

1 Samuel 15

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[0 : 0 0] Lord, thank you that we can come before you, knowing that in Jesus our sins are forgiven, Lord, that you've washed our sins away, and Lord, in washing our sins away and making us your children, you've also filled us with your Spirit, and it's through the work of your Spirit that we can understand your Word and hear what you're saying to us. So God, we ask that you would do just that tonight, that you would work by your Spirit to take your Word and apply these things to our hearts, Lord, so that we might know you and love you more and more. So visit us, we pray. Amen.

Good. So I want to do something we don't normally do when we look at a text. I want to just jump into, like, the main verse and just start right there. So go to verse 22. It's very easy in a long chapter like this, and there, we'll see as we kind of go through, there's sort of a lot of thorny theological issues to kind of lose the forest for the trees. So I want to just jump right in to what I think is the main point of this whole passage, and we're going to start there, and then we'll sort of work our way out. So it's verse 22. Look there at that verse. And Samuel said to Saul, 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. To obey is better than sacrifice. That is the big idea of our text. I think that's what God wants us to see through the example of Saul, through the negative example of Saul in this chapter. And that's what God wants from us as his creatures. God created us in his image to be in relationship with him and to listen to his voice in Scripture and to obey, to take his word to heart. That's why he's made us. And of course, to obey is better than sacrifice, but that doesn't mean that sacrifices were necessarily bad, right?

That's not Samuel's point here. God told the Israelites to make sacrifices. He told them how and when and what and even why to do that. So sacrifices aren't bad in and of themselves, but they were a means toward an end. They were sort of a step towards a goal. And that goal in the Old Testament was a relationship. The sacrifices were put in place so that a holy God could dwell with a sinful people in a relationship of intimacy and a relationship of obedience. And of course, they pointed forward to a greater sacrifice to come. But here's the problem, and here's where this text, I think, kind of hits us. Don't we often use outward sort of religious practices as a means of excusing or justifying our disobedience? Okay, here's what I mean. We take good things and we use them as a cover-up for the bad things that we do. What are some examples of that? How about the person who says, well, yeah, I know it's not right to play the lotto, but if I win, I'll tithe of my winnings, right?

Wouldn't that be a good thing? Tithing is giving 10% to the work of the Lord. Now, look, is tithing a bad thing? No. Giving is a biblical means of growing in grace. It's a good thing. But you can't use giving as an excuse to do something like gambling, which at best is just sort of a waste of time and money, and at worst is this hugely sort of addictive, destructive thing, right? To obey is better than sacrifice. God actually doesn't need your money, but he wants your heart, and he wants you to listen to his voice, to listen to his word and obey. Maybe here's another example. You're sharing your testimony with a friend. That is, you're sharing your story of how you became a Christian, and you bend the truth just a little bit to make the story seem more interesting or more compelling or more impressive. Now, again, sharing your testimony is a good thing, right? And we grow a lot in our faith when we share sort of the story of what Christ has done in our life with non-Christians, and we encourage one another a lot by sharing those stories with one another. But, again, you can't use that as an excuse for twisting the truth. To obey is better than sacrifice.

Of course, there's lots of examples that we could give, but why don't we just, I mean, just take a moment tonight as we sort of just go right into it to think. I mean, do you see patterns like this in your own life? I think if you think hard enough, you'll see them. I know my own heart, and I'm prone to taking some good thing and using it as a cover-up for some area of disobedience.

[4 : 51] Sure, I get angry and frustrated with my roommate, but I was on my way to church, and she was making me late. Yeah, I shouldn't have been looking at that on the internet, but I was working really hard this week, and I went to Bible study, too, so it must not be quite that bad. Or, yes, I'm holding a lot of bitterness and unforgiveness in my heart, but, you know, I spend a lot of my time in ministry, so I don't really have time to kind of deal with that stuff in the past. And isn't that the fallen human heart that we have? And right into that tendency that we all have, Samuel speaks loud and clear, to obey is better than sacrifice. That's what God wants. He doesn't want our money or our witness or our time or our ministry. He's God. All those things are his gifts, but what he wants is your heart.

He wants you to hear his word and obey. And actually, we've seen this theme throughout 1 Samuel. I don't think we've actually sort of picked it up in any of our sermons yet, but, you know, there's a running theme in this book that what biblical spirituality is all about, and everyone in our age is talking about spirituality, and we want to be spiritual, is really that. It really comes down to this, is actually listening to God's voice, trusting it, and doing what he says.

That's really the sort of core part of what it means to follow God. And why? Why is God so concerned that we listen to his word and that we obey? Well, first of all, because he's God and he deserves it, he made us, but also because it's for our good. Because God made us, it's for our good that we obey him. He knows how life works best. So that's really the sort of drive shaft in this passage. And I want to sort of back up now and sort of look at how the passage sort of unfolds. And we've been, we're sort of at, in chapter 15, the kind of nadir, that's like the low point of King Saul's life. Saul's going to be a character in the rest of this book.

You know, he'll meet his end at the very last chapter. But really, this chapter, chapter 15, is when finally he hits rock bottom. And in chapter 15, really, Saul serves as kind of a warning to us of this tendency to put sort of religious things as a cover-up for our sinful hearts. And tragically, what we're going to find in this chapter is that the Lord finally rejects Saul as king. And through all that, we're going to see how central it is to hear God's word and obey. So as we walk through, I want to just look at this chapter under three heads. First, God's unique command to Saul. And then second, what I would call Saul's successful failure. And then three, God's unchanging character. So first, let's look at God's unique command to Saul. Look down at verses one through three. Let's read these together.

And Samuel said to Saul, the Lord sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel. Okay, that's happened a number of chapters ago. Now, therefore, listen to the words of the Lord. There's that theme. Thus says the Lord of hosts, I have noted what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way when they came up out of Egypt. 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. Okay, now that is a shocking command, isn't it?

[8 : 33] And in a sense, it should be shocking to us. It's helpful to know some of the context here. The Amalekites, the people of Amalek, were an old and constant enemy of Israel.

Many years before, the Amalekites had attacked Israel when Israel was on its way from the Red Sea to Sinai. They had just come out of Egypt. They were tired and hungry and weary in the wilderness. And then Amalek came and sort of raided them at their weak point. And what you find is that that wasn't just the only time that they attacked them. When you read the book of Judges, it's very interesting. I didn't actually see this until I was studying this passage this week, that the Amalekites come up again and again and again throughout this period of Israel's history, always there, sort of attacking them, taking advantage of them, raiding their villages, destroying their crops. And so finally, here in 1 Samuel 15, God's judgment comes. In mercy, God had delayed it for hundreds of years. But now God says, enough is enough. And that should be very sobering for us.

That God is a God of justice. Now we should remember as we think about a command like this, that it's a unique command. At no other point in history should people read the Bible and think that God is telling them to do something like this. This was a unique thing. God only told Israel to do something like this, and God only told them to do it in a few very specific number of instances.

So, as we think about this part of this text, it doesn't give violence, it doesn't give license, excuse me, for violence and warfare and that sort of thing today. But what does this sort of very direct picture of God's judgment show us? I think it shows us two things. One, on the one hand, it shows us that God is the holy creator of all things. That God is actually the rightful judge of all peoples.

And that he will not allow wickedness to go unjudged forever. That there will come a time when judgment will fall, if not in this life, then in the next. But second, this, I think, few verses, this sort of instance of God saying, go and devote them to total destruction, I think it also shows us the utter sinfulness of sin. The gravity of sin.

[11 : 09] That persistent rebellion against God means and will mean utter and complete ruin. Everything. Everything. I'm sure you noticed that. Everything that belongs to Amalek will be destroyed because of sin. You know, we recoil at the thought that even infants are included in this total judgment that God says is to come on them. And, you know, I think that we should, you know, as we think, you know, as I've wrestled with that idea this week, you know, it struck me that I think we should leave the eternal state of those children in the hands of a merciful God.

We don't know sort of what happens to the souls of those children who die. I think we can leave that in God's hands and trust that he'll be merciful and just.

But, you know, this grim picture, this picture of total awful judgment, I think it's meant to be just that. It's meant to be a sobering picture of how awful sin really is and how total judgment really is.

So this is a unique but very clear command that God gives Saul to attack the Amalekites and to devote everything to destruction. And we see this in the story. Second point, Saul's successful failure.

And I call it successful failure because he goes in verse 4, it kind of extends through this whole middle section, verse 4 all the way to 33. You know, and if you skim down, you see what happens. Here's what happens. Saul gathers an army, he goes, attacks the Amalekites, and he wins. He's very successful. But look at verse 9. But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fatted calves and the lambs and all that was good and would not utterly destroy them.

[13:01] All that was despised and worthless, they devoted to destruction. Now, don't think that Saul is being sort of extra merciful here. It's not as if Saul's sort of being really kind when God's really, really mean. Why did Saul spare King Agag? Probably, it doesn't say exactly, but probably for financial or political reasons. He was probably going to sell him back to some other sort of part of the Amalekite tribe, or he was just going to sort of use him as a political sort of tool to express his own sort of greatness. And why does Saul keep sort of the best of the animals? Well, we find out a little later in this chapter that, you know, their plan is to sort of save the best animals. Oh, we'll go sacrifice those on Gilgal. That'll be a great idea. God told us to sort of devote them all to him. But, you know, let's save the best and let's go up on Gilgal and let's have some sacrifices. Now, here's the thing. Again, they probably weren't going to go and offer these animals as like sin offerings or guilt offerings, which were like totally consumed and given to the

Lord. They were probably going to go and offer them as peace offerings. Now, here's what you did with a peace offering. You sort of, you sacrifice some of it to God, and then the rest you barbecued and you ate. So, basically, they were going to go have a big party up on Gilgal with the best of what they just had and have a big feast. In other words, they were going to basically use sacrificing the Lord as a pretext for just filling their own stomachs. It would look really, really pious, but it would be super, super selfish. Well, what happens next in the story? The Lord tells Samuel what happens. Samuel's very upset, and then he goes and meets Saul. In Saul, look at verse 13. Presumptuously, Saul comes when Samuel meets him and says, ah, blessed be you to the Lord. I have performed the commandment of the Lord.

And then Samuel says this, and I think it's one of the most indicting lines in all the Bible. What then is this bleeding of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear? What a line.

And then comes the main point of the passage in verse 22. To obey is better than sacrifice. What were you doing, Saul?

Look at what follows in verse 23. He says, for rebellion is as a sin of divination and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry. He's saying, don't you see what you've been doing? You've been you've been going into the worst of the worst. This tiny little, this way you've sort of tweaked the commandment of God just a little bit in your mind has actually been, you've been falling into the same guilt that the Amalekites had fallen into. Idolatry, iniquity, wickedness.

[15:56] And then look how Samuel ends. Because you've rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king. And that pattern that began back in chapter 13 when Saul didn't listen to God's word, you remember back then? Pastor Greg preached a couple weeks ago. Saul sort of takes matters into his own hands. And at that point Samuel says, you know what? Your line isn't going to inherit the kingship. That same sort of refusal to really listen to God's word and to obey finally comes to a head here in chapter 15. And God says, you know, it's not just that your children are not going to take the throne. You're done. It's over. I'm rejecting you as king.

Jump down to verse 27. As Samuel turned to go away, Saul seized the skirt of his robe and tore it. 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's better than you. What a bitter moment in the Bible.

Saul. And that torn robe is a sort of bitter symbol of what's happened to Saul because he didn't really listen to God's word. The kingdom is going to be torn away and given to another, which we'll find out next week is none other than David, who will be the sort of central figure in the rest of first Samuel and in second Samuel and really the sort of archetype of kingship in the Old Testament. Let's look at the last part of the story, which is God's unchanging character. Let's pick up in verse 29. Samuel just told Saul that the kingdom is going to be torn from him and given to another. And then he goes on and says this, and also the glory of Israel will not lie or have regret.

The glory of Israel, that's where we're referring to God. The glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man that he should have regret. In other words, God doesn't change. He's not going to go back on his word. Saul's time as king is over, and God isn't going to change his mind.

Now that might sound kind of harsh, right? I mean, doesn't Saul say that he's sorry? Look at verse 29. I mean, he's sort of been saying, yes, I sinned. I'm sorry. He's been kind of saying that in this whole paragraph. But look at verse 29. Then Saul said, I've 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.

[18 : 28] And I think what we see in this verse is that Saul never truly repents. I think this verse is so revealing. I mean, look, what does Saul really care about in this verse? It's the honor of the elders, right? In other words, he cares more about what people think than what God thinks.

He only admits his sin when it keeps him from getting what he really wants, which is the admiration and the approval of others. And then in the next verse, Samuel actually ends up going with Saul, which is interesting, probably for the sake of political stability so that the nation doesn't fall apart. He carries out the sentence on Agag, which is something Saul should have done. And then the chapter ends like this. And Samuel went to Ramah, and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah. And Samuel did not see Saul again till the day of his death. But Samuel grieved over Saul, and the Lord regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel. What a tragic way for a chapter to end.

And of course, it's a bit confusing too, isn't it? I mean, didn't Samuel just say that God doesn't regret in verse 29? And yet here, he does regret. What's going on? Well, you see, the word regret in Hebrew has kind of a broad range of meaning. It can mean to change your mind, like in verse 29.

But it can also mean to feel deep sorrow. And that's what it means here in verse 35. That the Lord who doesn't change, who doesn't change in his faithfulness, who doesn't change in his mercy, who doesn't change in his goodness and his holiness, sees how far Saul has fallen, and God grieves. And that should bring it back to us today.

We began by saying that the main point of the passage was verse 22. To obey is better than sacrifice. But I mean, as we sort of studied the, I mean, quickly, as we just sort of walked through this chapter and seen the character of Saul, I mean, isn't it true that we're all so much like him? That we try to justify and excuse our disobedience, that we refuse to listen to God's voice in Scripture. We kind of tweak the rules that kind of benefit us, thinking that our way is a bit better than God's way. And then we sort of do some outward religious actions to kind of cover up and justify what we've done. And the question is, what hope is there for us? I mean, if God sort of tore the kingdom away from Saul, what's he going to do to us? Are we all doomed like Saul to end in failure?

[21 : 19] And I think the hope is found back in verse 28, that the kingdom will be given to a better king. And not merely David, because David too actually disobeyed God, as we'll find as we study the life of David. But that there'll be a better king. And there'll be a better king who's David's greater son, Jesus. Let's know what Hebrews chapter 10 has to say about Jesus in the New Testament.

Consequently, the writer to Hebrews says, when Christ came into the world, he said, sacrifices and offerings you've not desired, but a body you've prepared for me. In burnt offerings and sin offerings you've taken no pleasure. Then I said, behold, I've come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book. And then the writer to Hebrews goes on and says this, when he said above, you've neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings, these are offered according to the law. Then he added, behold, I've come to do your will. He does away with the first in order to establish the second. And by that will, we have been sanctified to the offering of the body of Jesus once for all.

What does the writer to Hebrews want us to see about this king, this Christ who's come? He wants to see that when Jesus came, he didn't just come to sort of offer up more sacrifices. He came to perfectly obey God's will. The writer of Hebrews here is pointing towards Jesus's active obedience, that he did everything that the law of God required, that he, as it were, built up a perfect record of righteousness that is then credited or imputed to everyone who trusts in him.

And what we see about the obedience of Jesus is that the obedience of Jesus was an obedience unto death. That Jesus didn't come to make sacrifices, but to actually be a sacrifice.

To be a sacrifice so great and so perfect and so sufficient that it would put an end to all sacrifices. And it would cleanse us, Hebrews says, once and for all.

[23 : 39] And I think that means a few things for us tonight as we kind of wrap up and go to the Lord's Supper. You know, if you're here tonight and you're not a believer, maybe you've actually tried doing lots of religious sort of things. You know, maybe you've actually sort of seen your badness and you thought, well, maybe one way I can sort of make up for that is by doing sort of lots of good religious things.

But I think what this text is saying to you tonight is that there's an invitation. There's an invitation to do what Saul didn't do, which is to actually genuinely repent.

To admit your sin and to stop trying to run your life by your own standards and to stop trying to use religious good things to cover up or justify all your bad things. To actually stop doing that, to admit you've been doing that and to turn away from that and to put your trust in Christ, who is perfectly righteous and who died for your sins.

And for those of us who are believers, you know, if you see these patterns in your own life, these patterns of sort of excusing sin or covering it up with religious activity, then tonight, you know, the call is for us also to turn from those things, to do what the Bible says is repentance, repentance, to confess to God what you've been doing, to really see and grieve how much it honors him, dishonors him, and to do it in a way that Saul didn't do. You know, Saul was really sad about sin because it cost him, you know, something that he wanted. When his sin was finally exposed, he thought, uh-oh, now I'm not going to get the approval of people.

But that's actually kind of a very false sort of repentance. You know, to be sad over the effects of sin in that sense isn't really grieving your sin because it dishonors God, because of what sin really is, which is a trying to sort of take God's place. So tonight, seeing that, maybe for the first time, as a believer, you can sort of practice some deep heartfelt repentance for those things.

[26 : 07] But don't just stop there. Actually turn and see what Jesus did for you, that he obeyed to the point of death, that he rose again to give you life, that he poured out his spirit into your heart so you might live in newness of life.

And then see this, that the God of the universe in him loves you and accepts you. I wonder if one of the things that Saul didn't really get was that God had genuinely chosen him and accepted him. You see a little earlier in our passage that Samuel says to him, look, you're so little in your own eyes, but God's made you king. Why are you listening to other people?

Why are you leading the people in righteousness? And I feel like when we really look at the cross and we see how much God loves us and how he's made us his own and how he's made us his child, how he's made us part of his kingdom, that we don't need to be enslaved to the other things that drive us, like the fear of man or the honor of other people. That we can actually be free from those things, knowing that we're loved in Christ, and we can be free then to obey in gratitude.

So in light of that, in light of reflecting on what Jesus has done, let's actually go to the table together. About once a month, if you're new here to Trinity, once a month we do the Lord's Supper.

And the Lord's Supper is really just the gospel sort of made visible, that there's bread that's broken, representing Jesus' broken body, and there's a cup that we share that's been poured out, which represents Jesus' blood. So Dan and Natalie, if you guys want to come up, let me read some words from the Apostle Paul as we think about preparing our hearts for communion.

[28 : 03] In 1 Corinthians, Paul says this, he says, And then Paul actually goes on in that same passage, to talk about some people who've been sort of treating these things lightly.

And he says, Hey, remember, that this is serious business. And when you come to the table, come with hearts that are broken and repentant for sin, but also resting and trusting what Jesus has done for you.

So really, you know, as we come to the table tonight, I mean, after a passage like 1 Samuel 15, it's good to come with humility. And it's good to come with a sense of contrite hearts.

But it's also good to come knowing that what these things symbolize is that Jesus has covered your sin, and that you're forgiven, and that he'll hold you to the end.

So friends, tonight, if you've turned from sin, you place your trust in Christ, take these gifts as a seal and assurance that Jesus died for you. And if you're not a Christian, then place your trust in Jesus tonight.

[29 : 37] Don't take the bread, don't take the cup, but take Christ. Turn from sin and trust in him. So with that being said, why don't we sing while we take the bread together?

Jonathan, would you help me serve tonight? Thanks, brother. I'll ask me you don't make sure that you...