

1 Samuel 15:1-35 | “Selective Obedience”

Preached on February 6, 2022 by Pastor Matt Brown

Turn in your Bibles to 1 Samuel 15, and we will be covering the whole chapter this morning.

Today, we will find a sad story of how God tears the kingdom from Saul, and gives it to another person. *[pauseeee]*

Do you know what selective hearing is?

It’s when someone ignores something said because they *aren’t* totally focused on what is being said.

The typical example that we think about is when a wife is talking to her husband about something, but he’s focused on something else.

And then at some point, she says, “Did you hear what I just said?”

And he says, “Uh, no, what did you say?” *[pause]*

He had selective hearing, for his hearing tuned out what she was saying. *[pause]*

But why? It’s because he was focused on something else.

You see, what we do (whether we recognize it or not) is we prioritize things in our minds.

Researchers say that, “Your brain [actually] chooses what to listen to based on what you’re trying to do.”¹

If you’re trying to complete a task, and your focus is totally into that task, then when someone starts talking to you about a different subject, chances are that you won’t process everything that they said. *[pause]*

What it comes down to is prioritization [pry-or-i-tie-zation].

We each tend to focus on what’s most important to us at that moment. *[pause]*

Well this morning, we will find someone who didn’t necessarily have selective hearing, but it was more so *selective obedience*.

He obeyed only in the things that he wanted to obey, and it was because he prioritized what he wanted and not what God wanted.

And that man is Saul. *[pauseeee]*

¹ Seladi-Schulman, Jill. “Selective Hearing: Definition, Symptoms, Treatment, and Listening Tips.” *Healthline*, 6 Apr. 2018, <https://www.healthline.com/health/selective-hearing#symptoms>.

In the past couple chapters in 1 Samuel, we have been seeing the downfall of Saul.

He disobeyed God by not waiting for Samuel to arrive before doing a sacrifice, and God told him that his kingdom would not continue.

Then he hindered the effectiveness of Israel's victory, and put Israel in some unnecessary messes because of his selfishness.²

Now, in this story, we will see the peak of Saul's folly, as he disobeys God once again and God tears the kingdom from him.

LET'S READ WHAT HAPPENS. [pauseeee]

The Lord, through Samuel, tells Saul to go and devote to destruction the nation of Amalek.

Saul was not to spare anything, no person or animal, for the nation of Amalak opposed Israel as they came up out of Egypt. [pause]

Now this brings up lots of questions and concerns in our minds when we hear something like this.

Like, "How could God do this? How could He command the destruction of every human and animal in that nation?"

I admit that something like this is hard to take at times, but we must put it into perspective. [pause]

First, who were the Amalekites, and what did they do wrong?

The Amalekites were raiding nomads who would often harass Israel.

They were by no means a nice little nation keeping to themselves, for they were mean and nasty. [pause]

In the period of the Judges, the Amalekites would often team up with other nations to attack Israel.

In fact, during one period of the Judges, whenever Israel would plant crops, they would come up and attack Israel.³ [pause]

But the evil that God points out most emphatically is that they showed no compassion on the traveling Israelites after the Exodus, but tried to kill them.⁴

² See 1 Samuel 13:8-15 for the disobedience of not waiting for Samuel & 1 Samuel 14:24-46 for the messes that Saul put Israel in.

³ See Judges 6:3.

⁴ This story is given in Exodus 17:8-13.

In Deuteronomy 25, God says this, “Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you came out of Egypt, how he attacked you on the way when you were faint and weary, and cut off your tail, those who were lagging behind you, and he did not fear God.

Therefore when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies around you, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven; you shall not forget.”⁵ *[pause]*

So here is Saul, given a direct order and special responsibility by God to accomplish this task.

And because this comes from God, we know that this is actually an act of just, divine judgment.

This was not arbitrary meanness, but divine judgment for sin. *[pauseeeee]*

We must not forget that God has authority over the life and death of everything since He is the Creator, and this story is a prime example of that. *[pause]*

God is good and just, and so nothing that He does will ever be evil or unjust.

And so when we hear about this in the Old Testament, we must remember that this is divine, just judgment meted out by God. *[pauseeeee]*

There’s something else that points to the fact that this isn’t arbitrary meanness, and it’s in the fact that the Kenites are allowed to leave and be saved from this destruction.

Saul tells the Kenites who are dwelling among the Amalekites to flee, for they showed kindness to Israel when they came out of Egypt. *[pause]*

If God was just arbitrarily mean, he wouldn’t have cared that the Kenites were there, too.

But he allows the Kenites to escape, for they treated Israel with kindness. *[pause]*

And if you think about it, God actually gave the Amalekites grace, for He gave them time to change and live from the time of the Exodus, when they attacked Israel, until this story.

They didn’t deserve that, but it shows His grace.

He is truly a just God in His judgment! *[pauseeee]*

Alright, getting back to the story - the Kenites are allowed to leave, and then Saul kills everything except Agag, the king, and the best of the livestock.

That’s not good, is it? For Saul was told to kill everything.

In response, God tells Samuel, “I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments.” *[pause]*

⁵ Deuteronomy 25:17-19.

Wow, so we already faced a difficult thing in this passage with the total destruction of a nation, but now we find something else that raises questions.

How can God “regret”?

Or even in the King James, it says, “I repent that I have set up Saul to be king.”

This isn’t the only place it says that either, for even at the end of the story, it says, “the Lord regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel.”

And just to add to the complexity of this - in verse 29, Samuel says, “the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not man, that he should have regret.” *[pause]*

OK, what is going on here?

Well the term ‘regret’ involves an emotional aspect of sadness over a situation.

And so this is showing us that God is a personal Being, who can be grieved by sin.

He is saddened by how Saul ended up, but it’s not like he would change it if He could go back, for God already knows all things.

This is why verse 29 is so important, for it helps us understand that God’s regret is not like our regret. *[pause]*

The Bible often uses language that we can understand so as to help us understand God better, and this is one of those times.

It’s using language that we can relate to to explain the emotions that God felt, yet we must remember that His regret is not exactly like our regret. *[pause]*

We don’t know the future, so we regret bad decisions, and want a redo.

But God knows all things, so his regret means that he has good, divine, and wise reasons to do something, but that doesn’t change the fact that it grieves Him when it happens.

He can still bemoan a situation, even though He knew it would happen, and was in control the whole time. *[pause]*

One commentator put it very well when he said this...

“Verse 11 does not intend to suggest Yahweh’s fickleness of purpose but his sorrow over sin; it does not depict Yahweh flustered over lack of foresight but Yahweh grieved over lack of obedience.

Here is a God who is neither fickle in his ways nor indifferent in his responses. Here is a God who has both firmness and feeling. If we cannot comprehend we can perhaps apprehend, at least enough to adore.”⁶ *[pauseeee]*

Alright, once again, let’s get back to the story: Samuel is angry, and crying all night over the situation with Saul.

And Samuel goes looking for Saul, but where is he?

“Oh,” someone says, “he went and set up a monument for himself, and then went to Gilgal.”

Ah, now we are about to get into the reasons for Saul’s disobedience.

You see, with Saul and with us, when we disobey, there is a deeper heart issue at play than what appears on the surface, and it’s this...

I. What we often want is our own way!

We disobey God because we want our way over God’s. *[pause]*

You see, disobedience is a battle of authority.

Will I submit to God, and obey exactly what He commands?

Or will I rebel and reject what He commands because I want something else? *[pause]*

This happens in the parent-child relationship.

When a child disobeys, it’s because they are thinking, “No, I don’t want to listen to you, I want to do something else.”

But if they obey, they are saying, “Yes, you are my authority, I will do what you say.”

So also, this happens when it comes to the Lord, and as Samuel confronts Saul, we see this come to the forefront. *[pauseeee]*

Samuel goes to Saul, and Saul acts like all is well, and acts like he did everything that he was told.

But his confidence is amiss. *[pause]*

Samuel is like, “Really? What’s all those animal noises then?”

And notice what Saul does, he does three things.

He blames it on the people, keeps trying to defend himself, and he tries to excuse it by making it sound godly. *[pause]*

⁶ Davis, D. R. (2000). 1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart (pp. 161–162). Christian Focus Publications.

These are the same things that we do when we sin...

Like Adam and Eve in the garden, we like to point the finger elsewhere.⁷

This is because in our pride, we don't like to admit guilt, and we look for somewhere to put the blame.

We say, "It wasn't really me who lied to my boss, for my spouse told me to do it."

"It wasn't really me who said mean things, for did you hear what everyone was saying?" *[pause]*

Like Saul, instead of owning up to our sin right away after being confronted with it, we keep trying to defend ourselves.

Saul just kept pleading his case, "I obeyed!...But I obeyed!"

And Samuel keeps pointing out what he did wrong, and Saul doesn't give in until Samuel tells him that he's rejected as king. *[pauseeee]*

How many times do you keep defending your sin, like a captain trying to hold onto a sinking ship?

With each denial, the guilt only becomes more evident. *[pauseeee]*

Also like Saul, we try to make our sin sound godly.

We say, "I cheated on my taxes, but I did it so that I could give more to the church. See, isn't that such a good thing to do for God?"

We say, "I'm not talking to people about all of those hard parts in the Bible because I want more people to come to Christ. Isn't that good?" *[pause]*

It's easy to do this because we like to twist things to make them sound better than they are in order to cover up our sin.

But this is like trying to cover up mold with paint - it may appear better, but it's still sin underneath. *[pauseeee]*

Saul was treating his sin lightly, yet this is the complete opposite of how he acted when Jonathan accidentally broke his foolish oath in the last chapter. *[pauseeee]*

So now that we have talked about *how* Saul sinned and *what he did* when confronted with his sin, let's think through the *why*.

Why did Saul sin here and why did he respond the way that he did? *[pause]*

⁷ See Genesis 3:12-13.

As I brought out in the main point: it's because we want what we want.

But more specifically for Saul, what did *he* want?

I believe that Saul wanted honor, glory, and reputation for himself. *[pause]*

You see, Saul disobeyed because he thought in the end, it would be better for him.

He disobeyed because he was concerned about his reputation. *[pauseeee]*

Evidence that he was consumed with his reputation is seen in how he goes and makes a monument for himself after killing the Amalekites.

So the victory wasn't about God and his purposes of exacting divine justice, but it was about Saul and his legacy.

Even the sparing of the king and the spoil would serve to enhance Saul's glory and prestige.

In fact, even Saul tells us why he did it when he says, "I feared the people and obeyed their voice." *[pause]*

He was afraid that the people would not like him anymore if he killed all of the best livestock.

It was about his reputation and glory, for he wanted to look good to them.

"Look at me, the king who has left you with the best sheep, oxen, calves, and lambs!" *[pause]*

You also see this desire for personal honor when he is confronted with his sin.

In his pride, he didn't want to admit wrong, but tried to blame others, make excuses, and defend himself so much that it took the reality of hearing, "You are rejected as king," to get him to finally confess. *[pause]*

This shows us that Saul did what he did for his own personal honor, rather than God's honor.

And when you do things for your own personal honor above all, you will be selective in your obedience, only obeying things that will make yourself look better. *[pauseeee]*

Think about the times that you disobey God, is it ever because of the fear of man, and the desire for a better reputation?

Maybe you think, "But what would 'so-and-so' think?! I want them to like me!"

Or, "I don't want to say anything because they might get mad at me."

Or, "I don't want to be more committed to my faith, for my co-workers might think I'm a religious nut." *[pauseeee]*

We can do the same things as Saul, disobeying God because of the fear of man and the desire for the approval of others. *[pauseeee]*

Saul could try his hardest to make it seem like his sin wasn't that big of a deal, but God knew.

For his sin showed a disregard for God, and a love for self. *[pause]*

And in multiple places in this passage, it brings out that Saul's lack of obedience was actually rebellion.

Samuel says that Saul had *rejected* the word of the Lord.

But most clearly, after Samuel says that "to obey is better than sacrifice," he says, "for rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry." *[pause]*

Now let's think about that statement.

How is rebellion as bad as the sin of divination?

Divination is the seeking of knowledge outside of God through some supernatural means.

Well rebellion is also going outside of God, for it's saying, "God, I don't need you. I'm choosing my own way." *[pause]*

And then presumption (which is sorta like arrogance) is as bad as idolatry because you are removing God from his rightful place, and putting yourself there. *[pause]*

Saul thought that a little disobedience was just a small thing, but disobedience is rebellion, which is as bad as divination.

Saul needed to be reminded of the heart of the matter, and the heart of the matter was his rebellious heart. *[pauseeee]*

Samuel tells Saul that he rejected God's Word, so God would reject Saul.

Saul finally confesses that he had sinned, and asks for pardon, but Samuel tells him that he's rejected as king.

So Samuel turns to leave, Saul reaches out to grab him, and tears his robe.

Then Samuel uses that incident as a picture of how God is tearing the kingdom from him and giving it to another.

And he confirms how this proclamation is a done deal by stating, "the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret." *[pause]*

The idea is that God does not lie or change his mind like man.

This is such an encouraging truth, is it not?

When you are facing the hardest situations in your life, the anchor that you can hold onto is that God does not lie.

That means that in those hard times, you can know that His grace is truly sufficient for you in your weakness,⁸ and this will always be true.

If he promises something, you can be 100% positive that it will happen.

You don't have to worry if He is twisting the truth or trying to deceive you, but what He says will happen! *[pause]*

And when you think about your eternal life, you can be assured that you have eternal life if you trust in Christ,⁹ for God does not change His mind like man.

If He has determined and promised to do something, you can know it will come to fruition, for He is not fickle, but faithful. *[pause]*

Praise God that He is not like us in this area!

We lie and deceive, but he's ever and always truthful.

We change our minds many, many times a day, but He never changes His mind. *[pauseeee]*

Looking at Saul and his disobedience reminds us that as sinners, our natural inclination is to seek our own way.

Our own way to be saved, our own way to get out of situations, our own wisdom, our own agenda, our own desires.

But what does the Bible say? "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned--every one--to his own way."¹⁰

Our own way means ruin, just like Saul found out, but God's way is life and blessing.

And so this pushes us to look outside of ourselves to what God wants, and what does God want?...

II. What God wants: obedience!

What does the Lord care about?

There are many answers given by different people.

⁸ A paraphrase of 2 Corinthians 12:9.

⁹ See John 3:16, 36.

¹⁰ Isaiah 53:6a.

Some people just say, “Oh, as long as you go to church, tithe, and do things like that, that’s all God cares about.”

Other people say other things.

But what does the Lord truly care about?

This question comes into view in our passage, when Saul states that they kept the animals alive to sacrifice to God.

And Samuel says, “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.”
[pause]

Saul disobeyed God and thought that the sacrifices would be acceptable to God.

But Samuel is like, “No, no no. God cares about obedience more than sacrifices.” [pause]

What’s he getting at?

He’s saying that no ceremonial act can make up for a rebellious heart attitude.

In sacrifice, you do an external religious act, but in obedience, you’re submitting your will to God. [pause]

Saul’s disobedience came from rebelling against God, yet he thought all would be well because they were going to do some sacrifices.

How is that OK?! It’s not!

God cares about a heart of willing obedience, not just empty worship. [pauseeee]

This is important for each of us because we can so easily think that it’s the other way around.

We can think, “I know I have disobeyed God in so many ways this week, but it’s OK because I went to church today.”

We think, “I know I didn’t really do anything for God this week, but it doesn’t matter, I put some money in the offering plate, so it makes up for it all.”

We try to cover up our disobedience with religious activities. [pauseeee]

What I find is that we often have an incorrect view of obedience to God.

Sometimes people view obedience as simply rolling up their sleeves, and getting the job done with no emotion.

Kinda like a robot, doing a duty, and moving on.

Like, “I just need to do this. It won’t be fun. It’s just something I have to do, that’s all.”

But that’s not the picture that the Bible gives.

Instead, the Bible cares about the heart behind obedience, and this is exactly why Samuel says, “to obey is better than sacrifice.” *[pause]*

Why would Jesus say, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments,”¹¹ unless He meant it?

Love and obedience go hand-in-hand. *[pauseeee]*

You see, God wants sincere obedience to Him, not just going through the motions of religious ritual.

Christianity is not a “check-box” thing, where you check boxes and as long as you check those boxes, you are good.

No, Christianity is about a relationship with the God of the Universe through Christ!

It’s about a life radically changed by God’s grace and love and then propelled to obey and live for Him, who has showered grace and love on us. *[pauseeee]*

This is what Samuel was trying to get across to Saul.

Notice what he said to him in verse 17.

I think the NASB version gets the idea across better, as it says this...

“Is it not true, though you were insignificant in your own eyes, that you became the head of the tribes of Israel? For the Lord anointed you as king over Israel. And the Lord sent you on a mission.”

Samuel was saying, “Look at the grace of God in your life! He took you from being a ‘nobody’ to be the head of Israel! Why would you not obey Him?!”

Saul, God showed you grace by giving you the kingship, He sent you on a mission, and yet you are going to rebel against this great God who showed you such kindness?” *[pauseeee]*

We need to understand this, and if you don’t get anything else out of this sermon, get this...

... True, right obedience is the result of a person who has experienced the grace of God and cherishes that grace.

It’s the result of a person who has tasted and seen that the Lord is good.¹² *[pause]*

¹¹ John 14:15.

¹² See Psalm 34:8.

This is why only someone who has experienced the love of Christ's saving work can then rightly obey.

So then the opposite is also true: someone who disobeys is someone who has lost sight of the grace of God. *[pause]*

Saul had forgotten the grace of God in his life.

Now that he had been king for a while, he didn't think about the grace of God taking him from 'rags to riches'.

And it became about him and his honor, as he thought he deserved more glory from the people.

Because of this, he pursued what he wanted rather than what God wanted - he pursued his honor and glory over God's honor and glory. *[pauseeeee]*

This is because someone who fails to dwell upon the grace of God fails to remember that they are simply an undeserving sinner, who owes everything to a merciful Lord. *[pauseeeee]*

This is key: if you don't marvel at the great grace of God, you will tend to be focused on your greatness and your wants.

You will seek your honor and glory above God's.

But someone who stands in awe of God, puts God in His rightful place in their minds and hearts.

They obey simply because they can't help but serve the One who gave them everything, and this brings Him honor. *[pauseeee]*

Have you tasted and seen that the Lord is good? Have you experienced His grace in saving you, a sinner in need of saving?

This happens as we are confronted with our dire situation, and the contrast between that and what Christ did for us in love.

For we were totally dead in our sins, incapable of saving ourselves, and Christ came and died in our place to provide us with forgiveness and eternal life. *[pauseeee]*

When one is captivated by that amazing grace, they obey God by responding in faith to the Gospel.

But one who isn't captivated by that grace actually disobeys God's Word by rejecting the message of salvation to their own demise.

Have you responded in faith to the matchless grace of Christ, who died and rose again for you? *[pauseeeee]*

As we consider what this passage teaches us, we see that...

What God wants should be the most important thing to us!

We don't do this because we are robots, just doing it with no emotion.

We don't do this because we need to check boxes and cover our bases.

We desire to do what God wants because we are astonished that we, who are sinners, who deserve absolutely nothing, have been given so much.

Like Saul, we have gone from being 'nobodies' to having so much, for Christ's death on our behalf has turned us from enemies of God to sons and daughters of the one true King.

But in our new status, we don't ever forget the grace of God, for the grace of God is the very reason that we have gone from rags to riches.

For our riches are in Christ, as we have been "blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places," and "in him we have obtained an inheritance."¹³ *[pauseeee]*

What else could we do but listen to what He says?

What else could we do but seek His glory and honor, and not our own?

He deserves it - not us - and we serve a God who utterly loves His people.

He loved His people so much that he was willing to bring judgment against the enemies of His people.

He loved His people so much that He was grieved over their king's sin and rebellion.

And He's the God who loves His people so much that he will not allow a bad king to continue to reign, but He will do what's best for His people.

And what's best for His people was providing a man after His own heart, David, but ultimately the perfect King, Jesus, who was sent to save us. *[pauseeee]*

Saul's disobedience reminds us that the natural inclination of sinners is to rebel and want our own way.

So what else do we need but God's grace to intervene and save us?

And even after we are saved, we need to keep marveling and remembering the grace of God in our lives, just like we are about to do when we partake of the Lord's Supper.

This leads us to the right attitude whereby we seek His glory and honor above all in obedience.

¹³ Ephesians 1:3, 11.

It is truly by the mercies of God that we are motivated to present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God.¹⁴

¹⁴ See Romans 12:1.