

BaptistWay Press® Premium Commentary

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Studies in Character and the Crown (1 Samuel)

Lesson Six

Obedience is Better than Sacrifice

Focal Text

1 Samuel 15

Background

1 Samuel 15

Main Idea

Saul's disobedience grieved God and cost him the crown.

Question to Explore

How do we try to justify our disobedience of God?

Quick Read

Instead of obeying God's directive, Saul chose to follow his warped interpretation of the command and fell into great sin.

Introduction

Stanley Milgram's parents came to the United States as Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe during World War I. They settled in New York City. He was a teenager when some members of the extended family who were Holocaust survivors came to live with them after World War II. He saw their tattoos and heard their stories. He wondered why people would obey commands and do such horrible things.

Milgram became one of the most influential figures of the twentieth century in the field of social psychology. He is most noted for his controversial "obedience-to-authority" experiments of the early 1960s. His Jewish identity coupled with his focus on the Holocaust led to this interest.

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Milgram used two persons in the experimental process. The “teacher” was told that the research was a study of the effects of punishment on learning. The teacher’s task was to help the “learner” in the next room to memorize a list of adjective-noun word pairs. When the learner made a mistake, the teacher gave him an electric shock from a machine on the panel before him. The learner’s additional mistakes earned progressively stronger electric shocks. As the intensity of the shocks grew, the learner reacted with desperate screams until he ultimately fell silent and refused to give any more answers.

Part of the controversy surrounding this experimentation by Milgram were ethical in nature. The teacher was deceived in that the research did not study the effects of punishment on learners; rather, it was a study of obedience to authority. The electric shock machine was a “prop” giving no actual shocks to the learner who faked being in pain through desperate, pitiful screams.

Milgram found that about two-thirds of the “teachers” were fully obedient to the authority of the experimenter and continued punishing wrong answers to the maximum shock level. In other words, they were obedient to authority though they believed they were causing great pain to the learner.

Milgram discovered several reasons why the teacher gave less shock to the learner than the experimenter demanded, thus disobeying the authority. One of them had to do with the relational distance between the authoritarian figure and the teacher. The stronger the relationship that the teacher felt with the experimenter, the more fully he obeyed the experimenter’s authority.

The closer we feel in our relationship to Christ, the stronger will be our obedience to the authority of God upon our lives. Did King Saul have a close enough relationship to God to obey fully God’s commands?

Commentary

The words of Yogi Berra, “like déjà vu, all over again,” could be applied to 1 Samuel 15. This chapter has so much in common with chapter 13. They both relate the story of a time when Saul was disobedient to God, was summoned to accountability by Samuel, and received God’s judgment upon his disobedience. In chapter 13 Saul lost the privilege to be the founder of a dynasty, and here he lost the privilege of being the recognized leader or king of God’s people.

God’s Command to Saul through Samuel (15:1-3)

Samuel reminded Saul of the authority to whom he is accountable. Samuel is part of that authority. Samuel was the one whom Yahweh instructed to anoint Saul to be king. The pronoun “I” (15:1) gets the emphasis by its position in the sentence. God used Samuel (and no other) to carry out this act.

As a prophet, Samuel communicated God's words to Saul. "The message from the LORD" (15:1) is literally, "the voice of Yahweh's words." Samuel was the spokesperson for Yahweh; therefore, Saul should respond to the authority of God (and Samuel) with complete obedience.

"Listen" (15:1) is the key verb in this chapter, occurring seven times. The root of this verb occurs almost 1,200 times in the Old Testament. It has the wide semantic range of hearing, listening to, understanding, or obeying someone. Here four English words are used to translate this verb *shama`*, the word upon which Samuel's name is built. These terms are "listen" (15:1); "hear" (15:14); "obey, obeying" (15:19, 20, 22 [twice]); and "gave in" (15:24).

The specific instructions to be obeyed regarded a people group called the "Amalekites" (15:2). The Amalekites descended from Jacob's brother Esau (Genesis 36:12). They were a nomadic group of people roaming an area south and southeast of the Israelites.

The Amalekites attacked the Israelites shortly after God's deliverance of his people from Egyptian slavery (Exodus 17:8-16). At that time God declared that he would punish them for this attack upon his people. God, through Moses, reminded his people of this intent (Deuteronomy 25:17-19). The Amalekites were among the people most despised by the Israelites. God commanded Saul to fulfill God's promise to punish and destroy the Amalekites. The language of God's command is that of a specialized form of divine punishment that God initiated toward any people group that threatened the existence of his chosen people.

"Holy War" is used to describe this special form of divine punishment, although that phrase never occurs in the Old Testament. Holy War defined times when God supernaturally intervened and fought in behalf of his people, the Israelites. God did this especially with regard to the entry of his people into the land that he promised them.

God utilized this form of punishment within certain restrictions and regulations that he established. God declared the war when necessary. He fought the war; therefore, he demanded to receive all the spoils of war. At the conclusion of Holy War, the Israelites were commanded to offer up the conquered enemy and all their possessions to God by destroying the property and killing the people.

"Totally destroy" (15:3) is the technical term for this dedication of people and property to the Lord through their destruction. It occurs eight times in this chapter. The original meaning of this verb is to consecrate or to make sacred, devoted to Yahweh.

The practice of Holy War ended during the period of the kings, but the theology of it continued in prophetic circles. This theology becomes the basis of the concept of our spiritual warfare in the New Testament (Ephesians 6:10-17).

Saul's Disobedience of the Command (15:4-9)

Saul listened to the authority of the command of God delivered through Samuel, and he began to obey. He secured a fighting force and met with them at “Telaim” (15:4), possibly “Telem” (Joshua 15:24) in southern Judah. The numbers seem to be excessive since previously he had gathered 3,000 men and then fought the Philistines with 600 (1 Sam. 13:2, 15). Later David fought the Amalekites with only 400 men (1 Sam. 30:9-10). Men from Judah were listed separately since their territory was closest to the nomadic people.

Saul did a commendable thing in giving an advance notice to the Kenites, another nomadic group (15:6), about the coming battle. They were metalworkers and historically enjoyed a close relationship with the Israelites. Saul then obeyed the command of God to attack the Amalekites (15:7). The victory was a complete one. He pushed the Amalekites far away from his southern border.

He also obeyed the command of God to “totally destroy” the enemy as per the regulations of Holy War (15:8). This latter obedience, however, was not a fully compliant one. Saul did not include “Agag” the king of the Amalekites (15:8, 9) in the dedication to God. Why did Saul keep Agag alive? Did Saul want to put Agag on display and use him as a trophy or monument to his great victory?

In addition to sparing the life of Agag, Saul also kept the choicest of the captured animals for his own use, while putting to death and thereby offering to God the “despised and weak” of the animals (15:9). What would make Saul decide to disobey God and keep these things for himself? Milgram’s experimentation suggested that it is about personal relationship.

Parents must establish behavior boundaries for their children. That is a necessity. In addition to determining rules or regulations to follow, however, parents must also be establishing a personal relationship with their children. When they are not in our presence, the best influence that parents have on our teenage and young adult children is the strength of the relationship that we have built with them, not our rules and regulations. It is harder to disobey a parent when one feels that it is a betrayal of the relationship rather than simply a breaking of a rule.

Saul's “Explanation” for his Disobedience (15:10-21)

The second word that Samuel received from God was abrupt and shattering, completely changing everything (15:10). God was “grieved” over what Saul had done (15:11, 35). This Hebrew verb can denote “to be sorry,” “to be consoled or comforted,” “to suffer pain,” or “to change one’s mind.” When God is the subject, it describes the emotional anguish within God as a response to human sinfulness. He responds to our disobedience not as an angry tyrant but as a grieving parent.

Saul's disobedience coupled with God's grieving over Saul made Samuel angry. He vented his frustration with Saul to God all night long (15:11). Then he went to confront Saul. "Carmel" (15:12) is not the better-known mountain location on the Mediterranean Sea where Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18). It was a village of Judah (Josh. 15:55; 1 Sam. 25). It was possibly the first place Saul passed through on his return from fighting the Amalekites. He stopped there and set up a self-serving monument to himself.

Samuel caught up with Saul at Gilgal (15:12). The irony is striking. Gilgal was the place where the people confirmed Saul as their king (11:14-15) and also the place where Samuel confronted Saul when he wrongly offered a sacrifice to God (13:7-15). Although God was grieved, and Samuel was angry, Saul was in a cheerful mood. He declared that he had fully obeyed the command or instructions of God (15:13), contradicting what God already knew. Samuel shattered Saul's delusional world with a rhetorical question dripping with sarcasm (15:14). The narrator used that verb *shama`* to report that Saul had not listened/heard/obeyed (15:1), but Samuel listened/heard (15:14).

Saul could not deny the presence of animals still alive, but he did provide his own set of "facts" to explain their presence. He asserted that they did destroy many animals, but "the soldiers" (not himself) kept some of the animals so they could subsequently offer them as sacrifices to God (15:15). This temporary sparing of animals from the "total destruction" dedication to God to sacrifice them later was of course not permitted by the principles of Holy War. The language of "the LORD your God" (15:15) instead of "our God" may be evidence of Saul's feeling some relational distance from God.

Samuel could not stand Saul's bold denial and interrupted him (15:16). Samuel serves in the parental role to the "child" Saul. When children intentionally disobey their parents in a significant way, the parents remind them of what all they have done for them. Then the parents ask, "How could you do such a thing to us?" Samuel reminded Saul of the position that God had placed him in, and the trust of this assignment given to him, and wondered how Saul could respond with disobedience (15:17-18). He announced an indictment of his action through three questions (15:19).

Samuel was assertive in this confrontation, but Saul responded with an aggressiveness of his own. He did not budge from his denial that he had disobeyed God. He was completely innocent, although again he accused his soldiers of taking the animals alive to sacrifice them to God (15:20-21).

God's Rejection of Saul for his Disobedience (15:22-31)

The literary form of Samuel's reply is poetry, a form the prophets of Yahweh regularly used in proclaiming his words to Israel and Judah. Samuel replied to Saul with another judgment speech. The indictment part of the judgment speech revealed how serious the sin of disobedience was. It is grouped with the sins of idolatry and seeking guidance from other gods (15:23).

While disobedience is linked to detestable things in the sight of God, obedience is evaluated as superior to offering sacrifice (15:22). Samuel does not denigrate the act of offering sacrifice, for that act itself was a gift of God to Israel and a way for them to establish communion with him. Having said that, obedience to God is “better than sacrifice” (15:22) because it is the free choice of the human will rather than conformity to a ritual law. Other prophets consistently expressed this same sentiment (Isaiah 1:10-13; Amos 5:21-24; Hosea 6:6; Micah 6:6-8).

The punishment for Saul’s sin of disobedience was a stern one. “Rejected” (1 Sam. 15:23) is the opposite word to “chosen.” God had chosen Saul to be the first king of Israel. God now rejected him as king or declared that this position would be taken from him. Rejection has now come full circle. The people had rejected God as king in favor of an earthly king (8:7), but that earthly king rejected God, and consequently God rejected the king (15:23).

Saul confessed his sin to Samuel. It was the sin of disobedience against God and Samuel. Saul “gave in” to the people (15:24, *shama`*). The reader may be skeptical about whether this was a genuine confession expressed by Saul. Saul may have expressed confession without the necessary attitude of repentance. Samuel seemed to think that was the case.

He refused to accompany Saul and repeated God’s punishment (15:26). Saul was not pleased with Samuel’s decision to leave. Saul must have made a strong, aggressive move to stop Samuel from leaving. This violent act of ripping or tearing Samuel’s cloak (15:27) became a symbolic act of God’s tearing the kingdom away from Saul (15:28).

The respected Old Testament interpreter Walter Brueggemann asserts that 1 Samuel 15:29 is a very important theological statement. This verse declares the truthfulness and steadiness of Yahweh, the God of Israel. He goes on to say that this verse, along with verse 11 and verse 35 is the place to begin the conversation in biblical theology about the sovereign will of God. “Change his mind” (15:29) translates the same verb that the writer used to describe God as being “grieved” (15:10, 35).

The emphasis is on the character of God in contrast to human character. That is the sense of calling God “the Glory of Israel” (15:29). While the Old Testament has much to say about the glory of God, this is the only verse in which this phrase occurs. While we are not dependable or trustworthy at times, God always relates to his creation in a faithful way, loyal to us. At the same time, our dependable God sometimes adjusts or adapts his saving purpose in response to human sinfulness.

Saul again confessed his sins to Samuel and again qualified it with a request (15:30). The prophet of the God, who does not change his mind, changed his mind and went back to central Israel with Saul. Saul fulfilled his desire to worship God (15:31).

God's Grief over Saul's Disobedience (15:32-35)

In these closing verses we see evidence of the complexity of both the personality of Samuel and the character of Yahweh.

Samuel the prophet faithfully carried out the instructions of God. He did what God commanded Saul to do by finishing the dedication component of Holy War. The putting to death of Agag was a religious act. The terminology suggests a sacrificial act like butchering that was done “before the LORD” at the sanctuary in Gilgal (15:33). It was not the killing of an innocent man (15:32).

God had rejected Saul. Samuel, too, was done with Saul. Saul and Samuel went to their respective home towns, and Samuel never sought Saul again to deliver a word from God to him (15:35). This book only records two other brief encounters that Samuel had with Saul, and both were at the initiative of Saul (1 Sam. 19:23-24; 28).

As the relationship between king and prophet/priest drew to a close, Samuel was not angry with Saul; rather, he was very sad. “Mourned for him” (15:35) is the language of sorrow expressed when death occurs.

Saul's failure took its toll on God as well. God's character demanded that Saul should be punished for his rebellion against God. Saul, through his disobedience, had disqualified himself to be the special representative of God to God's people.

The final assertion of the story is that Saul's failure that resulted in judgment produced a pain and anguish within God. “Grieved” (15:35) is that special word the Old Testament uses to describe the turmoil in God when he responds to human sinfulness. The fact that God grieved over the choice of Saul to be king does not mean that God realized that he had made a mistake in choosing Saul. He did not make a mistake. Saul was responsible for his own failure as king.

This grief or anguish within God never denotes the end of God's work or purpose; rather, it produces a hinge moment or a possibility of a new work of God. When God grieved over the wickedness of his creation and determined to destroy it in a flood (Gen. 6:6-7), he determined to “re-create” a new humanity after that judgment (Noah as a new Adam). God is not finished here either. He will choose someone new to become Israel's king, none other than a young boy from Bethlehem.

Conclusion

“Partial” is an adjective that means “not fully done or completed.” A partial hip replacement surgery replaces the ball of the hip joint but not the socket. A partial settlement is agreed to when all the legal issues are not able to be settled between the two parties. You may get partial credit for an assignment if you put forth some effort but fall considerably short of the assignment specifications. A partial mastectomy (lumpectomy) does not remove the entire breast.

Partial obedience to God is not when one says to God, “Absolutely not. I will not do what I believe you want me to do.” Partial obedience is when one follows the pattern of Saul in 1 Samuel 15. He accepted the assignment from God and then made his own decision about doing “some” of the things God wanted him to do but not all of them. Another word for partial obedience is *disobedience*.

Meet the Writer: Dr. Ron Lyles

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