

“Faith Without Works Is Dead”

October 2, 2016

1 Samuel 10:1-27

SI: We’re studying the book of 1 Samuel which is the early history of Israel. But it’s not ordinary history, it’s redemptive history.

This is about God working in history to prepare a people out of whom would come the Savior of the world, Jesus Christ.

INTRO: Someone once told me how when he was a child, his father left them.
Left his wife, left his kids, went off to chase whatever.
He had very little contact with them, barely provided for them, if at all—
but always said he loved them.
In later years, when his children got older and challenged him—
How can you say you love us? He would get indignant and defensive.

So did he love his children?

Well, I guess that depends on how you define love, and particularly fatherly love.
If love is a warm feeling or sentiment. If love is proved by saying I love you.
Then if he said he loved them, he did.

He knew his feelings. His children didn't. Who were they to judge?
But if fatherly love is delight in these precious little creatures God has put in your
care, and an impulse that drives you to make sacrifices for them and try to provide
for them and protect them and guide them—then, no, he didn't love them.
He could protest and loudly declare his love for his children
but the lifetime of selfish decisions he made were the antithesis of fatherly love.
All the things he didn't do, didn't even try to do, were an indictment against him.

We live in a sentimental culture. Feelings are king.
If someone feels something deeply and expresses it with strong emotions,
then who are we to question that? It must be true.
But deep down we all know that real love for another person will always manifest
itself in loving deeds and works. If the deeds aren't there, then love is dead.

That's also true of faith in Christ.

James says,

“For as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.”
True saving faith in Jesus Christ will manifest itself in particular ways.
If certain deeds aren't present then there is no faith.
It doesn't matter how much the person protests and says—
Yes, I believe in Jesus. Yes, I'm trusting the Lord. Faith without works is dead.
Real faith is practiced faith

As Protestants we sometimes stumble over this.

We are so intent on preserving and defending salvation by grace alone
and by faith in Christ alone, and so careful not to make it faith plus works—
That we are reluctant to judge the validity of a person's faith by his or her works.
But the Bible does.
And there are several good reasons we should too.

Not the least of which is that we need to put our own faith to the test.

Honestly assess whether our faith is real or not.

This morning we are embarking on a part of 1 Samuel that often troubles Christians.

In case you haven't read it in a while, here's what happens:

God chooses Saul to be king of Israel.

At God's leading, Samuel anoints him and then publically presents him to Israel and gives instructions for his reign. We just read that part in this chapter.

In the next few chapters Saul starts to lead Israel.

He has some successes and makes some mistakes.

Then Saul makes what seems to be a very small mistake—

and God snatches the kingdom away from him and gives it to David.

God doesn't just reject Saul as king, he rejects him as a person—

even cuts off communication with him through Samuel.

Saul isn't even given a second chance—at least it doesn't appear he is.

Where's the grace in that?

If you compare what Saul did with what David later did when he was king—

anyone would say that what David did was much worse.

But God didn't reject David and take the kingdom away from him.

It can't help but trouble you is that it doesn't seem Saul did anything that deserved God's severe response.

Let me take you back to that verse in James—

Faith without works is dead. Keep that in mind as we study Saul.

This is the main lesson we learn from Saul.

There can be something that looks like faith in the Lord, even feels like faith in the

Lord, certainly something that uses the right words of faith in him—but it's not.

It's actually unbelief. So it doesn't produce the works of faith.

It ultimately earns God's rejection. We don't want that.

We want living faith that produces good works that glorify God.

Let's look at this passage and ask two big questions.

1. What did the Lord want from Saul?
2. What does the Lord want from you?

MP#1 What did the Lord want from Saul?

At the very beginning of Saul's reign the Lord gave him a test—a test of his faith.

So what was the test? The writer of 1 Samuel doesn't tell us plainly.

He makes us work for it.

We have to pay attention to the details and ask what they mean.

Let's work our way through the story from the beginning.

Samuel privately anointed Saul leader over Israel.

After Samuel anointed him, he told him that on the way home

he would experience three signs.

First sign, men would meet Saul near certain location and tell him about the donkeys, that they were found and that his father was worried about him.

Second sign, at another specific location, will meet three men going to worship.

Samuel is very specific about numbers—three goats, three loaves of bread, a skin of wine—and they will offer you two loaves of bread.

The purpose of these first two signs was to assure Saul that Samuel's anointing was from God and that Saul really was the Lord's chosen king for Israel.

Then we come to the third sign. This is very important.

Samuel says that as you approach Gibeah, something is going to happen.

Two details about Gibeah—both crucial.

There was a Philistine outpost there. The Philistines were back in power.

They had stationed soldiers at this location to protect their interests.

The other detail that we learn later is that Gibeah was Saul's home town.

So Saul had been living, apparently for years, under the shadow of this outpost of occupying Philistines. It would be like a Cuban living near Guantanamo Bay.

Would be well aware imperialist Americans have Naval Base in his own backyard.

But Samuel makes a point of mentioning it. Your hometown. Philistine outpost.

Then, Samuel says, as you approach Gibeah you will meet a procession of prophets coming down from worship, playing their instruments and prophesying.

Praising the Lord, they are declaring his word, speaking by influence of Spirit—

The Spirit of the Lord will come on you in power, you will prophesy—and you will be changed into a different person.

So Samuel says, Saul, you're going to have a mountain-top spiritual experience.

A sense of Holy Spirit's presence and power like you've never felt before.

Now, look again at verse 7. It's the most important verse in the chapter.

“Once these signs are fulfilled, do whatever your hand finds to do, for God is with you.”

What do you think that means in the context?

Imagine you are a business owner and you hire a new salesman and you say:

There is such and such a place where we've never broken into the market.

Do whatever your hand finds to do.
You didn't explicitly tell him—I want you to find new customers in that area.
You told him about an opportunity and basically said go for it.
You expect him to be hungry for it and take your hint.
And you didn't tell him how to do it. That's why you hired him.
It's a test of sorts. You want him to want what you want.

Back to verse 7. What did God want Saul to want? What did he want him to do?
He wanted him want Israel free from the Philistines.

Wanted him to attack the Philistine outpost in his hometown.
How do we know that?
Well, besides Samuel's pointed reference to the outpost, the Lord himself had told Samuel back in chapter 9: I'm going to send you a man from Benjamin, he will deliver my people from the hand of the Philistines.

This was Saul's first test of faith.

Would his faith in the Lord show itself by him striking the first blow?
Of course, if he attacked the Philistine outpost, something else would happen.
The Philistines would hear about it and mobilize their whole army and invade.
Then Saul would face the supreme challenge of rallying the Israelites to him and leading them into a decisive battle. That would require even more active faith.

Samuel anticipates this and he gives Saul a very specific instruction. Verse 8.

Go down ahead of me to Gilgal. I will surely come down to you to sacrifice burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, but you must wait seven days until I come to you and tell you what you are to do.

So verse 7 and 8 go together as Saul's test of faith.

Saul, I'm not going to tell you how, but God wants you to deal with that Philistine outpost in your home town. It's time.

And then, when you do it, we all know what's going to happen next.

You're going to face the biggest fight of your life.

Go to Gilgal—a sacred place of worship—wait for me seven days.

Yes, those will be a long seven days. You will hear Philistines are on the march.

Your men will be looking at you and expecting you to act. They might scatter.
You'll have to tell them that you are doing this God's way.

You're waiting for Samuel to come and make sacrifices, consecrate the army.

God's going to lead us in this battle and he will get the glory.

It's a pretty specific test. But it hinges on Saul taking the first step.

He must have the sort of faith in the Lord that is manifested in a courageous acts.

What happened? The three signs all took place.

The last and most important one is described in some detail.

Saul has mountaintop spiritual experience. Holy Spirit came on him in power. We don't know exactly how that was manifested, but apparently Saul became so loud and expressive in his prophesying and praise that people in his hometown never forgot it. It even became a saying in town for something amazing.

But then what? Did he rally the men of his town and attack the Philistine outpost?

He didn't do anything. His uncle even asked him what Samuel had said to him.

But Saul did not tell him about the kingship. He just went back to regular life. So Samuel called all Israel together and he went through a public ceremony, in which Saul was very dramatically chosen as God's king.

What was Saul's response to being chosen?

He hid among the baggage. The people had to drag him out.

Now, this has been interpreted in different ways.

Some have said Saul not telling his uncle and hiding is evidence of his humility.

Like George Washington refusing a third term as President.

There is certainly an element of that. When he first met Samuel back in chapter 9 and Samuel said that all Israel would look to him, Saul said—

Why do you say that? I'm from the smallest clan in the smallest tribe.

He does seem to have been a quiet man who didn't want the spotlight at first.

He was a real person, not a fictional character. Real people are complicated.

Their motivations are often mixed—good and bad.

But look how the chapter ends. Saul goes back to his hometown Gibeah.

Not alone, God had touched hearts of valiant men, beginnings of an army.

They obviously want Israel to be free. God was giving him another chance.

But still Saul refuses to attack. Some critics doubt his ability to save Israel.

They are condemned for despising king, but criticism not incorrect.

What's unsettling about Saul is that here early on the question comes to mind—

Does this man really believe in the Lord or not?

He was given this test of faith and everything necessary to pass it, but didn't.

I figure most of you know the story of 1 Samuel, so I'm not spoiling it for you.

And we'll get to all this in due time.

Saul never attacked the Philistine outpost at his own initiative.

Someone else had to do it for him to begin the liberation of Israel.

And when the decisive battle with the Philistine was at hand, he didn't wait for

Samuel seven days in Gilgal as instructed him.
That proved to be the culmination of a pattern of unbelieving refusal to heed
God's call and take up the divine power at his disposal.
So the Lord rejected him and took away the kingdom.

What are we to make of this? What's the application for us?

Brings us to the second question:

MP#2 What does the Lord want from you?

He wants you to pass the tests of faith that he sends into your life.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians that the things in the Old Testament happened . . .
as examples and were written down as warnings for us,
on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come.

So Saul's life is an example and warning for us that even in this age of grace
God still sends test of faith. This was not just an Old Testament thing.

We inhabit the same spiritual world as the Israelites did.

Salvation is by faith in God's Redeemer. And faith in him is proved by tests.

Let me mention three practical applications from this story.

1. View tests of faith as positive things.

Academic tests can be powerful tools for learning.

The sermon tests I had in seminary, sample sermons I had to preach in front of my
classmates and professor—him sitting there with my sermon manuscript and a
pen, and then his incisive comments afterwards—those taught me things I never
would have learned any other way.

Medical tests—they might be painful and humiliating as your body is poked and
prodded—yet they are good things—even when they reveal problems.

Product tests, manufacturing tests—expensive, detailed—yet invaluable for
perfecting the product and procedure.

Testing faith is the means by which God strengthens it and matures your faith.

That's a good thing even if the test itself is scary or painful or hard.

James says it better:

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds,
because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

You can't help comparing Saul with David—

and 1 Samuel does a lot of that later when David comes on the scene.

Think how many of David's Psalms are about tests and trials God sent him.

David never downplays how hard they are:

Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death! That's a test!

But he ultimately views them with joy as good things in his life—

I will fear no evil, for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me!
Saul didn't view it that way. He saw the test as something bad to be avoided.
So this is an attitudinal check. Do you view tests of your faith as good things?
Do you consider them joy because you know you will be made stronger?

2. Second practical application is to **recognize that big tests of faith might seem to be unimportant things**. In fact, that's one of the ways you can tell it's a test. You keep telling yourself this is not a big deal, but deep down it bothers you, and maybe other believers are counseling you and you're dismissive.

Saul might have said: It's just a little Philistine outpost.

It's not the most strategic outpost. It's been there for a long time.

We even know some of the soldiers stationed there—they're not bad guys.

I've lived here all my life. I know more about this situation than Samuel.

Later on, in chapter 13, Saul does the same thing with another test—

tries to argue that it's no big deal that he didn't wait for Samuel seven days, like he had been told to do.

He does it again chapter 15 after another test.

What? I basically did what you said. What's the big deal?

But he knows deep down it's a big deal.

That time he knew he messed up but didn't try to fix it—we'll get to that one.

I've told you this story before from one of Dr. Rayburn's sermons.

Young man in his church asked him: Is it ok for me to buy a new Mercedes Benz?

This young man had gone into business for himself and had done very well in a very short time—he was very successful and had lots of money.

I'll read you what Rayburn said happened:

“We talked for a bit about the implications of our faith in Christ for such a question as that and I left him with the counsel that, whatever he did, he must do it, in good conscience, out of loyalty to the Lord Jesus. Clearly there are wealthy Christians and well-to-do Christians, and there is no law in the Bible against owning and using expensive things. But the way the question was troubling this young man was the indication that his loyalty was being tested.

He failed that test and is today living in open rebellion against the Lord.”

3. The third application is to appropriate and **make use of all God has given you to pass the test**. The Lord doesn't give you tests you can't pass.

He gives you tests you can pass. Gives you all you need to pass.

1 Cor. 10:13

No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

Temptation, trial, test—it's all the same concept. God gives you all you need.
He provides you a way.

What did Saul have? He had his calling and anointing to office.
He had some great people in his life who were for him and who he could have
asked for help and encouragement—Samuel, uncle.
Later on this group of valiant Israelite men who rallied to him.
He had the promises of God fulfilled through these signs.
He had the presence and help of the Holy Spirit.

The Lord has given you the same things. You don't have miraculous signs.
But you do have providential signs. You've all experienced those.
Where something happens that reminds you God is with you, what he expects.
Certainly you have the help of your callings, and Christian friends,
and obviously the presence and help of the Holy Spirit.
One very specific way the Holy Spirit helps you pass the tests of faith is through
the Lord's Supper—which we are about to take. The elements have no power.
The benefit is all the work of the Holy Spirit through them as we take in faith.
He connects you to Jesus and gives you strength and joy to follow him.

So let me ask you: What test of faith are you facing?
No one stands still in spiritual things because the Lord always sends tests.
The tests of faith he sends you may concern your pride, or your purity,
or your money, or your time, or your worldliness, or your selfishness,
or your courage—as it was in Saul's case.
God will test you, count on it.

You are either passing them and getting better, flunking them and getting worse.
Saul is a warning to us that we do not want to be getting worse.
So come to the Table of the Lord for grace and help to pass your tests.