

Rafael Septien, a former place-kicker for the Dallas Cowboys, was known for his creative excuses. Whenever Septien missed a field goal, he always had a new explanation for not being successful. Once, after missing a kick at Texas Stadium, he lamented that “the grass was too tall.” Of course, the stadium surface was artificial turf, not grass. After he blew a 30-yard field goal attempt, Septien explained, “My helmet was too tight, and it was squeezing my brain. I couldn’t think.” Another time he claimed to have been distracted because the 30-second clock was ticking too loudly. Once, when a field goal kick went wide, he turned to his holder, quarterback Danny White, and said, “No wonder. You placed the football upside down.”

Friends, this morning as we continue our journey through 1 Samuel, we see someone else who was pretty good at making excuses, King Saul. These excuses, however, could not make up for the fact that his actions and attitudes were not pleasing to God. Our text is 1 Samuel 15 (page 237 in the pew Bibles). I believe the Lord has some important lessons for us through this portion of His Word. So let’s pause and pray He would enable us to hear and heed them.

Last week as we explored Chapters 13-14, we saw how King Saul had been a disappointment to the people of Israel, and more importantly, to God. Now, Samuel, who though no longer a judge, is still a prophet, has a message for Saul from the Lord.

**1 Samuel 15:3 – “Go and attack the Amalekites and completely destroy everything they have. Do not spare them. Kill men and women, infants and nursing babies, oxen and sheep, camels and donkeys.”**

Those are pretty shocking instructions. On the surface, it appears a command to commit genocide. People like Professor Richard Dawkins, a leading atheist, point to this and similar passages and insist the God of the Old Testament is a moral monster.

Yet, a closer examination reveals that things are a bit more complex than 21<sup>st</sup> century critics might pretend. The Amalekites were not nice people. They were a cruel, pagan tribe that harassed and attacked Israel, the people of God, for over 200 years. Though

I don’t pretend to understand why the Lord ordered the total extermination of the Amalekites, I suspect it could be a just punishment for all their crimes and necessary because of the continual threat they pose to Israel. If that doesn’t seem plausible to you, I would be glad to talk about that with you later.

Saul then summons a huge army - 210,000 men and goes to battle against the Amalekites.

**1 Samuel 15:8-9 – He captured King Agag of Amalek alive, but he completely destroyed all the rest of the people with the sword. Saul and the troops spared Agag, and the best of the sheep, goats, cattle and choice animals, as well as the young rams and the best of everything else. They were not willing to destroy them, but they did destroy all the worthless and unwanted things.**

Don’t miss what happened here. Saul and his army have not done what the Lord commanded them to do. All the choice animals are spared to seemingly increase the wealth of Saul and his men. Saul’s focus is not on obeying and honoring God.

**1 Samuel 15:10-11a – Then the word of the LORD came to Samuel, “I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned away from following me and has not carried out my instructions.”**

Of course, a trillion years earlier, God knew Saul would fail to be a godly king. Yet, the Lord is working His plan, and that included choosing Saul as king and expressing regret for doing so.

Samuel then finds Saul, intending to confront him. He is still God’s prophet, so this is his job.

**1 Samuel 15:13 – When Samuel came to him, Saul said, “May the LORD bless you. I have carried out the LORD’s instructions.”**

Saul may have thought he was telling the truth. In his eyes, he has, for the most part, obeyed the Lord; however, it was obvious and certainly disappointing to Samuel that some of God’s instructions had been ignored.

**1 Samuel 15:14 – Samuel replied, “Then what is this sound of sheep, goats and cattle I hear?”**

He knows those are Amalekite livestock.

**1 Samuel 15:15 – Saul answered, “The troops brought them from the Amalekites and spared the best sheep, goats and cattle in order to offer a sacrifice to the LORD your God, but the rest we destroyed.”**

Now, I have no idea if Saul and his men intended to actually sacrifice those animals or simply add them to their own herds. Yet, when he is confronted, Saul insists their motives were good. But...

**1 Samuel 15:16 – “Stop!” exclaimed Samuel. “Let me tell you what the LORD said to me last night.”**

Samuel then reminds Saul how God had called him to be king and had given him clear instructions:

**1 Samuel 15:18 – “Go and completely destroy the sinful Amalekites. Fight against them until you have annihilated them.”**

And then Samuel asks the key question:

**1 Samuel 15:19 – “So why didn’t you obey the LORD? Why did you rush for the plunder and do what was evil in the LORD’s sight?”**

Saul, however, disagrees with Samuel’s rebuke.

**1 Samuel 15:20 – “But I did obey the LORD!” Saul answered. “I went on the mission the LORD gave me: I brought back King Agag of Amalek, and I completely destroyed the Amalekites. The troops took sheep, goats and cattle from the plunder – the best of what was set apart for destruction – to sacrifice to the LORD your God at Gilgal.”**

That is Saul’s story, and he is sticking to it. It does not, however, impress Samuel. He says:

**1 Samuel 15:22 – “Does the LORD take pleasure in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the LORD? (The implied answer is, ‘No.’) Look: to obey is better than sacrifice, to pay attention (to His commands) is better than the fat of rams.”**

And then Samuel spells out just how serious Saul’s sin is.

**1 Samuel 15:23 – “For rebellion is like the sin of divination (meaning witchcraft or occult practices),**

**and defiance is like wickedness and idolatry (meaning pagan worship). Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has rejected you as king.”**

At this point, Saul speaks what seems to be the right words.

**1 Samuel 15:24-25 – “I have sinned. I have transgressed the LORD’s command and your words. Because I was afraid of the people, I obeyed them. Now, therefore, please forgive my sin and return with me so I can worship the LORD.”**

OK, that sounds like the end of the story, right? Saul sinned. Samuel confronts him. Saul confesses his sin. The Lord forgives him. Everyone lives happily ever after. Yet.....

**1 Samuel 15:26 – Samuel replied to Saul, “I will not return with you. Because you rejected the word of the LORD, the LORD has rejected you from being king over Israel.”**

What is going on here? I believe that though Saul spoke the right words, that is all they were – words. He didn’t really mean them. They were not from his heart. How do I know that? Because if they were, the Lord and Samuel would have certainly pronounced forgiveness and probably restoration. But that doesn’t happen.

**1 Samuel 15:27-28 – When Samuel turned to go, Saul grabbed the corner of his robe, and it tore. Samuel said to him, “The LORD has torn the kingship of Israel away from you today and has given it to your neighbor who is better than you.”**

This, we will learn later, is David, son of Jesse.

Saul continues to profess his repentance. He says:

**1 Samuel 15:30 – “I have sinned. Please honor me now before the elders of my people and before Israel. Come back with me so I can bow in worship to the LORD your God.”**

The obvious question, however, is this: Does Saul really want to be forgiven and worship the Lord? Or does he merely want to enhance his reputation and have people applauding him for being a wonderful king, even a godly one? Apparently, it is the latter.

Because...

**1 Samuel 15:35 – Even to the day of his death, Samuel never saw Saul again. Samuel mourned for Saul, and the LORD regretted he had made Saul king over Israel.**

Again, if there was genuine repentance on Saul's part, I am certain Samuel would have assured him of God's forgiveness and given at least some degree of restoration. Because that doesn't happen, it seems obvious that Saul's words of repentance are little more than words.

OK, that is a narrative of what happened over 3,000 years ago. What could the Lord possibly be saying to us through these words? Quite a bit. Here are four lessons for us I want to highlight:

**1) Obedience to God is important.** It is important even when we don't think God's commands make a lot of sense. Again, I am not going to try and explain all the why's, but the Lord had a reason for commanding Saul to exterminate the Amalekites and their animals. The commands, however, did not make sense to Saul. Sparing the best of the livestock and using them for either sacrifices or for their own herds, *just made more sense* than killing them. Yet, whenever we decide that our ideas make more sense than God's commands, we are on dangerously thin ice.

Friends, today many folks think they can improve upon God's commands. The most obvious is with sexual behavior. Through the Bible, God has commanded that the human sexual relationship be confined to a man and woman who are married to each other. People have come up with all sorts of different ways to improve this command by adding other types of sexual relationships which they think are appropriate. Of course, attempting to alter God's commands concerning sex, thinking we have come up with a better idea than His, is probably not very wise.

Now, it is very likely that some of you in this room are not following God's commands as far as sexual behavior. That's not good. The good news, however, is that there is free and full forgiveness to all who turn to the Lord Jesus. I encourage you to confess your sin to the Lord and seek His help in changing that behavior. And if you are struggling with porn or

some other sexual addiction and really want some help, feel free to contact either Pastor Mark or myself.

Now, most folks disobeying God's commands on sexual behavior are very much aware they are doing something wrong. Many of us, however, are sometimes like Saul, thinking our disobedience to the Lord is no big deal. We may even convince ourselves that God is pleased with what we are doing.

For example, maybe you have a "friend" who worries a lot. Even though she knows the Bible says, "Be anxious for nothing, don't worry, instead pray," she sees her worry as just a part of her personality, not a sin.

Or maybe you have another "friend," who has read:

**Romans 12:17a – Do not repay anyone evil for evil.**

He knows we should not try to take revenge on someone who wrongs us. Yet, he figures that command doesn't apply to his brother-in-law because he just wants to teach him a lesson.

Friends, these are God's commands! When we are not following them, *it is a big deal*. A few days ago, I was pondering what Jesus says in:

**Matthew 5:19-21 – "Don't store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal. Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal."**

Friends, I think it is good to save money, especially to save money for retirement or college or even medical expenses. The Apostle Paul worked hard and apparently saved money in order to make sure he was not relying on other people to meet his financial needs. That is a good goal for us as well.

Yet, at the same time we need to make sure that our focus is on storing up treasure in heaven, not treasure on earth. Friend, if you know a lot more about what is in your 401-K account than you do about what is in the Bible, I suspect your focus may be in the wrong place. And if that is the case, you are disobeying God. And that, as we have seen today, is not a good thing. Obedience to God is important!!

**2) God is not impressed with our excuses.** In our text today, we see that King Saul, when confronted by Samuel, is pretty good at coming up with excuses. For example, in verse 20, Saul appeals to his partial obedience. He claims his obedience to God in some areas makes his disobedience in others irrelevant.

In verses 15 and 21, he tries to turn the focus away from himself to what his soldiers have done. He implies he really should not be considered responsible for the actions of these men who were following his orders.

In verse 15, he also appeals to common sense. Not killing all the Amalekite livestock, but saving some for his own use, was just the sensible thing to do.

In verse 21, Saul claims his motives are good. He wanted to use the animals to make sacrifices and worship the Lord. Even if he messed up on the details, it could not have been a big deal because he was really trying to do the right thing.

Then in verse 24, Saul blames other people for his disobedience. He was afraid of how they would react if he was diligent in carrying out the Lord's commands.

Friends, have you ever heard these types of excuses coming from your lips:

- Well, considering all the taxes I have paid over the years, I don't feel bad about not reporting that extra income I received.
- Yes, I know it is not good to look at porn, but you won't believe how many guys at work have been cheating on their wives lately.
- OK, I know I am supposed to go to church and worship the Lord with other Christians, but with my schedule, it just makes sense that I stay home on Sundays to get some rest.
- Oh, I realize I should not have lost my temper and screamed at my daughter like that, but I really wanted her to come with us to church last Sunday.
- Sure, it was wrong to cheat on that test, but everyone was doing it, and Joe gave me the answers.

Excuses, excuses! Yet, the Lord is not impressed with any of them. Whenever we are confronted by our sin,

the right thing to do, the best thing to do, is not make excuses, but to acknowledge our sin and confess it to the Lord.

- 3) God is not impressed by empty religious rituals.** I think 1 Samuel 15:22 is one of the most important verses in the Old Testament:

**1 Samuel 15:22 – Does the LORD take pleasure in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the LORD? Look: to obey is better than sacrifice, to pay attention (to His commands) is better than the fat of rams.**

Friends, this is a verse quoted in Hebrews 10. It is a great reminder that performing religious rituals is no substitute for trusting and following the Lord. Those rituals do not magically bring about forgiveness or reconciliation with God. Rituals done apart from faith have no spiritual value.

Some of my Roman Catholic friends seem to have a different idea, however. They believe no matter what they do during the week, as long as they go to the confessional booth on Saturday, say a few "Hail Mary's" or "Our Father's" for penance and take part in the Eucharist on Sunday, everything is good. They are free to sin as much as they want during the next week, and they can then go through the same rituals the next weekend. Now, that is really a corruption of Roman Catholic teaching, but I know folks who think that way.

Yet, I also know Baptists and people from all sorts of denominations who seem to think pretty much the same way. For them, being a Christian is all about attending church on Sunday, singing the hymns and worship songs loudly, telling the pastor what a great sermon it was and then going home and forgetting about the Lord for the next 6.5 days, until it is Sunday morning again.

Friends, I am not the judge. That is God's job. But it is hard for me to believe that folks who enthusiastically worship the Lord on Sunday, but don't seem to want anything to do with Him the rest of the week, are any more pleasing to Him than King Saul.

Friends, being a Christian, trusting and following Jesus, is not something one does for an hour or two a week. It is a 24/7 way of life. Yes, during that 24/7,

we all stumble and fall in many ways; and through Jesus, God graciously forgives us when we turn to Him. Yet, going to church 52 Sundays out of the year does not mean you are living in a way that honors the Lord, if your goal is not pleasing Him the other 313 days a year.

Back in 1978, a fellow named Keith Green did a song which said:

*To obey is better than sacrifice  
I don't need your money, I want your life  
And I hear you say that I'm coming back soon  
But you act like I'll never return*

*To obey is better than sacrifice  
I want more than Sundays and Wednesday nights*

Now, the song does have a theological problem, that if you are interested, I would be glad to discuss with you later. But on this point, he does hit the nail on the head. Sundays and Wednesday nights at church are not enough. God desires that:

**1 Corinthians 10:31 – Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do (24/7), do it all for the glory of God.**

Fulfilling religious obligations is not enough.

**4) God is not impressed with the right words, but with a right heart.** Remember, at the end of our text it appears that King Saul is saying all the right words. He seems to confess his sins and ask for forgiveness. Yet, as we noted, Samuel doesn't declare Saul forgiven, apparently because God is unwilling to grant forgiveness. I am convinced the reason for that is because God knew Saul's words were empty. He did not mean what he said.

Now, the important thing to remember is that you and I have a very hard time knowing if someone else's words are sincere. Yes, we can use a person's actions to evaluate his/her words, but even then we can certainly be mistaken.

Only God truly knows someone's heart. Thus, it really doesn't make sense for me to say, "*Oh, I don't think Sue is really a Christian. I know she says she is, but her actions don't match her words.*" Nor does it make sense to say, "*I know Joe is a Christian. I was with him and heard him pray and ask Jesus to be His Savior.*" Oh, professions of faith in Jesus are the right

words, but they are just words. Only God knows for certain whether those words are sincere.

Friends, for us this means we need to make sure our words are sincere. We need to make sure our heart matches our right words. That is true when it comes to our own profession of faith.

**Friend, are you really trusting in the Lord Jesus as your Savior or do you just say you are a Christian?** If it is the latter, you are on very thin ice spiritually, and I encourage you to talk to me afterwards.

This is also true when we are confessing our sins to the Lord. **Are we sincere in our repentance or are we just saying the words?** Thinking that somehow we can maybe fool God with good sounding words.

**Are we sincere in our worship and do we sing the songs because we mean them or because we just like to sing?**

I always remember how a friend of mine in college was part of a choir doing Handel's Messiah and singing "The Hallelujah Chorus" with great enthusiasm, even though he would admit that he didn't really believe what the words said.

Jesus, speaking of the Pharisees and quoting the Prophet Isaiah said:

**Matthew 15:8 – "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."**

May the Lord help us to always make sure that whenever we honor Him with our lips, our hearts are doing so as well.