

Title: “How the Mighty Fall: The Leadership Failure of King Saul” by The Rev. Charlie Holt

Description: In this sermon from 1 Samuel 15, The Rev. Charlie Holt examines the tragic downfall of King Saul through the lens of biblical narrative and leadership insight. Drawing from Jim Collins’ *How the Mighty Fall*, he explores how insecurity masked by pride, disobedience cloaked in religiosity, and the refusal to truly listen to God led to Saul’s rejection as king. Contrasting Saul’s external bravado with David’s internal devotion, this message challenges us to become people after God’s own heart—those who Shema: hear and obey the Word of the Lord.

---

We’re in the middle of a sermon series on 1 Samuel, and we’ll soon move into 2 Samuel. The focus of this series is the rise and development of the kings of Israel. By studying them, we gain insight into leadership—what makes for good character and what leads to failure.

Samuel was God’s prophet, and last week we looked at the moment when the people came to him asking for a king. This request grieved Samuel deeply because it marked a turning point in Israel’s story: the people were, in effect, saying, “God, your kingship isn’t enough for us. We want an earthly king like the nations around us.”

Samuel pushed back, but the Lord told him, “Give them what they ask for.” It was a case of natural and logical consequences: “You want a king? I’ll give you a king. But now you will have to live with what that means.” So God gave them Saul—a king like the other nations had.

In today’s passage, we arrive at a moment of grief—both the Lord and Samuel are lamenting the consequences of that choice. Saul, the king like other nations, has failed. And now God is rejecting Saul and sending Samuel to anoint a successor—a young boy named David.

David is different. While Saul is a king like the other nations, David will be a king after God’s own heart. That’s a critical distinction. So today, we want to ask: what went wrong with Saul? What led to his downfall?

In two weeks, we’ll hear David’s lament after Saul’s death. He says, “Oh, how the mighty have fallen.” Saul dies a tragic death—essentially by suicide through an enemy’s sword. So again, what led to Saul’s fall?

This is a question that fascinates not only theologians but also leadership experts. One such expert is Jim Collins, a business writer whose books I highly recommend: *Built to Last*, *Good to Great*, *Great by Choice*. One of his books is called *How the Mighty Fall*. In it, Collins identifies a predictable pattern that causes once-great leaders—whether in business, politics, ministry, or any field—to collapse.

Saul fits that pattern perfectly. Collins outlines five stages in this decline, and the first is this: hubris born of success. In other words, when things are going well, pride begins to creep in. The success goes to your head.

When Saul was first chosen, he was insecure. In fact, on the day of his coronation, he was hiding in the baggage! Samuel had to drag him out, saying, “Come on now, it’s time to be crowned.” But when Saul stood up, he looked like a king—tall, handsome, a foot taller than everyone else. People said, “Now that’s a king!” Simply because he was tall. That’s how superficial our judgments can be.

But beneath the kingly exterior, Saul remained deeply insecure. I’ve often noticed that pride is the flip side of insecurity. People who seem most full of themselves are often deeply wounded. Their confidence is rooted not in God, but in appearances, performance, and the approval of others.

There’s a term for this: false self. I once worked with someone who had been diagnosed with narcissism. One thing I learned is that narcissism is often a defense mechanism. Somewhere deep inside is a wound—perhaps from a parent or early life experience—and the person creates a false persona to hide the pain. They project strength, confidence, control. But they’re terrified you’ll see what’s really inside.

That was Saul. Instead of dealing honestly with his insecurity, he covered it with bravado. For example, after some initial military success against the Philistines, he made a foolish vow: “No one shall eat anything until evening, or they will die.” That’s not leadership; that’s rash posturing. Ironically, the one who broke that vow was his own son—who hadn’t heard the command and ate some honey. Saul then faced the possibility of executing his own son, all because of a foolish, prideful decree.

Jim Collins identifies a second phase of decline: the undisciplined pursuit of more. Success leads to overreach. Leaders begin to stretch themselves beyond their calling, grasping for power, reputation, or control.

Discipline is central to Christian leadership. The word “disciple” shares its root with “discipline.” In the Great Commission, Jesus commands us to make disciples of all nations, teaching them to obey all he has commanded (Matt. 28). An undisciplined leader is one who refuses to come under God’s authority.

This is where Saul finally loses God’s confidence—and Samuel’s. In 1 Samuel 15, God gives Saul a specific command through Samuel: to completely destroy the Amalekites and all their possessions. This wasn’t arbitrary. The Amalekites were a brutal enemy who had attacked Israel when they were weak, fresh out of Egypt. For centuries, they had continued in violence and cruelty.

God said, “Now is the time for judgment. Spare nothing.” Saul, however, disobeyed. He captured the Amalekite king alive and allowed the people to keep the best animals as plunder.

When Samuel confronts Saul, Saul greets him with a cheerful, “Blessed be you in the Lord! I have obeyed!” But Samuel replies, “Then what is this bleating of sheep I hear?” Saul shifts blame: “They spared the best animals... but it was for a good cause—to sacrifice to the Lord!”

Samuel is having none of it. He replies: “Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? The Lord anointed you king! Why then did you not obey? Why did you pounce on the spoil and do what is evil in the sight of the Lord?”

Saul insists, “I did obey!”—but it’s the kind of partial obedience we see in kids when they say, “I mostly did what you said.” Partial obedience is disobedience.

Samuel delivers one of the most powerful lines in all of Scripture:

“Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord?  
Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.  
For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry.  
Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has rejected you from being king.”

That word “listen” is key. In Hebrew, it’s Shema—the same word found in Deuteronomy 6: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one.” But Shema means more than just hearing with your ears; it implies obedience. To listen to God is to obey God. And if you’re not obeying, you’re not truly listening.

I sometimes get accused by my wife of not listening—anyone else? Sometimes we’re present, but not really tuned in. Shema calls us to be fully attentive—to hear, receive, and obey God’s Word.

We say this every Sunday in the Collect for Purity:

“Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid.  
Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,  
that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name.”

That prayer begins with an acknowledgment: God already sees our hearts. We can’t hide from Him. So we ask Him to cleanse us—to purify our desires so that we can love Him rightly.

That’s the foundation of godly leadership. Not appearance. Not bravado. Not charisma. But character. God looks on the heart.

We tend to choose leaders based on superficial traits—“He looks presidential!”—but God is looking for something deeper: a heart aligned with His own.

That’s why He chose David. David had flaws—serious ones. But he was “a man after God’s own heart.” He listened. He obeyed. And when he failed and was confronted, he repented.

This is the call for all of us—especially those in leadership. To be people after God’s own heart.  
To Shema: to listen, to obey, to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Amen.