

1 Samuel 15 • Getting It Mostly Right

Introduction

An old saying goes, “Close only counts in horse shoes and hand grenades.” Here we have the biblical example of that thought. God called Saul, allowed Saul to experience Him, and even provided the best spiritual guide possible in the person of Samuel. Yet Saul had a listening comprehension problem; he only did parts of what God asked, never everything required. Is God pleased when we’re “close”, when we get it “mostly right”?

⁸Now he waited seven days, according to the appointed time set by Samuel, but Samuel did not come to Gilgal; and the people were scattering from him. ⁹So Saul said, “Bring to me the burnt offering and the peace offerings.” And he offered the burnt offering.

¹⁰As soon as he finished offering the burnt offering, behold, Samuel came; and Saul went out to meet him and to greet him. ¹¹But Samuel said, “What have you done?”

And Saul said, “Because I saw that the people were scattering from me, and that you did not come within the appointed days, and that the Philistines were assembling at Michmash, ¹²therefore I said, ‘Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not asked the favor of the LORD.’ So I forced myself and offered the burnt offering.”

¹³Samuel said to Saul, “You have acted foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the LORD your God, which He commanded you, for now the LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. ¹⁴But now your kingdom shall not endure. The LORD has sought out for Himself a man after His own heart, and the LORD has appointed him as ruler over His people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you.”

¹Then Samuel said to Saul, “The LORD sent me to anoint you as king over His people, over Israel; now therefore, listen to the words of the LORD. ²Thus says 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. ³Now 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.’”

⁴Then Saul summoned the people and numbered them in Telaim, 200,000 foot soldiers and 10,000 men of Judah. ⁵Saul

[Read 13:8-14]

Background: Up until this time, things have been going well for Saul. He’d had military successes and was in the process of establishing the first government. Up to this point he had been obedient to God’s Word through Samuel. He was about to embark on another campaign which was to be kicked off, so to speak, by an initial offering under the auspices of Samuel.

Q: According to v.8, do you think Saul was really upset about Samuel being late? If not, what does this say about Saul?

A: It was that “the people were scattering from him”, that is, they were beginning to leave. This speaks of Saul’s overwhelming concern for the opinion of man over God. Saul was more concerned about keeping appearances with the people than God.

Q: What’s wrong with Saul beginning without Samuel? Why is this actually a very wrong action on a purely spiritual level?

A: Saul was acting as priest in Samuel’s place.

Q: When confronted by Samuel, how does Saul compound his error?

A: He lies, blaming the Philistines (which was not even in his mind according to v.8-9), and stating, “So I forced myself”. He’s not sorry for what he did, only sorry for being caught. There is no repentance of sin.

Q: According to v.13-14, what is the key problem?

A: Saul does not keep God’s Word. Therefore he is not “a man after His (God’s) own heart”.

[Read v.1-9]

Q: Why is God so harsh on the Amalekites?

1. They were the first to attack Israel after their departure from Egypt (Exodus 17:8-16)
2. They were a constant source of antagonism (Numbers 24:20; Deuteronomy 25:17-19).
3. They weren’t just sinners, but people who actively opposed God and enticed others to worship and follow false gods.

Q: Did Saul keep God’s full instructions as given in v.3?

A: No. According to v.9 both Agag and the best of the livestock were not destroyed. Only whatever was deemed worthless to the Israelites personally was destroyed.

came to the city of Amalek and set an ambush in the valley. ⁶Saul said to the Kenites, “Go, depart, go down from among the Amalekites, so that I do not destroy you with them; for you showed kindness to all the sons of Israel when they came up from Egypt.”

So the Kenites departed from among the Amalekites.

⁷So Saul defeated the Amalekites, from Havilah as you go to Shur, which is east of Egypt. ⁸He captured Agag the king of the Amalekites alive, and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. ⁹But Saul and the people spared Agag and 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.

¹⁰Then the word of the LORD came to Samuel, saying, ¹¹“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.

¹²Samuel rose early in the morning to meet Saul; and it was told Samuel, saying, “Saul came to Carmel, and behold, he set up a monument for himself, then turned and proceeded on down to Gilgal.”

¹³Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, “Blessed are you of the LORD! I have carried out the command of the LORD.”

¹⁴But Samuel said, “What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?”

¹⁵Saul said, “They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and oxen, to sacrifice to the LORD your God; but the rest we have utterly destroyed.”

¹⁶Then Samuel said to Saul, “Wait, and let me tell you what the LORD said to me last night.”

And he said to him, “Speak!”

[Read v.10-16]

Q: What does it mean in v. 11, “I regret that I have made Saul king”? Does this mean that God, being omniscient, made a mistake in appointing Saul as king?

A: “I regret” is what is called anthropomorphic language. That is, God’s actions and thoughts are put into man’s terms so that man can understand God and His actions. The meaning here is, “I’m very sorry that things aren’t working out, as I knew they wouldn’t.” God, through Samuel, had warned the people not to seek a monarchy, but they refused to listen. So God said, “You want a king? You got a king.” In selecting a king over Israel, Saul was probably the best God had to choose from at the time.

Q: How did Samuel respond to the news about Saul? (v. 11)

A: He wept all night.

Application: How do we respond when we hear that one of our brothers or sisters has fallen into sin?

Q: How do we know from this passage that Saul does not think he’s done anything wrong, that he’s carried out God’s commandments fully and properly?

A: The first thing Saul does is to “set up a monument for himself”. (v.12)

Q: What does this tell us about Saul?

A: Just as in 1 Samuel 13:8, he is more concerned about what man thinks of him more than God.

Q: What is Saul’s perspective on his carrying out God’s commands in verse 13?

A: Saul has an incomplete view of obedience. His view is called “relative obedience”; that is, he carried out only that part of the command that he thought he needed to carry out. He “reinterpreted” the command.

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Application: Make application in terms of Christians being obedient to the Lord. Have you known someone that only puts into practice **PART** of what God tells them, or just **PART** of a Scripture? How does God feel about us getting something “mostly right”?

Q: What is Saul’s explanation for his men keeping the best livestock? (v. 15) What’s wrong with that explanation?

A: They are for sacrifice. The problem is that everything of the Amalekites that lives and breathes is unclean and cannot be offered as a sacrifice to the LORD. Much of the Levitical law regarding sacrifices is how to make them pure and acceptable to God and therefore Saul’s actions are in further contradiction to God’s law. Saul has been disobedient to the immediate situation regarding the Amalekites, and in his personal walk to keep all of God’s Word.

[Read v.17-31]

Q: Who made Saul king?

A: The LORD. Saul has forgotten that it was God who made him king and it was God who empowered Saul to victory over the Amalekites. Saul has forgotten that he still does not have the right to make independent decisions apart from the LORD. In fact, Saul is probably taking some credit (praise) for the victory. His error of replacing Samuel as priest in chapter 13 is growing to the point where he is attempting to replace God.

Application: Instead of giving the praise to God, do we sometimes garnish it for ourselves? How do we credit God for how we got here? Or do we sometimes raise our education, self-will, hard work, etc. as having accomplished it for yourself?

Q: What does Samuel know about Saul’s motives for keeping the livestock? (v. 19)

A: Samuel knows that Saul’s motives were selfish.

Q: Who does Saul put the blame (responsibility) on in verse 21?

A: It was **their** fault. (Just as in chapter 13 it was said to be others’ fault.)

Q: In verse 21, the NASB uses the term “things devoted to destruction.” Elsewhere that’s translated, “things under the ban.” What does this remind you of?

A: The sin of Achan at Jericho who kept some things “under the ban” (Josh. 7:10-26). In other words, Saul and his men did the same thing as Achan had done. What should have been their just treatment by the LORD if it was the same as Achan? Death by stoning and burning.

Q: In verse 21, how does Saul refer to God?

A: He uses the phrase (both here and in v. 30), “**the LORD your God...**” not “the LORD **our** God” or “the LORD **my** God.” This indicates that Saul has moved away from the Lord, if he even had a relationship with Him in the first place. There is little evidence that he ever allowed his experiences in God to rule over and change his heart and mind. He may have experienced God, but did not allow that experience to change him personally.

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¹⁷Samuel said, “Is it not true, though you were little in your own eyes, you were made the head of the tribes of Israel? And the LORD anointed you king over Israel, ¹⁸and the LORD sent you on a mission, and said, ‘Go and utterly destroy the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are exterminated.’ ¹⁹Why 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?”

²⁰Then Saul said to Samuel, “I did obey the voice of the LORD, and went on the mission on which the Lord sent me, and have brought back Agag the king of Amalek, and have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. ²¹But the people took some of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the choicest of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the Lord your God at Gilgal.”

²²Samuel 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, And to heed than the fat of rams.

²³For rebellion is as the sin of divination, And insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He has also rejected you from being king.”

²⁴Then 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. ²⁵Now therefore, please pardon my sin and return with me, that I

may worship the LORD.”

²⁶But 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.”

²⁷As Samuel turned to go, Saul seized the edge of his robe, and it tore. ²⁸So Samuel said to him, “The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to your neighbor, who is better than you. ²⁹Also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind.”

³⁰Then he said, “I have sinned; but please honor me now before the elders of my people and before Israel, and go back with me, that I may worship the LORD your God.”

³¹So Samuel went back following Saul, and Saul worshiped the Lord.

³²Then Samuel said, “Bring me Agag, the king of the Amalekites.”

And Agag came to him cheerfully. And Agag said, “Surely the bitterness of death is past.”

³³But Samuel said, “As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women.” And Samuel hewed Agag to pieces before the Lord at Gilgal.

³⁴Then Samuel went to Ramah, but Saul went up to his house at Gibeah of Saul.

³⁵Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death; for Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD regretted that He had made Saul king over Israel.

Q: In verses 22-23, what is the Lord’s view of rebellion and insubordination? Why?

A: They are as divination (“witchcraft” in KJV), iniquity and idolatry. Rebellion and insubordination were the sins of Satan. Rebellion, in other words, is to reject the One True God for another, even if it’s one’s self.

Q: What is the second “curse” placed on Saul by Samuel in verse 23b?

A: The first was that Saul’s sons would not follow him to the throne; that the monarchy would not proceed along his line. This second pronouncement is that he will be removed from being king.

Q: What is Saul’s response now?

A: He ‘fesses up. He still blames the people, but at least he’s honest by admitting that he failed to follow the LORD. In other words, he honored his soldiers before he honored the LORD. Does that sound familiar? (See 1 Samuel 2:27-31 in regards to Eli.)

Closing Application: *What is the relationship between obedience to God and the “grace” of God in the NT? How do Christians view the need for obedience? Are we exempt from acting like Saul?*

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

Judas (not Iscariot) said to Him, “Lord, what then has happened that You are going to disclose Yourself to us and not to the world?”

Jesus answered and said to him, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him. He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father’s who sent Me.

—John 14:21-24

[Read v.32-35]

Q: Although Agag himself is killed, what are the real-world repercussions of Saul’s disobedience? How will not completely destroying the Amalekites return to haunt Israel both physically and spiritually?

After these events King Ahasuerus promoted Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him and established his authority over all the princes who were with him.

—Esther 3:1

Haman was an “Agagite”—a descendant of King Agag. Haman would be the chief architect of a plan to utterly and completely destroy every Jew in much the same way as God’s orders for the Israel to completely destroy the Amalekites.

Q: Why does Saul’s “fall” seem so permanent, so fatal when compared to others such as David’s?

A: Saul never really repents. He always goes his own way rather than God’s way.

Application: *What are the ramifications when we only obey God in part? To what has this lesson spoken to you concerning something to which you may not have been 100% obedient?*