

1 Samuel 13

Intro Excusing Foolish Choices July 27, 2008

When it comes to raising children, from the earliest years, we instruct, guide, and even demand that our child become independent. We long for dirty diapers to give way to self-sufficiency. We assist, but with a view that in time they will learn to do work on their own. From clothing themselves to getting chores done, we look for them to be self-reliant. Independency is our goal. We sit nervously in the passenger seat baffled why it is a good idea to allow an otherwise hormonally wacked-out adolescent to propel two tons of steel at 60mph only to be relieved we don't have to play family chauffer.

As it is with our kids, so it is with each of us, that we seek to move toward spiritual self-sufficiency, independency, growth...but know it has to be done in the context of wisdom. To be independent is not necessarily to be wise. The drunk on the street is certainly independent, but not wise.

Independency is not the summa bona of life. Self-reliance is an admirable trait only so far as one relies on wisdom to guide us. So often we act autonomously but, when we are a law to ourselves, when we behave apart from some external instruction and guidance, we fail to act wisely, but foolishly. When faced with the day-to-day choices in life, how are to we view the choices we make? What is the role of wisdom that keeps us from excusing foolish choices?

The trouble is the choices we make only appear to us foolish after we've paid the penalty of the wrong option. We try to act independently, doing our job well only later to have to explain to those around us why we failed so miserably. Take, for example the fictitious letter to an insurance company about a bricklayer who tried to finish the job on his own. The story is a favorite of mine and worth repeating.

Dear Sir:

I am writing in response to your request for additional information. In block number 3 of the accident report form, I put "trying to do the job alone" as the cause of my accident. You said in your letter that I should explain more fully and I trust that the following details will be sufficient.

I am a bricklayer by trade. On the date of the accident, I was working alone on the roof of a new six-story building. When I completed the work, I discovered that I had about 500 pounds of brick left over. Rather than carry the bricks down by hand, I decided to lower them in a barrel by using a pulley, which fortunately was attached to the side of the building, at the sixth floor.

Securing the rope at the ground level, I went up to the roof, swung the barrel out, and loaded the brick into it. Then I went back to the ground and untied the rope, holding it tightly to insure a slow descent of the 500 pounds of brick. You will note in block number 11 of the accident report form that I weigh 155 pounds.

Due to my surprise of being jerked off the ground so suddenly I lost my presence of mind and forgot to let go of the rope. Needless to say, I proceeded at a rather rapid rate up the side of the building.

In the vicinity of the third floor, I met the barrel coming down. This explains the fractured skull and broken collarbone.

Slowed only slightly, I continued my rapid ascent, not stopping until the fingers of my right hand were two knuckles deep into the pulley. Fortunately, by this time I had regained my presence of mind and was able to hold tightly to the rope in spite of my pain.

At approximately the same time, however, the barrel of bricks hit the ground and the bottom fell out of the barrel. Devoid of the weight of the bricks, the barrel now weighs approximately fifty pounds.

I refer you again to my weight in block number 11. As you might imagine, I began a rapid descent down the side of the building.

In the vicinity of the third floor, I met the barrel coming up. This accounts for the two fractured ankles and the lacerations of my legs and lower body. The encounter with the barrel slowed me enough to lessen my injuries when I fell onto the pile of bricks and fortunately, only three vertebrae were cracked. I am sorry to report, however, that as I lay there on the bricks in pain unable to stand, and watching the empty barrel six stores above me, I again lost my presence of mind and let go of the rope. The empty barrel weighted more than the rope so it came back down on me and broke both of my legs. I hope I have furnished the information you require as to how the accident occurred. It was, in short, a lesson on trying to do the job on my own.

Do you have trouble following instructions? Have you ever so prized self-sufficiency that you've gotten yourself in trouble? While self-sufficiency is a worthy goal in much of life, in our relationship with God self-sufficiency is deadly. In order for us, the created, to relate to God, our Creator, dependency and confessing reliance upon Him is the path to life. Reliant wisdom is the cure to foolish independence.

Wisdom here is the ability to see and admit when in where in life we think we can get by without God's help. Those places are where we excuse foolish choices because people loom too large and God seems far too small.

The trouble is, we far too often try to make our life work not flowing from faith in God's grace, but a reliance on our own ability. On the surface, it may look good, but at the heart it is not. Saul, Israel's first king can well be accused of this very problem, one that is probably very familiar to all of us. At times this king seems far too passive in his obedience to God, but here he is quite committed to the cause, but only finds himself rebuked by the prophet Samuel. READ 1 Samuel 13:1-16.

Saul defeated the Ammonites and celebrates the victory with Samuel in Gilgal. Samuel gives his retirement speech but is not yet stepping down from the role of prophet and priest entirely. He calls Israel to a lifestyle of repentance, of change that flows not out of changing the externals of life, but out of a faith in a God who will change us.

We begin assuming some time has passed by. The trouble is, when it comes to dating this material we are at a loss. The Hebrew is a bit muddled. The ESV reflects the lack of clarity, inserting an ellipsis. The NIV makes a stab at it by reflecting what some later LXX versions read by inserting that Saul was thirty when he began his reign and ruled for 40 years (using what Paul says in Acts 13:22). The (N)KJV makes a decent stab by saying "Saul reigned one year; and when he had reigned two years over Israel..." thus placing these events in his second year as king. This is not a problem for us or the integrity of God's Word. We do know some time has transpired since his anointing by Saul, his acclamation by the people and his annihilation of Nahash the Ammonite.

After his success over Nahash to the east, Saul maintains a standing army. He commands 2000. His son, Jonathan, 1000. They are stationed in the hill country of Benjamin, north of Jerusalem between the Jordan River valley and the plains to the west leading to the Mediterranean Sea.

To date, all we are told of Saul's exploits is his defeat of Nahash to the east. But years before when Samuel anointed Saul king, he was told to deal with the garrison located in his own town of Gibeah. Nothing has happened...until we read in v3 that Jonathan attacked the garrison in Geba, a town about three miles from Gibeah.

This was probably a small skirmish, a proverbial stone tossed at a hornet's nest and the bees are buzzing now. This scuffle raises the ire of a powerful nation that holds Israel in its grip.

The Philistines are militarily and economically dominant, possessing advanced weaponry and, in v19, they control the metallurgy in the region. They are the blacksmiths and for the Jews to even sharpen their farm implements they charge a hefty fee. That force is about to be seen.

Word gets out about the defeat of the Philistines. The Philistines are not going to take this lying down, as they have nothing but contempt for this upstart of a nation. Saul's army moves to the east, out of the mountains in the center and down toward the valley of the Jordan River. Meanwhile, to the west the Philistine troops muster to fight. The odds are not good.

Like the Afghan Mujahideen fighting Soviet Hind attack helicopters with WWI bolt action rifles, the Israelites can not stand up against the chariot. They fought with weapons from a by-gone age.

As the Philistines moved up into the mountains, the Israelites retreated...for good reason.

They went into caves and holes, even hiding in wells and graves. Some ran all the way across the Jordan valley to the east. Saul goes down out of the central mountains toward the Jordan and there along the slopes he waits at Gilgal, the place Samuel told him in the past to wait.

What happens next perplexes most and confuses the rest. We know Saul is far from perfect, but the events at Gilgal evoke sympathy for this tragic figure, but we need to think why the events turned out as they do.

In 1 Samuel 10:8 Samuel tells Saul to go to Gilgal and wait seven days. That most likely refers to an event from some time before, but that pattern is now established. Saul goes to this important meeting place and waits, as he was instructed.

Keep in mind, the Philistine armies are amassing. Their power is frightening and God's people are fleeing. Saul waits...seven days for Samuel to show up. I'm an impatient man. If someone is seven minutes late for an appointment, I assume they will not show up. But seven days? In Mexico people refer to mañana time, but this is mañana sevenfold.

Saul is not there for R&R. This is not spa-time. He's a general, called by God to lead an army against the Philistines. He goes to Gilgal to worship. He has no problem with that. But since Samuel is not there...let's get this sacrifice underway. I have a hard time calling him impulsive.

Saul takes on the duties of the priest. With no Samuel there, it appears reasonable it be done and for the king to do it. What is more, thirty years before when the people gathered at Mizpah and the Philistines attacked (the last time the Philistines were a threat – 7:13) Samuel made a sacrifice and God routed the enemy. It seems reasonable to do this again.

Samuel slits the lamb's throat, tosses it on the fire for the burnt offering. He readies the peace offering when all of a sudden *Mr. Punctuality* shows up. Better late than never, but never late, in my book. With blood splattered on his breastplate and his sword dripping in the dust, Saul goes out to meet Samuel.

Picture the aged prophet-priest, nose raised in the air, sniffing the roasting meat, eyeing the blood soaked hands of the king, asking the reasonable question "What've you done?"

Saul's response is classic (v11) because it is sooo you and me:

The people were scattering, the Philistines were amassing and you were nowhere to be found. What would you expect me to do? We waited seven days. You could have at least chiseled a text message. The next thing I expect are Philistine chariots descending the on us from Gilgal. How was I to fight without God's favor? Do you take me a pagan? I didn't want to do it, but I had to force myself to make the sacrifice.

Saul's rationalizing his behavior sounds all too familiar, so Samuel's remonstrance seems over the top. You have done foolishly... You have not kept the command of the Lord your God

This is more than being stupid. To be a fool is to act contrary to God's command, it is to act contrary to God's wisdom, but what command?

Out comes the sledgehammer to kill a fly: "For then the Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel forever, but now your kingdom shall not continue."

What?!? Chill old man. You're taking your duties as priest a little too seriously. A tad over reaction here, a little territorial, aren't you? Is Saul's sin worse than David's during his reign? Whatever happened to understanding and empathy? Where a gracious spirit?

Weigh these two sins out: Illegal goat BBQ or avoiding war, watching a woman bathe, raping and seducing her, impregnating her and then killing her husband.

But what is the problem? We see obedience and disobedience as a simple right versus wrong, as though any half-wit can spot what should be done at any point. There are mistakes, but is this that catastrophic?

Saul's tragic disobedience is a self-sufficiency which denies God's desire for us. What Saul did makes perfect sense and that makes it so deadly. The problem is not his impulsive flaw, but his unrepentant rationalization that cannot comprehend why anyone should object to what has just taken place.

First is the violation of God's command to the king.

Samuel (10:25) instructed Saul what Moses commanded in Deuteronomy 17, specifically in vv18-20 (read). Leviticus makes it clear only priests, not kings, make sacrifices.

At this level, if we spend time in God's Word, we will know what God desires from us. We know what obedience looks like. Yet, I have rarely found that people fail at this level. There is the occasional person I counseled that when they hear God disapproves of adultery are shocked, but for the most part we know where the major boundary lines lay.

That's easy in an academic setting. But when we look at Saul's response, we know there were extenuating circumstances. It is there we see the more heinous nature of sin, the subtler, the more dangerous, the more familiar. God's judgment on Saul's line does not fall here. There is something more about his foolish choice.

The bricklayer, if asked about physics, would know the idea is stupid. So why do it?

Second, what was most real to Saul when faced with this decision?

The loss of an army and the presence of an enemy loomed larger than a sovereign God. Saul's words condemn him in v11 as his rationalization demonstrates a fear of man. "If I were to continue to wait, I would lose my friends' support and suffer destruction by my enemy. God certainly would not want that!"

I would have come to worship on Sunday, but work takes so much out of me and Saturday chores exhausting, I need a break. This is the only time for me to get away with the family. God will understand. Anyway, He's the one who's filled my life all these obligations.

I know what a Christian home should look like. I know the choices our family should make as we raise these kids, but my wits are departing and advancing Philistines called kids surround me. If I try to parent, put my foot down, guerrilla warfare erupts and we all suffer.

If I don't sleep with him, I'll lose him and I can't face life without him. We'll be getting married soon anyway. I've put so much into this relationship, God will forgive me, I know.

What is most to the bricklayer? The pain and effort to do the job, 500lbs and six floors.

Third, what was most difficult for Saul when faced with the confrontation?

There is no tenderness, no repentance, and no ability to stop and admit he's broken God's law, that he acted impetuously, no sense of his own need for grace. Samuel's question when he arrived was not an immediate condemnation, but an opportunity for confession.

The excuses are too familiar:

God, my sin is really your fault. If you would have wanted me to avoid pornography you shouldn't have invented the Internet, you could have sent a fluke power outage, you're able to temporarily blind me. So, don't blame me. You're God!

I've got to take charge at work. You know the economy is bad and inaction is as deadly as wrong action. Overtime, ethical flexibility is not an option if I want to put food on the table.

The bricklayer can admit failure. His broken knuckles, back and legs are ample evidence. Unfortunately, spiritual consequences are far more subtle.

With that, Samuel pronounces the beginning of the end of Saul's dynasty.

What God requires is a man after His own heart...we know who that will be...right? Is this then just a set up for David? Is Saul merely a foil, a fall guy for the knight in shining armor, the boy with the sling to bring us something better? Do we end then with the admonition not to be like Saul, but act more like David and be sure your heart goes after God?

Good advice...impossible advice. What happens with this phrase: "a man after his own heart"?

Turn to Acts 13. Here Paul, reviewing God's work among his people, references this statement, applying it to David's line. God worked through David, but it is not David to whom God refers, but David's offspring, God's Son, Jesus Christ.

This is not just being sold out for God. This is not just giving your life to God every moment of everyday. This is about being connected to the only one who ever was the man after the Father's own heart, the only true prince over the Lord's people, the only one who ever kept God's law.

You and I so often do fail like Saul. We have honed the excuses well. We are well taught in self-reliance. We can be independent and we can eschew wisdom with the best of them, simply because we know how to live by our own judgments, our own abilities.

But here is where the Gospel calls out to us. Attach yourself to one whom the Father has accepted and will never turn away from. Look in faith not to your own abilities to act wisely, but the One who is wisdom. Trust not your law keeping, but the one who has kept the Law for you. Then you will know what it is to have God's favor rest on you.