

God Rules, Even over the Details

by Don Landis



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What is the use if we tell people that God has all authority, that He has given all authority to His Son Jesus Christ, that Jesus displayed God's authority by obeying His Father, and that God expects us to live our lives in submission to His authority, if in fact we ourselves do not obey Him?

The New Testament writer James makes it clear that God wants more than lip service. God wants obedience. "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves" (James 1:22).

The Old Testament narrative, found in 1 Samuel 15, speaks pointedly about the importance of obedience to God in every detail.

The Prophet Gives an Order to Saul

Because of the Amalekite nation's sins, King Saul was to lead his army into battle and destroy the Amalekites totally. The prophet Samuel told Saul explicitly, "Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and do not spare them. But kill both man and woman, infant and nursing child, ox and sheep, camel and donkey" (1 Samuel 15:3).

The King Responds

Mustering his forces, Saul goes into battle, defeats the Amalekite nation, and takes their king Agag captive. The Bible says, "He also took Agag

king of the Amalekites alive, and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword" (1 Samuel 15:8).

Saul destroys the people and most of the livestock, as he was commanded, but he does not keep every detail of God's command. "But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were unwilling to utterly destroy them. But everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed" (1 Samuel 15:9).

God Is Displeased with Saul

The Lord tells the prophet Samuel that King Saul did not carry out His orders. As a result, Samuel spends a

sleepless night in anguish and prayer to God (1 Samuel 15:11).

The Prophet Confronts Saul

Samuel gets up early the next morning and searches for Saul, who is touring the country to announce his victory, even erecting a monument to honor his achievement. When they meet, Saul compliments Samuel and basically says, "Mission accomplished."

Samuel responds with a classic question. "If you did all that God commanded, why do I hear the bleating of sheep and the lowing of oxen?" Samuel reminds Saul that his orders came directly from the Lord, with exact details, but he failed to carry them out.

Saul's Excuses

Saul shifts blame to the people, saying they wanted the sheep and oxen. In fact, he argues he did what he was told.

In response, Samuel condemns his actions as direct disobedience, and Saul responds with a confession.

End of Story?

Is this the end of the story? Not quite! When Samuel tells Saul that he had failed to obey the Lord's Word completely, Samuel shares several timeless truths about the importance of obedience.

First, he asks a question and then answers it: "Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord?" The answer: "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice."

Samuel next calls the king's actions "rebellion." To know God's commands and willingly disobey even a portion of them is rebellion. Saul, a king who executed rebels, understood the seriousness of this charge.

Samuel makes another statement to emphasize the seriousness of disobedience: "For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry" (1 Samuel 15:23, NASB). Samuel equates rebellion, or disobedience, with cultic practices! This is pretty strong language, because God really sees rebelliousness as serious sin.

In the end, Samuel informs Saul that this sin will cost him his kingdom. "Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, He has also rejected you from being king." Our actions—or non-actions—have consequences.

It is interesting that Saul then "repents" and says he sinned because he feared the people. Yet we suspect it is not a true confession from the heart. We see Saul's real heart when, as Samuel turns to walk away, Saul grabs Samuel by his robe with such force that it tears the coat. Samuel turns to Saul and says that, just as Saul has torn his coat, God will tear Saul's kingdom from him.

What a consequence! What a clear illustration for all of us! Obedience to the Word of the Lord, not just in general terms but in every detail, is very important to our God.

Truly it is not enough to be a hearer; we must follow through and be a doer of the Word. Our Savior says to us, "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15).

God does not want lip service but heart and life service.

Lord, what area of my life today needs to be brought under your authority in full compliance to your Holy Word? ■



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Study & Discussion Questions ...

- 1 In Ecclesiastes 5:4–7 what is God's attitude when we say we'll obey Him and then we break our word?
- 2 Perhaps Isaiah 29:13 is the source of the phrase "lip service." Look up this text and describe the value that God places on promises.
- 3 If you think that absolute obedience is taught only in the Old Testament, consider Jesus's direct quotes from the Old Testament in the New Testament verses Matthew 15:8 and Mark 7:6.
- 4 Saul says he spared some of the best livestock because he feared the people. What do you think the people said to him (assuming Saul did not blatantly lie)?
- 5 What role does pride play in disobedience? When we disobey, what are we really saying to the Lord?
- 6 Rebellion is equal to divination. In Deuteronomy 18:10, 2 Kings 17:17, and Acts 16:16, what was the consequence to the people, both spiritually and physically?
- 7 How does Matthew 7:13–29 underscore the importance of total obedience to Christ?
- 8 Add this verse to your Scripture memory list: 2 Corinthians 10:5.



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