

# Knowing God in the Word

That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. Philippians 3:10.

## Contradictions in Scripture: Sin By Command Part 2

In our last message, we introduced the difficulty found in Scripture when God seems to command people to do things that are sinful. We gave examples of this idea of “sin by command” and examined the reason for them. First, we considered the command for Hosea to marry a prostitute, not just a former one, but one who was still practicing. Yet we found that there was no specific command against anyone who was not a priest marrying a prostitute, though a woman who was a prostitute should have been punished herself. Another problem we considered was the command to Ezekiel to eat meat defiled by being cooked on human dung. Yet we pointed out that really the only reason food was unclean is because God proclaimed it unclean. This was a ceremonial law He made, not something that was inherent in the food itself. Therefore, since God made the clean and unclean laws, He certainly had the right to tell someone not to keep them, if He so wished. The same applies to the command to Peter to kill and eat unclean things in Acts 10.

Yet we also established it as a principle that the ultimate good is always to obey the voice of the LORD, and the worst of sin is to disobey Him. We considered I Samuel 15:22-23a in this connection.

**22. So Samuel said:**

**“Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices,**

**As in obeying the voice of the LORD?**

**Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,**

**And to heed than the fat of rams.**

**23. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft,**

**And stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry.**

Whatever good the law might have a man do, then, the greatest good is to obey the voice of the LORD, and to rebel against Him is as the worst of sins. Obeying the word of the LORD is ultimately man’s first duty, and trumps any other consideration. If the LORD, then, commands a thing, it is always going to be a far greater sin to disobey Him than any sin that might be involved in the command. To do what the LORD says to you, moreover, is always more important than what He might have said to others in the past. Thus if there is such a thing as “sin by command,” it would be better to obey than to disobey, in any case.

Yet are there really examples in the Scripture of sin by command? Does God actually contradict Himself in this? Let us examine some more instances wherein this seems to happen, and see if what else we can learn about sin by command.

### Striking the Prophet

Another example of a command to sin is when a prophet of the LORD commanded a man to strike him in I Kings 20:35. **“Now a certain man of the sons of the prophets said to his neighbor by the word of the LORD, ‘Strike me, please.’ And the man refused to strike him.”** We can quite understand why a man would refuse to strike one of God’s prophets, even if commanded to do so. Yet there is no mercy for this man when he refuses to do what would seem to be a despicable act,

as we see in the following verse. **“Then he said to him, “Because you have not obeyed the voice of the LORD, surely, as soon as you depart from me, a lion shall kill you.” And as soon as he left him, a lion found him and killed him.”** Why would God command someone to do such a thing? And why would he be so severely punished when he understandably refused to do it?

What we have already discussed regarding Ezekiel 4:12 and the command to cook food on human dung applies very much to the prophet who commands a man to strike him in I Kings 20:35. The key is what we found in I Samuel 15:22.

**“Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, As in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, And to heed than the fat of rams.**

Certainly under normal circumstances, striking one of the LORD’s prophets would be a sin indeed. Yet this was hardly a normal circumstance. In this case, the prophet had told the man to strike him, and had done so by the word of the LORD, as we are told in the verse. I take it as a principle that when the LORD wishes to communicate, the one He communicates to will always understand the message, and will know that it is the LORD Who is speaking to him. Therefore, I believe that this man knew that it was the LORD’s word he heard, and that the LORD was commanding him to strike this prophet. Therefore, for him to refuse to obey this command was rebellion against the word of the LORD, and, as we learned from I Samuel 15:23, **“Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft.”** This man committed a grievous sin, then, when he refused to obey the word of the LORD, and such rebellion amply justifies the extreme punishment the LORD inflicted upon him, when he was killed by a lion as soon as he left the presence of the prophet.

The man has even less of an excuse for his refusal to obey when we consider the next verse, I Kings 20:37, wherein one does obey the word of the LORD as it was given to him.

**37. And he found another man, and said, “Strike me, please.” So the man struck him, inflicting a wound.**

This second man was a submissive man, and not a rebel like the first man. He struck the prophet, and proved that no murder was implied in the command, as he struck him only to the point of inflicting a wound, and not to cause any further damage. The first man could easily have done the same, yet he refused. Perhaps he took a “hands off” attitude towards the affair, or did not desire the inconvenience if others learned he had struck a prophet. Whatever his reason, however, he rebelled, and such rebellion was far worse than striking a prophet. In fact, the greatest sin of striking a prophet normally would be that it was a sign that one was rejecting the word of the LORD being spoken through the prophet. Yet here, it was rejecting the word of the LORD that caused this man not to strike the prophet. It was not the command that was sin, but refusing the command that ultimately was a sinful act. Therefore, the larger issue of obedience takes precedence over what would normally be right and wrong in this case of “sin by command.”

## Images in the Temple

Another example of a strange “sin by command” are the images that existed in the tabernacle and in the temple. Exodus 20:4 commands:

**4. You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth;**

Yet when the LORD gave commands for the making of the ark of the covenant, He commanded the making of two cherubim to be placed on the mercy seat in Exodus 25:18.

**18. And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work you shall make them at the two ends of the mercy seat.**

Moreover, there were cherubim woven into the fabric of the tabernacle, according to Exodus 26:1.

**1. Moreover you shall make the tabernacle with ten curtains of fine woven linen and blue, purple, and scarlet thread; with artistic designs of cherubim you shall weave them.**

Solomon made two cherubim for the temple as well, as we read in I Kings 6:23.

**23. Inside the inner sanctuary he made two cherubim of olive wood, each ten cubits high.**

There were cherubim carved into the walls of the temple as well, just as they were woven into the fabric of the tabernacle. Other images are in the picture here as well, for palm trees and open flowers are included, according to I Kings 6:29.

**26. Then he carved all the walls of the temple all around, both the inner and outer sanctuaries, with carved figures of cherubim, palm trees, and open flowers.**

Along with cherubim and palm trees, lions, another creature that is “in the earth beneath,” were engraved on the carts used in the temple, according to I Kings 7:36.

**36. On the plates of its flanges and on its panels he engraved cherubim, lions, and palm trees, wherever there was a clear space on each, with wreaths all around.**

Pomegranates are also common in the décor of the temple, first of all as part of the priestly robe, as we read in Exodus 28:33-34.

**33. And upon its hem you shall make pomegranates of blue, purple, and scarlet, all around its hem, and bells of gold between them all around: 34. a golden bell and a pomegranate, a golden bell and a pomegranate, upon the hem of the robe all around.**

Pomegranates were also on the two pillars, Jachin and Boaz, that were made for Solomon’s temple, according to I Kings 7:18.

**18. So he made the pillars, and two rows of pomegranates above the network all around to cover the capitals that were on top; and thus he did for the other capital.**

There is probably no need to multiply examples beyond this. There are figures, both of living beings like cherubim and lions and plants such as palm trees, flowers, and pomegranates carved, woven, or engraved into the decoration of both the tabernacle and the temple. Yet how can this be, considering that the making of carved images, likenesses of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth, are forbidden in the ten commandments of Exodus 20:4? Is this not an example of God commanding, in the very building of His temple and tabernacle, the breaking of His commandment, of insisting on “sin by command”?

The first fact that we should notice is that the word for “carved image” in Exodus 20:4 is the Hebrew word *pecel*, coming from the root *pacal*, which means to cut, hew, or hew into shape. While it does refer therefore to a cut or carved image, we would note that the word *pecel* is never used in a positive sense. It appears thirty-one times in Scripture, and every time it appears it speaks of an idol. (This is not true of its root *pacal*, which occurs six times and five times is used in a positive sense.) The word *pecel* is never used of the cherubim, or any of the other images that appeared in the tabernacle or the temple. The words for “carving,” “engraving,” and so forth used of the figures in the temple are never this word. It seems clear that the word *pecel* is used synonymously for an idol, as is clear from Leviticus 26:1, among other places.

**1. ‘You shall not make idols for yourselves; neither a carved image nor a sacred pillar shall you rear up for yourselves; nor shall you set up an engraved stone in your land, to bow down to it;**

**for I *am* the LORD your God.**

It is clear that the figures of cherubim, lions, and other things made in the temple were not idols, and were not made for the purpose of worship. Therefore, it was not simply the making of figures that was outlawed, but rather the making of idols. This becomes clear when we consider the bronze serpent Moses was commanded to make in the wilderness, as we read in Numbers 21:9.

**9. So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.**

This serpent was made as an object of faith, not an object of worship. Those who were being bitten by serpents had rebelled in their hearts against the LORD by speaking against Him. If they would submit to the LORD by looking to the object of faith that was held out to them, their sin would be forgiven and the deadly poison that resulted from their sin would be healed. This was made to be a symbol, never an idol. Yet later on this serpent became an object of worship, and so Hezekiah destroyed it, as we read in II Kings 18:4.

**4. He removed the high places and broke the sacred pillars, cut down the wooden image and broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made; for until those days the children of Israel burned incense to it, and called it Nehushtan.**

For whatever reason, the serpent Moses made had never been destroyed, but had been kept by the sons of Israel ever since. In Hezekiah's day, it had been corrupted into an idol. So whatever the original intent of its making, it now had become an object of sin. Therefore, Hezekiah destroyed it, calling it Nehushtan, "a thing of bronze." Something could then be innocent in its making, but if corrupted into an idol, would be worthy of being destroyed.

Therefore, the LORD's command to make images, and even statues, for His tabernacle and temple was not "sin by command." It was never the making of statues or other images, but the making of them for the purpose of worshipping them, that was outlawed. This is even clear from Exodus 20:5.

**5. you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, *am* a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me,**

The making of statues and other images is not a sin, as long as they are not made for the purpose of worshipping them, and they remain not sinful as long as men do not begin to worship them. Therefore, there was no sin in the LORD's command for them to make images for the tabernacle and temple, since the purpose of them was not for them to be worshipped.

## **Elijah's Altar at Mount Carmel**

Another strange case when a prophet of the LORD seems to sin by command is the case of Elijah building an altar to the LORD at Mount Carmel. We read of this in I Kings 18:30-32.

**30. Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come near to me." So all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of the LORD *that was* broken down. 31. And Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come, saying, "Israel shall be your name." 32. Then with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD; and he made a trench around the altar large enough to hold two seahs of seed.**

Elijah is said to have built this altar "in the name of the LORD," which we would take to mean that he did it by the LORD's command and with His permission. Yet the building of such altars would seem to be forbidden by Deuteronomy 12:1-6.

**1. “These *are* the statutes and judgments which you shall be careful to observe in the land which the LORD God of your fathers is giving you to possess, all the days that you live on the earth. 2. You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations which you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. 3. And you shall destroy their altars, break their *sacred* pillars, and burn their wooden images with fire; you shall cut down the carved images of their gods and destroy their names from that place. 4. You shall not worship the LORD your God *with such things*. 5. “But you shall seek the place where the LORD your God chooses, out of all your tribes, to put His name for His dwelling place; and there you shall go. 6. There you shall take your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the heave offerings of your hand, your vowed offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks.”**

It is clear from these verses that the LORD wanted “burnt offerings, sacrifices,” and so forth to be offered at the place He would choose, which we know at the time of Elijah had become Jerusalem. “On the high mountains and hills” is listed especially as a place where the LORD did not want them to sacrifice, because these were “the places where the nations which you shall dispossess served their gods.” Yet Mount Carmel is a high mountain or hill. This is exactly the sort of place the LORD seems to have been careful to forbid them to commit sacrifices on. Deuteronomy 12:26-27 makes this even clearer.

**26. Only the holy things which you have, and your vowed offerings, you shall take and go to the place which the LORD chooses. 27. And you shall offer your burnt offerings, the meat and the blood, on the altar of the LORD your God; and the blood of your sacrifices shall be poured out on the altar of the LORD your God, and you shall eat the meat.**

This specifically tells them to bring their offerings to “the altar of the LORD your God,” and that at “the place which the LORD chooses.” Elijah did not do this. Yet Elijah was the LORD’s prophet, and seems to have been acting by the LORD’s direction throughout the incident on Mount Carmel. So was this, indeed, a case of “sin by command”?

First of all, we need to realize that there seem to be conflicting commands regarding this issue. For in Exodus 20:24-25, we see the LORD giving instructions to the people how to make an altar of earth or an altar of stone for Him.

**24. An altar of earth you shall make for Me, and you shall sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen. In every place where I record My name I will come to you, and I will bless you. 25. And if you make Me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stone; for if you use your tool on it, you have profaned it.**

Moses himself obeyed this command, making an altar in Exodus 24:4. Of course, at that point, the tabernacle had not yet been built. Yet we know that it was not until the beginning of I Kings, when Solomon made the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem, that the place where the LORD chose to place His name was actually chosen as Jerusalem. For a time, He seems to have chosen the place Shiloh during the time of the judges, yet at the time of Eli the priest, Shiloh was destroyed, and there was no place the LORD had chosen to set His name once again.

Therefore, we can understand that men might have built altars according to Exodus 20:24-25, knowing that the LORD had not yet chosen a place. They were especially excused in doing this if the place where they were building an altar was not a place where the nations the LORD had driven out before them had done their worship, as that is specifically what Deuteronomy 12 forbid. So we can well see that Gideon in Judges 6, Manoah in Judges 13, the representatives of the people of Israel in Judges 21, Samuel in I Samuel 7, Saul in I Samuel 14, and David in II Samuel 24 were not sinning when they built the LORD an altar, as the LORD had not yet chosen a place, and they did it according to Exodus 20:24-25.

Yet the same cannot be said of Elijah in I Kings 18. The LORD had already chosen Jerusalem as the place for His altar, and the temple had been erected there long since. Therefore, it would seem that

the command of Deuteronomy 12 should have been wholly in effect. Only the altar at Jerusalem should have been allowed, and no other place for offering burnt offerings should have been permitted. Why, then, did Elijah build an altar elsewhere and burn offerings on it? Was this not a case of him sinning by command?

To understand this case, we should consider the situation that Israel was in at the time when Elijah did this. The nation of Israel had been split in two by civil war, as might have happened in the United States if the north had not won the Civil War here and forced the south back into the union. The temple God had built was in the southern kingdom of Judah. Moreover, the kings of the northern nation had long been in the practice of forbidding their people to go to Jerusalem to worship, fearing that this would cause them to return their loyalty to the house of David, putting the northern kings off their throne. Whether this fear was well-founded or not cannot be said, as no king ever tried reversing this policy. Instead, they encouraged the inhabitants of the northern kingdom to worship golden calves that were built at Dan and Beth-el. For a northerner to cross the border and worship at Jerusalem could have been considered a treasonous act, and if he did this, he might as well remain in the southern kingdom, figuring a return home was now closed to him. This put all the northerners in a bad position. They must either abandon their homes, or else neglect the temple in Jerusalem. In this situation, it is understandable that many of them might have given up on the temple, and instead have returned to the command of Exodus 20:24-25, building for themselves altars to the LORD. In fact, Elijah refers to the fact that there had been multiple altars of this type, recently destroyed by the wicked queen Jezebel, in I Kings 19:10.

**10. So he said, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life.”**

Notice that Elijah refers to the LORD’s altars, plural. Since he was a prophet to the northern kingdom, and since the southern kingdom still worshipped the LORD and had not torn down His altar at Jerusalem, it seems clear that he is referring to altars that the inhabitants of the northern kingdom had built to the LORD within their borders.

So it would seem that Elijah was acting in this case typically to the way anyone who desired to remain faithful to the LORD yet who wished to remain in his home in the northern kingdom of Israel had acted since the time the two nations split apart. This might not have been strictly according to the commandment about Jerusalem, yet at least it could be in accord with Exodus 20:24-25. Though technically Jerusalem should have been the place from the time of Solomon on, that altar was in many ways inaccessible to the inhabitants of the northern kingdom, and this seems to have been the best compromise they could come up with. The LORD seems to have accepted it, at least enough that He had His prophet Elijah rebuild such an altar when it had been torn down, and offer burnt offerings to Him upon it.

Finally, we would note the same thing as above, that this was doubtless not a place where the Canaanites had worshipped, but a place the LORD’s followers had chosen to worship Him. The command was not necessarily against high places per se, but against those previously used by the Canaanites.

So we have examined multiple cases of what at first glance would seem to be “sin by command.” Yet, as we have pointed out, it is more important to obey the LORD than to keep rules and laws. Ultimately, what God says defines what is sin and what is not, and to disobey the LORD is in many ways the worst sin one can commit anyway. If the LORD says a thing should be done, then it is right, and cannot be “sin.” Therefore there really is no such thing as a “sin by command.”

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