

When God Hasn't Said Anything About It

Having focused extensively in previous lessons on the nature of God's specific and generic instructions, we turn our attention more fully to the other end of the spectrum. What about those innumerable instances when God *hasn't* said anything? How should we treat the silence of God? Is it permissive or prohibitive? When God hasn't specifically addressed something in either positive or negative terms, may we faithfully interpret his silence as license to proceed in whatever direction we choose?

Granted, we don't read anything in God's revelation to mankind about the yearly observance of Easter, but what's the big deal if we're remembering Jesus? The use of guitars, keyboards and drums in our corporate gatherings of worship can't be specifically authorized using the New Testament, but what's wrong with using them if our praise is enthusiastically directed toward God? May we build whatever we would like to build, fund whatever we would like to fund, solicit in whatever way we would like to solicit, as long as some justifiable good comes as a result of our efforts?

As human beings, we can formulate an endless amount of "good reasons." Given enough time and wiggle room, we can justify nearly anything. We can appeal to emotions and reason from past experiences and motivate with inspiring rhetoric, but *we* are not the ultimate standard of authority. The bedrock principles delivered in Isaiah 55.6-11 continue to resonate throughout the created order:

"Seek the LORD while he may be found;
call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake his way,
and the unrighteous man his thoughts;
let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.
For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

Words from the mouth of the Creator have been delivered to and preserved for his creation. There is divine purpose behind his revealed thoughts and demonstrated ways. He has already told us that his ways and thoughts are inherently distinct from our ways and thoughts. They are higher and holier. His purposes will be accomplished; his will shall succeed. Our responsibility, as repeatedly referenced in this study, is simple and straightforward.

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. (Eph 5.15-17)

In the end, therefore, the question is infinitely bigger than “Why can’t we?” or “What’s the big deal?” Despite our opinions, justifications, and rationalizations, the only thing that truly matters in the final analysis is this: how does God treat his silence in the Scriptures? Is it prohibitive or permissive?

The Sounds of Silence in the Old Testament

In Exodus 14, the people of Israel stood on the brink of freedom. Having been delivered from Egyptian bondage, they had been led by Moses to the shores of the Red Sea. What they didn’t realize was that Pharaoh had changed his mind about allowing them to be free.

The Egyptians pursued them, all Pharaoh’s horses and chariots and his horsemen and his army, and overtook them encamped at the sea, by Pi-hahiroth, in front of Baal-zephon.

When Pharaoh drew near, the people of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, and they feared greatly. And the people of Israel cried out to the LORD. They said to Moses, “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? Is not this what we said to you in Egypt: ‘Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.” And Moses said to the people, “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.” (Exo 14.9-14)

What did God want them to do? Wait. Wait for further instruction. Fear not, stand firm, and wait for the salvation of the LORD. How long should they wait? Until they received the command to move. Even if Pharaoh was in sight? Even if Pharaoh was in sight. What if the command to move didn’t come? Fear not. Stand firm. Wait. God will deliver you. He knows what he’s doing.

The LORD said to Moses, "Why do you cry to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward. Lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the people of Israel may go through the sea on dry ground. And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen." (Exo 14.15-18)

When God's people wait for God's instructions so that they might fulfill God's purposes, God gets the glory.

In Numbers 9, the children of Israel had made their way to Mount Sinai. It had been a year since they had observed the first Passover in Egypt.

And the LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the first month of the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying, "Let the people of Israel keep the Passover at its appointed time. On the fourteenth day of this month, at twilight, you shall keep it at its appointed time; according to all its statutes and all its rules you shall keep it." So Moses told the people of Israel that they should keep the Passover. And they kept the Passover in the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month, at twilight, in the wilderness of Sinai; according to all that the LORD commanded Moses, so the people of Israel did. And there were certain men who were unclean through touching a dead body, so that they could not keep the Passover on that day, and they came before Moses and Aaron on that day. And those men said to him, "We are unclean through touching a dead body. Why are we kept from bringing the LORD's offering at its appointed time among the people of Israel?" And Moses said to them, "Wait, that I may hear what the LORD will command concerning you." (Num 9.1-8)

"Why can't we?" is not a novel religious question. For centuries, men and women have faced choices of practical conduct in light of God's revelation. "Knowing what I know, what will I do?" "Having heard what I've heard, how should I proceed?" "If God hasn't addressed it, why can't I?"

These "certain men," had a choice to make. In Numbers 5.1-4, the LORD had already commanded the people of Israel to put out of the camp everyone who was unclean through contact with the dead. But it was Passover! A national celebration! And yes, this is what the LORD had specifically said, but did it really apply in this instance? Didn't this extraordinary situation overshadow what God had dictated in the law? "Why can't we?" was the question put to Moses.

Moses' response? Wait. God's silence on this specific nuance of law and conduct is significant. We shouldn't presume. We shouldn't rationalize. We should wait and seek

clarification from the LORD before we act. And in Numbers 9.9-14, God provided his answer, granting special permission for the men's observance one month later. But what would have happened if these men had interpreted God's silence as license to act? Multiple Old Testament examples suggest the consequences could have been disastrous.

In Deuteronomy 28-30, Moses delivered some of his final instructions and warnings to the people of Israel. In Deuteronomy 28.1-14, he established the blessings that would naturally come as a result of faithful obedience to the voice of the LORD. In Deuteronomy 28.15-68, he extensively elaborated on the curses that would consume the people if they did not obey. The principles behind his communication are simple and straightforward—if God said do it, do it! If God said don't do it, don't do it! Whether God had communicated something specifically or generically, the people were to respect his revelation. And as for the things he hadn't said?

“The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.” (Deut 29.29)

If God revealed it, it belongs to us, and our responsibility is to act. If God didn't reveal it, the secret things belong to the LORD, and his silence is not a license for action.

“Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it.” (Deut 12.32)

One of the holy vessels of the tabernacle system was the ark of the covenant. The LORD had “set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the ark of the covenant of the LORD to stand before the LORD to minister to him” (Deut 10.8). The LORD didn't say, “men from the tribes of Reuben, Simeon, Judah and Dan shall not carry the ark of the covenant.” But then again, a “thou shalt not” was unnecessary. By specifying the tribe of Levi as authorized, all other tribes of Israel were logically excluded.

Was God's silence concerning the rights of the tribes of Naphtali, Gad and Asher to carry the ark prohibitive? Listen to the logic of David, a man after God's own heart.

David built houses for himself in the city of David. And he prepared a place for the ark of God and pitched a tent for it. Then David said that no one but the Levites may carry the ark of God, for the LORD had chosen them to carry the ark of the LORD and to minister to him forever. (1 Chron 15.1-2)

King David understood that God's silence was prohibitive. When the LORD specifically authorized the Levites to carry the ark of the covenant, all others were logically excluded. “No one but the Levites” was authorized, and God's silence was to be respected.

Further instructions had been authoritatively given by God concerning the transporting of the ark.

“You shall cast four rings of gold for it and put them on its four feet, two rings on the one side of it, and two rings on the other side of it. You shall make poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold. And you shall put the poles into the rings on the sides of the ark to carry the ark by them.” (Exo 25.12-14)

Though he was a man after God’s own heart, when King David failed to respectfully follow the LORD’s clear commandments concerning the carrying of the ark, disaster soon followed.

David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. And David arose and went with all the people who were with him from Baale-judah to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the name of the LORD of hosts who sits enthroned on the cherubim. And they carried the ark of God on a new cart and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. And Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart, with the ark of God, and Ahio went before the ark.

And David and all the house of Israel were making merry before the LORD, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals. And when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah, and God struck him down there because of his error, and he died there beside the ark of God. And David was angry because the LORD had burst forth against Uzzah. And that place is called Perez-uzzah, to this day. And David was afraid of the LORD that day, and he said, “How can the ark of the LORD come to me?” So David was not willing to take the ark of the LORD into the city of David. But David took it aside to the house of Obed-edom the Gittite. And the ark of the LORD remained in the house of Obed-edom the Gittite three months, and the LORD blessed Obed-edom and all his household. (2 Sam 6.1-11)

God had never delivered a “thou shalt not” in respect to transporting the ark by cart. His law was silent in regard to methods other than poles on the sides of the ark. Was a deviation with good intentions accompanied by joyful praise a big deal? Listen to David’s adapted perspective as he later spoke to the priests and heads of the fathers’ houses of the Levites:

“You are the heads of the Levitical families; you and your fellow Levites are to consecrate yourselves and bring up the ark of the LORD, the God of Israel, to the place I have prepared for it. It was because you, the Levites, did not bring it up the first time that the LORD our God broke out in anger against us. We did not inquire

of him about how to do it in the prescribed way.” (1 Chron 15.12-13, NIV).

There was a prescribed way to move the ark. When human beings didn’t inquire of the LORD, but presumed for themselves, the consequences were dire. And they had no one to blame but themselves.

Years later, when the fame of King Uzziah—who was of the tribe of Judah—spread far, he overstepped the bounds of the law of God and was swiftly punished.

But when he was strong, he grew proud, to his destruction. For he was unfaithful to the LORD his God and entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense. But Azariah the priest went in after him, with eighty priests of the LORD who were men of valor, and they withstood King Uzziah and said to him, “It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD, but for the priests, the sons of Aaron, who are consecrated to burn incense. Go out of the sanctuary, for you have done wrong, and it will bring you no honor from the LORD God.” Then Uzziah was angry. Now he had a censer in his hand to burn incense, and when he became angry with the priests, leprosy broke out on his forehead in the presence of the priests in the house of the LORD, by the altar of incense. And Azariah the chief priest and all the priests looked at him, and behold, he was leprous in his forehead! And they rushed him out quickly, and he himself hurried to go out, because the LORD had struck him. And King Uzziah was a leper to the day of his death, and being a leper lived in a separate house, for he was excluded from the house of the LORD. (2 Chron 26.16-21)

The point of these, and so many other Old Testament accounts that could be listed, is plain. Thousands of years later, they scream out to us to be careful, to pay attention to what God has said, and to respect his silence.

“For the sons of Judah have done evil in my sight, declares the LORD. They have set their detestable things in the house that is called by my name, to defile it. And they have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind.” (Jer 7.30-31)

If God revealed it, it belonged to the people. Their responsibility was to act in accordance. If God didn’t reveal it, the secret things were to be left to his prerogative. His silence was not to be regarded as a license for action.

“Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it.” (Deut 12.32)

New Testament Echoes of the Same Principles Behind God’s Silence

We are not, on this historical side of the cross, under the authoritative scope of the Old Testament. At this point in God’s eternal plan of redemption, we are not subject to the jurisdiction of the old law delivered through Moses. And yet, we shouldn’t be surprised that the principles behind healthy respect for the Giver of all instruction and the Definer of all expectations would continue to resonate as foundational to “the law of liberty” (James 2.12). Fearful reverence for the silence of God is repeatedly prescribed for those who are “of Christ.”

Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen. (1 Pet 4.10-11, NIV)

Could there be any humbler, safer, more reverent approach as created beings than to strive to speak where the Bible speaks and to remain silent where the Bible is silent? The apostle Paul made his strong appeals to the Christians in Corinth based on that foundational principle.

I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another. For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it? (1 Cor 4.6-7)

They were the recipients of God-breathed truth via Spirit-guided apostles. If God’s will had been revealed in a given area, they shouldn’t boast as if there was no standard or expectation. If God’s will had not been revealed in a given area, they should zealously guard against going beyond what was written. Speak where God has spoken. Remain silent where God is silent!

In the strongest of ways, John powerfully warns against ignoring the revealed will of God.

I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we were commanded by the Father. And now I ask you, dear lady—not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but the one we have had from the beginning—that we love one another. And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, so that you should walk in it. For many

deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works. (2 John 4-11)

There is an objective body of truth described by a Spirit-led apostle as “the teaching of Christ.” To step beyond it—either into that which is specifically forbidden, or into the unauthorized realm of silence—is to transgress the will of Almighty God. And whoever does so progresses without God.

When men of the first-century stepped beyond the teachings of the authoritative apostles, the transgression was recognized and rebuked. In Acts 15, in response to certain men from Judea who were teaching Gentiles, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved,” the apostles and elders—with the whole church in Jerusalem—sent representatives to Antioch with a letter.

“The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, **although we gave them no instructions**, it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Acts 15.23-26)

The writer of Hebrews provides several illustrations which show how we ought to interact with the silence of God.

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

For to which of the angels did God ever say,

"You are my Son,
today I have begotten you"?

Or again,

"I will be to him a father,
and he shall be to me a son"? (Heb 1.1-5)

In these last days, by God's design, we are to listen to his Son. Why? One of the inspired arguments is rooted in the silence of God.

In Hebrews 8.4, the writer affirms that Jesus could not function as a priest during his time on the earth. Why? He was of the tribe of Judah, not Levi.

Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron? For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well. For the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. (Heb 7.11-14)

In the Old Testament, it was an understood fact that no tribe other than Levi could install a priest to serve at the altar. Why? God had said nothing regarding priests from another tribe. But in these last days, there is a change in the priesthood, and by necessity, a change in the law as well. It is evident that Jesus, our high priest, was of the tribe of Judah. The thunderous silence of God means something!

Conclusion

When God wants his will carried out in a certain way, he is very specific in his instructions, whether he is referring to individual disciples or the organization, mission, work and methods of his church. If we truly love him with all of our hearts, then we will respect the silence of his revelation to mankind and limit ourselves to the guidance he has provided.

To speak where the Bible speaks and strive for silence where the Bible is silent is a noble goal worthy of our highest efforts and most steadfast dedication. When God's people wait for God's instructions so that they might fulfill God's purposes, God gets the glory.

Questions for Growth and Discussion

1. Have you heard people reason from the “Why can’t we?” point-of-view when it comes to matters of service to God? If so, what were the issues? And why is “Why can’t we?” an unstable foundation upon which to build our relationship with God?
2. How does the example of the men who were unclean at the time of the Passover in Numbers 9 demonstrate for us that the end does not justify the means?
3. Is Moses’ response to their question in Numbers 9.8 still a valid approach for those who want to faithfully serve God? If not, why not? If so, why?
4. In Deuteronomy 29.29, when Moses said that “the secret things belong to the LORD our God,” what did he mean? Is his statement still true and applicable to us today?
5. In 1 Chronicles 15.12-13, David explains that the anger of God had broken out against the people because they had not inquired of him about how to move the ark “in the prescribed way.” What does he mean by “the prescribed way,” and does God have a “prescribed way” for Christian life and service?
6. Why was King Uzziah afflicted by God with leprosy in 2 Chronicles 26.16-21?
7. How will our approach to everything be shaped if we resolve to speak “as one who speaks the very words of God”? (1 Pet 4.10-11)
8. In your own words, summarize John’s point in 2 John 4-11.
9. Why was it a “big deal” that certain Jews were preaching the need for Gentiles to be circumcised, even though the apostles had given them no such instructions? (Acts 15.24)
10. Summarize how the writer of Hebrews reasons from a healthy respect for the silence of God.