

# Sermon 15, The Scripted Christian Life, Exodus 5:1

Read Philippians 2:1-11

**Proposition:** God approaches even Pharaoh with respect, but Moses doesn't — teaching us to heed God's word and esteem others better than ourselves.

- I. God's Script, 3:18
- II. Moses' Flawed Performance of God's Script, 5:1
- III. The Lessons
  - A. Don't Attach God's Name to Moral Crusades He Didn't Authorize
  - B. Don't Call Your Own Words God's Words
  - C. Honor All Men, Even Really Evil Ones
  - D. Follow God's Script by Keeping All His Commands at Once

## Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, one commentator drily comments that Exodus 4 ends in a way rare in the Torah: God, Moses, and Israel are all in harmony. Well, obviously, that situation did not last very long. I titled last week's sermon "Why We Worship" because I wanted to emphasize that we need to worship God regularly for His mighty acts. But the text goes on to show not only why we worship, but also, in today's passage, why we don't. We don't worship because so often our efforts to obey God make everything worse! That's what happened to Moses and the Israelites in Exodus 5. The text more than hints that part of the reason everything got worse is that Moses didn't exactly follow God's instructions. But when he backs up and tries again, this time delivering God's message in a more accurate fashion, either the damage is already done or Pharaoh was going to resist in his favorite way anyway. Regardless, there are lessons here for us about the difficulty of obedience, about the reality that trying to do what God wants is likely going to make things worse before they get better, and a final lesson about what to do when things go south. That is to go back to God and seek His help. He will give it to you when you acknowledge that you need it.

Well, let's dive in.

### I. Moses Disregards God's Word, v. 1

The opening of Exodus 5 is a piece of literary genius. If you don't know anything else about the book of Exodus, if the names "tabernacle" and "Red Sea" mean nothing to you, you probably know "Thus says the LORD: Let my people go!" Right here, in the first fifteen seconds of the first encounter with Pharaoh, the stage is set. You can't accuse Moses of beating around the bush, of hiding his intentions, or of being a slow speaker who just can't get his point across. Yes, Moses went there. Yes, he broached a controversial subject in the most controversial way possible. The man who named his son "Stranger There" is not therapeutically inclined, and he has no time at all to deal with Pharaoh's finer feelings. We cannot help but applaud the direct approach. Way to go, Moses! He may be 80 years old, but he's still got it. He just marches in there and delivers the command to Pharaoh. No ifs, ands, or buts.

There is only one small problem here. As noble and heroic as Moses looks to us, speaking truth to power, demanding the immediate abolition of Hebrew slavery up and down the length of the Nile, he is not doing God's work in God's way. "Who am I?" he wanted to know. He insisted to God that in his own human power he was never going to succeed in getting the people out of there. Now we see that he was only too correct. Remember, God had completely scripted the first encounter with Pharaoh. Moses was not supposed to wing this one. Go back with me to 3:18.

You shall come, you and the elders of Israel, to the king of Egypt; and you shall say to him, 'The LORD God of the Hebrews has met with us; and now, please, let us go three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God.'

That was what God envisioned for this opening salvo in His long war with Pharaoh. Obviously, God did intend to force the issue. But He told Moses to take the first step in the negotiations by speaking respectfully to Pharaoh. Notice the differences between the script and how Moses enacted it.

First of all, he left the elders behind. His age fitted him nicely to appear among the elders of Israel. He was supposed to make his request backed up by community leaders, people known to Pharaoh as the obvious local elites among the enslaved Hebrew population. He somehow left them out, and just came into the palace with his brother. Second, Moses uses this family name, "Israel," not the ethnic name "Hebrews" that God told him to use. Now, in ch. 1 the Pharaoh who began the oppression called God's people "Israel." That was a while ago, but presumably the name "Israel" is not something totally unfamiliar among the Egyptian elite. Anyhow, the point is not whether "Israel" and "Hebrew" were just as interchangeable to Pharaoh as they are to us. Maybe, maybe not. The point is that God specified what to say. He scripted the encounter. Moses deviated from that script, however minutely, at his peril.

Third, and more obviously different, the script from the Almighty said to ask with a "please" for three days off to sacrifice. Based on extant Egyptian records of work, it appears that it was customary to give slaves a little time off from working on these monumental state projects so that they could go and sacrifice to their gods. The elders' request, then, would have been neither unprecedented nor unusual, and it would have been asked politely.

Did you get that? God was not rude or demanding, *even to Pharaoh*. Yes, God knows the future and He is planning on having a showdown with Pharaoh. But He does not open the conversation with vitriol. He opens the conversation with a polite request to Pharaoh to do something for His people that Pharaoh is accustomed to doing for all of his slave populations.

Do you have the patience and respect of God Almighty? Do you treat everyone with respect, even if they are hardened baby-murdering, slaveholding, self-righteous pigs? God does. And you and I must do so too. Fear God, honor all men. The New Testament puts these two commands right next to each other, and the book of Exodus shows us that God does so Himself.

He has the right to command Pharaoh and to threaten Pharaoh. But He does not take it upon Himself to abuse Pharaoh or to cast harsh and intemperate language at him.

Wow. Brothers and sisters, do you know this God? Have you learned the lesson of the divine patience, the divine attitude of respect and honor?

But in the actual execution of what God had put in the script, Moses left all that behind. He does not address Pharaoh as his superior, saying “Please let us go.” He addresses Pharaoh as his inferior, saying “Send out my people,” in a full-blown imperative that comes from Yahweh, God of Israel. Does God have that right? Of course. But does Moses have that right? Not so much. Yes, he is a great prophet. But he’s also at the beginning of his career, just learning to speak the words of God. Moses is privileged to speak and write “Thus saith the LORD” many times. But this time, he miquotes Yahweh. This time, he attaches the name of God to the words of his own heart.

You and I have never done that. We have never vented our own spleen on another human being and then claimed that it was really God speaking. We have never gone on the rampage against someone who is genuinely a rotten human being, like Pharaoh but worse and more evil, and then laid that attack at the Almighty’s door. Have we? Of course we have. Some of us have done it more than others. But all of us have attacked, ranted, told off, and generally said “You are completely out of line, and God demands that you implement my agenda for your life right now!” All of us know people who are in the habit of doing this on a daily basis. By the grace of God, most of you have this attitude under better control, and it only comes out in moments of extreme stress. But you know it’s in your heart, just like it was in Moses’ heart. God said “Get in there, be respectful, bring along the authorized representatives of the community, and ask for something that is a known privilege of slaves.” Moses gets in there, is totally not respectful, demands immediate abolition, and does it in the name of God.

So in your personal life, in your political life, in your place and calling, whatever it is, learn the lesson of Moses. Do it God’s way; follow His script. Or else don’t do it at all.

What Moses did was wrong not just because of its bad consequences (for all we know, Pharaoh would have been livid anyway), but primarily because God told him to do it a different way.

Now, I daresay God is not going to script any of your encounters this week. If you have the chance to campaign against abortion, to talk to a transsexual rights activist, or to address a politician, God is not going to give you the exact words to say and tell you who to bring along. But He has given you an entire Bible’s worth of commands, and He expects you to keep them all at the same time. In other words, your script demands that you not forget the precept of charity while enforcing the precept of justice. Your script demands that no matter how degraded and wicked the lowlife to whom you’re speaking, you still follow the golden rule and demonstrate that you think your interlocutor is a better human being than you are. Because that’s what the Bible says: Everyone is better than you. “Esteem others better than yourselves” (Phillippians 2:3). To act in a Christian way, you are required not just to treat other people as better than you are, but to actually think that they are — even if they are genocidaires and slaveowners like the

King of Egypt was in Moses' day, even if they are propagandists and liars, even if they are thieves and murderers. Allow me to just observe that this particular Christian virtue is much neglected in our day, including by me. I am way too impressed by how virtuous I am to concede that my conversation partner is better than me.

Brothers and sisters, too much Christian engagement, in the home, at school, at church, and in the public arena consists of self-righteous grandstanding. I will make a partial exception here for the business world. I think that in general, you genuinely do respect and honor your co-workers and bosses, and that you treat them as you would want to be treated. I praise God for that attitude of honor that prevails in the workplace. But as we talk to our children at home or other people's children at school, and as we look at our disgusting public figures and cultural products, we all-too-easily adopt the same attitude that brought Moses into Pharaoh's presence to demand immediate abolition of Hebrew slavery in the name of God Almighty.

Don't get me wrong. God was against Pharaoh's slaveholding ways. God was acting to put a stop to them, and in the event, He was going to do a whole lot worse to Pharaoh than just use an imperative on him. But that's God's business. Moses' business was to follow the script, to carefully do what God had told him to do. And the same goes for you and me. As we attempt to carry out our callings in our assigned places, then, let us focus on obeying all of God's laws, not just the ones that appeal to us. Against the therapeutic, affirming face of our culture, we insist that God's moral standards are absolute and not to be compromised. Against the crusading, self-righteous face of our culture, we insist that God nourishes and sustains those who fight against Him, and that the right to be wrong lies ultimately in the patience of God, who is kind to the evil and ungrateful. In other words, we believe in kindness, not therapy. We believe in God, not in our own virtue. And let's not forget it. The moment our Christianity becomes about asserting that we are better is the moment we have forgotten the whole reason Jesus came.

By all means have a better idea and assert it. By all means condemn evil wherever you see it. But if you don't see it in your own heart, then I have good reason to question your ability to detect evil. And of course you should share your better idea. But if your better idea boils down to "I am a better person than he is," you don't have a better idea. You just have a large ego.

Brothers and sisters, will you learn the lessons that Moses neglected in this verse? Will you allow the Almighty to speak for Himself? Will you be sure to confine yourself to speaking His words in His way, with His attitude?

Here's what my point is not: Moses got off-script and thereby made everything worse for Israel.

No.

Jesus came and followed His Father's script to the letter. He *was* the script, the Word who expresses all that is in the Father's mind. And things got bad for Him really quickly. The point is not that if you stick to the script, you will avoid a lot of pain and suffering. The point is that if you stick to the script, you will please your Father and look like His Son.

How can we bear to do that when confronting evil? How do we not let our tongues, our frustration over our people's plight, run away with us? The answer is that we have to trust that

God will save and that His methods are the ones we have to choose over our own ideas. God saves through suffering. God saves through the painful and shameful death of the cross. But He saves, in a way that delivering moral ultimatums never can. So don't look to your own passion to deliver yourself or any other suffering person. Your passion doesn't save. Jesus' passion does. Moses had to learn that Moses wasn't going to deliver the people. By the end of ch. 5, he knows it all too well. You and I have got to learn that we aren't going to deliver the people either. The more we try, the more chances we'll have to learn that lesson.

Jesus saves. The way of salvation lies along the path of listening to and enacting His words, not substituting your own. Wash off that self-anointing, say to yourself, "I am not the Messiah." But then add, "But I know someone who is." Then go to Him, as Moses did at the end of ch. 5. Nothing can keep the Lord from saving — nothing but your attitude that esteems yourself better than others. He didn't come for the righteous. If you are just stuck on how much better than Pharaoh you are, you won't be saved. If you feel morally superior to *Washington Post* reporters, you won't be saved. Humble yourself. Say "Please" and mean it — not just to the evil power of the day, but especially to God, the good power of all days and times.

Moses needed to learn to follow God's word. When he did, he brought the people out of Egypt. And when you follow God's word, you will know how poorly you follow it, how little righteousness you have, and how much you need a Savior. His name is Jesus. Trust Him, and you'll hold a feast of worship to Him, not just in the wilderness of this world, but in the great banquet hall of the New Jerusalem. Amen.