

# **BaptistWay Press® Adult Online Bible Commentary**

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## **Studies in 14 Habits of Highly Effective Disciples**

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### Lesson Seven **Obedience**

#### **Focal Text**

1 Samuel 15:1-35

#### **Background**

1 Samuel 15:1-35

#### **Main Idea**

Disciples choose to obey God completely.

#### **Question to Explore**

Do I choose to obey God completely?

#### **Quick Read**

Partial obedience or conditional obedience is not real obedience at all. God expects our wholehearted commitment to him and his commands.

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### **Introduction**

One of my great young friends has served as a missionary in hostile environments. Recently he applauded our efforts to make disciples at Tallowood. I asked this young man, who has stood in the path of bombs for the sake of the gospel, “What is the essence of discipleship?” Without hesitation he said, “Obedience.” In both the Old and New Testaments we discover that God expects his people to obey him completely.

## **Commentary**

We find one of the most tragic stories of disobedience in the story of Israel's first king. For some time, Israel had been led by prophets and priests, men and women who had a personal relationship with Yahweh and chose to obey him. From the time of Abraham and the origins of the Jewish people, they had never had a king. Moses, the man of God, was followed by Joshua. After Joshua; Israel was led for a period of time by a group of local leaders called "judges." We recognize the names of Deborah, Samson, and Gideon as outstanding leaders of Israel who were never crowned as kings. Israel's king had always been God.

When Eli's spiritual leadership failed the people of God, Yahweh raised up a spiritual leader in answer to a young woman's prayer for a child. Samuel grew in grace and love as he learned to distinguish and obey God's voice. Then when his sons, like Eli's before him, began to disobey God, the people called for a king. Samuel took this personally, but God reminded him that they had not so much rejected Samuel but the Lord himself.

Saul absolutely looked the part of a king, because of his height and impressive physical appearance. Unfortunately, his character did not match his gifting. Samuel sternly warned the people about their rejection of God.

Saul started poorly by refusing to wait for Samuel to come and make an offering before the first battle against the Philistines. Samuel told him that his haste had cost him the kingdom. Though Samuel's words were not immediately fulfilled, shortly afterward God chose a leader "after his own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14). Though Saul's son Jonathan experienced military success, Saul proved himself unwise and lost the respect of his army by rashly threatening the life of his own son (1 Samuel 14). Finally the Lord gave Saul another chance to lead the people in battle.

### ***Hearing and Heeding God's Command (1 Samuel 15:1-9)***

Years after the Exodus and during Israel's entry into the Promised Land, the Amalekites had been a thorn in their side. Now after these many years, the Lord authorized Saul to go and punish them summarily for their lack of mercy to the Israelites. The payment was to be "in-kind": because they showed no mercy, they would receive no mercy.

Samuel's command to Saul was simple. "Let nothing that has breath live." This punishment sounds harsh in our ears. Why would God call for the death of anybody? In the ancient world these other nations who had so strongly persecuted the Israelites in the period of the judges were a definite spiritual threat to the people of God. They were evil personified.<sup>1</sup>

If younger generations were allowed to survive, in the ancient mindset they were obligated to destroy those who had killed their parents. At least we should note that the justice of God always required that the wages of sin be death. We may ask questions of

fairness, but the point is not “why did they have to die?” but “why does a holy God ever allow anyone to live?” God brings judgment on the world in various ways. Sometimes he uses natural disasters like floods and earthquakes to bring judgment on people as well.

First, Saul warned the Kenites before he attacked (1 Samuel 15:6). The Kenites were a fringe group of nomads and metal workers. Some have associated them with the descendants of Cain. Moses’ father-in-law is identified both as a Midianite and a Kenite. He worshiped Yahweh like the Israelites. Also, in the Book of Judges, Jael the Kenite woman kills an enemy of the Israelites (Judges 4:17-22).

Saul refused to obey the Lord completely. In the battle Saul and his army spared King Agag of the Amalekites and also the best of the livestock. Though they destroyed everything despised and weak, they did not obey God completely. Why did Saul not obey?

Why do we not obey God completely in our lives? Someone has said, “Delayed obedience is disobedience.” Another has said, “Partial obedience is disobedience.” What has God called the church to do? We are not called to bring death to sinners, but to bring life to them in Jesus’ name.

To this day our own agendas and needs stand in the way of our obedience to God. We have not completed the Great Commission. In this case, people are dying to face an eternity without God because we are not being obedient to his command. George MacDonald wrote, “I find doing the will of God...leaves me no time for disputing about His plans.”<sup>2</sup>

Texans remember Dallas Cowboys’ quarterback Roger Staubach. Staubach led the Cowboys football team to five Super Bowls and two Super Bowl victories. He struggled at the beginning of his career with the issue of obeying his coach, Tom Landry. Landry insisted on sending in the plays. He told Roger when to run and when to pass. Staubach was encouraged not to diverge from the plan.

The quarterback admitted that his inability to call his own signals was a source of trial for him. Roger considered coach Landry to have a “genius mind” when it came to football strategy. However, his pride convinced him that he should be able to run his own team. Roger later said, “I faced up to the issue of obedience. Once I learned to obey there was harmony, fulfillment, and victory.”<sup>3</sup>

In the New Testament we discover again and again that it is not enough to hear God’s command. *We must actually heed it.* So Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, contrasted the one who hears his word with the one who actually puts it into practice (Matthew 7:24-27). James also said, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (James 1:22). This involves not only sins of *commission* but also sins of

*omission*. Again James says, “Anyone then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn’t do it, sins” (James 4:17).

We must never underestimate the enormous impact of one act of obedience. In his “Chaos Theory,” Lorenz postulated that if a butterfly flaps its wings somewhere in the world, it may lead to a hurricane on the other side of the world. Something small and seemingly harmless can create great damage.

Obedience creates a sort of spiritual “butterfly effect.” In the New Testament when Ananias obeys God and goes to Saul to restore his sight, Saul gets the chance to obey (Acts 9:10-18). As a result, the greatest leader of the first century church was unleashed on the world. Henry Blackaby wrote, “God’s commands are designed to guide you to life’s very best. You will not obey Him, if you do not believe Him and trust Him. You cannot believe Him if you do not love Him. You cannot love Him unless you know Him.”<sup>4</sup>

### ***Having a Hard Conversation: An Excuse and a Message from God (1 Samuel 15:10-23)***

Even if nobody else knows our sin, God does. The formula, “The word of the Lord came . . .” was the prophetic formula to announce that God was speaking to his prophet and his people. The writing prophets of the Old Testament frequently used it to describe a revelation from God.

All of Samuel’s life he had heard God speak. From the first time he said, “Speak Lord your servant is listening,” (1 Samuel 3), the Lord had confided in him. Can the Lord trust us today with his word? What is God saying to us? One of our members says, “Jesus Christ is present in his church and he is speaking.” Do we have ears to hear?

Yahweh was grieved by Saul’s choice to disobey. Saul first turned away from God and then did not carry out his instructions. Not only was the Lord grieved, but so was his servant Samuel. Do we grieve over sin?

Samuel did not procrastinate, but rose early and pursued Saul, only to find that Saul had exited to Carmel, after setting up a monument in his own honor. Immediately, Saul defended himself by affirming his obedience to the Lord’s instructions. Remember Saul was to destroy *all* of the animals belonging to the Amalekites without exception (1 Sam. 15:3). Samuel’s words cut like a knife: “What then is this bleating of sheep in my hears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear?” (15:14). In other words, Samuel says: “If you obeyed; why is there so much evidence of your disobedience?”

### ***Excuses***

Saul answered Samuel by blaming the soldiers. The soldiers preserved the best of the livestock, but only for the purpose of worshiping God through sacrifice. In a sermon at Baylor University, Dan Yeary once told about one of his sons who was dressed and ready

for church. His mother left him only for a moment but discovered he had disappeared. They discovered him in the backyard with a paintbrush and bucket of paint. He had painted a solitary stripe down the back of the house. His parents asked him what he had done, and he affirmed, "But I didn't paint the dog." Apparently, he had thought about it!

Samuel stopped Saul in mid-sentence (15:16). Saul did not need to speak, but to listen for God's words about his choices and his conduct. Samuel reminded Saul of the story of his ascension to the throne.

Early in his life, Samuel had cultivated the ability not only to hear God's message but to speak it comprehensively and courageously. Once he had told the elderly priest Eli about the judgment of God without withholding a single word. Once, Saul had run and hidden when he was offered the throne. He had felt unworthy. Now upon a very clear communication of God's expectations, he had disregarded the purposes of God. *God's direct commands in our lives are not multiple choice questions for us to consider.*

Once when I received test instructions in Dr. James Vardaman's history class at Baylor, I ventured, "Do we have any choices about which questions to answer?" I was hoping that we could choose two out of three essays, for example. Dr. Vardaman smiled and tightened his jaw as he said, "Yes Mr. Brooks. You have a choice. You can take the test, or not take the test."

Saul attempted to explain himself with another excuse. "But I did obey the Lord," he said (15:20). All I did was bring back Agag. The soldiers just wanted to worship the Lord your God at Gilgal. To the end of the conversation, Saul sought to justify his disobedience.

Sometimes, when we sin, we in like manner try to minimize the consequences by arguing that we meant no harm. Further, the contraband animals would make a "marvelous offering" in sacrifice to God. Are we ever guilty of thinking if we do enough "good" we can overcome our own sin? This is like drinking diet coke to compensate for eating chocolate cake. Try as we may, the good things we do will not subtract from the bad things we do. This is sin management, not the gospel.

Samuel thundered in response. Yahweh, the Lord does not delight in offerings and sacrifice as much as in obedience. "To obey is better than sacrifice" (15:22). He indicted Saul's actions as rebellion and arrogance. The final word possesses a proverbial ring: "Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has rejected you as king (15:23).

### ***Repentance and Loss of the Kingdom (1 Samuel 15:24-35)***

The whole weight of his choices fell squarely on Saul's broad shoulders, and he was not able to stand. Finally he realized the gravity of his error. He failed as a leader because he gave in to the will of the people. Saul had feared the people more than he feared God. This remains a danger for leaders today. It is difficult to lead when we need popularity

and the approval of people more than we care about the approval of God. Saul asked for forgiveness and for Samuel to go with him to worship. Twice Samuel had made offerings to affirm Saul's kingship. Saul wanted to reboot one more time.

Samuel did not have the freedom to rescind the word of God. For Saul's rejection of God he had earned God's rejection as king. So the consequence was congruent with the crime. Rejection of God's word and plan in one's life leads to a rejection by God.

Saul did not let go easily, instead holding on to Samuel's robe until it tore. Samuel spoke the prophetic analogy: as you have torn my garment, the Lord has torn the kingdom from you and given it to one of your neighbors. Saul had created a problem not with Samuel, but with the "Glory of Israel" (15:29). God does not lie or change his mind.

One more time Saul negotiated: "But please honor me before the elders of my people so that I may worship the Lord" (15:30). Samuel returned with Saul so that Saul may worship. Then Samuel executed the judgment God had ordained. He killed Agag, the arrogant king of the Amalekites, who by this point felt that he would survive.

The separation of Samuel and Saul, as they went to Ramah and Gibeah respectively, symbolized the separation of Saul from the presence of God. From the narrative we know that God was with Samuel. If Saul was not with Samuel, he was not with God. Afterward, Samuel would mourn for Saul, personifying God's grief over Saul's sin and ascendancy to the throne, but Samuel never went to see him again.

### **Conclusion**

We do not live our lives in isolation. Our obedience to God has the powerful potential to make a huge difference in the world. God is planning on our obedience. Will we obey? Today?

When we listen for God's purpose and live according to his plan we will experience great joy in seeing his perfect work in the world. When we do we will be blessed, God will be blessed and others will be blessed!

When our sons were young, they learned a little song about obedience. To this day I cannot think of this story without hearing the simple melody and words: "I will obey. Do what you say. Call me today. And I will obey. Lord, I will keep all your commandments, follow you come what may. I will obey."

**Meet the Writer: Dr. Duane Brooks**

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Duane was called to preach while in middle school in Germany and ordained in Great Falls, Montana. He has served as pastor in four Texas Baptist churches - New Hope Baptist Church in Cedar Park, Williams Creek Baptist Church in Mart, and Pleasant Grove Baptist Church in Rosebud. Duane and his wife, Melanie, have two sons, Graham and Chase, and a daughter, Casey.

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<sup>1</sup> Tony W. Cartledge, *Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary*, 1 and 2 Samuel (Macon, Georgia: Smyth and Helwys), 192.

<sup>2</sup> George MacDonald, *The Marquis of Lossie* (HardPress Publishing, 2010), 402.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy W. Bowes, *Light Steps* (Nashville: Xulon Press, 2007), 92.

<sup>4</sup> Blackaby, Henry T., Richard Blackaby, and Claude V. King. *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2004), 22.