

1 Samuel 14

Intro August 3, 2008 Acting Religious or Living Faithfully

Turn with me to 1 Samuel 14 as we wrap up the life of a tragic leader, Saul. Israel's first king is a figure, who is frighteningly familiar to the face we see in the mirror each morning. Therefore, it's not hard to be sympathetic to this unfortunate person who sets the scene for King David, thus making David look all the better when set in comparison to Saul's constant failures.

But even last week, as we saw how his impatient BBQ cost him his kingdom, how Samuel, the priest cut off his legacy from the throne merely because he sacrificed a burnt offering. It is easy question God's harsh condemnation. You may recall I weighed out the sins of both kings, David and Saul. Sure Saul failed, but did he deserve denunciation for such an understandable offense, when, in comparison, David's sins seem to far exceed Saul's missteps?

If we focus on the actions, if we line-up sin for sin, if we focus on the deed, we've good reason to scratch our head at God's rejection of Saul and acceptance of David. But, if we look behind the actions and see that there is a difference between professing faith and possessing faith, we will have a better understanding of the nature of God's grace to us.

Once we stop thinking God's scorecard is one in which he tallies up our failures versus our successes, when we give up any hope of acceptance based on performance...and fear of rejection based on failures, then we'll see possessing faith is evidenced by a trust, a reliance on God's grace alone and stop the futile navel gazing of self-righteousness.

Saul and his son Jonathan serve as the mechanism to decide between whether we only profess faith or we possess faith. There are three tests, three comparisons that will aide us in this:

Pragmatic Worship or Faithful Engagement	vv1-23
Pious vows or Wise Thankfulness	vv24-35
Pitiless Justice or Gracious Sacrifice	vv36-46

We'll walk through this narrative to see how these test play out. You'll recall from last week, Jonathan, Saul's son, did what his father failed to do, he stirred the hornets' nest by attacking the Philistine garrison in Geba. This provoked total-war that caused most of the Israelites to seek protection in every crack or crevice available. But as our chapter opens both Jonathan and Saul adopted their typical stance. We'll see Jonathan's obedience that flows out of faith versus Saul's veneer of worship that is more pragmatic than faithful.

PRAGMATIC WORSHIP OR FAITHFUL ENGAGEMENT vv1-23

Jonathan decides this is a time for action. Without telling his father, Jonathan and his armor-bearer leave camp looking for a fight. Saul sits in a pomegranate grove, doing what he does best...nothing.

The story gives us some clues as to what the problem is here. Saul has six hundred men while Jonathan has just one with him. But among Saul's 600 is Ahijah the priest who wears the ephod.

Sounds impressively spiritual, a priest with the ephod, the High Priest's garment containing the Urim and Thummin, the means by which the High Priest could ascertain God's will. Saul appears to be in the right place with the right people. But did you catch the irony?

We know his family tree, even who his uncle is? Verse 3...he is Eli's great grandson, Ichabod's nephew. Remember Mr. Glory is Gone, the family line who was said to be cut off from the line of the High Priest's...just like Saul's, is functioning as the army chaplain.

The scene shifts to what Jonathan and his armor bearer do.

This unforgiving hilly region is marked by deep canyons running east and west. On the top of one plateau stood the Philistine sentries. Jonathan had an idea, one that could only work if God was behind it. Verse 6 expresses his faith, "It may be (perhaps) the Lord will work for us, for nothing can hinder the Lord from saving by many or by few."

This is no cocky, self-assured demanding of God to act. Whether he lives or dies is not Jonathan's concern. God, he knew, could work with just the two of them. While Saul appears fixated on the numbers of his soldiers, in this section, Jonathan knows that with God, there is always enough. This idea pervades Scripture, but is so easily ignored when we imagine that God's power is predicated on our ability. But what does His Word say?

- Of aged Sarah giving birth, the celestial visitor quipped: Is anything too hard for the Lord in Genesis 18:14.

- Job repents of his faithlessness when he says to God, “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.”
- The prophet Jeremiah admits this in 32:17 when he says, “Ah, Lord God! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you.”
- The angel tells Mary of the Elizabeth’s late conception and her miraculous child that nothing is impossible with God. And Jesus tells his disciples when it comes to salvation that “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

Jonathan sets the plan. They will disclose to the Philistines their position. If the guards want to come down to fight, they will wait for them, but if they invite them to scale the sheer cliffs, they will do that. (10) The Philistines see them, mock them for coming out of their cave (your mother was a hamster and your father smelt of elderberries) and invite them to come up the cliff, wanting to teach them a lesson (11-12).

Jonathan, followed by his armor-bearer scale the rock wall. Once they get to the top, they are no doubt tired and perhaps bloodied, but a fight ensues, leaving 20 men dead. Unwilling to sit by and wait, they trust God that whether they live or die, that if God wishes them victorious, they will win...and win they do.

Meanwhile, across the canyon, Saul’s watchmen see the commotion. For not only did the two soldiers defeat the Philistines at the post, the entire army panicked. Saul mustered his troops, discovered that Jonathan was unaccounted for, and prepared to attack.

What he did next appears commendable. Saul calls for the priest to bring the ark, to discern what God would have them to do. Was this a superstitious show or a genuine desire to fulfill Deuteronomy 20:4-5, that a priest was to address the people before battle? His heart is revealed in v19.

As the Philistine army falls into disarray and the Israelites worship God, Saul, sensing a missed opportunity, commands the priest to cease his activity (19). Withdrawing the hand may refer to the Urim and Thummin, the means by which God’s will was determined. No longer content to wait and see what God would have them do, Saul determined worship was now a waste of time.

Notice the difference? Saul has the priest by his side, the Ark is in the camp and the means to ascertain God’s guidance are in hand. Jonathan rushes out looking for a fight. But Saul’s worship is all for show.

Pragmatism: the idea that faith is fine only when practical. Religious exercise is fine, as long as it is useful. And we are personally able to determine when it should work and when not.

But it is Jonathan whose faithfulness to God’s character is admirable. Not demanding that God give them victory, he acts, but acts in faith. God is not someone to be manipulated and set aside when no longer useful to the plan. His faith informs his actions, that if God wills, success will come. If He does not will, then so be it. Few or many, God will always succeed.

PIOUS OATH OR WISE THANKFULNESS

v24-35

God routed the army by His power. Israelites came out of their holes. Those who succumbed to Philistine control turned on their conquerors. A nation without weapons (13:22) was victorious because God fought the battle. But leave it to Saul to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. As the enemy fled (23) and the Israelites were fighting hard, Saul spoiled the day by opening his mouth (24).

He makes an oath, binding the conscience of every soldier who fought with him that day. He curses any man who tastes food for the rest of the day. Saul wants victory, but on his terms.

On the surface it seems like Saul is at last being faithfully active, but it is again a veneer of religious expression, as though victory comes as God is impressed by pious self-sacrifice, as though God must grant victory in light of such zeal and denial.

The selfishness of this oath is seen in v24b, as it is Saul who wishes to be avenged on his enemies. Let his men bleed and die, let them starve and drop dead from exhaustion, for Saul must have his victory. Napoleon knew that an army marched on its stomach, but Saul thought nothing of this and imposed a law that God did not give.

As the battle moved into the forest, the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey gave the soldiers the promised gift. Yet no one dared to taste God’s gift for fear of Saul’s oath (26).

No one enjoyed God’s gift, except Jonathan who was not present when the oath was made. He dipped his staff into the honey and got the appropriate sugar rush. When told of his father’s

command, Jonathan accurately assesses the situation (29). My father has brought disorder to the land. This foolishness of this vow has lessened the victory (30) and incites real sin (32).

Having been forbidden to eat all day, when night comes and they are allowed to eat, the soldiers, fainting from exhaustion grab whatever spoil they can find and devour it. Having been forbidden by a lawless oath, they then break God's command. Ravenous, they slaughter animals without properly draining the blood as commanded by the Law of Moses.

What we see here is the great difference between a seemingly pious oath and a wise thankfulness for God's provision. The one looks so holy, the other so secular, but godliness is found not in the pious oath, but in the wise use of God's common grace.

We are not an oath-based culture, but the heart attitude remains. We don't call down curses on those who do not tow the line as we wish, but we make it quite clear when they violate our desires.

Lenten vows set aside that which is otherwise not forbidden fall into this camp. The house-rules of a church where a call for holiness extrapolates out of God's Word what is not explicitly stated, thus usurping the authority of Scripture.

What is behind this piety is a good desire, but a misunderstanding of sin. When Jesus condemns the Pharisees in Matthew 15 he identifies the source of our sin is not found in what goes into our mouths, but what comes out of our hearts.

In the same way, Paul, in Colossians 2:20, calls such commands what they are, self-made religion that has no benefit to stopping a sinful heart. Also in 1 Timothy 4:1-5 Paul likewise points to the right attitude with which we should receive what God has given us.

We see the right response in Jonathan, who sees the good in what God gives. He dips his staff into the honey. He doesn't stop and spend the day rolling in it, he doesn't cease to do what God would have him to do because there is honey. Saul feared good food would distract his men from what they were to do, but God gave the refreshment for their good.

God has given us so much to be thankful for. There is nothing finer than an evening spent with friends, a good meal, a bottle of wine, and laughter. It does not become more pious or spiritual by adding anything more to it than that.

What we see next in Saul is the natural by-product of pragmatic worship, of a thankless piety. When God is a means to an end, when we imagine that our own behavior can control his blessings in our life, what flows from our hearts reveals our lifeless profession. We possess nothing.

PITILESS JUSTICE OR GRACIOUS SACRIFICE

vv36-46

Saul continues to unravel. With the enemy in flight during the night, Saul desires to pursue the enemy. While the people seem pleased to follow him, the priest instructs Saul to seek God's will in the matter. Again Saul seeks God's will, but God is silent (37).

Saul senses something is terribly wrong. There must be sin. He knows that much, but he is too blind to see his own missteps. Unwittingly, he pronounces that even if it is his son who has sinned, he will die. But there is no introspection, no reflection.

The people remain silent (39). You can picture the uncomfortable glances when he mentions Jonathan. Poor Saul. God is silent, Jonathan is missing and the people say nothing. He is alone and it is his fault.

So he begins the process of determining what should be done.

The casting of lots, the use of the Urim and Thummin, the two stones held by the High Priest in the ephod, somehow (we don't really know) would signal between two options. Saul and Jonathan are placed against the rest of the leaders. The stones make it clear that it is Saul's household that is to be signaled out. Then Saul and Jonathan are set against each other, and God points to Jonathan as the culprit.

Jonathan's response shows his incredulity

I tasted honey. Is that a crime?

"I will die" is not acquiescing to judgment, but gives the sense of "and I'm going to die for that?"

The process brings us to a sad truth. An oath was made, a curse was uttered. Jonathan was guilty, the Urim and Thummin pointed him out as the guilty party. So we see Saul blinded by his need for justice (44). It matters little whether God is offended. It is of no

concern that God's Law is not at stake here, but that King Saul was disobeyed. For that offense, he will take the life of his own son.

We see no sorrow or regret for the rashness of the vow. No realization that his extra biblical law was wrong. No ability to see sin as something personal in him. For that reason, he can demand justice all the while he himself is guilty.

The people revolt against Saul. The king is not sovereign.

They demand Jonathan not be harmed. God used him to give them the victory they now enjoy. They ransomed him...rescued him by payment, a redemption. The demands of Saul's justice were met, so that the guilty party could go free.

Have you ever met someone whose sense of personal justice far exceeds God's own standards? You? Do you see the problem here? It is not so much the acts of sin committed or the righteousness done that makes Saul or David a bad or good king. It is not that Saul messed up just one too many times and God cuts him off out of utter frustration.

Rather it is the cold faithlessness of Saul. His worship convenient, his actions pietistic but godless, his justice leaves no room for repentance. That well describes acting religious as opposed to living faithfully.

How easy is it for us to demand perfection of others to abide by our rules, even and properly by God's perfect standards? We stomp and yell when we see the sin in others, holding them to either criterion exceeding the Law of Moses or simply what is clearly stated, but have no room for grace, for redemption...for grace.

It is for that reason the gospel gives us such hope, for our God gives us not pitiless justice, but gracious sacrifice.

For God's own Son, worship was not pragmatic; it was not just a formalism to be engaged in when convenient. When Jesus went to the cross He entrusted himself to the Father far more than even Jonathan did facing the Philistine army. When he gave His word, it was only in obedience to the Father and He completed what he vowed to do...make us sons of the Father. When justice had to be met, it was not cold and pitiless. Rather the justice owed to us was placed on Him.

For that reason, the elements set before us on this table are the spiritual food we need so that we engage life by faith in God's grace alone. Here we find God's nourishment sweeter than honey, able to refresh for whatever battle we face. Here we find our rescue, for the ransom has been paid by the Father's Son, our King and Savior, Jesus Christ.