

Saul's Reign: *Strike 3! (Part 2)*

1 Samuel 15:17-23

¹⁷ And Samuel said, "Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? The LORD anointed you king over Israel. ¹⁸ And the LORD sent you on a mission and said, 'Go, devote to destruction the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are consumed.' ¹⁹ 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?" 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." ²² And Samuel said, "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. ²³ 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." (ESV)

My time is short, so I'm going to jump right in, with one exception. I'm going to remind you of the background to this whole book. The background of the book of Samuel was to make a case that Israel needed a king. But not just any king, they needed a king like David. So as we looked at the first 12 chapters last fall we saw the drama building until Israel came and asked for a king like the other nations, and they got one. His name was Saul. What we've been looking at this fall is how this person Saul is not the king Israel needs, and why he's not the king that Israel needs. We've also seen what it means to have faith and what it doesn't mean to have faith, and what you know about God as we looked at Saul. Each of the chapters 13, 14, and 15 of 1 Samuel makes one strike for Saul as king over Israel. Right now we are looking strike 3, and there will probably be at least three sermons about strike 3.

Once the kingdom was turned over to Saul God promised him He wouldn't fail them or forsake them. He promised them He'd give them the Philistines into their hand. Basically he promised them success IF – "Saul, your only job as king is to obey." That's it. So remember the last time from chapter 15, God gave Saul a mission. He said, "I want you to go and destroy the Amalekites." That goes all the way back to Exodus for when the Amalekites attacked Israel as they were coming out of Egypt. When they were despondent and already beaten up the Amalekites attacked them and God promised the Amalekites that He in fact would judge them. He gave them 300 years to repent, and apparently they didn't. So now He tells Saul, "Here's what I want you to do. Go in and devote to destruction the Amalekites—everything." And He doesn't leave any wiggle room, "Man, woman, child, sheep, goat, oxen, anything that's there devote to destruction." Saul went through and easily routed the Amalekites, except he spared their king, probably just to show off, probably for political reasons, and also he spared the best of the sheep and the oxen, supposedly to sacrifice. We saw the last time in this chapter that when he was initially confronted about it, what did he do? He shifted the blame and basically threw Israel under the bus. Remember Samuel comes looking for him and asks, "What have you done?" As soon as he sees Saul, Saul yells out to him, "Blessing upon you. I have obeyed the commandment of the Lord." And do you remember Samuel's reply? He says, "What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears, and the lowing of cattle?" Saul says, "Well, you know. I did the right thing, but the people spared the sheep and the oxen in order to sacrifice." He begins to explain himself, and that's where Samuel says, "Stop. Just stop. Right now. I'm going to tell you what the Lord has said about you." So the rest of the chapter is really three dialogs. We're just going to look at the first one this morning. We're going to look at just two points from these few verses.

The first point is: God's view of us trumps our view of us. Let me put it in second person. God's view of you trumps your view of you. I'll explain what I mean. Notice what Samuel says when he finally begins to speak in verse 17,

¹⁷ And Samuel said, "Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? The LORD anointed you king over Israel. ¹⁸ And the LORD sent you on a mission and said, 'Go, devote to destruction the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are consumed.'" (ESV)

Did you see how he opened up? He opened up this dialog by reminding Saul of who he was. Not who he was in his own eyes, but who he was according to what God had called him to be. Over 10 years ago, Judy and I did what is called a "parachute drop" into Capitol Hill. Presbyterian Church of America asked us to plant a church in Capitol Hill. We had a 3-year-old, a 2-year-old, and our youngest was born about a month after we got here. Several months into the project of trying to plant this church from scratch, I was extremely discouraged. I thought, "You know, I just don't have what it takes to plant this church. I need some pity." So I went to the worst possible place to find pity (I found out afterward). I thought to myself, "Who might give me some pity?" So I made an appointment with this sweet older man that I'd met earlier who was running the Union Gospel Mission at the time. His name was Tom. [looking at assistant pastor Tom Ramsay] I thought, "You know, he'll probably give me a hug and tell me he knows how hard it is, and he'll say, "You know, Tommy, you're probably right. You probably should just go back to Atlanta." He did give me a hug. And he was nice. I said, "You know I don't think I have what it takes to plant this church." While I can't remember his exact words, I think they were something like, "I don't see that you have a choice." That's not very pitiful! In other words, he said, "Tommy, God has called you to plant this church and it's obvious He's called you, all the stuff is in place, you just now need to go do it." In other words, "Quit showing yourself so much pity." Part of the reason we're still here is (fortunately or unfortunately) thanks to that meeting ten years ago.

I think of this passage all of the time, and I think of that meeting when I read this passage. Because for most of our lives we are sort of defined by self-pity, are we not? I think all the time, "I don't have what it takes to be the pastor here." And yet, what I have to remind myself of is, "Tommy, what's more important? What your view of yourself is or what God has called you to do and what His view of you is?"

And it's even bigger than that because you have to ask yourself the question. Samuel poses a question here. He doesn't tell Saul, he asks him a question, "Though you are little in your own eyes, has not the Lord anointed and called you?" The question is, "Even on the macro level, if you're a Christian here, are you driven by your view of yourself or are you driven by how God views you?" It's clear here that Samuel assumes Saul is completely driven by his insecurities. Therefore he's defensive, therefore he shifts blame, therefore he never gets it. The question is, "Are you driven by your insecurities or are you driven by how God sees you?" If the Gospel is true, what that says is that Jesus went to the cross and was crucified and bore all of your sin. You were not just forgiven, but you were actually given and credited all His righteousness when you trusted in Him. So now when God uses you, He sees you as completely righteous, completely justified with nothing lacking. Are you driven by that or are you driven by the fact that you feel so sinful, so guilty, like "I can't lead in the church because I just don't have what it takes?" Welcome to my world!

The question is whether or not you're going to believe the Gospel in every area of your life. Do you feel like you're having a hard time with your kids if you're a mom? Have you ever felt like you don't have what it takes? Have you felt like you're failing? What's defining you, your own view of how well you're doing with your kids,

or the view that God has of you through Christ? Are you in business and you feel like, “Man, I just don’t know what to do with my business. I’m out of my league.” What’s defining you? What defines you, your inadequacies and your sinfulness or how you know God can use you? No matter what happens with your business, no matter what happens with your kids, at the end of the day you’re in a right relationship with God and He delights in you.

You can’t have much more delight than to anoint someone as king, and that’s how Samuel starts. What we’re going to see with Saul is that there have been hints about it throughout 1 Samuel. You ask yourself, “Does Saul really understand the Gospel? Does he understand the promises of God? Does he really have a relationship with God?” When you look at chapter 13 you can almost understand when he was overwhelmed by the Philistines and made a mistake. You can almost understand that. But as we get into the end of this chapter, as Samuel probes deeper and deeper into Saul’s heart you’re going to find, “Maybe he doesn’t really get it at all.” And the reason he doesn’t get it at all is because of that very first question.

Here’s something you need to remember. His only job was to obey and yet his obedience and our obedience are completely defined by and dependent upon our understanding of God’s promises and His Gospel to us. In other words, if you’re obeying for obedience sake it means nothing, you don’t get it. But if you’re obeying because your heart has been changed, you get it. So that’s the question you have to ask. What is obedience? We’re going to see that Saul was disobedient, but his disobedience at the end of the day really wasn’t the thing, his relationship with God, or lack thereof, is what issued forth in disobedience. In other words, his obedience or disobedience was simply a symptom of whether or not he knew God and knew about Him.

So what’s the second thing we see here? The first thing was that God’s view of you trumps your view of you. The second thing is that religiosity does not equal obedience. Notice what happened here, and I’ll probably talk more about it later. In verse 19 where Samuel asks,

¹⁹ 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?” 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.” (ESV)

If you put yourself in Saul’s shoes and you’re really trying to avoid further probing, Saul made a tremendous mistake here. The mistake he made is that he violated what I would call the POW principle. What’s the POW principle? It’s just this: Never volunteer any more information than what’s asked of you. So if he was really trying to avoid something, and if he was really, frankly smart at all, when Samuel said, “Why didn’t you obey?” He should have said, “I did obey.” Period. It would have been like watching the Presidential debates, right? There’s an accusation, someone says, “Your tax plan is this.” And the other person says, “That’s not true.” Period. What do you do then? You can’t do anything. That’s what Saul should have done if he wanted to escape probing, but he didn’t. He kept talking, and that’s where Samuel gets him.

Notice what he says first. He says, “I did obey” and he sort of obfuscates. In other words, did he really obey? Imagine you’re a parent and your teenage son or daughter asks to borrow the car and you say, “Yeah, you can borrow the car, but take my keys and go to the grocery store and buy a loaf of bread and come home.” And they take your keys, then stops at the grocery store where they buy everything but bread, and then they take the car out with their friends until about three in the morning. When they come home, you’re furious and you say, “Why

didn't you do what I told you to do?" And their response is, "I did. You told me to go to the store." Would you view that as obedience? You would say they're crazy. That's what you have to think about Saul here, but he keeps talking. He says, "I did obey. I went on the mission." So either one of two things is going on here. Either Saul doesn't know the true nature of obedience and he really means what he says here, or he DOES know the true nature of obedience and he's trying to be slippery. Whether he doesn't or he does, both of them go back to what he knows about God. So he continues, "I did obey. I went on the mission and I brought back Agag." I think he wants us to be impressed by that. And then notice how he basically takes credit for the good part of the mission and throws Israel under the bus again for the bad part. He says, "I devoted the Amalekites to destruction, but the people, those disobedient people, kept the best of the sheep and the oxen."

And then maybe in what's the most telling line from Saul's mouth in the whole book of Samuel, he says, "They kept the best of the sheep and the oxen to sacrifice to the Lord your God." You notice he doesn't say they kept the best of the sheep and oxen to sacrifice to the Lord MY God or the Lord OUR God. What Saul is completely defined by is not his relationship with the true God, or what other people think it should be, or what Samuel's relationship with God is. But Saul apparently has no real relationship with God himself. By running his mouth, that's where Samuel hammers him. Samuel says, "Saul, do you really think sacrifice is more important than obedience?" He says, "The Lord delights in obedience more than sacrifice." In other words, your religion, Saul, doesn't cut it, and being religious doesn't cut it whether it's for my God or for your God. What it shows is that you don't get it at all. And get this—your obedience doesn't cut it either if your obedience is motivated by just religion. If Saul really got it, he would have been undone here because obedience is better than sacrifice. But, "I don't even have what it takes to be obedient. Now what?" If you think you're pleasing God by your obedience, really what you're doing is offering your obedience as another kind of sacrifice. And if you're just offering your obedience as another kind of sacrifice, is it really pleasing to him? The answer is, "No." What you need instead is an obedient king who is able not only to be obedient but to offer sacrifice, but it's got to be bigger than that. Notice it doesn't say sacrifice isn't important. You need an obedient king who is able to offer sacrifice who then is willing to give you his obedience.

Of course that's what I talked about in the beginning. There is only one king who is completely and truly obedient to God's plan, and His name is Jesus. The beauty of Jesus' obedience is that Jesus was not obedient in order just to be religious. Jesus didn't obey God just to please Him, but rather Jesus obeyed God because He knew God was pleased with Him. Do you see the difference? Are you seeking to be obedient with the hope that God will be pleased with you, or are you being obedient because you know God is pleased with you? The only way you can know God is pleased with you is if you put your faith in His Son Jesus. Because by putting your faith in Jesus, your sins are taken away and all his righteous and goodness is given to you, and then at that point you have a chance. So the question I'll leave you with today is just that. What motivates your obedience? What motivates your goodness? What motivates your morality? Are you trying to please God? What motivates who you're going to vote for? Is it trying to please God in hope of gaining His favor or is it because you are absolutely certain that you have His favor? You're absolutely certain, your sins have been taken away, and He looks on you and delights in you. If that is the case, more power to you.