

# (The New Covenant Servant) 2. God's Strictness With His Servants

by Zac Poonen

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*God requires much from those to whom He commits much and is strict with His servants because He has committed much to them.*

**Scripture:** Exodus 4:24, Numbers 20:7

**Topics:** "Accountability", "Obedience"

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## Description

Zac Poonen emphasizes God's strictness with His servants, illustrating that those entrusted with much are held to a higher standard. He recounts the story of Moses, who faced severe consequences for disobedience, highlighting that even minor infractions can lead to significant repercussions in God's eyes. Poonen warns against the dangers of hasty actions and the importance of total obedience, using examples from the lives of Moses and Saul to demonstrate that God expects His servants to adhere strictly to His commands. The sermon concludes with a reminder that God's judgment may be delayed, but it is inevitable, urging believers to maintain integrity in their commitments and speech.

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## Transcript

The Word of God teaches us one thing from beginning to end - that God requires much from those to whom He commits much. God is strict with His servants because He has committed much to them.

When Moses was on his way to Egypt, after being commissioned by God at the burning bush, we read that God tried to kill him (Exodus 4:24). That is amazing, considering the fact that God had just called him to His service. And Moses was the only man on earth who was fit to fulfil that task. He was the most important person on earth for the fulfilling of God's purposes, and God had spent 80 years training him!! Why then did God want to kill Moses?

Moses' wife, Zipporah, not being a Jew, had not believed in circumcising their son. And Moses had submitted to his wife's opinion, and disobeyed God. Moses was now going to be the leader of God's people. And yet here he was pleasing his wife and disobeying God in his own home. When Moses was dying, Zipporah knew at once the reason for her husband's illness. So she circumcised her son immediately. Only then did God spare Moses' life.

There we can see that God does not tolerate any compromise or disobedience or wife-pleasing in His servants. If we are to lead God's people, we must be totally obedient. There is no partiality with God. He will judge even His most eminent servants if they disobey Him.

### The Importance of Patience

When Moses was 120 years old, God punished him again. And this time the punishment was not lifted. God had told him to speak to the rock for the water to flow. But Moses lost his temper and hit out at God's people first and then hit the rock too (Numbers 20:7-13). That looks like a small mistake to us. But it was serious in God's eyes.

Moses spoke angrily to the people saying, "Listen now, you REBELS...." (Numbers 20:10). The implication there was that all the people were rebels, whereas Moses himself was not! But Moses too was a rebel for he disobeyed God the very next moment. God was not happy with such speech. God's Word says that

"it went hard with Moses, because he spoke rashly with his lips" (Psalms 106:33).

Do we see the rebellion there, in the very act of hitting out at God's people? We often speak, without God having told us to speak.

The Bible says,

"Let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger - because the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God"

(James 1:19, 20).

When we see a problem in our home or our church that needs to be sorted out, what do we do? Do we speak and act quickly, without waiting on the Lord? If so, then it is no wonder that we fail and bring confusion into our home and into the church.

It is at such times that we must remember that our anger cannot achieve the righteousness of God. When we are not at rest in our hearts, but agitated with another, the best thing we can do is keep quiet. That way we will at least not do any damage to God's work.

It is a serious thing to be a servant of God. We cannot take such a responsibility lightly. God's servants have tremendous authority. But they have to be extremely watchful that they are obedient to God in the smallest thing - especially in their speech.

Once when Moses' sister Miriam had criticized him, he kept quiet and did not reply. The Holy Spirit's approval of Moses' reaction is found in His recording there that Moses "was more humble than any man who was on the face of the earth" (Numbers 12:3). On another occasion, when Korah gathered others in rebellion against Moses and questioned his authority, again Moses did not get provoked, but fell on his face and kept quiet (Numbers 16:4). Why didn't he keep quiet at Meribah, when the people rebelled against him? Why did he have to speak rashly towards the tail-end of his life?

Patience is the primary mark of a servant of God (2 Timothy 2:24) - and of an apostle (2 Corinthians 12:12). We can be patient for a long time and keep falling on our faces again and again. But the question is whether we will keep on "entrusting our cause to Him Who judges righteously" until the end of our lives, or whether we will begin to justify and defend ourselves, after we have endured for some years (1 Peter

2:23). God will never allow us to be tried or tested by anyone at any time, beyond our ability (1 Corinthians 10:13). But He will allow us to be tested to the limit of our strength. He will however give us grace to be patient, if we are willing to die to ourselves, our rights and our reputation.

May God help us all to be men who will fall on our faces, when we are insulted and badly treated - today, tomorrow, next week, next month, next year, and until the end of our lives.

Moses would have entered Canaan if he had fallen on his face at Meribah. He missed so much by being careless at just one point towards the end of his life. There have been many other servants of God like that, who lived in faithfulness for many years, and then became careless and slipped up towards the end of their lives. Thus they ruined God's plan for their lives.

On an earlier occasion, we read that God had punished the Israelites with the same punishment that He gave Moses - not being permitted to enter Canaan. But they had rebelled against God TEN TIMES (Numbers 14:22). God gave the Israelites ten chances, before punishing them. But He gave Moses only ONE chance. Why? Because God expected more from Moses than from the Israelites.

The Israelites had seen only God's external actions, but Moses had understood God's ways, having spoken with God face to face (Psalms 103:6). If we represent God and preach His word, He will expect ten times more from us than from others in our church.

God's servants cannot be careless in their speech, even when they are provoked. Only when they learn to eliminate worthless words from their speech, can they become God's spokesmen (Jeremiah 15:19).

#### The Importance of Total Obedience

Saul was another man whom God chose to lead Israel. Saul never wanted to be a king. It was God Who placed him on the throne of Israel. And when the Israelites came to make him king, Saul hid himself, saying, "Who am I to be the king? My family is the least of all the families of Israel" (1 Samuel 10:21, 22). What a humble man he was!

But it wasn't long before Saul became big in his own eyes and God had to take away the anointing from him.

In 1 Samuel 15, we read that Saul modified God's commands and did not kill everything of Amalek, as God had commanded him to. He followed his own reason, and did what pleased the people. This is what happens when anyone becomes big in his own eyes. And here we see two of the greatest snares that every servant of God faces - the opinion of his own reason and the opinion of other people. Saul lost his anointing because he allowed himself to be influenced by these two factors. We have no right to modify any of God's commands according to our own wisdom. And if we seek to please men, we "cannot be servants of Christ" (Galatians 1:10).

If Saul had remained small in his own eyes, he would have retained the anointing until the end of his life. But he began to love his throne. And that is how many another servant of God has lost his anointing too. Standing repeatedly before people, as God's spokesmen, has a way of going to our heads, if we are not watchful.

But Saul did not only cling on to being king. When he saw an anointed younger brother (David) coming up, and others having confidence in him, he schemed to suppress him. He was jealous of David, because

David had a faith that Saul did not have. And he wanted to kill David because the people admired him.

But does God ignore the actions of such Sauls - who stick to their thrones, even after God has rejected them? For a long time God may spare them. In Saul's case, God spared him for 13 years. David was about 17 years old when he killed Goliath. But he became king only when he was 30. For 13 years after David had been anointed by God, God allowed Saul to continue to rule as Israel's king.

What lesson does all of this have for us?

God may allow us, even after we have become backsliders, to stay on in a ministry, long after we have lost the anointing of the Spirit.

Others may not recognise that we have lost the anointing, because of their lack of discernment. So they may continue to accept us as servants of God, because they respect our age or Bible knowledge or experience. But we must not imagine that such acceptance by the people is sufficient for us to remain as God's servants.

What is the use of man accepting us if God Himself has rejected us? It is a terrible tragedy when a man continues to serve the Lord or to lead a church, even after the anointing has gone from his life.

#### Avoiding Hasty Actions

Unfortunately David, when he became king, also modified God's commands. And God had to punish him too. There is no partiality with God. God is strict with all who serve Him.

In 2 Samuel 6, we see how even good intentions cannot save us from missing God's will, if we are not exact with God's Word. David was taking the ark back to Jerusalem - which was a good thing. But he didn't do it the way God had commanded in the Law. God had commanded the Levites to carry the ark on their shoulders. But David modified that command and placed the ark on a cart and let the oxen pull the cart. There he was imitating the Philistines who had adopted that method a few years earlier (1 Samuel 6:8-12).

There are Christian leaders doing the same thing today. They run their churches according to the management techniques of worldly businesses rather than according to the teachings of God's Word.

As the oxen carried the ark, they stumbled. When Uzzah saw that, he reached out his hand and held the ark, to prevent it from falling. And God killed Uzzah, immediately "for his irreverence" (verse 7).

It is sad, but true, that when God's shepherds make a mistake, the sheep suffer too. David had made a mistake and Uzzah suffered for it. And David learnt there that God is very strict with His servants.

Uzzah had the best of intentions. Yet "the anger of the Lord burned against Uzzah" (verse 7). Uzzah had been taught from childhood that only the Levites could touch the ark. But he took God's commandment lightly in that moment and suffered for it.

The error of Uzzah can be repeated today. When we see things going wrong in our church, we can reach out our hands "to steady God's ark". And God may smite us, because even though our intentions may have been good, we went outside our "boundaries". We may have done what our reason told us was right. But we did not wait on the Lord to find out His will. We acted in haste.

Jesus said, "I will build my Church" (Matthew 16:18). Building the church is the Lord's business, not ours. He has never delegated that task to any of us. So when we say, "I am building the church in such-and-such a place", that is arrogant conceit. If ever we begin to think that the Body of Christ is our own private business, we will certainly make the mistake that Uzzah made, one day or the other.

If we see the church shaking, let us go to God and tell Him, "Lord, YOU are building the church, not me. Preserve Your church."

And when we feel that things are not going as they should, let us ask ourselves whose work it is and who is in charge of it. Is it the Holy Spirit or we?

At times, we may feel that something has to be done immediately. But if we act without listening to the Holy Spirit, we will always act in the flesh. And our actions, even if done with good intentions, will cause more confusion than if we had done nothing. So we must say,

"Lord, You are in charge here. The government is on Your shoulders. And I want to listen to You. Tell me what YOU want me to do."

There are many types of fools described in the book of Proverbs. But finally, the greatest fool of all is described thus,

"Do you see a man who is HASTY in his words (or his matters)? There is more hope for a fool than for him" (Proverbs 29:20).

The one who is hasty - hasty to say something or to do something - feels absolutely confident that he knows what is best for any situation. He doesn't have to consult God at all. He can act on his own. Such a man is the greatest fool in the world.

It was prophesied about Jesus that,

"He will delight in the fear of the Lord and He will not judge by what His eyes see or His ears hear" (Isaiah 11:3).

Jesus could not avoid seeing many things because His eyes were not blind. Neither could He avoid hearing many things because He was not deaf. But He feared His Father so much that He would never make a judgment or form an opinion merely on the basis of what He saw or heard. As He once said of Himself,

"The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father doing" (John 5:19).

When the Pharisees came to Jesus with the woman caught in adultery, Jesus did not reply to their question for some time. He was waiting to hear from His Father. When He heard, He spoke. It was just one sentence: "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone". That accomplished more than an hour-long sermon would have done!

When someone comes to us with a complicated problem, if we give him advice based on our cleverness and our past experience, the problem may only become more complicated. But one word of wisdom from the Father can work wonders.

And so the next time we see "the oxen stumbling and the ark about to fall", let us not be eager to put our names at the top of the list of fools!! Let us not be quick to judge by what our eyes see and what our ears hear, and act in irreverence. Instead, let us put our faces in the dust before the Lord and say, "Lord, I lack wisdom here. What do You want me to do?"

It is so difficult to acknowledge that we lack wisdom, especially when we know that the others in the church are younger and more immature than us. But if we humbly acknowledge our need, God will give us wisdom in abundance.

### Keeping Our Word

We see yet another example of God's strictness with His servants in 2 Samuel 21:1. During the days of David's kingship, there was a famine in Israel, for three continuous years. When there is a famine of the prophetic word in our assembly like that, it is good for us to do what David did. He sought the Lord for an answer. And the Lord said "This is because, many years ago, Israel broke the promise that she had made to the Gibeonites".

Israel had promised the Gibeonites 300 years earlier, in Joshua's time, that their descendants would never be harmed. But Saul had broken that promise and killed some of them, when he was king. The punishment for that sin caught up with Israel only 30 years later. God keeps His accounts very carefully. Nothing is forgotten of the wrongs that we have done, if we have not settled the matters righteously. God may take 30 years to settle His accounts with us. But they will be settled one day. God did not remove the famine from Israel until the matter was settled.

All who serve God must be very careful with the words they speak, not only in the meetings, but also outside the meetings.

We should not promise to do something for someone and then forget about it. For example, we should not promise to pray for people (who ask us to pray for them), and then forget to do so.

If we are unable to pray for the many who ask us to pray for them, then we must be honest and tell them, "I will pray for you when I remember to." Or alternatively pray for them then and there. But we should never make promises that we cannot keep.

How can we speak God's word solemnly if we make promises to others lightly? If we are unable to do something that we promised to do, we must go to that person and explain why we could not keep our word, and ask for his forgiveness. It is serious to break a promise.

"Every idle word that men speak they will give an account in the day of judgment" (Matthew 12:36).

God takes the promises we make to others quite seriously. We have no right to break our word, even to unbelievers or to servants (as the Gibeonites were).

We may imagine that since no punishment has come upon us for a long time, that God has forgotten about the unrighteousness we did somewhere, that has remained unsettled. But God never forgets. God's judgments may be slow in coming, but they will come finally.

"Therefore let us offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire." (Hebrews 12:28, 29).

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