

“The Progress of Disobedience”

January 29, 2017

1 Samuel 15:1-35

SI: When Saul was anointed king of Israel, the Lord expected him to strike the first blow for the liberation of Israel from the Philistines.

He never did it. Eventually his son Jonathan struck the first blow.

The Lord honored that and gave Israel a victory.

But Saul’s failure to obey was a window into his heart.

Saul didn’t obey not just because he was afraid or cautious—

it was because he didn’t have living faith in God.

Faith without works is dead. Saul’s faith appeared to be dead.

So the Lord gave Saul one last chance to show that he did believe and that he would obey.

Through the prophet Samuel, Saul was given a specific task with specific instructions.

Would Saul’s trust in the Lord prove to be real? Let’s see.

INTRO: A few years ago there was an anti-drug abuse campaign that focused on meth.

It consisted of a series of mug shots of individuals that were taken at intervals over several years.

The first mug shot would be the first time the person was arrested for meth.

Then there was another photo a year or two later, and then another later.

And the last one would be 5 or 10 years down the road.

What these pictures showed was meth's effects on the appearance of these people.

They went from normal-looking and healthy to ravaged—gaunt, missing teeth, covered with sores and scabs.

It's a horrifying progression.

In each photo another line is crossed and finally, by the last one, the person looks beyond all hope.

As far as physical appearance, Saul was impressive.

He was a tall man—a head taller than anyone else.

He was handsome. People were drawn to him.

And the hope was that he would prove to be as impressive on the inside

as he was on the outside, and that his faith in God would grow stronger.

But what the story of Saul shows is the progressive downward slide of a faithless life. It shows the effects progressive disobedience takes on the heart of a person who does not know and trust the Lord.

We've seen Saul's faithlessness and disobedience over and over in 1 Samuel, but a line is finally crossed in this chapter.

The Lord says to Samuel: I am grieved that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and not carried out my instructions.

And then Samuel tells Saul:

Because you have rejected the word of the LORD,

He has rejected you as king.

Does that really happen? Does God really reject people?

That's a frightening thought, but even more sobering is the final picture of Saul in this chapter and where his disobedience leads him.

There are lots of beautiful things in the Old Testament—

The Old Testament is the story of God's grace—

his covenant with Abraham and Israel, his promise to send the Messiah.

That's the main reason we read the Old Testament,

because it gives us a foundation for understanding God's grace to us in Christ.

But there are also lots of ugly things in the Old Testament.

And we need to read it for those things too.

The Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11

that the bad things that happened to the Israelites because of their sins were recorded and written down for us, for Christians, as examples and warnings.

Those are Paul's exact words—examples and warnings.

Then Paul says:

So if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall.

When you see people in the OT falling, heed the example and warning.

Don't think it doesn't apply to you.

These examples and warnings are God's grace to us. We have to heed them.

So, let's look square in the face of Saul's progressive disobedience and the effects it had on his soul and take the example and warning to heart.

Three points:

We'll look at the rationale for disobedience, its excuses, and its confirmation.

Credit where credit is due: sermons by Dr. Robert Rayburn on chapter.

MP#1 The rationale for disobedience

Disobeying God always has a rationale.

Turning away from God's commandments never seems unreasonable to the person who disobeys. There will always seem to be good reasons not to obey.

It certainly appeared foolish to Saul to do what God commanded.

It's not clear why Saul spared Agag, the Amalekite king who God told him to kill.

Maybe he thought it was wise, as a king himself, to show deference to a king.

Maybe he thought it brought him honor to be so magnanimous.

But it's clear why he spared the best livestock and destroyed only the bad stuff.

There were lots of good arguments for that.

What a waste of good property.

Surely God doesn't want us to waste his resources.

Some of these animals can be used for sacrifice.

We'll be giving them as offerings for the worship of God.

It would be poor stewardship to destroy these animals.

The Amalekites took from Israel long ago, this just replaces that financial loss.

We aren't really gaining anything, just evening things up.

In the past God permitted Israel to take plunder in warfare, so it can't be bad now.

All of that is reasonable.

And it seemed especially reasonable to the men who were looking at all those flocks and herds and thinking about getting all that wealth for themselves.

But it took faith to know that not one of those reasons amounted to a hill of beans if God had commanded the destruction of the Amalekite flocks and herds.

We run into this all the time. There are always good reasons for disobedience.

A case can always be made for not obeying God.

If your parents wisely forbid you to do certain things—

they think it would expose you to temptations or be a waste of your time,

it's easy to raise arguments against your parents, isn't it?

Other Christian kids get to do this, even kids in our church.

You're making me a weirdo. You're making my life dull and uninteresting.

I'm old enough. I need this experience, part of my growing up.

And parents and grownups struggle in the very same ways.

We can always think of reasons not to obey the Lord.

We can always come up with an argument for not listening to his voice—

because doing what he says strikes us as unreasonable or too hard.
For many years of my young adult life, even all through seminary,
I rationalized not obeying the Lord about giving.
I put some money in the offering plate, but not anywhere near the tithe I knew he
was requiring of me. I never gave in a sacrificial way.
And I had a number of good financial reasons for not obeying.
Mostly how unwise it would be with our budget already so tight that time in life.
Like Saul, I was motivated by fear and caution about the future.

Samuel tells Saul that rebellion is like the sin of divination,
and arrogance like the evil of idolatry.

What does that mean? What is divination?

Divination is trying to discover the future through occult practices so that you can
then line up your plans in a way that brings you the greatest advantage.

You go to a seance and ask the spirits of the dead or you go to a fortune teller
and ask her to look into her crystal ball—Tell me what's going to happen.

The law of Moses explicitly prohibited the Israelites from doing that.

Why? Because using divination is saying that God's word is not sufficient for me.

I can't just obey him and trust he will keep his promises.

I can't trust God for the future.

Idolatry is the same thing, it's trusting things we can see instead of God himself.

The point is that when we disobey God, particularly when we disobey a specific
commandment that the Holy Spirit has challenge us with,
and when we do so because our sight and reason tells us we know better—
then that's not just disobedience, it's unbelief.

I don't believe God can take care of me and provide all my needs if I give the
tithes and offerings he commands in his word.

As I look into my crystal ball, I see for myself a much more reasonable path.

Only faith understands that obedience is absolutely necessary.

And no matter how difficult, or how scary—

no one will profit more from it than the one who trusts and obeys.

Every one of us, at one time or another, has reasoned our way to disobedience.

Usually, God gets our attention and we repent and start to obey.

But sometimes disobedience progresses beyond rationalization
and crosses another line.

That's what happened to Saul. Brings to second point . . .

MP#2 The excuses for disobedience

Sometimes after a person disobeys God, and it comes to light, he gets called on it—

perhaps by the church—he gives excuses to mitigate and lessen his guilt. That's what Saul did when Samuel confronted him. Gave three typical excuses.

1. The first excuse is to set your virtues over against your disobedience.

Look at all the good things I've done!

Saul wanted his failure to obey the Lord's command to be excused because of how he did everything else the Lord said to do.

I have carried out the Lord's instructions, he told Samuel.

Rayburn tells about a man who was once in their church who had some unethical business practices. When he was confronted about it, he was offended the church didn't pay enough attention to the good things he'd done.

He had provided jobs for some unemployed people in the church.

But God is never pleased when obedience in one thing is offered as an excuse for disobedience in another.

2. The second excuse is to blame others for your failure.

This has been a standard excuse since Adam in the Garden.

Adam, did you eat the fruit I told you not to eat?

That woman you gave me, she gave it to me. It wasn't my fault.

Saul said it was the soldiers' fault. They were the ones who spared the livestock. Husbands blame their wives for their own sins and vice-versa.

Children blame their parents, parents blame their children.

We defend ourselves with a passion. We accuse other people to defend ourselves.

We see it in public life all the time. But that's not the only place.

Many times I've heard people blame the church for this or that thing they've done.

If they've had a falling out with someone, if they have a critical spirit—it's the church's fault for not doing this or that for them.

3. The third excuse is to place a positive spin on your disobedience.

I may have done the wrong thing, but I did it for a noble reason.

Saul excuses his failure to destroy the Amalekite livestock by claiming they've saved the best animals in order to sacrifice them to God.

Which is clearly untrue, or at least highly exaggerated.

We make a harsh or unkind remark—it's speaking the truth in love.

We fail to share our faith when prompted by HS—casting pearls before swine.

We don't give offerings generously—it's being frugal with family budget.

Samuel was unimpressed with Saul's excuses.

And we should be quick to refuse to allow ourselves to use them either.

If you've disobeyed the Lord, it's your fault, no one else's.

No other obedience can make up for what you've failed to do.

There are no good reasons for doing what God forbids, failing what commands. Remember Jesus' description of judgment day.

Lord, did we not cast out demons in your name, perform many miracles?

Yes, you did, says Christ. But depart from me, I never knew you.

Not everyone who says Lord, Lord will enter heaven, he who does will of Father.

But the most effective way to demolish your excuses is preach the Gospel to self. An old Scottish Presbyterian once said:

“The most effectual inducement to obedience is a constant improvement of the blood of Christ by faith, and a sense of forgiveness kept on the soul.”

When you know you're forgiven because Jesus bled for you, and your Father in heaven loves you, then and only then, can you openly confess your sins and claim them without excuse and move toward obedience.

If we keep reading 1 and 2 Samuel, we come to the story of David.

David did some terrible things as king of Israel.

The difference between David and Saul does not lie in the fact that one disobeyed God and the other did not.

David disobeyed in ways that were just as inexcusable as Saul.

The case can be made David's disobedience far more destructive than Saul's. Thousands of Israelites died as a result of David's sin of numbering the people at the end of his reign—not to mention the business of Bathsheba and Uriah. And in both of those cases David certainly rationalized his disobedience.

But here's the difference: When David was caught he did not make excuses.

He confessed and he repented. The grace of God moved him admit his sin.

And in doing so he showed that disobedience was not his truest self.

Deep down in David's heart he loved God and trusted God and wanted to follow his commandments.

But deep down in Saul's heart, he didn't love and trust God.

So he hung on to his excuses and his disobedience progressed until it crossed another line. This is like the last photo on one of those meth posters—but it's played out on a man's soul.

Saul goes from rationale for disobedience, to excuses for disobedience to confirmation of disobedience. Our last point . . .

MP#3 The confirmation of disobedience

The Bible teaches in many places that if a person continues to rationalize and excuse his disobedience, if he continues to defy the Holy Spirit's call to repent and obey, and if he does that over weeks and months and years . . .

Then here's what can happen—

His heart becomes impervious to the influence of the word of God.

He becomes confirmed in his disobedience and moves beyond hope of salvation.

The English Puritan John Owen said that if a person delays and delays repentance then he can make himself “sermon proof and sickness proof.”

In other words, you come to the point where no sermons will move you toward God and life-threatening sickness won't either. You've made your heart impervious.

But doesn't the Bible say whosoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved?

And didn't the thief on cross repent and get forgiveness and heaven?

Yes, both of those things are absolutely true.

But it's also a fact that most people who have made a life's work of refusing to heed God's call don't repent. One thief repented, but don't forget that one did not.

After Samuel confronts Saul and after Saul gives his excuses,

Samuel gives him the message that God has rejected him.

Saul then seems to repent. He says the right things. I've sinned.

I've violated Lord's command. Forgive my sin and come back and worship.

But Samuel knew Saul's confession was insincere.

He reiterated the Lord's rejection of Saul and turned to go.

That's when Saul grabbed Samuel's robe and it tore and Samuel took the opportunity to say it a third time. God's tearing the kingdom from you.

What happens next is telling. When Saul realizes he's failed to convince Samuel with his high sounding confession, he offers a more candid one.

He no longer hides the fact that what he's really interested in is not forgiveness but saving face. Please come back with me so I'll be honored before elders.

He bargains with Samuel. You go back with me, I'll worship the Lord.

So Samuel goes, not because he has accepted Saul's terms, but because he's made it clear to Saul that he's not fooled by his insincere confession.

Samuel also goes back because he has some business of his own—

he has to execute Agag and know Saul can't be trusted to do that.

No doubt Saul was sorry for the troubles it caused him,

but he got out of it ok in the short run.

Samuel came back with him and to all the people, at least, Saul looked good.

But in Saul's heart things were not good, because he had crossed a line.

He became confirmed in his disobedience and the course of life set for hell.

There are a few times after this when Saul appears to repent.

He feels bad about some things he's done, but his heart never turns toward God.

The prophet Hosea spent years appealing to the Israelites to repent, return to God. But he realized at one point in his ministry that the window of opportunity had shut. Their deeds do not permit them to return to their God. A spirit of prostitution is in their heart; they do not acknowledge the LORD . . . When they go . . . to seek the LORD, they will not find him; he has withdrawn himself from them.

Or look at the picture in Revelation 9. The Lord has sent terrible disasters on world as foreshadowings and warnings of his judgment. Multitudes of have perished. But John writes that:

The rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands; they did not stop worshiping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood—idols that cannot see or hear or walk. Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic arts, their sexual immorality or their thefts.

By the time Saul was ready to say he was sorry for his sins, his heart so corrupt he couldn't say it sincerely. Couldn't even fake it well enough to fool Samuel. There is one time, and one time only for repentance.

There is one time for turning to God in faith and obedience and that time is now. The Devil will do his best to get you to think about what you should have done yesterday or what you might do tomorrow.

If he can keep your heart in the past or the future, then he's won.

Now is the time to repent and return to the Lord.

God's warnings are gracious.

God loves you and Jesus loves you and through the Word and Spirit they call you.

They call you to repent and trust and obey and to follow the path of life instead of the progressive downward spiral of disobedience.

Sin is an infection that can spread and render you deaf to the Lord's voice and powerless to respond to his call. So nip it in the bud. Don't let it take root.

And that takes both breaking off sins and taking up acts of obedience.

Where is the Lord calling you to do that today?