**Listen Up!**

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**1Samuel 15:1-3** Samuel also said unto Saul, The LORD sent me to anoint thee *to* *be* king over his people, over Israel: now therefore hearken thou unto the voice of the words of the LORD. 2 Thus saith the LORD of hosts, I remember *that* which Amalek did to Israel, how he laid *wait* for him in the way, when he came up from Egypt. 3 Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.

**1Samuel 15:7-9** And Saul smote the Amalekites from Havilah *until* thou comest to Shur, that *is* over against Egypt. 8 And he took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive, and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. 9 But Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep, and of the oxen, and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all *that* *was* good, and would not utterly destroy them: but every thing *that* *was* vile and refuse, that they destroyed utterly.

**1Samuel 15:10-15** Then came the word of the LORD unto Samuel, saying, 11 It repenteth me that I have set up Saul *to* *be* king: for he is turned back from following me, and hath not performed my commandments. And it grieved Samuel; and he cried unto the LORD all night. 12 And when Samuel rose early to meet Saul in the morning, it was told Samuel, saying, Saul came to Carmel, and, behold, he set him up a place, and is gone about, and passed on, and gone down to Gilgal. 13 And Samuel came to Saul: and Saul said unto him, Blessed *be* thou of the LORD: I have performed the commandment of the LORD. 14 And Samuel said, What *meaneth* then this bleating of the sheep in mine ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear? 15 And Saul said, They have brought them from the Amalekites: for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen, to sacrifice unto the LORD thy God; and the rest we have utterly destroyed.

**1Samuel 15:20-23** And Saul said unto Samuel, Yea, I have obeyed the voice of the LORD, and have gone the way which the LORD sent me, and have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. 21 But the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the chief of the things which should have been utterly destroyed, to sacrifice unto the LORD thy God in Gilgal. 22 And Samuel said, Hath 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 hearken than the fat of rams. 23 For rebellion *is* *as* the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness *is* *as* iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the LORD, he hath also rejected thee from *being* king.

When I think about my own feeble attempts to obey God, and to do things right, I am struck with the fact that at best, I sometimes fall short. On any day, the carnal creature in me comes fawning around trying to put some fleshly spin on spiritual things. I am like Paul who confessed in Romans 7, that when I would do good, evil is present with me. That evil presence always tries to find some exception to the things of the Lord when those things make even modest demands upon the flesh, or when they seem to contradict the purported wisdom of my human mind.

This is where we find Saul in our text. He has been given a great opportunity to prove himself a king worthy of the appointment by being an agent of God in bringing judgment upon the Amalekites for their attempt to wipe out the children of Israel at Rephidim (**Exodus 17**). That was 400 years before this account. It reminds us that our Lord is longsuffering, but that His wrath will not wait forever. It also reminds us that regardless of what we see going on in the world today; how men make merchandise of their fellow man and cause untold grief to millions by their wicked deeds; nevertheless, there is coming a time when those destructive souls will be brought to the bar of God and will there meet the justice they have earned and asked for.

So it was, at the time of our text for the Amalekites. A payday had come. The Lord was the author, and Israel was the agent. This was the time when Saul was to deliver the judgment of God. But, if we read our text correctly, Saul felt that some alteration of the plan was in order because there was apparently a better way to conduct this cleansing act. So, here he goes, and does it his way. In that doing, the Lord has provided for us a most sobering yet enlightening message on obedience. May the Holy Spirit help us to learn it and profit from it.

I. **Following Human Reasoning, People Will Find Exceptions For Their Conduct**

* v.9 teaches us that unsanctified human reason uses a flawed value system
  + fat and healthy livestock always looks too good to destroy just for the sake of eliminating; symbolic of the reality that things which look acceptable may not be (i.e. the only livestock acceptable to the Lord in this situation were dead livestock, killed on the spot)
  + **Prov. 14:12** There is a way which **seemeth right** unto a man, but the end thereof *are* the ways of death.
  + **Prov. 19:21** *There* *are* **many devices in a man's heart**; nevertheless the counsel of the LORD, that shall stand.

II. **Like Saul, We May Imagine That a Modified Obedience Will Produce Acceptable Results**

* v. 20 - Saul appears to believe that the outcome of this military action has produced results that were the goals which God had set
* Is this kind of reasoning the result of misunderstanding, or the result of personal interpretation? (The judgment of the Lord against Saul’s actions revealed in v. 23 plainly points to personal interpretation and disobedience in the face of understanding).
* This account suggests that **we need an established rule** for how to carry out obedience to the Lord: **the rule** - do it the way God says (look again at v. 3)
* It is very pointed that the Lord, in telling Abraham (**Genesis 22:18**) why he would be the Father of the faithful did not say, “because you trusted me,” or “because you were faithful,” but rather, “And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; **because thou hast obeyed my voice**.”
* I need to pause for a minute here and say something about the idea of knowing what we are supposed to do in obedience to the Lord – that is, we all know that sometimes we don’t know exactly what or how to do something to be in strict obedience to the Lord. Sometimes because of this, we make too hasty and wrong decisions about what to do and find ourselves to be in a place and time where we realize we have made a mistake through not thinking and praying something through until the Lord shows us the way. I want to look at a type of this situation in the OT and say something about that.
* Before we look at this type though, I want to say something about this situation in our text: In this account, it is not that Saul does not know exactly how to obey the Lord. In a case like we find Saul in, obedience to the Lord is spelled out in plain language. The Lord says, (v. 3) “Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.”
* So, in situations like this, when the Lord’s instructions are clear, we should never have uncertainty about how to obey Him.
* But, there are times when we do not have clarity for a number of reasons. Those are the times we need to think about what I am going to show you as a type from which we can draw our lesson. Now let’s look at:
  + **Jos. 3:3** And they commanded the people, saying, When ye see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests the Levites bearing it, then ye shall remove from your place, and go after it.
  + **Jos. 3:4** Yet there shall be a space between you and it, about two thousand cubits by measure: come not near unto it, **that ye may know the way by which ye must go**: for ye have not passed *this* way heretofore.
  + What I would like for us to see in this type is the distance the Lord placed between the tribe of Israel and the ark. I think that represents something that we can turn into a lesson. And I want us to pay attention to the second phrase in verse 4. I think these two things can give us our lesson about getting to a place to understand how to obey the Lord when there is some uncertainty.
  + The space the Lord directs can represent a pause by the tribe and waiting on the ark to show the way to go.
    - Waiting until the ark was a half-mile ahead of them was significant…more than sheer respect for the holiness, the consecration, the separateness of the ark would demand.
    - But it is a great type of waiting an adequate time for the Lord to show the way before we begin to get engaged in a solution.

**III. Making Exceptions Produces a Witness Against Us – v. 14** And Samuel said, What *meaneth* then this bleating of the sheep in mine ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?

* There are always the bleating sheep and the lowing oxen
  + Proofs of our disobedience will show up in our lives; a little more carelessness about the word of God; a little more inattention to our personal behavior; a little less enthusiasm about the things of the Kingdom
  + Those proofs will create noise which can drown out the voice of the Lord in our hearts
  + Those proofs may also constitute a herd of carnal things to interfere with our focus on the Lord (for all the professed good intent that Saul claimed would come out of saving these fat cattle, they were the very things for which the Lord had a complaint against him).
    - When Israel passed into the promised land, the tribes of Gad and Reuben asked Joshua if they could stay on the opposite side of Jordan where there was great cattle country. Joshua and the elders of Israel said they could if their warriors would go on across Jordan and fight with the other tribes until the land had been subdued. They agreed to obey that judgment and Joshua said something very meaningful to them that day. He told them if they would obey the final decision, they would do well, but if they would not, then things would be very different. Listen to his caution and warning: **Numbers 32:23** - “But if ye will not do so, behold, ye have sinned against the LORD: and **be sure your sin will find you out**.” This would be the bleating sheep and the lowing oxen for Gad and Reuben.

IV. **No Amount of Sacrifice or Other Spiritual Contributions Can Substitute For Obedience (v. 22 -** “Behold, to obey *is* better than sacrifice, *and* to hearken than the fat of rams.”)

* The apparent intent of saving the cattle was to use them to worship the Lord.
  + I want us to notice that Samuel did not say that sacrifice was worthless, but rather that obedience was better than sacrifice and listening better than the best of sacrifices.
  + We can put ourselves out quite a bit in trying to make up for doing things wrong by being disobedient, but it will be the disobedience that the Lord will call us to account for.
  + Even if our intentions are good when we do something that is represented by Saul’s reserving the cattle for worshipping the Lord, the disobedience will make our “cattle” a point of contention between us and the Lord, as these cattle did between the Lord and Saul.
    - Innovations in worship or service that contradict the Lord’s plain directions will be rejected in the final analysis
    - In other words, “making up” for disobedient innovation will not right what we have made wrong by disobedience.

V. **The Outcome of Disobedience Can Have Life-changing Consequences** - v. 23 - For rebellion *is* *as* the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness *is* *as* iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the LORD, he hath also rejected thee from *being* king.

* As I suggested earlier, when we are uncertain about what we should do to obey the Lord, He is gentle and instructive toward us and if we wait on Him until He shows us the way to go, we won’t have any problem following Him in obedience.
* But, if we know what He has told us to do and we begin modifying things to suit our own opinion about the matter, we will get in trouble with the Lord. And this trouble can be life-altering.
* God viewed Saul’s disobedience as rebellion and stubbornness
  + I think most of the time when the Lord’s people know exactly what the Lord wants them to do, yet they excuse themselves but don’t actually think of their disobedience as rebellion and stubbornness. Yet the Lord sees it that way.
  + The Lord’s view of it also shows us the severity of rebellion and stubbornness in spiritual matters (i.e. rebellion as witchcraft and stubbornness as iniquity and idolatry).
    - According to the Lord’s own words, it was disobedience that caused Aaron and Moses to be denied entry into the Promised Land
    - The two sons of Aaron were killed by the Lord for disobeying the Lord by offering strange fire before the altar (**Lev. 10**).
    - Here, in our text, the kingdom of Israel was ripped out of Saul’s hands because of disobedience to the Lord’s plain instructions.
    - In the days of David, Uzza the Levite, was struck dead by the Lord when he, with good intentions, reached out and put his hand on the ark to steady it when it looked like it would tip over as it was being brought back to Jerusalem on an ox cart. No one was to touch the ark and even those who carried it only touched the carrying poles attached to it (**Num. 4:15**).