, Acts 9:9-19. Let me call this message *Awkward Obedience*.

Acts 9:10-19 ¹⁰ In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

¹¹ The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. ¹² In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

¹³ "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

¹⁵ But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

¹⁷ Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

¹⁸ Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, ¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

The date was July 3, 1863. The place was Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. For two days, that small community of 2,400 residents had been ravaged by war. The Union army was led by George G. Meade. The Confederate army was led by Robert E. Lee. The day began with a cannon fire. Both sides shelled the other for hours. The sound was deafening. They say the people of Philadelphia, 140 miles away, could hear it. Then, the cannons grew silent. The Confederates stopped firing because their ammunition grew low. The Union stopped firing because the smoke had grown so thick they couldn't see their targets. Lee thought the Union had stopped firing because they had run away, like they had done in the past. Desperate for a victory, Lee took a great gamble. He ordered General Pickett to line up his men and march up the hill in open view to confront the enemy. Standing shoulder to shoulder that line of 12,000 men stretched out for a mile. At first, their ascent looked promising. Those few minutes were called the high water mark of the Confederacy. Then, in a moment everything changed. At a single point on the battlefield, the Union army opened fire on their enemy. Within an hour, it was over. Lee's gamble didn't pay off. Only half of those 12,000 returned. The Confederacy had not just lost at Gettysburg. It was the beginning of the end of the war itself.

These are my questions for you. Do you consider those 12,000 soldiers heroic because they obeyed their orders? Do you consider those 12,000 foolish because they obeyed their orders? If you were part of Pickett's March, would you have marched up the hill? If you were part of Pickett's March, would you have run for the hills? Speaking of obeying God, Thomas a Kempis once said, "*Instant obedience is the only kind of obedience there is; delayed obedience is disobedience. Whoever strives to withdraw from obedience, withdraws from Grace.*" If that quote makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

When we last left Saul, he was hungry, thirsty and blind. In Damascus, he was forced to do the most unnatural thing, wait! The scriptures do not tell us how long he waited. However, the scriptures do tell us that while he waited, God was at work. If Saul was going to fulfill his destiny and become the greatest evangelist in the history of the church, then he would need some help to get started. God drafted that help in the form of Ananias.

The name Ananias was a common name at this point and time in history. The name actually means "*The Lord shows grace.*" Ananias had the right name for the job. He would be forced to offer grace to a man who deserved no grace. Just think about it for a moment. Saul didn't deserve a single ounce of grace. Because of Saul, people died. Because of Saul, countless lives were disrupted. Because of Saul, countless people were forced to leave their homes. Because of Saul, some mothers never saw their children again. Because of Saul, no one got a good night's sleep. In his little corner of the world, Saul evoked the same emotions as Adolph Hitler in our world. Welcoming Saul into that early Christian community was like welcoming a Muslim Jihadist into our church. There is no other way to say it. Saul doesn't deserve an ounce of grace, but grace was offered to him by a man whose name means "*The Lord shows grace.*" There is only one problem. Ananias was reluctant to show Saul grace.

Don't be too critical of Ananias. We have all been in his shoes. What God wants us to do is not a mystery. We know what God wants us to do, but we just refuse to do it. You can't claim ignorance. Is anyone here surprised that God expects us to care for those who live in poverty? The Third World is filled with these people. You can't miss them. However, generally speaking, we are doing nothing to help them. As a matter of fact, we do an excellent job of ignoring them. Is anyone here surprised that God wants us to love unconditionally? It sounds easy, but it is hard to do. God doesn't see our differences (gender, age, race, nationality, education and economics). God only sees what we have in common, what we all need, love and acceptance! However, generally speaking, we only love and accept people who are just like us. Is anyone here surprised that the Biblical standard for giving is the tithe, 10%? On our way to our next vacation, we cry "poor" and give about 2%. Is anyone here surprised that God wants us to live moral lives? We are ambassadors of Jesus Christ! We are representing Jesus. The problem is, we have accepted immorality as proper behavior. The truth is, we may live in the most immoral times in American history. Do I have to go on? Do I really have to go on? We are just like Ananias. The problem is not a lack of knowledge; we know what God wants us to do. The problem is we just don't want to do it. Every day we are forced to choose. Are we going to do what God wants us to do and obey? Are we going to do what we want to do and disobey? If you find some truth in that statement, say, **"Amen!"** That leads us to the question of the day.

Why are we so reluctant to obey God's commands? There are several reasons. One is illustrated for us in the scripture reading. Ananias tries to reject God's instructions because he is afraid. He has heard what Saul has done to others and he doesn't want it to happen to him. You really can't blame him. When was the last time you were afraid?

In 1996, Kathryn went to the former Soviet Union for the first time. Everyone responded to those trips in a different way. Some were excited and interested. Some did everything to discourage her. Some man said to me, "If she was my wife, I wouldn't let her go! Russia is a dangerous place and you can't trust the Russians." I responded by saying, "You don't have to worry. She would never marry you. As a matter of fact, she wouldn't touch you with a ten foot pole." He has not been the only one through the years.

I can honestly tell you that every mission experience I have had in my life has been coupled with resistance. The destination didn't matter. It happened when we went to the Philippines, Mexico, Russia, Ukraine or Haiti. It happened when we organized Mill Creek Workcamp and brought 400 young people to our community to help our poor. It happens every year we send our youth on a mission. Someone has to play the role of the negative person. The question is, why? Sometimes, it is over-exposure to 24/7 news. They can't give us enough negative information. However, more often it is old-fashioned fear. They don't want you to go because they would never go. They would never go because they are afraid.

When you go on a mission trip, you make them look like a coward. Listen to what I am about to say. If you don't feel God calling you to get involved in missions, then don't. However, don't discourage someone who is called. You are nothing more than a tool in Satan's work belt. God expects us to help the needy in our world! Sometimes people disobey God because they are afraid. Sometimes they disobey God for another reason.

Last Sunday night, I visited a friend. He is not a member of this church, nor do I want him to join. He is my escape from you. His son is getting married next May, so I began to ask him about the plans. He didn't know anything. I asked, "Why don't you know anything?" He said, "They don't tell us anything!" The bride was inside the house, so I summoned her. When she came out, I began to interrogate her. I asked her everything. What are the colors? How many in the bridal party? Are there children in the wedding party? Is her wedding dress white? Where is the reception? What is the menu? Is it a live band or a DJ? Are you going on a honeymoon? Where are you going on your honeymoon? This was my final question: "Have you had any problems planning your wedding?" She responded, "Just one, the minister. He requires premarital counseling. The groom doesn't want to go." I asked, "Why doesn't he want to go?" She responded, "You know him. He doesn't want to be told what to do." I thought, he is going married and he doesn't want to be told what to do. This marriage will never last!

Maybe that is why we have such a hard time obeying God. We just don't want to be told what to do. That is why so many have fallen in love with God loving us. We can do whatever we want because God loves us just the way we are. The problem is that while God loves us the way we are, God expects us to change to be a little more like Jesus every day. Never forget, someday you are going to stand accountable before God. When God commands us to do something, He expects us to do it. Remember Thomas a Kempis? He said, *"Instant obedience is the only kind of obedience there is; delayed obedience is disobedience. Whoever strives to withdraw from obedience, withdraws from Grace."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

Several weeks ago, I began to tell you some Fred Craddock stories. Do you remember Fred? He taught homiletics at Candler School of Theology at Emory University. I consider him one of the finest preachers of the twentieth century because no one can tell a story quite like him. Let me tell you one more of his stories. You may remember it from the past.

Over a school break, Fred decided to go back home for a visit. It is no place special on the map. It is just a little town in Arkansas. On the first morning of his visit he ventured downtown. He walked into the diner that had been there for a hundred years. Fred just wanted to sit there, eat breakfast and remember simpler times. He said the place had not changed. Everything was identical to his youth, even the owner. As Fred waited for his fried eggs, the owner walked up to him and said, "I know you! You used to live here. You went on to be a preacher! I need to talk to you." Fred nodded yes, but he thought, "Just go away! All I want is breakfast and some quiet."

The owner pulled up a chair and began to talk. He said to Fred, "I don't know what to do." Fred said, "About what?" The owner responded, "About the curtain!" He motioned to the curtain and Fred looked. The curtain had been there for years. Fred remembered that curtain from his childhood. The curtain wasn't there just for decorative purposes. It had a practical purpose. The curtain was there to separate the white customers from the black customers. The white customers would enter the restaurant through the front door and ate on that side of the curtain. The black customers entered through the back door and ate on that side of the curtain. Just then, Fred's breakfast was delivered. He wanted the owner to finish up his story because his eggs were getting cold. To hasten it along, Fred asked the owner, "So what is the problem?" (Fred knew the problem.) The owner said, "Should I take the curtain down or should I leave the curtain up?" Fred gave him a blank look and the owner continued. "If I take the curtain down, I will lose my business. If I leave the curtain up, I will lose my soul!" The owner knew what God wanted him to do, but he was afraid. The story doesn't change.

We are just like Ananias. We know what God want us to do, but we refuse to do it. Sometimes we are afraid. Sometimes we just don't want to do it. Are you going to take the curtain down, or are you going to leave the curtain up? Charles Stanley once said, *"The bottom line in the Christian life is obedience, and most people don't even like the word."*

Will you pray with me?