

Obedience is better \* 1 Samuel 15

October 20, 2019 \* Langford Community Church \* Graham Gladstone

This morning we're going to pick up our story where we left off before Thanksgiving – the people of Israel have asked for a king and God agrees to give them a king. He tells Samuel who it will be and Samuel anoints this handsome young man named Saul to become the very first human king of Israel.

At first, things go well. Saul appears to be humble and gracious and merciful; he wins victories for his people and the people are pleased to have him as their king. It really does look as though King Saul is stewarding the nation for the true king, YHWH, as it should be.

But over time, some of that sheen starts to wear off. You start to see more selfish and arrogant tendencies poking through Saul's character. You start to wonder if maybe King Saul isn't pursuing his own agenda, instead of the true King's.

And all that comes to a head I think in the passage that was just read for us – chapter 15. I had originally intended to cover the whole of Saul's life, but that's a huge swatch of Scripture, and I found that it really obscured the point, rather than clarified it. So we're going to look at chapter 15 instead, because I think that it is emblematic of the lesson that we learn from Saul's life as a whole.

And the question at the heart of Saul's life is one that is relevant to us today. What's more important to God? Obedience or sacrifice? Is God more pleased when we give things up for Him and ritually honour Him in church, or when we simply walk in His ways? Do formal religious activities make up the difference when we don't walk in His ways? Those are good questions, and chapter 15 – indeed, all of Saul's life – helps us to answer it. So join me in chapter 15, and we'll see what it says. 1 Samuel 15 and we'll start at verse 1.

Now at this point, Samuel has anointed Saul and Saul has led his people to a great victory over an invading king whose name is literally 'the Snake' – king Nahash the Ammonite. King YHWH has helped king Saul to win a number of battles, and the whole nation has acclaimed Saul as their ruler. Samuel remains on the scene to give spiritual guidance to the king and to the people and in chapter 12, he leaves them with a very important reminder – 1 Samuel 12:24 - 24 But be sure to fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart; (you have a king now but the LORD still deserves your full attention); consider what great things he has done for you (and that's REALLY important. Samuel calls the people to call to mind all that God has done for them, and let THAT motivate them to serve and revere the LORD). Because if they don't... if they persist in doing evil - ~~25 Yet if you persist in doing evil,~~ both you and your king will be swept away (1Sa 12:24-25 NIV). That's really important. Even though Saul reigns, YHWH is still the king, and even King Saul is accountable to YHWH. Chapter 15 puts that to the test. 15:1.

NIV 1 Samuel 15:1 Samuel said to Saul, "I am the one the LORD sent to anoint you king over his people Israel; so listen now to the message from the LORD.

2 This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt.

Now this shows that YHWH is a patient and long-suffering God. WAY back at the Exodus, when God brought His people out of slavery in Egypt, the very first danger they faced was an attack by these people the Amalekites. YHWH saved His people; they won the battle and got away, but YHWH never

forgot that offense against His children. And He was waiting, generation after generation, to see if any of the Amalekites would turn away from the evil spirit that led them to attack His people in the first place. And generation and generation the sin remained, and so finally, here, in Saul's generation, He would see justice done. And this is what Saul was to do, as the agent of God in the world. Verse 3 – 3 Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.' "

This kind of attack sounds brutal to us – and it was – and it's something that we don't dare do any more - but it was actually quite common in the ANE. Archaeologists have found all sorts of evidence of this 'total destruction' warfare – [here's a picture](#) of an ancient stone memorial (a little later than this period – Omri's reign) where a Moabite king (just east of Israel) brags of 'totally destroying' seven thousand Israelite captives (Chisholm, TtT, Hist/Cultural Bkgd).

And recall that this is not an unprovoked attack on an innocent people; this is God exacting justice for the ever present wickedness that led Amalek to attack Israel in the first place. He has put it off as long as He could, giving them all a chance to repent, but it hasn't happened. And so, He gives the command.

King Saul has one job. Destroy everything.

4 So Saul summoned the men and mustered them at Telaim--two hundred thousand foot soldiers and ten thousand men from Judah.

5 Saul went to the city of Amalek and set an ambush in the ravine.

Ok, so far so good.

6 Then he said to the Kenites, "Go away, leave the Amalekites so that I do not destroy you along with them; for you showed kindness to all the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt." So the Kenites moved away from the Amalekites.

Ok. God didn't really say anything about the Kenites, but good to show mercy where you can.

7 Then Saul attacked the Amalekites all the way from Havilah to Shur, to the east of Egypt.

8 He took Agag king of the Amalekites alive, and all his people he totally destroyed with the sword.

Well...

9 But Saul and the army spared Agag and the best of the sheep and cattle, the fat calves and lambs--everything that was good. These they were unwilling to destroy completely, but everything that was despised and weak they totally destroyed.

Now what does that tell you about their attitude toward God's command? We'll take out the trash, but we're keeping the best stuff. The best of the sheep and cattle, the calves and lambs – they were unwilling to destroy – those are valuable. They'll fetch a good price. And having a foreign king in your custody – well that's a huge status symbol for a king like Saul.

But what was Saul's one job? Destroy everything.

10 Then the word of the LORD came to Samuel:

11 "I am grieved that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions." Samuel was troubled, and he cried out to the LORD all that night.

YHWH feels that pain of Saul's rejection. He graciously chose to raise this nobody out of obscurity to make him the first ever human ruler of his people; and Saul has spit in His face. In keeping the livestock alive, Saul has said – I'll obey you as far as it benefits me, but beyond that point – I'm in charge.

YHWH's diagnosis is exactly right – verse 11 – Saul has turned away from me. Saul has made a decision NOT to follow YHWH, but instead to lead himself.

Well, the next morning, Samuel went to meet Saul and he ran into some people who said – 'you gotta go see the monument that Saul has put up to honour himself!'

Here's a picture of something comparable – a lot of ANE kings would put these up to proclaim how wonderful they are – and I expect that Saul's would do the same.

Anyways, as Samuel reached the camp, Saul came out to him, probably a little hung over from the night before but still bubbling with excitement and he says, verse 13 - "The LORD bless you! I have carried out the LORD's instructions."

~~12 Early in the morning Samuel got up and went to meet Saul, but he was told, "Saul has gone to Carmel. There he has set up a monument in his own honor and has turned and gone on down to Gilgal."  
13 When Samuel reached him, Saul said, "The LORD bless you! I have carried out the LORD's instructions."~~

14 But Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear?" Saul you had one job – destroy it all. And yet you've kept the best.

15 Saul answered, "The soldiers brought them from the Amalekites (it's their fault); *they* spared the best of the sheep and cattle to sacrifice to the LORD your God (*your?*), but we totally destroyed the rest."

16 "Stop!" Samuel said to Saul. "Let me tell you what the LORD said to me last night." "Tell me," Saul replied.

17 Samuel said, "Although you were once small in your own eyes, did you not become the head of the tribes of Israel? The LORD anointed you king over Israel. (You owe everything to Him!)

18 And he sent you on a mission, saying, 'Go and completely destroy those wicked people (again, this is righteous act – God paying back the sin of the people), the Amalekites; make war on them until you have wiped them out.'

19 Why did you not obey the LORD? Why did you pounce on the plunder and do evil in the eyes of the LORD?"

Now listen, Saul is about to do some phenomenal revisionist history – but there are a few key rules in interpreting Scripture. You can trust when God speaks and when the narrator speaks, but characters – they sometimes lie. And God has already told us – verse 11 – that Saul has turned his back on following God. So we need to read Saul's response in light of that.

20 "But I did obey the LORD," Saul said. "I went on the mission the LORD assigned me. I completely destroyed the Amalekites and brought back Agag their king. (Did you really destroy them then?)

21 The soldiers took sheep and cattle from the plunder, the best of what was devoted to God, in order to sacrifice them to the LORD your God at Gilgal."

We don't know for sure if this was true, or if this was an improvised excuse on the spot – 'oh yeah, we kept them for sacrifices – totally!'

But Samuel replies: 'Look, it doesn't matter.' Obedience is better than sacrifice. You could have sacrificed the whole of the plunder, plus all that you had, but it wouldn't mean a thing if you didn't do what I asked in the first place.

22 But Samuel replied: "Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.

23 For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has rejected you as king."

I read some really interesting commentary here from African theologians this week – they write – "God sees disobedience as more than just a refusal to carry out an instruction. It is an indicator of the state of our heart and of whether God is indeed the one we serve" (Gbile Akanni & Nupanga Weanzana ,350).

And it's clear that Saul is serving himself and not the LORD and that costs him the crown. This is God sweeping him away, just as Samuel had warned back in chapter 12. Remember that – Samuel says – if you have a king – but still – you need to serve and fear the LORD – otherwise you get swept away – and that's what happened. And this isn't Saul's first failure. He had already proven himself unfaithful in chapter 13 – he went ahead and offered unauthorized sacrifices and now, here, in chapter 15, he's stepped in it again. Keith Bodner calls chapter fifteen 'the final exam' for Saul (Bodner, 150) and clearly he has flunked the test. And Israel needs a king that will be fully devoted to God.

Well...

24 Then Saul said to Samuel, "I have sinned. I violated the LORD's command and your instructions. I was afraid of the people and so I gave in to them.

25 Now I beg you, forgive my sin and come back with me, so that I may worship the LORD."

Well now all of that is true and Saul is right to ask for forgiveness. Is he sincere in it though? He clearly knows what he has done wrong and he confesses all that he has done. That's good.

But... God has already told us that his heart is not in it (v. 11). And Saul has a habit of using outwardly religious forms to get what he wants. Back in chapter 13, he went ahead and offered sacrifices when he was supposed to wait for Samuel because he figured – 'well, that'll get God's favour and then we're bound to win.' Chapter 14, he takes into his counsel as priest a guy named Ahijah – Ahijah is Eli's great-grandson – so Saul's priest is from the discredited line of Eli. Doesn't matter what the priest believes, as long as you've got one. 14:18, the battle's brewing with the Philistines and Saul calls for the Ark of the Covenant to be brought in – cause surely then, with the religious icon, we'll be sure to win! (How'd that turn out last time?). The very next verse, Saul tells his priest to ask God if they should attack; and in the middle of prayer, Saul says 'forget it, we're going!' And then verse 24, in the middle of the battle, he makes this stupid vow that no one should eat until they win the battle, because surely that fasting will

force God's hand to give them victory. Saul knows how to work the system. If you want something from God, you sacrifice to Him. If you get called to account, you just ask for forgiveness.

And of course that's what Saul does. He doesn't want to lose the kingship. So he says 'Forgive father for I have sinned.'

I found [Bill Arnold](#) quite helpful here – he writes: “[His] strategy might be called self-serving confession (15:24–25). Technically, he uses the right words: “I have sinned.” But this is followed by many more words revealing the compulsory and obligatory nature of that confession. He intends to appease Samuel by mentioning yet again “the people” (or “army”) and his fear of them.... Even his confession, if it can honestly be called that, is contrived and motivated by self-interest. It is disingenuous, and Samuel responds by reaffirming Yahweh's rejection of Saul as king” (15:26–29)” (Kindle loc. 4451)

And to be frank, I think that Saul's second response to that rejection is telling. It confirms the insincerity of Saul's confession. Instead of doubling down, humbling himself before Samuel and before God, acknowledging the enormity of his sin – as a king – his mind immediately goes to 'how can I save face?' Verse 30 he says – 'well at least come back with me before the elders of Israel to make it LOOK like I'm still king.' One must maintain appearances you know.

31 So Samuel went back with Saul, and Saul worshiped the LORD.

From this point on, Saul continued to reign, but it just becomes more and more clear that he is pursuing his own agenda, at the expense of God's. And eventually he dies in battle and [1 Chronicles 10:13](#) interprets it for us. “13 Saul died because he was unfaithful to the LORD; he did not keep the word of the LORD and even consulted a medium for guidance, 14 and did not inquire of the LORD. So the LORD put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David son of Jesse.”

It's really a sad story of a man raised to unparalleled heights by the grace of God who chose to abuse the privileges he'd been given and refuse the God who gave them. He wanted to obey God only where it benefitted him, and make up the rest with ritual action.

And this is where Saul's story [intersects with ours](#).

Because sometimes, we do the same thing. We think that going to church or giving to charity or just being nice is pleasing to God. But unless those things are founded on a real, wholehearted devotion to God, they're not honouring to Him at all. In fact, they're an affront to His generosity.

And that's why Saul's story is so important to us – we need to hear – Obedience is better than sacrifice.

Inner devotion is better than outward ritual. It's more important to God that we honour Him with all of our hearts by obeying Him than that we come to church and make grandiose sacrifices. He delights when people are sincerely devoted to Him.

That's not to say that outward worship is useless; it can and should be an expression of inner devotion, but the problem is that we can do things outwardly without really believing them inwardly.

That's what my 'Christian' life was like for a long time. I did the rituals. I gave the offerings. I gave up chocolate for Lent – I tried to make God think that I really loved Him and deserved His blessings – but my heart really didn't reflect that. I was singing hymns on Sunday but ignoring Him on Monday. I called the shots; I made the plans; I was the king of my own life and I tried to keep God happy with a religious veneer.

But none of that impressed God. He knew my heart. He knew that my 'partial obedience' was actually 'total disobedience.' He knew who I was living for. And it wasn't for Him.

But God Himself came for sinners like me. For sinners who lived for themselves instead of for God. Jesus died in my place – so that I didn't have to - to give me abundant life - and God raised Him from the dead to be my King in all of life. To be a good king. A faithful king. A God king whose way leads to blessing.

And now that I'm one of His children, my desire IS to be obedient – not just for my own benefit but because of the wondrous things God has done for me. I think we need to pay close attention to what Samuel said back in [chapter 12](#) – to think about all the things that the LORD has done for us, and to let those things motivate us to love and fear and serve and obey the LORD. *(24 But be sure to fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things he has done for you. (1Sa 12:24 NIV).)* We don't obey and sacrifice to gain God's favour – we obey and sacrifice because God has already given it.

And even when I fall short of that, my sin is covered by Jesus' blood when my heart is fully His and I admit my need for Him. I think that was Saul's problem. Samuel confronted him with his own self-centredness and Saul's instinct was to lean harder on himself – to try to manipulate God to make things right, but he was really using religion to keep God at bay. Jesus calls us to lean wholly on Him and to let that trust flow out in obedience AND in sacrifice.

So let me ask you – what's more important to you? Obedience or sacrifice? Ritual or devotion?

Living in post-Christendom Canada, this is especially relevant to us. So many generations have grown up with the idea that appearance is everything – that you need to look neat and tidy and all together when you go to church – and then when you get home, it doesn't really matter if you live for God – but that's not true obedience, is it? God desires consistency, and formal worship that pours out of a devoted heart.

Are there areas in your life where you are like Saul – attempting to cover up disobedience with sacrifice and ritual or are you living with wholeheartedly everyday devotion to the God who is our King?

Is your spiritual life characterized by a desire to do God's will? A warm, heartfelt desire to accomplish the things that God calls you to? Or are you satisfied coming to church on Sundays. When you feel like it. Or maybe giving money to satisfy God. Or holding the door open for old ladies. Those are all nice things to do and good ones too. But they are no substitute for true obedience.

Obedience is better than sacrifice.

And it's neat to see this theme over and over again through all of Scripture. It or something like it appears at least ten times in the whole of the Bible. [Micah 6:7-8](#) says –

7 Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

8 He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

(Mic 6:7-8 NIV).

And Jesus Himself tells us that loving God and loving our neighbours is better than any sacrifice. "33 To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices" (Mark 12:33).

Obedience is better.

And when I stopped to think about it, it makes sense that we would obey. 21<sup>st</sup> century Canadians, we don't like being told what to do, and yet, when I stopped to think about it, all that my parents asked me to do as a child was for good. Obeying them benefitted me. Sure, when I had to clean my room or get a needle, it was a little painful, but all of those things they asked me to do were for good. They would never command me to do something harmful. You'd never command your kids to do anything harmful. You would call them only to obey to benefit them. And God's that way too. He asks us to follow Him because His way alone leads to blessing.

Obedience is better.

#### BENEDICTION

23 Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men,

24 since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

(Col 3:23-24 NIV).