

When a Leader Falls

Listening to the Sound of Our Own Disobedience

1 Samuel 15

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1. INTRODUCTION: "When a Leader Falls"

Today I would like to talk with us about a common experience, I am talking about the common human experience of being disappointed by leaders.

Maybe we've all experienced it. The pastor whose preaching blessed you for years—until the announcement of his moral failure. The ministry leader whose books shaped your faith—until the news broke. The elder you trusted—until he resigned in disgrace. The Christian author who wrote about marriage—until their divorce. The worship leader who led you into God's presence—until the affair came to light.

And when it happens, we find ourselves asking: How? How could someone who seemed so close to God fall so far? How could someone who spoke so beautifully about Christ live so differently in private? How could religious performance and hidden disobedience coexist for so long?

But here's the uncomfortable truth that Scripture forces us to confront: **The question is not "How could this happen to them?" The question is "What is keeping this from happening to me?"**

Years ago, I learned this the hard way.

When I was in college, I had a pastor who profoundly shaped my faith. I'll call him Pastor Billy. He was the kind of pastor who didn't just teach about Jesus—he modeled what it looked like to follow Him. He invested in my spiritual life. He was the first to teach me how to study the bible and how to preach a sermon. He's one of the primary reasons I'm in ministry today.

And years later, when the news broke about his moral failure, I was devastated. Not just sad—devastated. Because this wasn't some distant celebrity Christian I'd never met. This

was a man I knew personally, who had spoken into my life, who had shown me what pastoral ministry could look like.

I remember wrestling with God. "How did You let this happen? How did I not see it? How could someone who seemed so genuine be living a double life?"

But eventually for me, the questions shifted. From "How could this happen to him?" to "What would keep this from happening to me?"

Because there's this gap between public performance that everyone sees and private obedience that happens 24/7. And this gap between public faithfulness and private obedience is not just a problem for famous leaders or gifted pastors or people with impressive platforms. It's a danger that exists in every human heart—including yours, including mine.

The Question We Need to Ask

So this morning, I am inviting you to consider a question. Not the question "How could that leader fall?" But the question: **"What is it in my heart that keeps me from wholehearted obedience?"**

And the story we are exploring today—the story of King Saul in 1 Samuel 15—is going to help us consider this question. We are looking at a leader who had everything going for him—impressive gifts, military success, public support, religious zeal—and yet his leadership was rejected by God. Not because he lacked talent or charisma or even religious activity. But because he failed at the one thing that mattered most: **wholehearted obedience to God's word.**

The Pattern Scripture Reveals

The Bible is remarkably honest about leadership failure. It doesn't hide it. It doesn't minimize it. And it doesn't treat it as an exception to the rule—it treats it as a warning about what happens when leaders stop attending to the gap between religious performance and what is in the heart.

The pattern continues throughout church history.

- Leaders who started well and ended poorly.
- Leaders who said one thing publicly and did another privately.

- Leaders whose religious performance was impressive but whose obedience was incomplete.

Why This Matters to All of Us

Now, I know some of you might be thinking: *"I'm not a leader. I'm not in full-time ministry. I'm not writing books or preaching sermons. So why does this matter to me?"*

Here's why: **The same obstacles that bring down leaders are active in every believer's life.** You might not be writing books about grace while engaged in an affair. But the obstacles in your heart are the same. You might not have the exact same struggle as the fallen leader, but the patterns that lead to spectacular public failure are the same patterns that lead to quiet private disobedience. In other words, the gap between religious performance and wholehearted obedience doesn't just exist in celebrity Christians—it exists in all of us. The big difference is that the stakes are just more public when leaders fall. Which is why James wrote, “Not many of you should become teachers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” While the quantitative impact may be different, the qualitative patterns in the heart are the same in all of us.

Now, before we go any further, there is one more thing that I want to be very clear about—because this message can be misheard in a devastating way.

This is not a sermon about earning God's love through obedience. You cannot earn what has already been freely given. If you're in Christ, God's love for you is not based on your performance. It's based on Jesus's performance. And His performance was perfect.

This is not a sermon about whether you're "Christian enough." If you've put your faith in Jesus Christ, you are His. Period. Your salvation doesn't depend on how well you obey—it depends entirely on Christ's finished work on the cross.

This isn't a sermon about how to become God's child. It's a sermon about how to live as God's child. This message is for God's people to hear, and it is about the gap between what we profess we believe and what we practice in our lives. And not merely the gap that exists, but the obstacles that create this gap and keep those who *are* God's children from experiencing the intimacy with Him and the obedience to Him that He desires.

In other words, as we examine these obstacles this morning, I'm not asking you to audit your salvation. I'm asking you to examine what's keeping you from the abundant life

Christ promised—the life of freedom, joy, and intimacy with God and impact for God's kingdom that comes from wholehearted obedience.

So, what kept Saul from wholehearted obedience? As we go back through the story of King Saul, I invite us all to consider the obstacles that kept Saul from the obedience God required. My goal is to help us recognize them. Not just in Saul's life. But in ours as well.

2. RETELLING 1 SAMUEL 15

As chapter 15 begins, we first notice that

- **King Saul had a clear mission from the Lord.**

The word of the LORD came to King Saul through the prophet Samuel. And it wasn't a complicated word. It wasn't ambiguous. It wasn't open to interpretation.

Samuel stood before the king and reminded him of something crucial: **"The LORD sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore listen to the words of the LORD"** (v. 1).

Notice that phrase: *"listen to the words of the LORD."* That's going to be the issue in this story. Not Saul's military skill. Not his strategic thinking. Not even his religious intentions. The question is simple: **Will this king listen to God's words?**

God's command was crystal clear: **"Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey"** (v. 3).

This was the fulfillment of a centuries-old promise of judgment. The Amalekites had attacked Israel when they were vulnerable, coming out of Egypt—hitting the weak, the elderly, the stragglers. God had declared then that He would one day blot out their memory. That day had come. And Saul was God's appointed instrument for that punishment.

The mission was clear. The parameters were explicit. There was no room for negotiation.

- (There was a Battle and a Stunning Military Victory)

And so, Saul did what Saul did best—he organized, strategized, and executed a military campaign.

He gathered 210,000 troops. He even showed remarkable care and wisdom—before the attack, he warned the Kenites, who were a friendly tribe living among the Amalekites, to get out of harm's way (vv. 5-6). This wasn't mindless violence; Saul was being thoughtful, protective of allies, strategic in his approach.

And then, it says in verse 7, **"Saul defeated the Amalekites from Havilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt" (v. 7)**. It was a comprehensive, sweeping victory. Saul proved once again that he was a capable commander. He knew how to win battles. And he should be commended for that.

But here's where the story takes its dark turn.

- Next we see the Disobedience: (Keeping What God Commanded to Destroy)

Look at verses 8-9:

"And he took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive and devoted to destruction all the people with the edge of the sword. But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fattened calves and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them. All that was despised and worthless they devoted to destruction."

Read that carefully. **Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fattened calves and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them.** This is where Saul **won the battle** but **lost his kingship** in the same campaign.

How was that possible? Because

He destroyed *most* of the Amalekites—but kept the king alive.

He destroyed *most* of the livestock—but kept the best animals.

He destroyed what was worthless—but kept what was valuable.

In Saul's mind, this was probably pragmatic, maybe even generous. *"Why waste good resources? These animals could be useful. Plus having an enemy king as a trophy will make for a great victory celebration. God will understand—look at everything we DID destroy!"*

But God had said: "Do not spare them." And Saul spared. That's the crux of the story right there.

- **But then came the Aftermath: (A Monument to Himself)**

Now watch what Saul does next—because this reveals his heart:

Before we see what Saul was doing next, notice the devastating word Samuel was receiving from the Lord—**"I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments" (v. 11).**

And while Samuel was receiving this news, Saul was busy building.

Not an altar to God. Not a memorial to the LORD's victory.

"Saul came to Carmel, and behold, he set up a monument for himself" (v. 12).

A monument. To himself. Not an ephraim stone to remember what God had done. No! No! A monument. For himself. For a victory, after which he had disobeyed God's explicit command.

Can you see what's happening in Saul's heart? He's more concerned with his **image before people** than his **obedience before God**. The monument says it all: *"Look what I did. See what a great king I am. Let's remember who led Israel to this victory."*

Meanwhile, God is saying to Samuel: *"I regret making him king."*

- **Then comes the Confrontation: (The Sound of Disobedience)**

So, Samuel gets up early, grieved, angry, wrestling with God all night. And he goes straight to find Saul.

And when Samuel arrives, Saul greets him with stunning confidence: **"Blessed be you to the LORD. I have performed the commandment of the LORD" (v. 13).**

Think about that. Saul genuinely seems to believe he has obeyed. He's not lying—he's self-deceived. In his mind, destroying *most* of the Amalekites and *most* of the livestock counts as fulfilling God's word.

But Samuel hears something Saul apparently doesn't notice anymore. Samuel says: What is that?

"What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear?" (v. 14).

What is this that Samuel is hearing? Is it not the sound of animals? Is it not the sound of animals that should have been destroyed, a sound of their testimony against the king. Is this not the sound of disobedience?

- **Next we see Saul's Excuse: (Religious Intentions)**

At this point, Saul has been confronted with his disobedience. And his response is quite revealing. Listen to Saul's defense, because this is where we discover what God values—and what God rejects. Saul says:

"They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the LORD your God, and the rest we have devoted to destruction" (v. 15).

Did you catch that? Saul's defense is **religious**.

"We saved these animals to offer to God! This is for worship! This is for sacrifice! Isn't that better than destroying them?"

And notice: it's not "the LORD our God"—it's "the LORD **your** God." Saul is already distancing himself from the God whose voice he failed to hear. Out of the heart the mouth speaks.

Saul thinks he's found a clever loophole: **"Yes, I disobeyed your command by not destroying everything completely, but I did it for religious purposes. Surely God will understand. Surely religious worship covers a small, inconsequential disobedience."**

This is the moment. This is where Samuel delivers one of the most important statements in the arc of the biblical story. Just as Saul is making his excuses:

- **Samuel delivers the Verdict: (What God Actually Values)**

Samuel stops Saul cold.

"Stop! I will tell you what the LORD said to me this night" (v. 16).

He then reminds Saul of who he is: **anointed by God, appointed by God, sent by God with a specific mission.** And then he asks the devastating question:

"Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD?" (v. 19).

Saul tries again to defend himself—**20 And Saul said to Samuel, "I have obeyed the voice of the LORD. I have gone on the mission on which the LORD sent me. I have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and I have devoted the Amalekites to destruction. 21 But the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the best of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the LORD your God in Gilgal."**

And then Samuel speaks the saying that defines everything, that gives clarity to what is going on here:

**"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 also rejected you from being king." (vv. 22-23)**

Let that sink in. In other words, Samuel is saying:

**God doesn't want your religious performance.
God wants your wholehearted obedience.**

Saul won a military victory. He showed strategic wisdom. He intended to offer sacrifice. He maintained public worship. He eventually even confessed his sin.

But none of that mattered. Because **he did not listen to the voice of the LORD.**

Kings come a dime a dozen. But kings with character are rare.

- **Lastly, we see Saul's Confession: (Too Late, Too Shallow)**

Finally, Saul admits: **"I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the LORD and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice" (v. 24).**

There it is. He **feared the people.** He **obeyed their voice** instead of God's voice.

Even his quasi-confession reveals his heart: **"Yet honor me now before the elders of my people and before Israel"** (v. 30).

Even in his attempt to confess, Saul is still managing his image. He's still concerned about his reputation. He wants Samuel to come back with him so it *looks like* everything is okay between him and God.

Samuel does go back. Saul does worship. But the relationship is broken.

"And Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel" (v. 35).

So, what does this historical account teach us? What does it tell us about what God values?

Think about all the things that Saul had going for him:

- ✓ Military competence
- ✓ Strategic thinking
- ✓ Impressive physical presence
- ✓ Early humility
- ✓ Religious intentions
- ✓ Willingness to worship publicly
- ✓ Confession of sin

None of it mattered in terms of Saul's position as King.

Because Saul did not have the one thing God required: **wholehearted obedience to His word.**

The bleating sound of animals in the background was a soundtrack to Saul's failure. He thought he could substitute **impressive religious performance** (sacrificing the animals) for **wholehearted obedience** (destroying them as commanded).

But God said through Samuel: **That's not how this works.**

And through this tragic event, we learn this:

God values wholehearted obedience over impressive religious performance . . . every single time.

You can't compensate for disobedience with religious activity.

Obedience is better than sacrifice.

Listening to God's voice is better than the fat of rams.

And so we look at Saul and shake our heads. *"How could he think God would accept this? How could he be so blind?"*

But that's not the right question. What we need to ask is: **What is keeping this from happening to us? What is keeping me from wholehearted obedience?**

Because the uncomfortable question for us is this: are we not far more like Saul than we want to admit. Do we not also substitute religious activity for obedience? The story of Saul is not just ancient history—it's a mirror. And for the rest of this message, we're going to let this mirror show us some of the obstacles that kept Saul from the wholehearted obedience God desired. Because these obstacles are like blocks, blocks, when stacked one on top of another, create a wall, a wall between our public faithfulness that everyone sees and our private obedience that happens 24/7.

3. FIVE OBSTACLES TO WHOLEHEARTED OBEDIENCE

Obstacle #1 comes in the form of an illusion.

Scripture Foundation:

"But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fattened calves and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them. All that was despised and worthless they devoted to destruction." (1 Samuel 15:9)

The Pattern in Saul's Life

Notice what Saul did: he **obeyed selectively**. He destroyed what was worthless. He kept what was valuable.

Saul treated God's command like it was an opening offer in a negotiation. *"God said destroy everything, but surely He'll be satisfied if I destroy most things. Certainly we can keep the best animals—they'll certainly be useful for sacrifice!"*

Maybe in Saul's mind, this was no big deal.

Obedience to God can't be 'pick and choose. Saul and his army lost sight of the concept of a God-ordained punishment mission. They destroyed only things and people that were not seen as useful, and kept everything that could be of use to them. This was in effect a form of negotiation. But therein lies the first obstacle we see. It is:

1. The Illusion That We Can Negotiate With God

The Pattern in Our Lives

Do we not do this? Do we not at times treat obedience like it's multiple choice:

Do our actions not illustrate that we are convinced that **partial obedience is acceptable obedience.**

But look at God's response to Saul: **"Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king" (v. 23).**

Not "because you lack competence."

Not "because you lack confidence."

"Because you rejected the word of the LORD."

Why This Illusion Is Deadly

The illusion that we can negotiate with God reveals a fundamental misunderstanding: **we think we're God's business partner when we're actually His servant.**

God is not looking for our input on His commands.

He's not inviting us to revise His standards to fit our convenience.

He's not interested in hearing why we think we know better.

He's the King. We're the subjects. Obedience is not negotiable. Partial obedience is disobedience.

Biblical Reinforcement

This isn't just an Old Testament issue. **James 2:10 says: "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it."**

God's commands are not a buffet where we select what appeals to us. They are a unified expression of His character, His holiness, and His will. When we selectively obey, we're not being "mostly obedient"—**we're being disobedient.**

And here's the application: **The moment you start negotiating, you've already chosen disobedience.**

Negotiating with God is obstacle #1.

OBSTACLE #2 has to do with our misguided fear.

Scripture Foundation:

"Saul said to Samuel, 'I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the LORD and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice.'" (1 Samuel 15:24)

The Pattern in Saul's Life

When Saul finally confessed, he revealed the real problem: **"I feared the people."**

Not: "I didn't understand."

Not: "I made a mistake."

Not: "I was confused about what you meant."

"I feared the people and obeyed their voice."

Obstacle #2 in closing the gap between public faithfulness and private obedience is this:

2. The Fear of People's Opinions Over God's Approval

Bergen explains what this means: "What had motivated Saul to move away from obedience to God's command? Fundamentally it was **misdirected fear: instead of fearing the Lord as required by the Torah, Saul 'was afraid of the people'** (cf. Mark 11:32; John 7:13). Because of that misguided fear, Saul 'listened to the voice of' ('gave in to') the people instead of listening to the Lord's voice as required by the Torah (cf. Deut 27:10)."

Saul was living for a human audience instead of the divine audience.

The Pattern in Our Lives

Do we not understand this temptation?

- The pastor who waters down Scripture's hard truths because he's afraid of losing attendance
- The parent who fails to discipline because they want to be the "cool parent" their kids like
- The Christian who hides their faith because they're afraid of what colleagues will say

Proverbs 29:25 diagnoses the problem: "The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is safe."

Why This Fear Is Deadly

When we fear people more than God, we will inevitably **obey the wrong voice**.

The moment we start calculating, "*What will people think?*" before asking "*What does God say?*" we have already chosen disobedience.

The Path Forward

Jesus addresses this directly in **Matthew 10:28: "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell."**

The question is not: "What will cost me the least?"

The question is: "**Whose opinion matters the most?**"

Saul could maintain his image before the people for a season, but he couldn't maintain his kingship before God. He played to the wrong audience and lost everything that mattered.

Because here's the solemn truth: **You will always obey the voice you fear most.**

And this misdirected fear becomes a huge obstacle in closing the gap between our public faithfulness and private obedience.

But these are not the only obstacles:

OBSTACLE #3:

Obstacle #3 has to do with our desire to maintain control of our circumstances.

Scripture Foundation:

"Saul said, 'They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the LORD your God, and the rest we have devoted to destruction.'" (1 Samuel 15:15)

The Pattern in Saul's Life

Here's what makes Saul's excuse so revealing: **he framed his disobedience in religious language.**

"We kept the animals to sacrifice to God!"

On the surface, this sounds spiritual. It sounds worshipful. It sounds like Saul cared about honoring God.

But here's what was really happening: "In effect Saul was treating God as if he were a child, or an idol. The dedication to God of all Amalekite property required it to be destroyed: to keep it, even for such a noble purpose as sacrifice, was not an acceptable alternative. **Sacrifice can never be an alternative to obedience and without obedience is an irrelevant abomination.**"

Think about what Saul was doing: **he was redefining obedience on his own terms.**

God said: "Destroy everything."

Saul said: "I'll keep some things and sacrifice them to you."

But who decided that sacrifice was the better option? **Saul did.** Not God.

And this illustrates for us obstacle #3, which we can state this way:

3. The Desire to Maintain Control Through Religious Activity

The decision to control the situation becomes an obstacle for us.

When we suggest a sacrifice, we remain in control. When we offer obedience, we surrender control.

One commentator puts it this way: **"In sacrifices a man offers only the strange flesh of irrational animals, whereas in obedience he offers his own will."**

That's the issue: **When we offer sacrifice, we remain in control. When we offer obedience, we surrender control.**

With sacrifice, I decide:

- What to give
- When to give it
- How much to give
- How it looks to others
- Whether it's convenient

With obedience, God decides all of that. **I just submit to do what God has clearly said.**

Maybe this is why religious activity is so attractive? Perhaps it's because:

1. **It's measurable** - We can count dollars given, hours served, verses read, meetings attended
2. **It's visible** - Others can see and affirm our religious performance
3. **It feels productive** - We sense we're "doing something for God"
4. **It allows compartmentalization** - We can be "spiritual" in some areas while disobeying in others
5. **It maintains our sense of control** - We choose what to offer rather than surrendering what God demands

The Pattern in Our Lives

What about us? Do we ever do this? Do you ever substitute religious activity (which we control) for obedience (which requires surrender):

Examples:

- What about when we serve in multiple ministries (sacrifice) while refusing to reconcile with a family member (disobedience).

In daily life:

- The parent who takes children to church faithfully (sacrifice) while displaying a critical, unforgiving spirit at home (disobedience)

Do we think: *"If I just do enough religious activity, God will overlook this area of disobedience."*

But that's exactly what Saul thought. And God said: **"To obey is better than sacrifice."**

The issue here is not a question of either sacrifice or obedience, but rather is our sacrifice an actual expression of wholehearted obedience, or is it an attempt to maintain control? The point is not that God doesn't want sacrifice. The point is that God wants a different type of sacrifice. Practically speaking, a **sacrifice must be offered to the Lord on his terms, not ours**. And Saul's postponement of the total destruction of the spoils, however much he dressed it up in religious language, it constituted a flagrant violation of God's will.

In **Romans 12:1**, Paul gives us a picture of sacrifice that pleases the Lord:

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."

The sacrifice God wants is **the surrender of ourselves**—not the management of religious activities.

The sacrifice God desires is the surrender of our wills to His, not the preservation of our personal brand for others to admire.

Because here's the truth: **You can't bribe God with religious activity to overlook your disobedience.**

That's obstacle #3.

Obstacle #4 has to do with a deception.

Scripture Foundation:

"But the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the best of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the LORD your God in Gilgal." (1 Samuel 15:21)

The Pattern in Saul's Life

Notice how Saul defended his disobedience: **he emphasized his good motives**.

Not once but **three times** (vv. 15, 21, and implied throughout), Saul insisted that the animals were kept **"to sacrifice to the LORD."** His emphasis was not just that it was religious activity, but that their hearts had good intentions.

His argument was essentially: "Yes, I *technically disobeyed the command to destroy everything, but our hearts were in the right place. We meant well. I had a noble purpose. Doesn't that count for something?*"

Here we see obstacle #4, which is:

4. The Deception That Good Intentions Justify Partial Obedience

But here's what's devastating: **we already know the truth.**

Back in verse 9: "But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and of the oxen... and all that was good, and **would not utterly destroy them.**"

Would not utterly. In other words, Saul and his men were '**unwilling**'! Unwilling to destroy.

The account says they were **unwilling**. Saul says they were **worship-motivated**.

One of them is lying. And it's not the narrator's account.

Why Good Intentions Don't Justify Disobedience

Samuel's response cuts through Saul's excuse: "**Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD? Why did you pounce on the spoil and do what was evil in the sight of the LORD?**" (v. 19)

The word "pounce" is important. Saul wanted to claim that the animals were spared in order 'to sacrifice to the LORD.' But Samuel disregarded that claim: '**Why did you pounce on the spoil?** That is what the people did in the previous chapter (1 Samuel 14:32) when they were famished and recklessly slaughtered the Philistine animals to satisfy their hunger.

Saul wanted Samuel to believe that his decision to spare the spoil was worship-motivated, but Samuel saw through the religious spin. This wasn't about worship. This was about **wanting and keeping what God said to destroy.**

The Biblical Standard

But Scripture is clear: **good intentions don't excuse disobedience.**

- **Uzzah** had good intentions when he reached out to steady the ark (2 Samuel 6:6-7). God still struck him dead.

- **Aaron** claimed good intentions when he made the golden calf—"for a feast to the LORD" (Exodus 32:5). God still sent a plague.
- **Ananias and Sapphira** intended to give a generous gift (Acts 5:1-11). God still judged their deception.

The issue is not just *what* we do but *whether we are obeying when we do what we do*. And **no amount of good intention can transform disobedience into obedience.**

Chuck Swindoll says this:

"God wants our hearts, not our handouts—hearts yielded to the Holy Spirit and willing to set our desires aside to do what God says."

This is where it is so easy for us to be deceived. Even if we take Saul at face value—if we give him the benefit of the doubt, and let's just assume that he is not deliberately and consciously trying to cover up his failure to fully obey God's word—what we see here is something of sin's deceitfulness (cf. Hebrews 3:13). **The very sinfulness that leads to disobedience often blinds us to the reality of our disobedience.**"

That's the danger: **we can genuinely believe our good intentions make our disobedience acceptable.**

Let me give you an embarrassingly personal example from this week.

I was at the grocery store shopping, picking up some items for a ministry event at the church. I had the church credit card in my wallet, my list in hand, and I was moving through the store—sweet tea to drink, salad dressing, and cookies for dessert.

Just as I was heading to checkout, I walked past the ice cream freezer. And there it was: Häagen-Dazs Coffee Ice cream. My favorite flavor. You know the one—that flavor that makes you forget you're a grown adult and turns you into a kid again.

So I grabbed a pint and put it in the cart.

Now, as I was unloading everything onto the belt, a thought occurred to me: "Wait—am I going to pay for this ice cream with my own money, or am I just going to let it get included with the church purchases?"

And here's where it gets interesting. Listen to the rationalization that immediately started running through my mind:

"It's only \$4.50. That's nothing in the grand scheme of the church budget."

"Plus, I don't want to slow down the line behind me by making the cashier ring up a separate order. That would be inconsiderate to all these people."

But then—and this is where Obstacle #4 really shows itself—another thought crept in:

"What difference does it make anyway? I'm doing ministry work for the Lord. I'm serving the church. I'm using my Saturday to shop for a church event. Don't I deserve a little \$4.50 ice cream for my trouble? My intentions are good. I'm serving God."

Do you see what just happened?

I took a decision that was clearly about me wanting ice cream, and I baptized it in religious language. I made it about my service. My sacrifice. My good intentions.

I was trying to convince myself at that moment—that because I was doing ministry work, the rules were different. That my good intentions somehow sanctified my dishonest choice.

And that's exactly what Saul did.

He took animals that God said to destroy, and he said, "But I'm going to sacrifice them to You! My intentions are worship!" He reframed his disobedience in religious language and genuinely seemed to believe it was acceptable.

By the way, I paid for the ice cream separately. But not before I stood there and recognized in myself the exact pattern we're seeing in Saul. And it was deeply uncomfortable.

Because here's the truth: We can learn to baptize our disobedience in the religious language of good intentions.

But: **The road to serious sin is paved with good intentions to justify small compromises.**

And that is a deadly obstacle to closing the gap between our public faithfulness and our private obedience.

The fifth and final obstacle to closing this gap comes in the form of a temptation that we all can face.

Scripture Foundation:

"Saul said, **"They** have brought them from the Amalekites, for **the people** spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the LORD your God, and the rest **we** have devoted to destruction."

 (1 Samuel 15:15)

The Pattern in Saul's Life

Notice how Saul structured his defense. It's a masterclass in blame-shifting:

- **"They** brought them" - Not me, them
- **"The people** spared" - Not my decision, their choice
- **"We** devoted to destruction" - But I'll take credit for the obedient part

OBSTACLE #5: The Temptation to Shift Blame Rather Than Accept Responsibility

"He had listened to the wrong voice, and now he knew it... Where have we heard something like that before? The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate" (Genesis 3:12). **Saul stood in the great tradition of sinners since Adam who deny responsibility for their own sin and blame others.**"

This is the pattern:

- **Adam:** "The woman you gave me..."
- **Eve:** "The serpent deceived me..."
- **Aaron:** "The people demanded it..." (Exodus 32:22-24)
- **Saul:** "The people spared the best..."

But here's what's crucial: **we already know from the story that Saul's culpability has already been established.**

Back in 1 Samuel 15:9 the narrator carefully told us that it was Saul and the people that 'spared' Agag, the Amalekite king, and 'the best' of the animals. This even suggests that **it was Saul who took the lead in this.** But Saul's defense shifts the blame: "They ... the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen"

Saul tried to put the blame on the soldiers, as if he could do nothing to stop it.

But Samuel wasn't having it: **"Why then did YOU not obey the voice of the LORD?"** (v. 19, emphasis added). The "you" is singular. Samuel puts the responsibility exactly where it belongs: squarely and unequivocally **on Saul**.

Why is this so important? Why is this obstacle so powerful in creating this wall between our public faithfulness and private obedience. It's because the temptation to shift blame rather than accept responsibility reveals something about our hearts.

Blame-shifting reveals:

1. **Pride** - "I'm not the problem; others are"
2. **Fear** - "If I accept responsibility, there will be consequences"
3. **Self-deception** - "I genuinely believe it's not my fault"
4. **Spiritual immaturity** - "I haven't learned to own my sin"
5. **Image management** - "I can't let people see my failure"

All of this contributes to blame-shifting, and blame-shifting makes true repentance impossible.

Let's consider the contrast between two kings who were each confronted with their sin:

Saul's confession:

"I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the LORD and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice." (v. 24)

Even his confession shifts blame: "because the people..."

David's confession (after his sin with Bathsheba):

"I have sinned against the LORD." (2 Samuel 12:13) "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment." (Psalm 51:4)

No excuses. No qualifications. No blame-shifting. **Just ownership.**

genuine confession says:

- "I chose to disobey. No one made me."
- "I knew better and did it anyway."
- "I am responsible for this sin."
- "I cannot blame circumstances, other people, or my past."

The Call to Radical Ownership

James 5:16 says: "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed."

Not: "Confess others' sins."

Not: "Explain why you had to sin."

Not: "Share the complex factors that led to sin."

Confess YOUR sins.

True repentance sounds like:

- "I am responsible for this."
- "I cannot blame anyone else."
- "This is my sin, my failure, my choice."
- "I'm not minimizing, explaining, or justifying—I'm confessing."

Here's the truth: **Until you stop blaming others, you can't truly repent. And until you truly repent, you can't close the gap between public faithfulness and private obedience.**

Conclusion

We've examined five obstacles that keep us from wholehearted obedience:

1. **The illusion that we can negotiate with God** - treating His commands like opening offers
2. **The fear of people's opinions over God's approval** - listening to the wrong voice
3. **The desire to maintain control through religious activity** - offering sacrifice instead of surrender
4. **The deception that good intentions justify partial obedience** - baptizing disobedience in religious language
5. **The temptation to shift blame rather than accept responsibility** - refusing to own our sin

Every single one of these was true of Saul. And if we're honest, some of these show up in our lives too.

The Practical Response:

So here's what I want us to do before you leave this morning:

Don't try to fix all five at once. That's just another form of religious performance—trying to master a checklist so you can feel better about yourself.

Instead, I want you to ask the Holy Spirit one simple question: **"Which one of these obstacles is most active in my life right now?"**

Not all five. Just one. The one that's currently keeping you from the intimacy with God that He's calling you to.

Maybe as I was describing the obstacles, one of them hit you harder than the others. Maybe you felt that uncomfortable recognition—*"That's me. That's what I'm doing."*

Start there.

And then ask three follow-up questions:

First: "Where specifically is this obstacle showing up in my life right now?"

Not in general. Not theoretically. Where specifically?

- Is it in your marriage? Your parenting?
- Is it at work? In your finances?
- Is it in a specific relationship? A specific habit?
- Is it in your ministry? Your service at church?

Name it. Be specific. Write it down if you need to.

Second: "What is this obstacle costing me?"

Because here's the truth: disobedience always costs us something. It's costing you:

- Peace with God
- Intimacy in relationship

- Joy in your Christian life
- Fruitfulness in ministry
- Integrity in witness

What is this specific pattern of disobedience actually costing you? Name the cost. Feel the weight of it.

Third: "What would wholehearted obedience look like in this specific area?"

Not what would *perfect* obedience look like—what would *wholehearted* obedience look like?

- If you're negotiating with God about your finances, what would it look like to stop negotiating and just obey?
- If you're fearing people more than God in your workplace, what would it look like to fear God more?
- If you're substituting religious activity for obedience in your marriage, what would it look like to actually obey what God's been asking of you?
- If you're justifying disobedience with good intentions in your parenting, what would it look like to stop justifying and start obeying?
- If you're shifting blame in a specific conflict, what would it look like to own your part without excuse?

Be specific. Picture it. What would it actually look like to obey in this one area?

And then—and this is crucial—**take one step this week.**

Not ten steps. Not a complete overhaul of your life. **One step.**

- If you're negotiating with God about generosity, maybe the one step is giving someone a gift this week.
- If you're fearing people more than God, maybe the one step is having that conversation you've been putting off
- If you're substituting religious activity for obedience, maybe the one step is saying no to that ministry event so you can be home for that difficult conversation with your son.
- If you're justifying disobedience, maybe the one step is confessing to someone what you've been rationalizing

- If you're shifting blame, maybe the one step is apologizing without explaining or defending yourself

One obstacle. One area. One step. This week.

That's not legalism. That's not works-righteousness. That's responding to grace with obedience. That's removing one barrier to intimacy with God.

Let's pray.

Closing Prayer:

Father, thank You that You don't just diagnose our disobedience—You provide the power to overcome it. Thank You that the same Spirit who convicted us this morning is the same Spirit who will empower us to obey this week.

We ask You now: show each of us which obstacle is most active in our lives. Give us the courage to name it specifically. Help us count the cost of continuing in it. And give us a clear picture of what wholehearted obedience would look like.

Then give us the grace to take one step this week. Not to earn Your love—we already have that in Christ. But to experience the joy and freedom that comes from walking in obedience to Your voice.

We can't do this in our own strength. We need Your Spirit. We need Your grace. We need Your power.

And so we pray in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Benediction:

2 Corinthians 9:8 (ESV)

[That] God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.