

Good morning, Moon Valley!

Today we continue our sermon series titled, □ “Making a Difference in a Nation Adrift.” It is a study through the book of 1 Samuel.

Our text for today is □ 1 Samuel chapter 15:1-35. This is a pivotal text from which we are going to learn an important lesson about how not to obey God’s word.

Here’s the big idea I draw from the text: □ Selective obedience to God is seductive and destructive.

That is to say, obeying God’s word only partially and not completely is tempting but harmful. In other words, picking some parts of God’s commands to obey and rejecting others can be an attractive delusion that leads to ruin. Put another way, treating God’s commands like a smorgasbord from which we can pick and choose can seem reasonable but can make us miserable.

The story in our text is going to flesh out this big idea. The story begins in □ 1 Samuel 15:1, where it says,

ESV 1 Samuel 15:1 And Samuel said to Saul, “The LORD sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore listen to the words of the LORD.”

Samuel reappears in this verse after having left Saul back in 1 Samuel 13:15. This encounter between Samuel and Saul did not necessarily occur immediately after fighting with the Philistines in chapter 14. In fact, it is reasonable to assume some time had passed.¹

¹ David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 388.

Samuel delivers to Saul an important message from the Lord himself. □ Verse 2 begins the message.

ESV 1 Samuel 15:2 “Thus says the LORD of hosts, ‘I have noted what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way when they came up out of Egypt.’”

□ “Amalek” is the name of Esau’s grandson, who had long been dead. The name is used here to refer to all the descendants of Amalek, also known as Amalekites. The Amalekites were an aggressive, nomadic people who ranged on the southern fringes of the Promised Land.

The Lord is harkening back to the exodus, when God liberated the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. As the Israelites journeyed from Egypt to Sinai, faint and weary (Deuteronomy 25:18), the Amalekites attacked the Israelites from behind without provocation (Exodus 17:8-16). With God’s help, the Israelites were able to defeat the Amalekites in that first battle, but a long period of unbroken hostility ensued.²

As recorded in □ Exodus 17:14, the Lord prophesied to Moses after the first battle, saying,

ESV Exodus 17:14 “. . . I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.”

Now, here in our text, the Lord, speaking through Samuel, is calling Saul to fulfill that prophecy. In □ verse 3, the Lord says to Saul,

ESV 1 Samuel 15:3 “Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.”

² Mattingly, Gerald L. “Amalek, Amalekites.” Edited by David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck. *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000.

This command to kill everything that breathes, including children and infants is not only deeply disturbing, but it also puts me in a preaching predicament. This is not the focal point of the story, but it has just become the focal point for many of you who are now wondering how a loving God could do such a horrible thing.

I feel compelled to somehow address this elephant in the room; otherwise, you may not be able to absorb anything else.

I am pretty sure I wouldn't be able to give a totally satisfying explanation for this no matter how much time I had. So, I certainly don't expect a little sermon side bar to answer all questions or remove all revulsion. But I do want to provide just enough perspective to enable you to get past your questions and revulsion to see the main point of the story as it unfolds.

I want to make five brief points.

First, divine commands for total annihilation like this one are confined to rare, isolated moments in Israel's history.³ This is not a biblical theme. It is not the norm in the Hebrew Scriptures, nor is it normative for Christians now. There is no justification for such a holy war today.⁴

The broader, oft-repeated theme of the Hebrew Scriptures is reflected in Psalm 86:15, where Saul's successor, David writes,

ESV Psalm 86:15 But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

³ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The God I Don't Understand* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 90-91.

⁴ Eugene H. Merrill in *Show Them No Mercy: Four Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, Stanley Gundry ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 85.

Second, the Amalekites were exceedingly wicked and deserved God's punishment. They not only attacked Israel without provocation, they also engaged in some heinous religious practices including prostituting children, exposing them to bestiality, and burning them to death as form of worship. Flutes and drums were played during child sacrifices to drown out the screaming of the children being burned to death.⁵

Third, God's command was not based on any notion of vicious self-interest or ethnic superiority. This is not a case of ethnic cleansing. On the contrary it is a case divine punishment operating through human agency.⁶

Fourth, God sometimes allows things he hates to accomplish a greater good. Hebrews 12:2 tells us that the Lord despised the shame of the cross; nevertheless, he allowed the violence of the crucifixion to provide salvation to the world.

Therefore, it is reasonable to think that God hated the thought of innocent infant casualties among the Amalekites, and yet he allowed their swift demise for a greater good, perhaps with the foreknowledge that they would be far better off in heaven with him forever than they would be growing up in that evil, dead-end culture.

It may also be that, in God's economy, the extermination of the Amalekites was the painful price of preserving Israel, from whom Jesus, the Savior of the world would eventually come.

Fifth and finally, Hebrews 1:3 tells us that Jesus "is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature." We need to remind ourselves that Jesus provides the clearest picture of what God is like, not some isolated incident in Hebrew history that we cannot fully

⁵ Dan Kimball, *How (Not) To Read the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), 277-278.

⁶ Wright, *The God I Don't Understand*, 92.

comprehend. God in the person of Jesus provides the best evidence that God is not an unloving moral monster.

Now, let's get back to the story in 1 Samuel 15. □ Verses 4 through 7 describe the build-up and the battle.

ESV 1 Samuel 15:4 So Saul summoned the people and numbered them in Telaim, two hundred thousand men on foot, and ten thousand men of Judah.

□ ESV 1 Samuel 15:5 And Saul came to the city of Amalek and lay in wait in the valley.

□ ESV 1 Samuel 15:6 Then Saul said to the Kenites, "Go, depart; go down from among the Amalekites, lest I destroy you with them. For you showed kindness to all the people of Israel when they came up out of Egypt." So the Kenites departed from among the Amalekites.

□ ESV 1 Samuel 15:7 And Saul defeated the Amalekites from Havilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt.

So, Saul does obey the Lord in defeating the Amalekites. But it is a selective obedience. Saul's obedience is partial, not complete, as evidenced in □ verses 8 and 9.

ESV 1 Samuel 15:8 And he took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive and devoted to destruction all the people with the edge of the sword.

□ ESV 1 Samuel 15:9 But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fattened calves and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them. All that was despised and worthless they devoted to destruction.

Saul does not utterly destroy all that breathes among the Amalekites. Instead, he spares Agag and some of their best livestock.

In sparing Agag, Saul may have been following a common practice in the ancient Near east for a victorious king to make a slave of the defeated king as a trophy of his triumph.⁷

But God is not happy about this selective obedience, and he communicates his displeasure to Samuel in □ verses 10 and 11.

ESV 1 Samuel 15:10 The word of the LORD came to Samuel: 11 “I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments.” . . .

The original Hebrew word translated “regret” has several possible meanings. It can mean to change one’s mind, as in “I thought it was a good idea at the time, but now I see it was a mistake that I regret.” It can also describe having pity or compassion. And it can also simply describe the experience of sorrow or heartache, and that is how it is used here.⁸ It is not that God feels like he made a mistake or didn’t see this coming. The Lord is simply heartbroken over the selective obedience of Saul.

Samuel’s response is not favorable either. The last part of □ verse 11 explains,

ESV 1 Samuel 15:11 . . . And Samuel was angry, and he cried to the LORD all night.

⁷ Bill T. Arnold, *1 & 2 Samuel, The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 220.

⁸ *ESV Study Bible*, note for 1 Samuel 15:29.

In the morning, a sleep-deprived Samuel goes to confront Saul, but discovers something else that likely stoked his anger, as recorded in □ verse 12.

ESV 1 Samuel 15:12 And Samuel rose early to meet Saul in the morning. And it was told Samuel, “Saul came to Carmel, and behold, he set up a monument for himself and turned and passed on and went down to Gilgal.”

Saul builds a monument to himself. This, added to keeping Agag as a trophy, suggests that Saul is preening with pridefulness. He is Mr. Big.

When Samuel catches up with Saul, I imagine Saul notices a less-than-congenial look on Samuel’s face. The king preemptively asserts his innocence, suggesting he knows he is about to be called on the carpet. □ Verse 13 explains.

ESV 1 Samuel 15:13 And Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, “Blessed be you to the LORD. I have performed the commandment of the LORD.”

Samuel immediately deflates Saul’s puffery in □ verse 14.

ESV 1 Samuel 15:14 And Samuel said, “What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear?”

Saul blames the selective obedience on the people. Notice all the pronouns in □ verse 15, which are telling.

ESV 1 Samuel 15:15 Saul said, “**They** have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the LORD **your** God, and the rest **we** have devoted to destruction.”

Through the use of the pronoun, “we,” Saul counts himself among those who destroyed the livestock in obedience to God. Through the use of the pronoun, “they,” he excludes himself from those who spared some livestock in disobedience to God. And through the use of the pronoun, “your,” he distances himself from his own responsibility to God.⁹

Beyond the pronoun play, Saul defends the selective obedience by offering the lame excuse that the best of the livestock were spared so that they could be sacrificed to God.

Samuel sees through Saul’s bovine scatology and calls him on it in □ verses 16 through 19.

ESV 1 Samuel 15:16 Then Samuel said to Saul, “Stop! I will tell you what the LORD said to me this night.” And he said to him, “Speak.”

□ ESV 1 Samuel 15:17 And Samuel said, “Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? The LORD anointed you king over Israel.”

□ ESV 1 Samuel 15:18 “And the LORD sent you on a mission and said, ‘Go, devote to destruction the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are consumed.’”

□ ESV 1 Samuel 15:19 “Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD? Why did you pounce on the spoil and do what was evil in the sight of the LORD?”

⁹ Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, 398-399.

Samuel is inviting a confession and repentance. Instead, he gets a rehash of the same excuses in □ verses 20 and 21.

ESV 1 Samuel 15:20 And Saul said to Samuel, “I have obeyed the voice of the LORD. I have gone on the mission on which the LORD sent me. I have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and I have devoted the Amalekites to destruction.”

□ ESV 1 Samuel 15:21 “But the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the best of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the LORD your God in Gilgal.”

Even if we assume Saul is telling the whole truth about intending to sacrifice all the spared animals to the Lord—a dubious assumption—it does not change the sinfulness of Saul’s selective obedience. Samuel begins to explain this in □ verse 22, saying,

ESV 1 Samuel 15:22 And Samuel said, “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.”

Religious ritual is no substitute for full obedience. You can’t make up for selective obedience by trying to buy off God. The Lord wants our obedience far more than sacrifices.

In □ verse 23, Samuel says something that I have read right over for years, not fully realizing the significance of it. He says,

ESV 1 Samuel 15:23 “For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king.”

The parallelism of this verse suggests that the selective obedience of Saul is an act of rebellion and presumption. The original Hebrew word behind “rebellion” is a strong term that usually describes a revolt against or a willful disobedience toward God.¹⁰ The original Hebrew word translated “presumption” can carry the idea of arrogance and some translations render it that way.¹¹

Samuel draws a sobering comparison. In this verse, he says that the selective obedience of Saul is not only an act of rebellion and arrogance, it is furthermore as bad as □ “divination.” “Divination” is like witchcraft or sorcery, and is strictly prohibited in the Mosaic Law, which describes it as an abomination to the Lord (Deut. 18:10-14). At the root of divination is putting something else in the rightful place of God as an authoritative source of direction.

Moreover, Samuel says selective obedience is as bad as □ “iniquity” and “idolatry.” These two terms come as a pair. “Iniquity” is the trouble that leads to “idolatry.”¹² Idolatry and divination spring from the same root that puts something or someone else in the rightful place of God.

In Saul’s case, he has arrogantly put himself in the place of God, deciding for himself what ought to be done, overriding God’s word. That is a form of idolatry. Saul has deified himself.

It is likely that Saul did not think of his selective obedience as an act of rebellion and arrogance and idolatry. After all, he *partially* obeyed. He might even argue that he *largely* obeyed. He killed off every Amalekite except Agag.

¹⁰ Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (TWOT).

¹¹ The NIV for example.

¹² TWOT.

But therein lies the seductiveness of selective obedience. It doesn't seem so bad. We rationalize that it's not that big of a deal.

In verse 23, Samuel boils it down to this for Saul: □ “you have rejected the word of the Lord.”

By now, I hope you are getting the impression that Samuel is not soft-pedaling this. Don't be seduced into thinking selective obedience is no big deal. It is a rebellious, arrogant, idolatrous rejection of the Lord.

The gravity of this begins to dawn on Saul as the story unfolds, continuing in □ verse 24.

ESV 1 Samuel 15:24 Saul said to Samuel, “I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the LORD and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice.”

Saul confesses a common fear that often fuels selective obedience: □ “I feared the people.”

Which raises the question: What does Saul have to fear from the people? After all, he is their king.

I suspect Saul fears being unloved. He fears being rejected. He fears being unpopular. He fears these things more than he fears God. So, he tries to ingratiate himself with the people by letting them keep the best of the Amalekite livestock for themselves. I can imagine Saul saying something like, “Hey, I know you boys have been fighting hard, so take the best of the spoil for yourselves. You've earned it.” Saul selectively obeys God in the hope that other people will love him for it.

But now Saul begins to see the severity of his selective obedience, or at least it dawns on him how destructive the consequences could be for him. The story continues to unfold in □ verse 25 and following.

ESV 1 Samuel 15:25 “Now therefore, please pardon my sin and return with me that I may bow before the LORD.”

□ ESV 1 Samuel 15:26 And 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.”

□ ESV 1 Samuel 15:27 As Samuel turned to go away, Saul seized the skirt of his robe, and it tore.

□ ESV 1 Samuel 15:28 And Samuel said to him, “The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you.”

□ ESV 1 Samuel 15:29 “And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret.”

You may be wondering, “Wait a minute. This says God doesn’t have regret, but back in verse 11, it says God does regret. Isn’t this a contradiction?”

Remember, I said that the original Hebrew term translated “regret” has various meanings. Back in verse 11, God regrets making Saul king in the sense that he is heartbroken about what Saul has done. Here in verse 29, it says God does not have regret in the sense of changing his mind. Samuel is saying here that the Lord’s decision to reject Saul as king is final and unchangeable.

And by the way, the “neighbor” to whom the kingdom will be given is David.

Saul continues to plead with Samuel to return with him to the people, probably so that he can save face. Samuel relents, if only to finish the job Saul failed to do. □ Verses 30 through 35 round out the story.

ESV 1 Samuel 15:30 Then he said, “I have sinned; yet honor me now before the elders of my people and before Israel, and return with me, that I may bow before the LORD your God.”

□ ESV 1 Samuel 15:31 So Samuel turned back after Saul, and Saul bowed before the LORD. 32 Then Samuel said, “Bring here to me Agag the king of the Amalekites.” And Agag came to him cheerfully. Agag said, “Surely the bitterness of death is past.”

□ ESV 1 Samuel 15:33 And Samuel said, “As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women.” And Samuel hacked Agag to pieces before the LORD in Gilgal.

□ ESV 1 Samuel 15:34 Then Samuel went to Ramah, and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul.

□ ESV 1 Samuel 15:35 And Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel.

This brings us back to the big idea: □ Selective obedience to God is seductive and destructive.

Saul was seduced into selective obedience, and it cost him his kingship, and his reputation, and his peace of mind. And it damaged the trust and future of his own son Jonathan, who would have been a great king. But

he never got the chance, because Saul forfeited the throne not only for himself, but also for all his descendants.

In what way might you and I be selectively obedient today? It is not so much about keeping track of percentages as it is about keeping track of our hearts before God.

With selective obedience, it is not the percentage that is bad. It is the underlying idolatry. It is putting ourselves in God's rightful place because we think we have a better idea about what is good for us and others.

We reason, "I know this thing I am tempted to do is not right before God, but if I don't do it, I am afraid I will lose my relationship. Or I will lose my job. Or I will lose out on happiness. Or I will lose my reputation. Or I will lose control. Or I will lose financial security. Or I will lose the approval of my tribe. And besides, this thing I am tempted to do is not that big of a deal. I am obedient to God in most other things."

The story of Saul reminds us of the truth. Selective obedience to God is seductive and destructive.

Let's pray. Lord, help us to avoid being seduced by selective obedience. Examine and refine our hearts that we may be fully surrendered to you. Amen.