

NO OTHER WAY
1 Samuel 15

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Turn to 1 Samuel 15 as we continue our sermon series, “The Cry for a King: A Study in 1 Samuel.”

Verse 22

And Samuel said,

“Has the Lord as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices

As in obeying the voice of the Lord?

Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice.

Today, I am going to give you the secret of discipleship. In fact, if you’ll listen to the message from the prophet of God, Samuel, today, then you’ll know what is at the very heart of following Jesus. What is at the very heart of being a child of God.

Sometimes we miss the mark. Sometimes we slide past the simple.

I’ve made an observation over the years that people in the pews have an insatiable desire to live more closely to God, to know the Lord Jesus Christ at a deeper level. That’s a wonderful thing. Unfortunately, beside this desire I’ve discovered that God’s people want to do anything and everything but what God asks us to do to be close to Him.

In Christian life, there seems to be an unending parade of new conference leaders, new podcast preachers, new seminars, or the latest best seller pushing new principles of spiritual growth. Sometimes the Christians who have been going to church for twenty years will sign up for an out-of-town conference because they just want a deeper walk or a deeper insight than they are getting from church. They’re looking for a secret to spirituality, something mystical or new that will draw them closer to God. People in pews chase after these seminars and teachers and preachers and podcasters, much like would-be miners going after a gold rush. The problem, of course, with gold rushes is that most often you end up with no gold or fool’s gold, and not the genuine item.

You’ve probably never done it, but I’m going to confess that I have. I’ve actually looked for my glasses when they’re on my head. I mean, going around the house searching for your eyeglasses and someone calls attention to the fact that you’re probably not going to find them since they’re already on your face. It is so easy to miss the obvious, to miss that which is right before us. Ever been on the phone and start looking for your phone?

I fear in modernity that our search for the secret to discipleship has caused us to miss the plain, the obvious, the simple – the clear word of God.

You know, in antiquity there were those who always wanted a deeper teaching, a deeper knowledge. They always wanted a secret. They were called Gnostics, and they were heretics because they thought salvation was based upon some knowledge, some mystical wisdom rather than upon the word of God.

There are no secrets. There are no hidden codes. There are no new-found steps to make you closer to God. Your Sunday School teacher has had it right all along.

Following God is developing a dynamic relationship between Creator and creation through our Lord and Savior Christ Jesus and is accomplished by faith first and then obedience to His commandments. We're saved by the grace of God, to be sure, but we're drawn close to the side of God by being obedient children to a heavenly Father.

In our story today in 1 Samuel 15, the call for Saul is to listen. Look at the end of verse 1 in Chapter 15. "Listen to the words of the Lord."

The key to being close to God is listening to the commandments of God and obeying those commandments.

Verses 2-3

Thus said the Lord of hosts, 'I will punish Amalek for what he did to Israel, how he set himself against him on the way while he was coming up from Egypt. Now go and strike Amalek and utterly destroy all that he has, and do not spare him; but put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.'

The issue of holy war and annihilation of this people is a whole other matter which will not divert our attention today, though I am sensitive to the fact that this is a difficult and troublesome text for us to read. You remember the Amalekites were long-standing enemies of Israel, being distantly related by their ancestry in Esau (Genesis 36:12).

They attacked Israel shortly after the exodus of the nation from Egypt, and their eventual destruction was foretold by Moses in Exodus 17:8-16. In fact, in Deuteronomy 25:17-19, God says, "Remember what Amalek did to you along the way when you came out from Egypt, how he met you along the way and attacked among you all the stragglers at your rear when you were faint and weary; and he did not fear God. Therefore it shall come about when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your surrounding enemies, in the land which the Lord your God gives you as in inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven; you must not forget."

The Amalekites were a semi-nomadic tribal group and are portrayed as terrorists who preyed on weaker opponents, showing no regard for God (Deuteronomy 25:17-18). Because of their cowardly tactics on an unsuspecting nation, Israel in the Exodus, Yahweh promised to extract vengeance against them in some future day when Israel was established in the Promised Land.

God had a score to settle with the Amalekites. Saul was going to be the instrument of the wrath of God against King Agag and the Amalekites.

So the command comes. Listen to the Lord. Utterly destroy the Amalekites. Even their animals. We're going to blot this people from the earth for the way they have treated the people of God. That's the command.

The term "totally destroy" occurs eight times in 1 Samuel 15. There was no doubt, no debate, no decision to be made about what God expected from Saul.

In verse 7, we find out that Saul, indeed, did defeat the Amalekites. But partial obedience is no obedience at all. For, verse 8, he captured the king. Kept him alive. And not only did he spare Agag the king, but look at verse 9. He spared "the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were not willing to destroy them utterly; but everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed."

Is that what God said? Keep all the good stuff for yourself and obey my commandments in regard to destroying that which has no value?

The Lord knows that partial obedience is no obedience is all. The Lord knows that Saul has not done what He has asked. Saul has neither listened nor obeyed.

Saul responds in three ways when confronted by Samuel about his sin. First of all, he tries to deflect the blame. Secondly, he tries to justify it. And thirdly, he tries to minimize it.

Verse 10-11

Then the word of the Lord came to Samuel, saying, "I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me, and has not carried out My commands." And Samuel was distressed and cried out to the Lord all night.

The prophet gets up (verse 12) early the next morning and goes to meet Saul. And when Saul sees Samuel, he declares (verse 13), "Blessed are you of the Lord! I have carried out the command of the Lord."

I have done it. I've been obedient. I've listened to what God wanted me to do. And I have accomplished it. I have obeyed the command.

Kind of odd that he brought that up first thing, in a seemingly defensive tone. Had Samuel asked him anything about keeping the command at this point? I don't think so. He declares that he has kept the command precisely because he has not.

Baaa. Baaa.
Moo. Moo.

“If you’ve kept the command, why do I hear the bleating of sheep and the lowing of oxen.” If you’ve utterly destroyed the Amalekites and their animals, then why on earth do I hear all these cows? As one commentator quipped, “A cow mooed and called him a liar.”

There was a little boy who wanted to buy his mom a birthday present. He went to the department store and asked the salesclerk to show him the cookie jars. She showed him a vast assortment of jars. There were tall, slender cookie jars. There were short, wide cookie jars. There were white cookie jars, and there were cookie jars in a myriad of colors. The little boy didn’t seem to be interested in the colors or the shapes. He very carefully and methodically went to each jar, lifted the lid, and put it back on. He did this with every jar, all down the line. When he had gone through them all, his face fell as he got to the last jar, removed the lid and replaced it. He looked at the salesclerk and asked, “Aren’t there any jars with lids that don’t make noise?”

Mooing cows and clinking cookie jars tell the story of disobedience.

First, I want you to notice his attempt to deflect the blame. He blames the people, the troops. Isn’t that the way it’s always been when we’re confronted by God? Adam blamed Eve. Eve blamed the serpent. And the serpent had to slither away. The blame game is the oldest game known among men.

The cows and the sheep wouldn’t cooperate with the cover-up – they made noise. “Oh, those,” said Saul. “the people (v. 15, 21) brought them from the Amalekites...oh, yea, the people.” Notice how he distanced himself from the actions of the people. The people spared the best of the sheep and the oxen to sacrifice to the Lord your God. But now the rest, you know – what you’ve asked us to do, we’ve taken care of business. Utterly destroyed. Yea. Utterly destroyed.

“No,” says Samuel. “This is what the Lord told me last night concerning you. You were little in your own eyes, and I made you king over Israel. And the Lord sent you on a mission (verse 18), and said, ‘Go and utterly destroy the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are exterminated.’ Why then did you not obey the voice of the Lord, but rushed upon the spoil and did what was evil in the sight of the Lord?”

The second attempt by Saul is to justify his sin.

Look at verse 21

“But the people took some of the spoil, sheep and oxen,...to sacrifice to the Lord.”

What Saul is saying is, “We did exactly what God asked us to do. Oh, yeah, we brought back a few of the best animals to sacrifice to God. And we brought back Agag” – of course, a self-condemning contradiction. Total annihilation would not have allowed him to bring back Agag. He spared the king to show off his own power and his own might – a trophy of Saul’s triumph is the only reason he spared Agag.

“Yeah, that’s it. That’s exactly what we did. We did what God told us to do, but we kept some of the best sheep and some of the best oxen, and we spared Agag, the king. But we did that because....” You hear his stuttering and stammering as he tries to explain. “That’s it, we’re

going to give them to God for the sacrifice. We're still going to kill them, it's just going to be a sacrifice. That's it."

Then our passage of note, verse 22
Has the Lord as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices
As in obeying the voice of the Lord?
Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice.

God seeks and desires and deserves the obedience of His people.

The third thing Saul does is to try to minimize his guilt. Look at verses 24-25. "Then Saul said to Samuel, 'I have sinned; I have indeed transgressed the command of the Lord and your words, because I feared the people and listened to their voice. Now therefore, please pardon my sin and return with me, that I may worship the Lord.'"

He finally utters the words, "I have sinned." But not like David will do when he's singing the Psalter. He again mentions the people – meaning the army – and his fear of them. But even his confession is motivated by self-interest. It's contrived, not contrite. He closes by, "Now Samuel, it's no big deal. I'm sorry I've sinned. Now come with me and let's worship together." He knows that if Samuel does not appear with him before the people, he will lose face. In fact, the only words of sorrow we have is when Samuel mourns for Saul and Yahweh is grieved that He made Saul king. Look who is grieving. Not Saul, but Samuel (v. 35). "And Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death; for Samuel grieved over Saul. And the Lord regretted (or grieved) that He had made Saul king over Israel.

These chapters (13, 14, 15) in 1 Samuel deal with the fall of Saul. He lost his dynasty in chapter 13, his popularity with the people in chapter 14, and now, in chapter 15, he loses his right to even serve as king.

Will Willimon of Duke University pointed out that we have psychologized the gospel. We turned it into a feeling. The people who rush off to the seminars, to the discipleship camps, are wanting a feeling. They want a mood. We have deluded ourselves into thinking the Messiah is the great cosmic affirmer of everything we hold dear and all of our illusions.

We want a God to bless who we already are, rather than to be obedient to Him.

One prominent Christian leader (Bill Bright) said, "In all of my millions of miles of travel to most major countries of the world during the last 49 years, I have never met a happy disobedient Christian, nor have I met an unhappy trusting, obedient Christian, no matter how difficult the circumstances. (Bill Bright, "Living daily in God's will, The Christian and Obedience," Ccci.org/10steps/step6/living/retrieved April 10, 2002, www.homileticsonline.com)

You want the secret to discipleship? You want the secret of having the joy of the Lord? If you're disobedient to the commands of the Lord, you will not have the joy of the Lord. If you are obedient to the commands of God, you will have the discipleship for which you are searching. There is no other way. There is no short cut.

Dan Johnson tells of studying with a well-known biblical scholar in Cambridge, England. One day Dan asked him, “What is the rock-bottom essence of the Christian life?” The scholar replied: “I think I have found it. It sounds much too simple, but I am convinced of its merit. It is found in an old song whose chorus goes like this: ‘Trust and obey, for there’s no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey.’” (Neglected Treasure: Rediscovering the Old Testament, quoted in homileticsonline.com)

God gives us His commands for a reason. He knows they will lead us into His joy, in to His pleasure.

Aren’t there any cows who can keep quiet when you’re in trouble? The cows will always moo and the cookie jars will always clink, and God already knows before the noise of our disobedience.

Saul admits (verse 24) that he feared the people and listened to their voice. The people talked Saul into keeping the goods. He should have feared the Lord rather than fearing the people. When we disobey God because of the pressure of others, we are fearing the wrong one. We ought to be fearing God – the God of the commandments – rather than giving in to people.

It is very important to God that we are obedient to His commandments. Listen to the words of Jesus:

John 14:15

If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.

John 14:21

He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loved Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him.

Or John 15:19

If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love.

Paul agrees with Jesus (1 Corinthians 7:19)

Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God.

You want the proof that, indeed, you’ve received the grace of God? Look at 1 John 2:3: “By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments.”

Or even harsher still, the next verse (1 John 2:4), “The one who says, ‘I have come to know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.”

Even the last book, Revelation 14:12, “Here is the perseverance of the saints who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus.”

We are a people who always look for a short cut. We don't want to really read a book; we want Cliff Notes. We don't want to boil potatoes; we will settle for fake flakes and call it good. A people who always justify their disobedience, even as the ancient Israelites justified keeping the cows to sacrifice.

God doesn't want our sacrifice. God wants our obedience.

You know the neat thing about obedience is this: It doesn't take any special talent. It doesn't take any special gift. In fact, obedience is a gift God gives to every disciple. You don't have to be particularly bright. You don't have to be particularly talented. Everyone of us who follows Jesus has an equal opportunity to be obedient to His commandments.

God gives His commandments for a reason – they are good for His people.

Richard A. Schmidt, St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Daphne, Alabama, was quoted in The United Methodist Report as saying, "God is less interested, I suspect, in our acts of obedience than in the pleasure of our company." (The United Methodist Report, 10/8/1993). How wrong could the priest be? That's diametrically opposed to what God's word says. You're not so great that God must have your company; He is so great that He must have your obedience.

The Lord does not delight in our sacrifices. He delights in the obedience of His people.

When you are obedient to God, you show God that you love Him. You want to please Him. "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments."

In an article entitled "God Lite," theologian James R. Edwards traces how "the more we obey God, the more real God becomes to us and the greater our love grows. And the more we love God, the more we become like God. It is like a good marriage: People who love their spouses want to please them; and if they do not want to please their spouses, they can hardly talk of loving them."

Edwards then shows the way in which "obedience is not a penalty levied on faith. It is the strength of faith. The Bible absolutely will not separate faith and obedience, as though obedience were some kind of inheritance tax that God levies on the free gift of salvation. God cannot separate them and still offer salvation. There is something about love that is no longer love apart from obedience. Dietrich Bonhoeffer kept saying this in *The Cost of Discipleship*: 'Only those who obey can believe, and only those who believe can obey.'" (*Christianity Today*, April 29, 1991; homileticsonline.com)

When you obey God, you show God that you fear Him. Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

When you obey God, you show Him you are willing to walk His way and not your way, that you've sacrificed your own wisdom for God's wisdom.

“By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments” (1 John 2:3).