



Justice, Obedience, and Impassability

1 Samuel 15:1-34

Grace Church | 11.29.20

“If I Was God For A Day”

Today we come to a passage that, if we are honest, will make us a bit uncomfortable. We have two difficulties: first, a demonstration of the justice of God; second, a description of the emotions of God. If there are two things that are notoriously difficult for finite minds to understand, it is retributive justice and the mind of God himself. Let us remember the authority of the Scripture is actually strengthened by passages such as this, not challenged. This is because God is unafraid to show in his Word the serious nature of sin and rebellion against him, and he is more than willing to reveal the very character and nature of his heart. He doesn't hide from us the realities of sin or the intricacies of his glory.

So often when we come to challenges against our presumptions of the character of God, we respond not in faith, but in suspicion. Perhaps you have heard or used this phrase before: “My God would never do ____”. Or put another way: “The God I know is not like that.” We believe that if we were God, we would never condemn anyone, or send pain to anyone, or delay the right ordering of an imperfect world. *If I was God for a day, here is how things would roll.*

Typically any push back we have against the revealed character of God has to do with our autonomy. At the core of our lack of trust in God is a desire for self-deification. We want to be our own god, our own authority, and we want to define our own reality. And what is the sin of self-deification? It is nothing less than idolatry. When we begin to root around too deep and bring our finite presumptions onto an infinite God, we begin to fashion a god who is not the true God, but a false one. Through the process of self-deification, we create a god who we can understand, who we can control, who we can domesticate. If God is really God, at the logical end of all our attempts to justify his actions lies idolatry. We want a house pet to wag its tail and make us smile, not a creator, savior, or Lord. So the path from our presumptions to our replacing God looks a bit like this:

Presumptions of God —> Suspicion of God's Motives —> Self-Deification —> Idolatry —> Rejection

Now, what I am not saying is that your faith in God must never suffer doubt, and if you ever doubt you are simply one step away from idolatry. We are all prone to doubt. But doubt is not a fruit of



the Spirit, friends. The question when we doubt God's character or God's motives is: where do we take our doubt? Do we take our concerns of God up with God himself, through prayer and submission to his word, or do we take our concerns of God to somewhere else?

And I want you to work with me this morning in a state of humility—not so I can convince you to trust me, but so that I can lead you to trust God. If you walk out of here today with a greater heart of faith and a desire to lay down your presumptions and really come to God on *his* terms, then you will walk out more full of faith that will lead to your joy and God's glory. So let's commit this morning to be clay in the hands of our potter. So today we will again do a compare and contrast. One on side we have two clear pictures of God. And on the other side, through the example of Saul, we have two clear pictures of humanity.

Our first comparison of God and us is this:

The Just Wrath of God vs Our Disobedient Presumptions

Central to understanding this text is realizing that the whole exchange of chapter 15 is centered on obedience. God gives a command, will Saul obey? So immediately in our text we are struck with the command of God. In **verse 1**, Samuel shows up again and showcases his authority. I am the one who anointed you, he tells Saul, and I am the one who brings the word of God for you. So be careful to *listen*. This word *listen* occurs six times in our passage, indicating the significance in this narrative of hearing and submitting to God. What is the command that Saul is meant to listen to and obey? We see it in **verses 2-3**.

Saul's task now is to muster the forces of Israel to commit the Amalekite people to destruction. God has decided to use Saul as his instrument for justice. Saul's instructions are very clear: he is to execute justice on the Amalekites through complete destruction.

So let's pause here for a minute. I want to give several reasons why this command of God, even as it bucks up against our presumptions, is just.

First, the justice of God means rebellion against God is a capital offense.

Amalek is an ancient enemy of Israel. They are a nomadic people group, so they travel around in tents and have no specific fortified location. But the significance of the Amalekites is the way they treated God's people during the time of Exodus. Instead of showing them kindness, they persecuted them when they were the most vulnerable. When Moses recounts the attack from the Amalekites in Deuteronomy, he notes how they attacked without honor, from the rear and without any warning or motive, raiding a nomadic people for nothing more than their own personal gain. After hundreds of years, God has not forgotten this, and neither have the Amalekites shown any sign of repentance. We can look at the innocence of Amalek, but that is not how sin works, church. Sin pervades our breath, our beating heart, our nature, from the moment of our birth. The wages of such sin is death—we have rejected the only one who sustains our life, and our



rejection of him leads to destruction. Every single moment you breathe is an act of God's merciful grace. For him to remove that grace, even for a moment, means your end. The realities of God's commands against the Amalekites remind us how serious it is to sin against God, and how serious it is for a people group to sin specifically against God's people.

Second, the justice of God means that God will always protect and avenge his people.

The Amalekites were not just in general rebellion against God, they specifically came after the flock of God. As the great shepherd-king, God rules over Israel for their good. In Deuteronomy 25 we read:

“Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you came out of Egypt, how he attacked you on the way when you were faint and weary, and cut off your tail, those who were lagging behind you, and he did not fear God. Therefore when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies around you, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven; you shall not forget.

God literally baked a promise of vengeance into the Mosaic law. He charges Israel to not forget. God takes seriously the protection of his people. This is certainly good news for those of us who recognize our real enemies of sin and Satan are not forgotten by God. He will avenge us, his justice knows no decay to time.

Thirdly, the justice of God means that he holds all people in his hands.

If God is the giver of life, he is also the taker of life. No one escapes from his mercy and justice. Whether he takes life in a child or in a man who has lived a long life, whether death comes suddenly or it is expected, God is not surprised. And neither is he out of control. The Lord gives, the Lord takes away, blessed by the name of the Lord. If we cannot trust God with life and death, he is not worth trusting with anything else. And so when we see death in the Scripture and in our world, we mourn. Things are not as they should be. But we also trust: God knows what he is doing. To fail to ascribe to him sovereignty over human life would mean that some other power or person is really in charge of who lives and dies. And that kind of power is too burdensome for anyone who is not eternally just.

Fourthly, the justice of God means he uses specific means and people to carry his justice.

We balk at 1 Samuel 15 because even if we are okay with God holding the keys to life and death, we are bothered by the fact that he has human beings carry out his justice. We must remember that the nation of Israel is unique. The role God has given them in the world at this time is not only spiritual but political. God gives the authority at times to his chosen servants to hold the realities of life and death. That is a terrifying authority, but one that God decides, particularly in this moment of history in 1 Samuel 15, to use. We may pray and ask him: why this way? But we also



trust: just as he uses our own civil government to temper and control evil in the world, so he has used other means to carry out his justice. The church today is not the arbiter of God's civil justice like Israel was in her day. But the fact that the New Testament church is not a political entity does not make the fact that Israel was a political entity wrong. God is doing something specific through Israel wielding his sword—showing us too in this passage, I believe, how Israel is an imperfect tool of God's justice, and preparing our hearts for a more perfect justice to come.

So on one side, we have the just wrath of God against sin. But that is only part of the picture. Like Saul, we are prone to presume we know better than God, and in our presumption we are led to disobedience.

Verses 4-8 give off no intention that Saul will be disobedient to God's commands. He raises up a sizable army for his task. He warned the Kenites, who lived in an area where the Amalekites are camped, to flee—since the wrath of God was coming, and they had shown kindness to Israel in the time of their wandering in the wilderness. Saul tracks down all the Amalekites and has no trouble defeating them. But **verse 9** shows us the one detail Saul fails to deliver on. Instead of following God's instructions to destroy the Amalekites and all of their possessions, Saul spares Agag their king and also takes for himself any sheep or oxen or calf or lamb that was worth keeping. Notice the text says that this was the action of Saul and the people. The king is in on this.

Verses 10-12 show us that nothing escapes the sight of God. God reveals to Samuel Saul's disobedience by saying that he "regrets" that he has made Saul king. We will come back to that language later. For now notice Samuel's response of anger and grief, praying to God all night. He is visibly upset at Saul's clear rebellion against God. So he goes to meet Saul in Gilgal. In the same place he is affirmed as king, he will be rejected. And yet, when he comes to meet Saul in **verse 13**, how does Saul greet him? He does so with a cheerful, confident demeanor. "Hey Samuel, he says, a great day today. I feel great after doing exactly what God told me to do." What Saul doesn't know is that Samuel is not fooled by his self-deception. He knows Saul is lying, and so he points to the evidence in **verse 14**: the bleating of the sheep and the lowing of the cows means Saul is caught red-handed.

Once again we see Saul shift blame, as is becoming normal for him. In **verse 15** he blames the army, saying "they" have brought them, but he leaves himself out of the equation. But he also places a nice religious excuse over his disobedience, by pointing out that the animals they spared are to be sacrificed before the Lord. Whether this is true or not is besides the point: he has failed to obey God. Saul is only playing dumb—he knows he is caught. And Samuel is fed up of his excuses, interrupting him in **verse 16** to give him the Word of the Lord.

In **verses 17-19**, Samuel gives Saul another chance to admit his fault and explain himself. He clearly points out his sin by showing the seriousness of his royal position ("are you not the head of the tribes of Israel?") and exactly where he erred ("why did you pounce on the spoil and do what is evil?"). But none of this changes Saul's heart. He doubles down in **20-21**, repeating his excuses



from before. The difference now is the emphasis: he says “I have obeyed, I have carried out.” Any disobedience is shifted to the people and away from him.

What comes next is a poetic prophecy of God’s second outpouring of just wrath in this passage. This time it is not on the Amalekites, but on Saul. Previously Saul’s line had been cut off, but this is much worse. We see the progression of disobedience in **verses 22-23**. Sacrifices are empty without obedience. Rebellious disobedience is just as bad as divination, a practice of trying to discern heavenly oracles apart from God’s word, a failure to *listen*. Presumption that you know better than God is the same as idolatry. Disobedience is rejection, and so God has rejected Saul as king. There is finality in these words.

Let’s pause now to try to apply all that is going on in the text so far. Where does Saul’s disobedience stem from? It is not from being naive. But neither does it seem to stem from an active rebellious spirit, where he denies everything the Lord asks. No, he has cloaked it well. His disobedience is shrouded in aspects of obedience and religious motives. But ultimately his disobedience stems from his presumption. He presumes that he knows more than God. God says clearly: “this is the way”, and Saul says “I think my way is probably better”. God says: “here I AM” and Saul says: “my God would never ask that of me.”

Church, I cannot emphasize enough how prone we are to this sin. The Christian life is ultimately a path of self-denial. It means we lay down our self-identity to take up a new one. It’s a cross-bearing life, a “less of me” life.

Today is as good as day as any to nail your presumptions of God to the cross. Do you think it cruel that God has called you in this season to singleness? Lay down your presumption, friend, at his feet. Perhaps you struggle: how could God’s plan for sexuality, for marriage, for gender, really be good, if it requires self-sacrifice? Bring your presumptions to the throne of grace, don’t make excuses for it. Perhaps you wonder: “how can God allow suffering and pain?” Such a question won’t be answered by attempting to convince yourself you know better than God. Your answer will come when you surrender to God and ask him. Remember the pattern we see in Saul’s example:

Presumptions of God —> Suspicion of God’s Motives —> Self-Deification —> Idolatry —> Rejection

Ask yourself, where are you on this spectrum? And hear a taste of good news this morning: Jesus Christ came into the world, and the religious folks of the day were suspicious of him. But do you know what he promised? He promised if you would follow him, you would have troubles. You would be uncomfortable. You may have to lay down your dreams. But when you follow Jesus, when you reject your desire to self-deify, he promises never to reject you. It’s all worth it, church. In going the way of Jesus Christ, you will find life. You will change, you will not be the master of your fate, but you never were. Submission to the gospel is freedom from self-deification and self-deception. It’s freedom from presumption, and freedom from suspicion. It’s freedom to ask questions, to stand firm, to love and enjoy your creator. It’s freedom to step into the oceanic joys of faith.



The Impassable Love of God vs Our Disingenuous Repentance

Now let's examine our second comparison. I want to start first with Saul's example, which is where our hearts are driven to in our sin. In **verse 24-25**, we finally see Saul accept his guilt before God. He uses the right words here, but look a little closer. The reason for his disobedience is summed up in a fear of man. He says he feared the people, his army, and he wanted to be accepted by them. Now certainly this is part of Saul's fault, but it is certainly not all. I say it is part of his sin, because we see his desire for Samuel in verse 25 to return with him. He wants Samuel to come up before the people with Saul and make a big show of Saul's forgiveness and religiosity. So certainly, Saul's sin is worrying about his reputation. But Saul's sin is also deeper. There is no indication in our text that he was pressured into disobedience. It's not just that he fears the people, Saul's sin is that he has rejected God. He thinks he knows better than God himself. The great temptation of the religious is towards half-hearted, manipulative repentance. By admitting to some fault, but not our true fault, we can maintain our personal agenda while also appearing holy and humble.

And this is why Samuel rejects Saul's proposition in **verse 26**. You still don't understand Saul, he says, your repentance is not genuine. Your sin is rejection of God, not fear of the people. Saul sees his sin as a simple fix. Say sorry, then Samuel will vindicate you before everyone. If his sin was just against Samuel, maybe that could happen. But Saul's sin is rebellion against God, it's setting himself up and over and against God almighty. Saul's failure to grasp the seriousness of his offense showcases his repentance is anything but genuine.

So Samuel leaves, indicating that the time for saying sorry has already passed. As he goes, Saul grabs at his robe and tears it in **verse 27**. Every Israelite would have had a small tassel sewn to their robe to remind them of God's Torah, his authoritative word. Saul has realized that his days as king are numbered, and there is no going back. His last attempt is as desperate as it comes. Grasping at the robe was a sign of supplication. He grabs onto Samuel's tassel, reaching out to hold onto whatever last vestiges of control and authority he can, crying out for another chance. But none comes. In **verse 28** Samuel uses Saul's actions as an object lesson. Saul has torn the sign Samuel's authority, and so God has torn the authority of the kingdom away from Saul and will give it to someone close to him, someone better. Eventually, in **verse 30-31** Saul gives up. But he still only wants to keep his reputation intact, which is why he asks to be honored before the elders. He still doesn't recognize yet what has just happened. He now is no longer a rightful king, rather he is a imposter on the throne. But he still sees Israel as "his people" and not God's, and Yawheh as "Samuel's God" and not his. In **verses 34-35** we see how final this rejection is. Never again will Saul meet with Samuel to receive the word of the Lord. They live just a few miles apart, but God has left Saul and will now pursue and prepare his new king.

All in all, Saul's half-repentance should grieve us. It's a sorry picture into the state of the human heart when we are far from God. And it should also bring us to humble fear. I am reminded by this narrative of the parable Jesus tells of those on the last day who will come to him, shocked by their rejection from the kingdom of God. "Didn't we cast out demons and heal the sick and preach in



your name?’ They will say. And Jesus will tell them on that day: “depart from me, I never knew you.” If, like Saul, we wait until it is too late to reach out for the end of the robe of God, we will hear the same terrible news. Because God is a God of justice. It takes no faith to cry for mercy when the wrath of God is revealed already. And the justice of God says that his people, the people of faith, are safe, but he will not let his enemies go unpunished. That truth is simultaneously terrifying and comforting.

Still, we wrestle with it. Why does God not offer Saul a second chance? Does God even *care*? Well, beneath the surface of this text, there is something being revealed about the character of God. Samuel gives us the explanation in **verse 29**. God is not like men. He does not change his mind, he does not lie, and he is not fickle. He does not have regret. Theologians call this truth of God His *impassability*. The word means that God does not have passions. In other words, he is never overcome with emotion. Any emotion he feels never changes his state of being. This is why he is so different than us, what Samuel highlights here. We change our mind and our state of being based on our emotions every day. We *feel* sad and therefore are moved by our sadness to some action or thought. Our emotions act upon us, they govern us, they control us.

But God is not like man. His emotions are not like ours—they do not control him. If they did, he would not be God, emotions would be! Think of the emotion of romantic passion, something we equate usually for “love”. If God was like us, he would *feel* passion in a particular moment, but then not feel it in the next. This kind of love would control him, as it often does us. But God does not feel or possess something like love—he *is* love. Love is not some abstract supernatural force pushing and pulling God. No, he sits above his attributes because he *is* his attributes. Without God, there would be no love at all.

Because God lacks nothing, he is impassable. But this does not mean that he is stoic or lifeless. He does not have emotions in the way that we would describe them: as forces that take over us. What this means is not that he lacks love or compassion or grief, but rather that he has them in perfect measure! He can experience the full measure of love and compassion and even grief, because he is not overcome by them. This guarantees that his love and compassion never change or never fluctuate. It’s why Jesus Christ the God-man weeps over the Lazarus he is about to raise, and it’s why our text in **verse 10 and verse 35** can describe God as “regretting” that he made Saul king. In context, these verses are not in opposition to one another. Only God can be perfectly free from passions and yet still feel sorrow over sin. Only God can be perfectly steadfast in his sovereign will and yet still feel grief that his king has rejected him.

Just as the impassability of God makes him more emotive, not less, the passability of Saul makes him more stoic and cold, not less. Consider the comparison between God and Saul in this passage. I love the way Eugene Peterson puts it:

The picture we get is one of Saul coldly and deviously trimming his overinze to terms that serve his own interests, and of God (and Samuel) experiencing the effects of his sin and regret and grief and sorrow. While Saul calculates, God *cares*.



Saul is so overcome with the emotions of pride and greed and power and fear that he loses himself in lies and self-deception. Our text is showing us good news: that kind of fall could never happen to God. He is not a calculating piece of heavenly machinery: he is the God of life, of justice, of compassion, and of love.

Because when you think about it, this is a passage about the love of God. God's love is evident in his justice on the Amalekites. He will not let his people's oppressors carry on forever: he is too loving. His love is evident in his rejection of Saul. He loves too much to let an idolatrous king rule over his people. And ultimately we see his love displayed in the most gruesome part of our text: **verses 32-33**.

Agag, the murderer and deliver of God's people, fancies himself safe. He cheerfully comes when Samuel calls. Surely if Saul the warrior spared him, the prophet can't do anything to him. His demeanor mocks the holiness of God. He does not plead for mercy, he comes thinking he is the leftovers of God's justice, that somehow the rules don't apply to him. Agag represents the effects of half-obedience and half-repentance. When we don't take full measures against our sin, when we let some of it hang around, it gets confident. Saul could not finish the job of God's justice, and so Agag the wicked king survives. Too often we let sin stick around.

But God is not like us. Samuel, the representative of God, makes sure the message is clear: no sin can escape the justice of God. As he hacks Agag to pieces, we see an act of love. God himself through Samuel finishes what the disobedient and unrepentant king Saul could not do. God steps in to our failure and executes justice and equity where we cannot. Even when we think we know better than him, it does not stop him from carrying out his work.

You see, whether we have the right presumptions of God or not, he is not confused as to who he is. Even if we try to tame him by our suspicion of him, he never stops being himself. He is a God of justice, who tracks down evil that threatens his people and cuts it to pieces. He is a God who uses whatever means necessary to execute justice. And we know this is true, because God showed it to be true in the death of Jesus Christ.

Like Agag, our enemy Satan was tricked into thinking he had escaped with his life. But the cross of Jesus Christ was the place where God poured out his just wrath against sin. It was the final destruction of the Amalekites and their rebellious king Satan. Through the actions of Jesus his true and obedient king, the cross became a sword that rendered sin and death eternally decapitated. He finished the job. Why? Because his impassable character overflowed into merciful love for you and for me. He won by being himself torn to pieces—like the bread of the supper his body was torn—hacked to pieces, absorbing the Father's wrath that we deserved.

And this beautiful and glorious act, where Jesus went to the cross as our substitute, to absorb the justice of God that like the Amalekites, was due to us, this cross that we adore and fall down before and lift up as a signal of the unmistakable love of the Father? Some don't understand it. Some call it "cosmic child abuse". Some say: "the god I know would never send his son to death." So they keep



all the nice and tidy parts of the gospel and they get rid of all the ugly ones, just like Saul picked and choose what his obedience looked like.

But let me close with this exhortation. Do not be tempted to think that your ways are better than God's. We follow a bruised, beaten, bloody Savior. But he wasn't bloody because he lost out, because he was unpopular. He didn't do it to prove a point about power structures or social reform. He didn't do it because he was overcome with emotion. He spilt his blood so that yours wouldn't have to be. And he rose, victorious, so that you wouldn't have to take the credit. That is justice. That is love. That is gospel.

