

Every Word?

by Pat Higgins

Forerunner, "Prophecy Watch," May-June 2015

Both the Old and New Testaments often repeat the principle that to establish a fact requires two or three witnesses. This criterion applies to the death penalty (Deuteronomy 17:6; Hebrews 10:28), accusations against an elder (I Timothy 5:19), disputes with the brethren (Matthew 18:16), establishing iniquity or sin (Deuteronomy 19:15), and problems in the church (II Corinthians 13:1).

What if God gives us a command, not just two or three times, but *fifteen* times? Surely, such repetition would establish the importance God places on that instruction. In Deuteronomy, we find such a repeated charge, in which God declares fifteen times that we are *to be careful* to obey all His commands.

Because God felt the need to pound this idea into our minds, following His example, here are the fifteen times in Deuteronomy He tells us to be careful in our obedience:

“. . . be careful to observe them . . .” (4:6).

“Take careful heed to yourselves . . .” (4:15).

“. . . be careful to observe them” (5:1).

“. . . be careful to do as the Lord your God has commanded you . . .” (5:32).

“. . . be careful to observe it . . .” (6:3).

“. . . if we are careful to observe all these commandments . . .” (6:25).

“Every commandment which I command you today you must be careful to observe . . .” (8:1).

“. . . you shall be careful to observe all the statutes and judgments . . .” (11:32).

“These are the statutes and judgments which you shall be careful to observe . . .” (12:1).

“Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it” (12:32).

“. . . you shall be careful to observe these statutes” (16:12).

“. . . be careful to observe all the words of this law and these statutes” (17:19).

“. . . be careful to observe them with all your heart and with all your soul” (26:16).

“. . . if you heed the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you today, and are careful to observe them” (28:13).

“. . . command your children to be careful to observe—all the words of this law” (32:46).

The message is loud and clear: be careful to obey *every* and *all* commands of God. Some would consider these many statements as mindless repetition. Why this “overkill”? Because humanity has proven since the beginning that it is nearly unfailingly *not* careful. Were Adam and Eve careful to obey all that God commanded? No, and their progeny, all humanity, has followed in their footsteps ever since.

Was ancient Israel careful to obey? Of course not! Their history is a record of failure nearly at every turn. Was the early church careful? Not completely. So, in various places we find the writers of the New Testament having to admonish those who were missing the mark. What about in more recent times? Were the leaders of our former fellowship careful in their obedience? Like ancient Israel, the answer is the same: of course not! God’s church would look far different if they had been.

What about those in the greater church of God today? Most recognize that we are in the Laodicean era of God’s church. What is a Laodicean? Scripture describes a Laodicean as one who is lukewarm or half-hearted, suggesting that such a Christian shows a lack of intensity or focus that is almost the opposite of being careful.

To admit that we are in the Laodicean era is to acknowledge the reality that the vast majority of us *are not* careful in our obedience to God. This situation illustrates the perversity of human nature that, for most of us, the repetition of a command fifteen times is still not enough to make the message stick.

While Deuteronomy repeatedly warns us to adhere carefully to all that God commands, Christ takes it even further, saying, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word” that comes from God (Matthew 4:4; Luke 4:4). In Matthew 5:18, He adds, “For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.” Not even the smallest letter or word or even one little hook of a Hebrew letter is to be overlooked.

Therefore, we are to live by every word as Christ commands, even if it is only two or three words or just a small two-letter word. Everything matters. Notice two examples that illustrate that it is a mistake to overlook even the smallest of details.

Count for Yourselves

For the first example, notice an instruction that God gives regarding Pentecost in Leviticus 23:15: “And you shall count for yourselves from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering: seven Sabbaths shall be completed.”

This verse teaches how to count Pentecost, but it also reveals *who* should count Pentecost. Who is the “you” in verse 15? In verse 6, “you” is the person who is to eat unleavened bread. This “you,” then, is each one of us. The addition of “for yourselves” makes it even more emphatic that *we* are to do the counting. It is not done by a calendar, not by the ministry, but “for yourselves.”

Just as the ministry does not eat unleavened bread for us because God commands “you” to eat it, it follows that they are not to count Pentecost for us either. We eat unleavened bread every year, so we should also be counting Pentecost *for ourselves* every year. “You” and “for yourselves” are not in and of themselves significant words, but here they become significant because *God* said them.

Does this counting seem to be a small thing? Yes, it does seem inconsequential. But we are to live by every word that God gives to us, not just those *we* consider important. The name “Laodicea” originates from two Greek words: *laos* meaning “people” and *dike* meaning “to judge” or “to decide.” For a Laodicean, *they*, the people, take it upon themselves to decide what is important instead of submitting to whatever God says.

Why would God have each of us count Pentecost in place of looking at a calendar—the way most of us have always determined which day to observe? Each of us counting every year when calendars are easily available does not seem to make much sense. But that is irrelevant. What is relevant is that we do what God commands us to do, to be careful to obey *all* He commands.

Consider an experience Herbert W. Armstrong recounted in the May 1981 *Good News* article entitled, “Why Many Don’t Understand Pentecost”:

I had learned in my intensive, almost night-and-day study of the Sabbath question that we are commanded also to keep the seven annual Holy Days.

I DID NOT KNOW WHY! I knew only that God said, “DO IT!” My wife and I did—alone! For seven years!

We have his good example to do whatever God tells us to do and trust that God, who loves us, has a reason for what He commands, even if we are clueless as to why. Herbert Armstrong was one who followed all those admonitions in Deuteronomy to be *careful* to obey *whatever* he saw commanded by God, even if it meant changing years of error he adamantly taught. Do we follow that example, or are we Laodiceans deciding for ourselves rather than counting for ourselves as God specifically commands?

God’s Love

A second example illustrates well the error of overlooking even the smallest of words. As believers, we have been personally called by God, which is a great honor. However, are we aware that God loves no one in the universe more than us—*no one*, including Jesus Christ? By what authority is that claim made? How about Jesus Christ Himself?

In His last prayer just before His arrest, Christ prays for “those who will believe in Me through their [the disciples’] word” (John 17:20). That includes each of us who believe in Christ because of the words His disciples wrote in the Bible. Referring to these believers in verse 23, He asks God to reveal to the world “that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.”

Understanding the full impact of this verse hinges on the little, two-letter word “as.” One definition is “to the same extent or degree; equally.” “Equally” means no more, no less. This definition makes Jesus’ request staggering in its implications! It means we can truthfully say that there is not a being in the universe—including Jesus Christ—whom God loves more than us. Every individual whom God has called can say the same thing. God loves us all at the same incredible, beyond-our-comprehension level.

This verse also shows Christ’s unbelievable love for us. He has been with God forever, yet the Son feels no animosity that our Father loves us Johnny-come-latelies just as much, unlike the elder brother in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. In fact, in His prayer Jesus is asking God to broadcast this

truth to the world! Our Savior is preeminent in position and responsibility—but not in the Father’s love. As the perfect Parent, God does not love any one child more than the others.

Yet, in the midst of our trials, do we believe Jesus Christ? Is there any bit of knowledge more important to have deeply embedded in our minds as we face life’s many problems and challenges? We have the assurance of the depth of God’s love for us from Christ Himself. That could be the most important single piece of information about God’s love that we can know, and God packed it into one, two-letter word.

Are we to be careful to live by every word, not to overlook even one of them, no matter how small? That question deserves a resounding, “Yes!”

Unique Circumstances

Through these two examples, we see that every word matters. From the many repetitions in Deuteronomy, we see that carefully obeying every word is vital. We should not make the mistake in thinking this is a small point.

Failure to be careful in our obedience has unique consequences as we approach the end of this age. It will be a time of tribulation whose severity the world has never seen or ever will see again. Christ warns us of that in Matthew 24:21, “For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be.”

God promises protection for some during this time:

Because you have patiently obeyed me despite the persecution, therefore I will protect you from the time of Great Tribulation and temptation, which will come upon the world to test everyone alive. (Revelation 3:10, *The Living Bible*)

Seek the Lord [inquire for Him, inquire of Him, and require Him as the foremost necessity of your life], all you humble of the land who have acted in compliance with His revealed will *and* have kept His commandments; seek righteousness, seek humility [inquire for them, require them as vital]. It may be you will be hidden in the day of the Lord’s anger. (Zephaniah 2:3, *The Amplified Bible*)

Who receives this offer of protection? It is those who “have patiently obeyed” Christ and “have acted in compliance with His revealed will and have kept His commandments.” It could not be more clear.

In conjunction with obedience, Zephaniah also instructs us to “seek humility.” Why is humility vital? It takes humility to submit carefully to *all* that God commands compared to the Laodicean arrogance in deciding for oneself what is important to obey and what is of too little consequence to obey completely.

Many call this place of protection where God hides the obedient at the time of the Great Tribulation the “Place of Safety.” They consider it a refuge provided by God for three and a half years of final training. People in God’s church have debated the where, the why, and the how of this subject for decades.

If there is a Place of Safety, who would God want there? It would be a time of intense training. Would He not want people who have *already* proven they are completely in sync with Him, believing and living by His every word, willing to follow without question wherever He leads? Why would He take on at that crucial time the task of herding cats, people who have proven they prefer to do their own thing? He has already demonstrated the futility of such an undertaking in His dealings with ancient Israel.

At this unique time in history, being careful could be the difference between being protected from what is to come and being left squarely in the middle of it. It could be a choice between life or death, escape or tribulation. Are we making our choice now by how we respond to those fifteen commands in Deuteronomy?

We can be careless about our obedience and lie to ourselves about the quality of that obedience. After all, it is what Laodiceans do:

Because you say, “I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing”—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked. (Revelation 3:17)

God sees the truth. Time seems short as we see the world around us rapidly disintegrating daily. So, at this critical time, we need to consider soberly, honestly, and carefully, and obey *all* that Christ means when He says, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God” (Luke 4:4).

Carefully obeying every word matters.