

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

1 Samuel 15:24-31

²⁴ 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." ²⁵ Now therefore, please pardon my sin and return with me that I may worship the LORD." ²⁶ And Samuel said to Saul, "I will not return with you. For you have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you from being king over Israel." ²⁷ As Samuel turned to go away, Saul seized the skirt of his robe, and it tore. ²⁸ And Samuel said to him, "The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you." ²⁹ And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret." ³⁰ Then he said, "I have sinned; yet honor me now before the elders of my people and before Israel, and return with me, that I may bow before the LORD your God." ³¹ So Samuel turned back after Saul, and Saul bowed before the LORD. (ESV)

Up to this point we've been looking at the book of 1 Samuel, particularly Saul. The whole book of Samuel is trying to make a point. It's trying to persuade Israel of something, and ultimately it's trying to persuade us of something. What it's trying to persuade us of is that Israel needs a king, and not just any king, but in fact a king like David. As we went through the book we saw in chapters 1-12 this transition from the time of Judges to the time of when Israel would have a monarchy. Israel made a mistake, not of asking for a king, but of asking for a king like the other nations. They wanted a king who was powerful and a king who was physically impressive, and they got one. The only problem was that he was very spiritually dull. Frankly, before I started this I was pretty sympathetic toward Saul. I thought, "You know, maybe he gets it, but he just keeps messing up." The deeper I dig, I find not so much that I'm not unsympathetic, but that I'm sympathetic for different reasons. What I have sympathy for now is that it's very clear that Saul doesn't get it at all. As we've looked at chapters 13, 14, and 15, the author of this book is making the case by using basically three strikes that show why Saul should not be the king. I'm not going to review strike 1; you can read it in chapter 13. Strike 2 is in chapter 14, and strike 3 is in chapter 15. I realize I've taken about three sermons to talk about each strike. I was looking at my preaching schedule and if I'd stuck to it I think we'd be on about 1 Samuel 20 by now. I have to ask your forgiveness. Either way, today is the culmination of the last strike against Saul. Today is also the culmination of where we see what Saul's fatal, tragic flaw is, or at least the way it manifests itself; we see his idol.

If you remember last week we talked about how God gave Saul a command. The command was this: "Go and destroy the Amalekites and don't leave anything." Saul disobeyed. He went in and they destroyed some of the things. But the king lived and they kept the best of the sheep and the oxen, and that kind of thing. When Samuel came to confront him, he said, "Is not obedience better than sacrifice?" Saul said, "We kept the stuff in order to sacrifice it to the Lord your God." Samuel said, "Is not obedience better than sacrifice?"

I left you last week with this question, and the question was of obedience. "Why do you obey (if you do)?" Do you obey in order to gain God's approval, or do you obey because you have God's approval? Do you obey in order to impress God, or do you obey because God has already done all the work so you obey out of gratitude? Which is it? That assumes, of course, that you tried to obey. Basically, Saul didn't obey at the end of the day. Whether he was driven by trying to please God or driven by the fact that he knew God was pleased with him, he didn't obey. So now what? Where do you go now with Saul? That's what Samuel does. Basically we have two conversations here that we are going to look at. The first conversation begins right after he's been confronted with his lack of obedience, and learns that obedience is better than sacrifice. Notice what Saul says first here.

²⁴ 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." ²⁵ Now therefore, please pardon my sin and return with me that I may worship the LORD."

In just a minute we're going to look at what Saul's fatal flaw is, or his failure to live the Gospel. I'll give you a hint. It's the same problem most of us have most of the time. Here's Saul who is anointed and called to be the king of Israel, who was royalty, on one hand. On the other hand, in spite of the fact that he was royalty, he lived like a slave.

When we talk of the issue of obedience, every human being 100 percent of the time is obedient. You're always obedient. The question is to whom are you obedient? Are you obedient to God or you obedient to something else? That's what we're going to look at in just a minute. But before we get there, I want you to notice a major difference that's going to start coming up.

We're transitioning out of Saul and into David. Did you notice how Saul responded when he finally got caught, when he finally got to a point where he had no wiggle room? What did he say? "I sinned. I transgressed the law of the Lord. I transgressed your word, now can you pardon me and let's go? Can we just keep moving?" There didn't seem to be a lot of heart in that. The contrast you see between Saul and David is night and day. It also shows you the difference between the kind of king you need. Remember the great event from David's life, maybe the worst sin? If you've been a Christian for awhile you are thinking, I hope, of his sin with Bathsheba. Remember the story of David and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 12? David's troops were out fighting and David for some reason was left back behind in Jerusalem. He looks out and sees the apparently beautiful wife of another man, Bathsheba, and he calls for her and knows her and she becomes pregnant. Then David, in order to cover up his crime, he has her husband killed. He put him on the front lines of the battle. Israel pulls back, and Uriah, her husband, is killed. Nathan the prophet comes to David and tells him a story. He said, "Let me tell you a story about a man who had many, many sheep. He was very wealthy and could have anything he wanted, and yet he looked down and saw one small man with one little ewe sheep. He took that little ewe sheep and killed the man. What do you think that man deserves? David was furious. He said, "He deserved death. He deserves to be punished." And David just kept going on. Then Nathan says to him, "You're the man. You're the one. You're indignant and you're self-righteous, and you're angry about the sin, and you are the one who has committed it." What was David's response to that? It was completely and utterly different than Saul's response to his sin. When Saul gets caught, Saul says, "Okay, I sinned. I broke the rules. Now can we go down and worship?" It's sort of like this: (I've done this as a child myself as I remember) You get caught doing something and you say, "I am sorry." And the parent goes, "You're not really sorry." And the child says, "How do you know?" You want to see something else. What does David say? David doesn't say just, "I have sinned." When David gets caught and he is convicted he says, "I have sinned against the Lord." In other words, David's life is defined by his relationship to God. Saul's relationship is defined by his relationship to everything else. So when David gets caught, David realizes that his sin, although it has harmed Bathsheba, has harmed Israel, has harmed Uriah. At the end of the day the person who is most violated by David's sin is God Himself, and David says, "I have sinned against the Lord." And immediately Nathan says, "You are pardoned. The Lord has forgiven your sin." He lists out a bunch of consequences, but you get this idea that David doesn't even feel like he's worthy of asking for forgiveness, and yet because he's actually owned up to his sin he immediately receives it. Saul, on the other hand, says, "Yeah, okay, you busted me. I broke the law. Now will you just pardon me so I can get on with it so I can go worship the Lord your God?" Saul takes it a step further. He shows us what really dominates him and what is his master, and it's not God. We see that in the fact of his confession, but we really see it in his excuse. Saul's really big on excuses. He said, "Okay, I sinned against the Lord and I broke the law and I transgressed your word because I was afraid of the people." Notice what he says,

²⁴ . . . because I feared the people and obeyed their voice. (ESV)

Saul has just identified his god. Saul's god is the opinion of other people. Saul's god is the concern for what other people think about him and what other people will say about him. Guess what? Most of you, including me, struggle with having the same god, don't we? Do you ever worry what people are going to think about you? Do you ever worry how people are going to see you? How much time did you spend doing your hair this morning? I know a lot of you guys are saying, "It's easy for you to say." Right? [Tommy is bald]. But are you constantly worried what people are going to think of you? How much energy do you put in making sure that outside everything looks good? Saul doesn't know that he's admitted it, but he did. He's trying to make an excuse but really he shows his heart. He says, "I did it because I feared the voice of the people and I obeyed them." If the Gospel is true and if the promises of God are true, Saul doesn't need anyone's approval because he already has it. It would be easy for me to stand up in front of you and say, "You know what, if the Gospel is true, you don't need other people's approval, so just get out there and quit worrying about it." By the way, everyone struggles with it. Some of you really need people's affirmation and approval and other people don't. But you are still driven by people. Let's consider a hypothetical situation where you have a pastor who walks down the hall and he sees someone coming who's very fond of giving him constructive criticism. The pastor sees him or her before they see him, and he escapes into a Sunday school room for a few minutes. Purely hypothetical. [audience laughter] But that person is just as driven by people as the person who constantly needs their approval. The question is, "How do you get above that? How do you break that? How do you not have to worry about what people think about you? How do you not be driven by that?" The answer is simple. You need someone else's approval. It's hard-wired into us to need the approval of someone. The answer that the Gospel of Jesus gives us is that in Christ you have His approval. You see, Someone came and lived without caring about anyone's approval, and His name was Jesus. When you read through the New Testament one thing that's striking among many is that Jesus didn't really care what other people thought about Him, at least some people. He cared in some sense what everyone thought about Him. He said, "What are you going to do about Me? I'm the light of the world." On the other hand, the Pharisees and the religious people and the politicians, all wanted Jesus to seek their approval and Jesus said, "I didn't come for the healthy, I came for the sick." And because Jesus scorned their approval, they killed Him, crucified Him, but He rose from the dead. Now the glory of the cross is this, that when Jesus went to the cross He not only took all of your sins, He not only took the things that make you ashamed in front of other people upon Himself, but also in that same moment He gives you all of His righteousness, and all of the approval that God has for Him is credited and given to you. So now the only way you can break the sort of shackles of the approval of other people is to the extent that you understand that you have the approval of God. Unmerited and completely yours. Do you understand that? Some of you may not be Christians here today, and you're thinking, "I don't know about that." Even if you don't believe that, at least think through the question, "How much are you driven by what other people think about you?" How much does it enslave you? Don't all of us envy people who are free? You watch something on the Discovery Channel where a guy sells everything and takes his family to live in the Himalayas. You say, "I'd love to do that." That person has a different agenda than you, a different motivation. The question is, "Why aren't Christians more free?" Christians are some of the most bound-up people I've ever met. The answer is that we fail to consider and constantly look upon the cross and say, "Right there is where all my approval is. It's not with the people I work with. It's not with my congregation. It's not with my pastor. It's with Jesus Himself."

As the conversation goes on, in my mind it takes sort of a humorous twist. Notice what happens next in verse 26.

²⁶ *And Samuel said to Saul, "I will not return with you. For you have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you from being king over Israel."* ²⁷ *As Samuel turned to go away, Saul seized the skirt of his robe, and it tore.* ²⁸ *And Samuel said to him, "The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you."* ²⁹ *And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret."*

There are two ways you can look at passages like that one I just read. One, you can look at it from a theological perspective. Throughout the Bible you see that torn garments or rended robes are a sign of repentance or a sign of something bad happening. On the other hand, you can look at it from the human perspective. Saul sort of pushed Samuel over the edge here. If you remember all the way back at the beginning of this book, Hannah prayed that if God would give her a son, she would give him over to the Lord. So she gave Samuel to the priest, to Eli. And then what did Hannah do every single year for the rest of Samuel's life? She spent the whole year making him a very elaborate robe. She would visit him once a year and present him with this hand-made robe. And now Saul has reached out and he's torn the robe. In other words, "Don't mess with my mama's robe!" You know, in a sense he sort of crossed the line there. Whether it's just a big theological point or whether it's that [human perspective] or both, the fact is that Samuel turns around and makes the definitive statement. He turns around and says, "This day." You see up to this point he said, "The Lord has rejected you. The Lord is not going to give you an eternal dynasty." As soon as Saul rips his mama's robe, Samuel turns around and says, "Right now, as of this second, you're out of here. The Lord has rejected you; He will not change His mind. The Glory of Israel does not change His mind. He doesn't even have regret." He makes it completely and utterly definitive. "It's over. The Lord has taken the kingdom from you, and He is giving it to a neighbor." Now think about how it would feel if you are a person who is driven by the need for other people's approval and the need to be seen as doing well in other people's eyes. How would you feel if a prophet said to you, "The Lord has taken the kingdom from you and has given it to your neighbor who is better than you"? How's that for approval? How does Saul respond? If you are listening to this story and are sort of identifying with Saul, you would hope he would finally get it and say, "You know, I don't have anything. He is better than me. Everyone's better than me. I'm the most rotten sinner in the world. Please, please have mercy on me." What does he say? He only confirms what we've seen up to this point who his master is, and it's very sad. Notice what he says in verse 30.

³⁰ Then he said, "I have sinned; yet honor me now before the elders of my people and before Israel, and return with me, that I may bow before the LORD your God."

So you see I'm obviously editorializing, but he said, "Yeah, okay. Yeah, yeah, I sinned but will you still go down the hill with me so the elders still think everything's okay? In other words at the very end he has been rejected utterly and completely. What Saul is still worried about is what his primary god is thinking about him. "Samuel, please at least make a good appearance. Let's go down the hill together and then the elders and the people will think that everything is okay."

I'll leave you with this question that is obvious with Saul, but it also should also be obvious with us, I hope. Whether you are a Christian or not, are you more concerned in your life with being seen as a sinner with people thinking you're a sinner, or you more concerned with the fact that you are a sinner? Are you more concerned that people see you as being a sinner or are you more concerned with the fact that you are a sinner? If your primary drive is that people see you as a sinner, I have nothing to offer you. I have no hope for you, frankly, if that's what drives you. If the primary question you're concerned with is that you are a sinner, I've every hope in the world because Jesus did not come for the righteous. He says that over and over and over again, and yet Christians and people who are not Christians don't get it. You think, "Man, if I could just be good enough, if I could be righteous enough, then I'm going to be in like duck soup." Jesus says over and over again, "It's the sick that need a doctor, not the healthy. I didn't come for the righteous, but the unrighteous." If you see yourself as a sinner and that bothers you, then you ought to rejoice because you are the very person that Jesus came to save. You're the very person that He promises, "I'll never fail or forsake." Which one are you? What drives you the most? Think about that.