

1 Samuel 15:10-35: Ninety-Nine Obedience is Witchcraft

I titled my sermon this morning “Ninety-nine percent obedience is witchcraft.” That might sound humorous, but it really sums up the entire passage and ties in what is probably the most memorable part of this chapter where Samuel tells Saul he is practicing witchcraft.

As you know, Saul was given a command by God to completely wipe out the Amalekites. **Vs. 3** says “to devote them to destruction.” Interestingly, that phrase is usually used in relation to bringing an offering to God. An OT person hearing that language would be reminded that that’s what they did when they brought an animal to God at the Tabernacle. They would take the best of their flock and they would devote it to destruction before the Lord. That’s what Saul was to do to the Amalakites. This is was as much an act of vengeance on behalf of God as it was worship to God.

But here, Saul does just the opposite. He keeps the very best for himself. The king is alive, the good spoil is all his, and he devotes all the worthless stuff to destruction. The worthless stuff was probably 99% of everything the Amalakites had. The people and the warriors were mostly destroyed. Their small or lame or sick cattle and herds were destroyed.

By all accounts Saul had an amazing victory over the Amalakites. We’d look at the situation and there would be no doubt in our mind that Saul crushed them with overwhelming force.

And this is where the deceitfulness of sin comes in. From the outside Saul was victorious and obedient. But we know better. We actually know that he was flagrantly and intentionally disobedient. And the worst part was he knew it. And he tried to pawn off his disobedience as obedience. You know what Saul’s doing? He’s trying to manipulate God. He’s trying to manipulate Samuel. He’s trying to have his cake and eat it too.

We all struggle with this to some extent. Where we are being mostly obedient in a situation - maybe even 99% obedient - but deep down inside we know we’re out of bounds. We know we are transgressing the Lord’s commands. We can make all the excuses and comparisons to others we want. We can try to convince them of the vastness of our obedience. But in reality it’s that last 1% that truly rules our heart.

We’re like the rich young ruler who had kept all the commands of the Lord blamelessly from his youth. There was nothing you could pin on him. But when Jesus - the God of the universe - tells him to go sell everything, give it to the poor, and follow him the man goes away sad (**Matt. 19:16-30**). He had been obedient in everything - except greed. He wasn’t really worshipping God, he was worshipping trinkets. That’s 99% obedience and Jesus says he’s not in the Kingdom of heaven.

As I mentioned we all struggle with this to some extent. But for some this is all-pervasive. This is the continuous cry of their life: “I am 99% faithful and so I am good to go!” When all along they know what really rules their heart. It is manipulation, it comparison, it is diversion. And what it amounts to is appearing just godly enough in order to still worship some other god.

But the Lord Jesus calls us to love him with **all** of our heart and soul and mind and strength. (**Matt. 22:37**)

We are called to crucify our sinful desires daily. (**Matt. 16:24**)

We are called to mortify - execute - the flesh. (**Col. 3:5**)

And anything that gets in the way of that has to go. Saul was a manipulator; a game-player. He wanted others to think he truly followed the Lord, but it was all just a ruse. I want to look. What were his tactics? How did he try to manipulate Samuel into thinking he was sincere and obedient? I want to look at Saul’s attempt to put on a show.

1) They do just enough where obedience might seem arguable.

Manipulators aren’t dumb. Sometimes they’re lazy. But a lot of times they are opportunists. They do just enough to make an argument that they’ve been faithful.

That's what's happened here. Saul has accomplished just enough where he's going to make an argument that he's actually been faithful. He's gone to war, he's travelled far, there's no doubt that something has been accomplished - maybe even good things. But not the objective.

It's like when you tell your kids to go clean their room - 100% clean. And they come and proclaim to you: It is finished! And you go into the room and clothes are picked up off the floor, But the bed isn't made - "you didn't tell me to make my bed." Clothes are bulging out of the drawer - "you just said pick up my room." The hamper is piled high - "you didn't say do the laundry."

Maybe technically all those things are true - there's an argument that could be made there. But everybody knows it's nonsense. And, by the way, that's probably an indicator of manipulation: When someone starts a sentence with "Technically..." Because what they're doing is acknowledging that they knew what was required, but think there's some sort of wiggle room out of it.

You know what true obedience is? It's where no one can argue that what has been done is total and complete faithfulness. It's where you tell your kid to go clean their room and they thoroughly clean it, vacuum it, and do the windows.

I'm not trying to pick on kids here. My point is really just that true, God-honoring obedience isn't just trying to do the minimum. It's not doing what could arguably be called obedience. It's going above and beyond the call of duty in an effort to please the Lord in everything we do. Where obedience is not arguable. It's incontrovertible. It's obvious to everyone. Most importantly, it's obvious to the Lord.

2) They lie about what faithfulness is. Read 10-14

Saul was instructed to go completely annihilate the Amalekites. Destroy every last one of them including their cattle, herds, camels. Everything was to be destroyed. The command could not have been more clear. There was no wiggle room, no area of argumentation. It was utter destruction.

And upon seeing Samuel, Saul declares: "Hey, I obeyed what you said!" What's he doing? He's lying. Lying, of course, is the gold standard for all manipulators. It is withholding information necessary for the truth or telling information that is not reality. You can't even really manipulate a situation unless you control the information - or lack of information - another person receives.

Actually, that's what the word manipulate means: Manipulate means to control or influence someone cleverly or unfairly.

We're all guilty of this on some level. We've hidden information, skirted the truth. We know what we've done. That's lying.

A lot of times we call these "half truths." But half truths are really full lies because the truth is still not known and usually the most important information is what is left out. And actually the manipulation of a half truth is what makes them all the more disgusting and reprehensible. It is an intentional distortion of reality.

That's what Saul is doing. "I've been faithful." No you haven't. And you know it. He'll confess later in **Vs. 24** that he obeyed the voice of the people knowing that what he was wrong. This is a blatant lie that manipulators do all the time. "I've been faithful!" No, you haven't.

We knew some parents who had an adopted child who had an attachment disorder and a proclivity to play games and manipulate. They would give him a command and have him repeat it that way he couldn't argue ignorance. One time they were driving up to the house and they told him to bring the garbage can in before coming inside, and he acknowledged it. But he didn't do it; when he got out of the car he claimed he didn't know what their command was. For 3 days they had him sit outside all day long while he tried to remember what it was they told him. On day 3 he walked over to the garbage can, wheeled it in, came inside and said, "I did what you told me."

He knew all along. We know all along. But this is the spouse who spends money when they know they shouldn't. This is the employee who knows what their boss wants them to do but rejects it because they

“misunderstood” or “it was confusing.” No it wasn’t, and you know it. Don’t lie about the agreement. Don’t change the definition of faithfulness.

3) Huge: Blatant disobedience is twisted to seem like obedience. Read 14-15

This is a deep level of depravity and the gist is: I had to sin in order to obey. Or; I sinned so that a greater good could come.

Can I tell you something? You cannot worship the Lord through sinful means.

When I was in Bible college, every year the bookstore would lose at least one study Bible to theft. Can you imagine that? “I want to learn more about God, so I’m going to swipe this really nice Bible to do my morning devotions.”

That’s exactly what Saul is saying. “Hey we kept the best of the animals so we could sacrifice to Yahweh!” I disobeyed because I wanted to worship God! I want to give him presents! That’s like saying “I robbed the bank so I could tithe money to the church.” It’s foolishness.

But this is what manipulators do. There’s always some excuse for unfaithfulness. Some justification. Some way that their sin makes possible God being glorified. The ends are supposedly justified by the means. Their sin turns into a good thing for God!

But that’s not possible. They are like those of **Isa. 5** who call good evil, and evil good. Light for darkness and darkness for light. Sweet for bitter and bitter for sweet.

They ignore their sin, excuse their sin, justify their sin, compare their sin to others. “It’s not as bad as this.” “Well you do this.” No sorrow. No sadness. No repentance. Even when they do admit it was sin it’s almost like a “Well, I guess you’re right. You got me there.” Like they’re in mental checkmate rather than in humble sorrow.

That’s why Samuel has had enough. He says “Stop!” Stop it. Saul is a grown man. He’s a king and he’s just playing games.

4) Manipulators will use every excuse they can think of. Read 17-21

This is now the 3rd time Saul claims innocence. Not a shred of remorse or regret. And he takes no responsibility for his actions.

We see this in politics all the time: I didn’t do it, I didn’t do it, I didn’t do it. Well, I did do it, but it wasn’t that bad and they made me do it. And others have done it too.

There’s always some excuse. There’s always some reason given for lack of faithfulness.

True repentance is when people stop blaming others. Your wife didn’t cause you to sin. She didn’t cause you blow up in anger. She didn’t cause you to be unfaithful. She didn’t cause you to mismanage your household.

Your husband didn’t cause you go behind his back. Your husband didn’t cause stretch the truth. Your husband didn’t cause you disrespect him.

This is what manipulators want. They want to sin and not be guilty. They want a free pass out of their iniquity.

In fact, manipulators will often claim even a little responsibility. “I shouldn’t have done this...but so and so...” There’s always some other person or situation to blame.

True repentance begins with radically owning our sin. “Not only did I do it, the situation is far worse than what you might think.”

5) Rebellion to the Lord is really witchcraft - or idolatry. Read 22-23

This is one of the most memorable passages in the entire book of 1 Samuel. It is a poem of judgement. The poem itself is worthy of a fair amount of consideration because of its pattern and form and logical flow. But so that we don't get too bogged down, all we need to know is that it is a poem of judgement. It is essentially:

Roses are red, violets are blue,
You've sinned against God, now he's through with you

This is what this is. It is profound, it is precise, and it is condemning. But it gets to the heart of this whole situation. It addresses one of Saul's excuses and exposes his heart. It also reveals that Yahweh has rejected Saul completely. **Read 22**

The first part is a question, the second part is the answer. If you remember, Saul said that he had spared the best of the cattle *in order* to sacrifice them to God. Later he said that the people took them, although he would have killed them. But Samuel's point is clear: Obedience is better than sacrifice.

In the OC people were expected to obey God perfectly. "Cursed is the one who does not abide by everything written in the book of the Law and do them" (**Deut. 27:26; Gal. 3:10**). The Law commanded perfect obedience. By the way, so does Jesus. Jesus demands more obedience because he says what happens in our hearts is just as important as what happens by our actions.

In any case, the Law required perfect obedience. Condemnation would come without perfect obedience. But God knew Israel would never be able to perfectly obey all the Law. The Law was to be a continual reminder of their need for sacrifice and cleansing. So God included in the Law the sacrificial system. If a person did disobey unintentionally, then they could offer a sacrifice. Sacrifice was sort of the parachute if your airplane of obedience was crashing. It was the backup. But it was better to obey and not need to sacrifice.

What Saul had done earlier was say that he had disobeyed in order to sacrifice; flipping the whole thing on its head. God didn't want sacrifices, he wanted righteousness. If you obey then there's no need for sacrifice. Saul's excuse was ridiculous on its face. Here's the next part of the poem. **Read 23**

So it goes from question and answer in **22** to reason and condemnation in **23**. This is actually where I got the title: Ninety-nine percent obedience is witchcraft. The KJV, the NKJV, and a couple others translate "divination" as "witchcraft." Which is really what divination is. It is idolatry. It's worshipping some other God.

What both of these indicate is what the Bible calls willful sins. High-handed sins; intentional sins. People often ask if there are differences in severity of sins - are some sins worse than others. And the answer is yes, but not how we usually think of it. Willful sins, intentional sins are far worse than unintentional sins. That's the distinction the Bible makes.

Heb. 10:26-27: For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment."

God knows we're going to sin unintentionally. No one can avoid that. It's intentionally sinning that's the real danger. That's witchcraft. That's idolatry.

If someone claims to be a believer and willfully sins, they may as well just read some tarot cards, bow down to little images of Buddha, light some incense for Baal, or go sing praises at the local Muslim mosque because it's the same thing. Willful sin is an utter rejection of God. It is witchcraft.

"I'm not doing witchcraft!" When we sin deliberately we might as well be. Because we are utterly rejecting God.

And Samuel says: because you rejected God, he's rejected you. **Read 23**

See, this cuts through all the nonsense. Saul wasn't confused or trying his best or at the mercy of the people. Saul was presumptuous - intentional - about his sin. He deliberately rejected the Word of the Lord and so the Lord deliberately rejected him as King. Can I show you the NT equivalent to this? **Turn to 2 Timothy 2:11-13.**

This is another poem, interestingly enough, that touches on these very same issues. Willful sin versus unintentional sin. **Read 11-13**

This is the basic gospel message but packed into it is the issue of how we relate to Jesus as sinners. If we have died with him: If we've been united with him in his death. When we place our faith in Christ, we die with Christ. His death becomes our death. The wages of sin is death, and if we believe in Jesus, he died that death for us. So if we're united with him in death, we'll also be united with him in life.

If we endure, we will reign with Jesus. The Bible constantly calls believers to endure all the way to the end of their lives. That's the only assurance we have that we are saved. And if we do we will reign. I don't believe that believers reign presently on the earth. And there is some debate over whether this reigning happens when a person dies and goes to heaven or if this reigning happens in a future millennium. That's beside the point. The point is endurance leads to reigning.

But here's the connection to Samuel: If we deny him, he'll deny us. This is active denial. Active rejection.

Jesus said this same thing. If you confess me before men, I will confess you before who? My Father who is in heaven. If you deny me before men, I will deny you before my Father (**Luke 12:8-12**).

Denial can be through words, it can also be through actions. Keep your hand here, but turn to the right a couple pages to **Tit. 1:16. Read**

You can profess with your mouth you love Jesus all the while denying him with your actions though willful disobedience.

But here's the last promise in **2 Tim. 2:13**. If we are faithless, he remains faithful. It's not like God's going to cut you out of the Kingdom because you're trying your absolute level best to follow him. We're all faithless. We all break faith and sin. You know what we rely on in those times? That Jesus is faithful.

Do you see the difference between active denial, active rejection, high-handed sin and simply being faithfulness?

Back in **1 Sam. 15** Saul wasn't simply being faithfulness, he wasn't messing it up a little bit. This was full on rebellion. Full on witchcraft. Full denial, full rejection. He denied God, so God denied him.

His response to this little poem only confirms this all the more. There's no mourning over his sin. No weeping. Actually, at first his response looks positive, but then we realize nothing has changed. Here's the last trait of a manipulator.

6) They are primarily concerned with the opinion of others. **Read 24-28**

Manipulators are primarily concerned with public appearance. They fear the opinion of other people. Maybe they fear the opinion of their family, their friends, their boss, their spouse, their children. Everything they do is a publicity campaign to make sure they don't look bad.

Saul sounds humble because he is admitting his sin. He even pinpoints exactly what the sin is: he feared men more than God. Great! He identified it.

But he doesn't want to take care of it. He wants Samuel to take care of it. He wants the weight on Samuel to deal with it.

You'll hear something similar in a lot of modern talk about accountability. "I just need someone to hold me accountable." Well that might be and we should hold each other accountable. But can I tell you something? If I have to rely on some other person to interrogate me and drag out of me my sin, how am I any more like Jesus? I'm not.

The Bible talks about 2 things related to accountability. The first confession. Confess your sins one to another (**James 5:16**). This is **proactive** confession of sin. If you have an accountability partner, that's great, but don't make them do the heavy lifting. Don't make them ask all the hard questions. The heavy lifting is on you. If you're really repentant about your sin you'll volunteer it. I've been in accountability groups. I know how to manipulate and answer questions without answering questions. The Bible calls us to confess.

Second, accountability is what I do with my brother who doesn't realize he's in sin. I've been working on my basement lately, we're finishing a room down there and there's drywall mud and dust everywhere. Sometimes I'll go down to the basement just for a minute and my wife will tell me I've got drywall dust all over the back of my shirt. I didn't know that, she's pointing it out because I didn't see it.

That's what the Bible means by accountability. Pointing out things that we're apparently missing. And then dealing with that if there's no repentance.

Saul wants Samuel to do all the work for him and Samuel calls him on it. "I'm not going with you - you've rejected the Lord." Even here, Saul should say something like "You're right. I need to make this right." But what's he do? In desperation he rips his robe. And Samuel tells him the Kingdom has been ripped from Saul.

Vs. 29 presents a little bit of a difficulty. **Read 29**

How is it that God won't have regret when back in **Vs. 11** God said he regretted making Saul king? Does God regret Saul or not? How do we deal with that? Well, I think the ESV Study Bible actually has great summary answer. Regret can mean "feel sad" or it can mean "change your mind." God was sad he made Saul king. He ordained it and knew Saul would fail, but he was still sad. On the other hand, once God rejected Saul he would not regret it - he would not change his mind.

We have flexible words in English too. The word "sorry" is like that. I can say "sorry" because I accidentally bumped into someone by mistake as an act of asking forgiveness. I can tell someone I'm sorry that they're going through a difficult situation - as a statement of compassion. Maybe I'm in sorry condition - meaning I'm pathetic. Regret is the same way, it's meaning depends on the context.

Here God wasn't changing his mind. And we see that Saul is still not repentant, he still wants the praise of people. **Read 30-31**

Honor me before men. He still wants the praise of people. He doesn't want to be humiliated before Israel. And Samuel caves, doesn't he? He goes back with Saul while Saul puts on the public charade of devotion to God.

Here's the epilogue. **Read 32-35**

Gruesome. Agag though all was well when Samuel finished the job Saul should have completed himself. Even at the end, it is Samuel who has to do what Saul should do. And Samuel makes it clear: Agag is not an innocent man. He has made plenty of women childless. He's killed plenty of children.

At no point in all of this was Saul ever obedient. At no point was he ever truly sorry. At no point was repentant. At every turn he made excuses, blamed others, hid the truth, still refused obedience.

Turn to Luke 18:9-14. What do we do with all of this? What does God really want? God wants true repentance. True sorrow. This is a familiar parable that I think speaks well to what God wants. **Read 9-14**

The tax collector doesn't care what other people think. He's off all alone. His cries of repentance are not known to anyone. This is a parable, a fictional story. The reason Jesus knows what he is saying is because he made the story up. But if this were a real man who was truly repentant this is what he'd be saying.

The tax collector is earnest. He's beating his breast, he is in agony over his sin. He's not shrugging his shoulders. He's not saying "Well, I'm not perfect." No, his sin is all consuming. His need for grace is ever before him.

The tax collector doesn't compare himself to others. The Pharisee compared himself to all manner of the lowest in society. Everyone looks good when standing next to a adulterers. But the tax collector isn't even looking around. There's no comparing. It's just him and God and he knows he's wretched. And he knows God is holy.

The tax collector doesn't claim any goodness of his own. He is only a sinner. In private, in his closet, he knows who he is. He knows the depravity of his heart.

The tax collector pleads for God's mercy. This is the only thing he can do. No works, no comparing, no religious service. No AWANA verses. He needs mercy.

But here's the good news: He went down to his house what? justified. Full and free pardon. Full and free forgiveness. No more guilt. No more shame. The righteousness of Christ fully and freely imputed to his account.

This is what God wants. Not games, not manipulation. He wants honesty and sorrow and truth from our hearts.

Pray