

Character Before Success

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What I would like to do today is talk with you about the foundation for successful leadership from a biblical perspective. I was really interested to find that Stephen Covey's very popular book, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective Leaders*, echoes a strongly biblical view of foundations for leadership.

I don't know how many of you have had the opportunity to read *Seven Habits of Highly Effective Leaders*, but Stephen Covey in the book says that in his preparation for writing this particular book he had the opportunity to survey the last 200 years of literature on success. He says that it is really interesting in looking at the last 200 years of writing in America on success because for the first 150 years of American writing on success, up until about World War I almost all of the literature on success could be defined as focusing on character and ethics as a foundation of success.

And so you had lots of writing about the need for perseverance or the need for integrity. You had writings like Ben Franklin's autobiography that told us how he spent months working on instilling in himself various character strengthening principles. And these character qualities then formed the foundation for successful living.

Over and over again, up until World War I, the writers and thinkers said that hard work leads to success and honesty leads to success and integrity leads to success. And the mythology of America was all about George Washington never telling a lie and that made him a great leader. Right living was uniformly seen as the foundation for success and great leadership.

Then after World War I the literature on success made a radical shift toward "the personality ethic." And what we begin to find is that success becomes a function of certain personality traits and on practicing certain kinds of skills.

Now, when we say that success is a function of certain personality traits, we mean that to be a successful leader, you have to have the personality trait, for example, of a positive mental attitude. And so you see all these maxims coming out in poster form.

"Your attitude determines your altitude."

"When life hands you a lemon, turn it into lemonade."

"Change those scars into stars."

"Problems can make you either bitter or better."

All of these can-do, positive mental attitudes became the determinant of success under this new personality ethic.

And then, in addition, there is a great amount of literature suggesting that success is a function of practicing certain kinds of skills—communication skills, listening skills, negotiating skills, power strategies, one-minute management techniques. Now I am in no way opposed to skills training and there are certain skills I would do well in acquiring. I also believe in the value of a positive mental attitude. But I believe that our forefathers in America fundamentally were closer to the truth regarding success and leadership than we are today.

See the foundation for success in the Bible is the very slow, not a quick fix, but the very slow process of acquiring good character. Right living in the Bible is the basis of true success. Being the right kind of person is the foundation for leadership from a scriptural perspective. To use Jesus' parable of the two foundations, the foundation of rock and the foundation of sand, skills based training alone or personality ethic kinds of things is a foundation of sand for Christian leadership. The foundation of rock to build leaders on is the foundation of strong character.

Now let's say that as we go through this you become convinced that character really is the foundation for leadership and for success. How shall we gain good character? And how shall we pass along the lesson, the necessity of good character to young adults?

Now, I believe that here again our forefathers understood how to teach people virtues, moral lessons, better than we do today. If you look back at how folks in the 19th century and the 18th century, all the way back to Bible days, got character inculcated into them, it was through the telling of stories. Stories would be told giving examples of people who lived bad lives and did bad things. And we saw those people suffer bad consequences, become unhappy, unsatisfied with life and ultimately end up poorer as people because of their bad lives. On the other hand, stories were told about people who worked hard, who endured, who were courageous and kept their word. And it was told that as a result of practicing these good character qualities that these people succeeded. There is power in story telling.

James 5 tells us this:

"Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know we consider blessed those who persevered, you have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about."

The apostle Paul likewise says in 1 Corinthians 10, in looking back on the Old Testament and all of the story of the nation of Israel, he says:

"These things happened to them as examples and were written down to us as warnings for us."

Do you understand the power of story telling? You know, in this culture by and large truth is so suspect that I believe people have gotten very dulled in hearing straight on propositional revelation. We live in a culture that is called a post-modern culture, which means that people are suspicious about the claims of truth. The average guy on the street doesn't know if there is one truth. He/She suspects that there isn't any absolute truth. But people listen to stories.

The average person has grown suspicious of the claims of science, the claims of progress. How are we going to reach the average person? By simply yelling louder? No. By the old method of telling stories. Stories are powerful and people today are open to hearing a good story. That is why we sit in front of the television set for 25 hours a week. Even bad story telling is interesting to us. I mean we watch bad story telling all the time on television.

Isn't that what TV is? It is generally shallowly written stories about shallow people who are involved in shallow pursuits resulting from shallow motivations. And yet, who are somehow achieving incredible success and happiness because they are good looking and willing to bend the rules, not subject to anyone's authority. And they live in great apartments in N.Y.C. with no visible means of support along with other great looking guys and gals, who spend their time moving in and out of new and exciting relationships. And these shallow people, living shallow lives are somehow immune from the pain of casual sex with multiple sex partners or the pain of getting fired from their jobs for total insubordination.

Ah, there I have just written the script for much of the fall season!

Values do get transmitted through stories. And this morning what I want to do is look at the story of a man who will serve as a negative example for us regarding the foundation for successful leadership. We are going to look at the story of a man named Saul. He was the first king of Israel.

It is a tragic story. It is a story of what might have been, but never was, a story of wasted potential, wasted talent, a wasted life. It is the story that serves as a sharp rebuke to the leadership models being promoted today in the Christian church. In looking at the story of King Saul, I have called today's talk *Character Before Success*.

Let's pray.

Now, in giving you this message on character before success or character as a foundation for success, I obviously need to define for you what I mean by success. Good character is not necessarily a foundation for a large bank account. Lots of people have large bank accounts without good character.

Good character is not required as a foundation for good looks. Very shallow people have been known to have wonderful looks. Good character is not even a foundation for starting a large Christian ministry or starting off in Christian leadership with a big bang and a lot of impact. Again, people with bad character can start in Christian leadership very strongly.

Well, what do I mean by success and the statement that good character is the foundation for success? By success I mean long-term success. I mean finishing your life well. When I say that good character is a foundation for success, I mean good character is a foundation for ending your life still having a warm personal intimate relationship with God and with your family and with the church—ending well.

Now, if you use, as a definition of success, “ending well, finishing the race well” then you are going to find that there is no substitute for good character. And if you search the scriptures and you try to find examples of people who finish well, you are going to find that there aren’t that many people who really achieve success in life. You have the occasional Daniel and Paul, Joshua and Caleb. But they are far outnumbered by the Demus’ and King Solomon’s and Judas’ and, in the case today, King Saul.

As we read the story of King Saul, I want to first of all deal with a leader’s power base. The base of a leader’s authority in being able to influence others toward a certain goal.

Now, there are a number of potential power bases that a leader can use to bring about influence in whatever circle of influence the leader is operating in. One base of power can be force. The threat that if you don’t do what the leader tells you to do that you are going to be isolated, you are going to be shamed, you are going to be kicked out of the group, you are going to be fired. Some bosses in the work place use the power base of force, the power of coercion to get their way. And people in the office walk around continually on egg shells because the boss is known to explosively break out in tirades or to demote people or fire them. We talked about abusive church leaders the last couple of weeks who could also use this power base of force, the power to cut a person off from fellowship.

There is the power base not only of force, but of manipulation. Some leaders are wonderful at building little coalitions of supporters and flattering people. Telling people what they want to hear. Working their agendas through the extending of certain benefits and carrots.

We see this political style of leadership also in the church. Certain pastors have become adept at playing the board over against the church hierarchy. The old timers against the new comers. The base of authority.

Well, a third base of power could be skills, gifting, knowledge. What a person possesses. We give people authority when they have certain characteristics or certain giftings or certain knowledge that we need when we find it useful. Knowledge is power. Gifting, charisma is power.

What was Saul's base of authority. Well, it was this third category, mainly. What he possessed. Look at 1 Samuel 10:9:

"As Saul turned to leave Samuel, God changed Saul's heart, and all these signs were fulfilled that day. When they arrived at Gibeah, a procession of prophets met him; the Spirit of God came upon him in power, and he joined in their prophesying. When all those who had formerly known him saw him prophesying with the prophets, they asked each other, 'What is this that has happened to the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets?'"

Saul was anointed, that is Saul had God's Spirit on him. He possessed the powerful spirit of God. And then when Saul was being appointed as the first king of Israel by Samuel, it says in verse 23:

"They ran and brought Saul out, and as he stood among the people he was a head taller than any of the others. Samuel said to all the people, 'Do you see the man the Lord has chosen? There is no one like him among all the people.' Then the people shouted, 'Long live the King.'"

Saul not only had a tremendous presence of the Holy Spirit on him, but he was also physically very impressive. He was a very tall man, likely, a very good-looking man. He had all the physical qualities of a leader. And he was a very popular leader, widely acclaimed by the people.

Beyond this, chapter 11 tells us that he was strategically brilliant in working out his military plans. In chapter 11 he was quite successful in battle. What I am saying is that Saul's power base was what he possessed in terms of the outward trappings of charisma, popularity, gifting, anointing, even anointing from the Holy Spirit. And I would like to suggest to you that all of that is not a foundation for success in the way that I previously defined it, at the end of your life having a warm, intimate relationship with God, with others in your family, and with the church.

You see, I believe that there is only one real power base that is a sustaining power base for a Christian leader and that is the leader's spirituality. The perception on the part of people that here is a man or woman who has a growing relationship with God that ought to be emulated.

To use the terms that I was using before, the only true power base for a leader is ultimately their character, at least in the long term. See, initially, people will come and be attracted by an individual's gifting, by what a person possesses. I certainly will agree with that as an initial matter, as a starting point, many people will be drawn to a leader because of a leader's gifting. Because of the anointing

of God on the leader in terms of what the leader possesses—knowledge, persuasiveness, the ability to prophesy, the ability to heal, the ability to counsel, the ability to preach. Yes, as an initial matter, it is what the leader possesses that often attracts people.

But what keeps people, what influences people long term, at least people who love God is the leader's character. Because the longer somebody stays around a leader, the more they dig through what the leader possesses and they begin to look for what the leader is. Not what the leader does, not what the leader produces, not what the leader's level of gifting is. Over time those things become less important to people who love God. And folks who love God and not just the show, not just the tickling of their ears, folks who love God will always cut through the veneer and say, "What kind of human being is this leader?" And the only reason I am going to stick around here is if I find a person of substance.

Is this person generous? Is this person able to be confronted with their own failings? Can this person truly be challenged? What does this person do when they are angry? How strongly principled is this individual? Is the person harsh? Is the person inappropriate with the opposite sex? Does this person enjoy the success of others?

Long term, long term, people who love God will leave leaders who have bad character. Long term, churches that aren't built on a foundation of character and spirituality will implode.

You know, the greater the gifting or anointing on a leader or on a church, the more necessary it is that that leader have good character. It is like the fire on the burning bush that Moses saw back in the Old Testament. The bush will either be consumed by the fire of God or it will remain. The more powerful the anointing, the more you can look for the anointing either consuming the individual or the church because they are not made of the right stuff, there hasn't been a strong enough emphasis on character, or the bush will remain.

So, let's see what happened to King Saul. Did the bush remain or was it burned up? Look at chapter 13:5-12:

"The Philistines assembled to fight Israel, with three thousand chariots, six thousand charioteers, and soldiers as numerous as the sand on the seashore. They went up and camped at Micmash, east of Beth Aven. When the men of Israel saw that their situation was critical and that their army was hard pressed, they hid in caves and thickets, among the rocks, and in pits and cisterns. Some Hebrews even crossed the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead.

Saul remaining at Gilgal, and all the troops with him were quaking with fear. He waited seven days, the time set by Samuel; but Samuel did not come to Gilgal, and Saul's men began to scatter. So he said, 'Bring me the burnt offering and

the fellowship offerings.’ And Saul offered up the burnt offering. Just as he finished making the offering, Samuel arrived, and Saul went out to greet him.

‘What have you done?’ asked Samuel.

Saul replied, ‘When I saw that the men were scattering, and that you did not come at the set time, and that the Philistines were assembling at Micmash, I thought, ‘Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the Lord’s favor.’ So I felt compelled to offer the burnt offering.’”

The prophet Samuel had given Saul the command to wait a full seven days and Samuel would come and offer the sacrifices. But it appeared to Saul that Samuel was not coming. The troops were scattering. The situation was desperate. It appeared to Saul that something needed to be done and so Saul offered the sacrifice without waiting for the prophet Samuel.

What I see going on in chapter 13 is that the Lord gave Saul an integrity test. Bobby Clinton in his book, *The Making of a Leader*, says that almost always early on in the formation of a leader, the Lord gives the leader an integrity test. He puts the leader in a situation to test the leader’s heart motivations. To see whether the leader has just the veneer of Christianity, the appearance of character, simply pay s lip service to the importance of a relationship with God, or whether underneath he has the real thing – a genuine desire to please God—an integrity test.

It is like when you were back in school, every once in a while the teacher would say, “okay, class, pop quiz time. Put your books away. Take out your pen. We are going to test what you really know.”

And the Lord, in emphasizing that character is the foundation in his value system for success, often gives leaders integrity tests. He puts us in situations that pressure us regarding whether we will conform to our inner convictions or give up. There are situations that the Lord will put you in to test whether you will have the courage to stand up to your convictions. You will be pressured. Here is the moment. Somebody is putting down pro-life fanatics or TV preachers or people who believe they have the absolute truth. Will you openly acknowledge in an unpopular situation in class, that you are a Christian or will you keep your mouth shut? Integrity test time!

Integrity test time. You are being tempted. Temptation is often used by the Lord to check a person’s integrity. The temptation may not come from the Lord, it may come from the enemy. But the Lord is over that temptation and allows the temptation to test you. Will you resist the temptation to say something bad about an individual who has hurt you? Will you resist the temptation to lie your way out of an unpleasant confrontation? Or to inflate our resume or to quit when things get really tough? Will you resist the temptation to become cynical or bitter because you’ve been hurt or the church has flaws?

There are lots of integrity checks. For young leaders, often there is an integrity check of a conflict that arises in a church. There is a challenge to the ministry vision of a young leader. And folks rise up and say, "No. We don't want to go that way. We want to go this way." Integrity test time. Young leader, do you believe that you have really been called to bring this vision to this group of people or do you say, "I don't know. I just give up?"

There are lots of integrity checks for young leaders. Sometimes the integrity check for you will be whether you can be a follower and not always have your own way. You know, Jesus gave us some wonderful tests for picking leaders in Luke 16. He said,
"First to he who is faithful in very little is faithful in very much and he who is unrighteous in very little is in unrighteous also in much."

In other words, one way that you pick a leader or a future leader for a ministry is to just watch how they do in small things. Are they willing to help set up communion? Are they really good about hosting a kinship? Are they on time? Do they complete their assignments? One way to check someone's integrity is to look at what they do in small things.

It is easy to move right to the issue of gifting. I remember when our church was small, we used to do communion every week. And on one particular occasion, there was what seemed to me to be a gifted guy who came into our church. He had a seminary degree. He was very attractive and very bright, well-spoken, a great family background. So I thought, "Oh well, let's give him communion to do."

He had been at a church for a month and he called me and said, "Rich, I have put together a slide show for communion. I have pictures from around the city of little children and I coordinated with music."

I got real nervous on the phone. I said, "Mike, how long is this going to take?"

He said, "Oh, I don't know, about a half an hour."

So I said, "Well, gee, Mike, we usually only take about five minutes to do communion. Maybe we could have a special communion service [I was trying to be real conciliatory. We didn't have very many talented people in those days]. Maybe we could do a special communion service some day, but now we would kind of like it to be maybe about five minutes."

Well, he got off the phone real quickly. He was obviously upset. He called me back a little later and said, "You know, I just talked with John Cook and he told me I could have ten minutes to do communion. You said 'five.'" It seems like you guys don't have your act together at all. Which one is it, five or ten minutes?"

I realized I made a very serious mistake. This guy had never proven himself in something little and I was giving him public ministry. So I said, "Well, Mike, the issue is not five or ten minutes. I think both of us are trying to say the same thing. We mean brief. But it seems like you've been offended by this whole thing."

He said, "I have not been offended, but it just seems like you can't get your act together."

I said, "Look, I am sorry for the way this has all worked out. I ask your forgiveness, if I have offended you or the church has offended you."

He said, "Well, that's not good enough, Rich. Asking forgiveness is not good enough."

So I said, "Well, Mike, that's about as good as I got."

I got off the phone. He never came back to church. I had picked charisma over character. I didn't check him out in little things before giving him something, which for us, was big.

Jesus also gives us a second test in Luke 16:11. He says,
"If you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous mammon, who will entrust true riches to you?"

In other words, before you give someone spiritual leadership, let's see how they are doing in the secular realm. An integrity test that is often missed by many churches is what is the guy's work reputation? We are giving people small group leadership and worship team leadership, well, how are they doing at work? Do they show up on time? Do they put in a full day's work for a full day's pay? Are they goof-offs? How are they doing in school? Are they goofing off in school?

You know, a wonderful test for spiritual leadership is secular leadership. It is great when I hear that someone is very well thought of at their particular job. See, going into ministry is not an escape where we say, "Gee, I am failing at everything else. Why don't I try becoming a pastor or a worship leader?" Going into ministry ought to be, "I am doing really really well in my other job. But God seems to be pressing on me and pushing me toward life in ministry." Integrity test – How does a person do in their secular occupation?

Third, and here is one I think is a major integrity test for young leaders. Luke 16:12,
"If you have not been faithful in the use of that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own?"

Major integrity test – How have you done in following the lead of someone else? Must you always have your own way or else you don't want to play the game? Do you easily get hurt or offended because your idea didn't win?

Then you need some shoring up, friend, in the area of character. You have not passed the integrity test. Because truly before you get to do your own vision, Jesus says, "How have you done in carrying out the vision of someone else?" Before you get other people to carry water for you, how have you done in carrying water for others?

Are you loyal to your leaders? Do you speak well about them privately? Or do you always have a better idea and critique people privately? If you critique your leaders regularly when you are in private, then you failed the integrity test and the Lord will not entrust you with that which is your own because you haven't been faithful in dealing with that of others.

Often in the formation of a leader, there is a very attractive alternative presented instead of Christian leadership. Integrity test time. Here is a wonderfully attractive alternative career option. Money is dangling in front of you. The job offer is there. You can move to another city. You can spend sixty hours a week doing this other activity. Christian leader, what are you going to do? Integrity test time.

See, the Lord has a wonderful way of backing you and me into the corner and checking out our heart motivations. What are you really about, he says? What do you really want?

And when he checked Saul out, he found that Saul did not ultimately want a long term relationship with God. That what Saul ultimately wanted was the applause of the crowd. People-pleasing was more important to Saul than God-pleasing. And so, when Samuel confronts him with making an offering and not waiting around for Samuel, Saul replies,

"When I saw that the men were scattering, and that you did not come at the set time, and that the Philistines were assembling, I thought, 'Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the Lord's favor.' So I felt compelled to offer the burnt offering."

The people are leaving. They are my identity. I have to keep the people at all costs.

You know what it was that cost Saul to fail the test? It was this view that "I cannot wait for the Lord to act on my behalf, I must make things happen by myself." Saul had this tremendous character failing of always taking things into his own hands when things looked like they wouldn't work out according to the promise of God.

You see, trust in God is a big thing for the Lord. That is a big character issue for the Lord. He really, really counts trust in him important. He wants people, especially leaders, who can be in pressurized situations and yet wait for God to do something rather than feel compelled to make something happen on their own.

And he put Saul in one of those pressurized situations and gave Saul the option of waiting for him through the prophet Samuel to make the sacrifice. But Saul was one of those guys who was impatient with the timing of the Lord. Things were not happening at the pace that Saul thought they ought to be happening at. And so Saul reacted and out of impatience he had to make something happen.

Let me ask you something in applying this particular point and then we will move on. Do you trust God enough to be patient with his timing in your life? Or do you often feel the need to make something happen on your own?

Do you trust God enough, those of you who are single, to wait for God's timing regarding bringing someone along for you who shares your Christian commitment, your vision, your calling? Or do you have to take it in your own hands and make it happen?

You are struggling with your job. Do you trust God enough to open up another job for you or to give you perseverance in your present job? Or do you have to make something happen in an illegal, illicit way, through lying on a resume or bending certain kinds of statements to make an opening for yourself where God doesn't seem to be making an opening for you in complete integrity?

Are you a person who is constantly making a way for yourself in ministry? "Got to fight my way in. Toot my own horn or no one will notice me." The Lord will always give you that integrity check and especially if you are a leader.

Now, if you pass the integrity check and do the right thing in a pressurized situation, you wait upon the timing of the Lord, the Lord will expand your circle of influence. Over and over again that is the biblical pattern. A person passes the integrity test, they don't take matters into their own hands, they trust the Lord and wait for his timing and the Lord expands their circle of influence, their ability to lead and to bear fruit for God.

But Saul failed. And then the Lord gave him a final exam. And the final exam was not just an integrity test. It was an obedience test.

"Saul, I am going to give you some very clear instructions and I want you to follow my instructions to the letter. I am going to be very clear about them, but you have to obey me completely." Obedience test time, chapter 15:1-11:

“Samuel said to Saul, ‘I am the one the Lord sent to anoint you king over his people Israel; so listen now to the message from the Lord. This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel when they waylaid them as they came up from Egypt. Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys.’”

So Saul summoned the men and mustered them at Telaim—two hundred thousand foot soldiers and ten thousand men from Judah. Saul went to the city of Amalek and set an ambush in the ravine. Then he said to the Kenites, ‘Go away, leave the Amalekites so that I do not destroy you along with them; for you showed kindness to all the Israelites when they came up out of Egypt.’ So the Kenites moved away from the Amalekites.

Then Saul attacked the Amalekites all the way from Havilah to Shur, to the east of Egypt. He took Agag King of the Amalekites alive, and all his people he totally destroyed with the sword. But Saul and the army spared Agag and the best of the sheep and cattle, the fat calves and lambs—everything that was good. These they were unwilling to destroy completely, but everything that was despised and weak they totally destroyed.

Then the word of the Lord came to Samuel: ‘I am grieved that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions.’ Samuel was troubled, and he cried out to the Lord all that night.”

Now, it is clear that the issue here was an obedience test presented to Saul by the Lord. In verse 1 he says, “Listen now to the message. Hear, O Israel, listen to my voice.” And then you see that the sin that Saul committed in verse 9 was that he was unwilling to destroy completely. There is this unwillingness, the issue was one of the will. And if you look up that Hebrew word “unwillingness” it always suggests disobedience.

And then, of course, the Lord tells us that the issue of obedience when he says, “I am grieved that I have made Saul king because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions.”

An obedience test will often be presented to us as leaders. And the Lord will ask you to follow a specific set of instructions even though you don’t understand.

“Will you trust me on this?” the Lord will ask, “And follow me even though right now you can’t see and you can’t understand.”

In summer camps they often play a game where they will blindfold one of the kids, completely blind fold them and have them run through the woods, blindfolded. They will have to listen to a camp counselor’s direction to turn left here; to right there. Some of the kids will trot along trusting that the counselor

will give them the direction at the appropriate time and they won't smack into a tree. You see other kids shuffle their feet real slowly and struggle with the exercise. Other kids will tear off their blindfolds. "I can't move forward," the kid is saying, "Unless I can see where I am going."

The nature of the Christian life is often that we are called to move forward and run forward even when Jesus Christ is demanding something that is illogical, counter-cultural, or feels unsafe. You know just becoming a Christian is counter-cultural. Becoming a Christian is risky business in 2000. It takes a willingness to obey God and to trust him to be a leader because leaders are people who are asked to follow the leading of God. And the Lord will often want to lead you blind.

"I don't see how this is going to be paid for."

"I don't see how we are going to get the resource for this particular project."

"I don't see how we are ever going to launch this particular ministry, but God you keep saying it to me over and over again that that is what you want. That you want the city impacted in this way. That you want to do something for the homeless. That you want me to be involved with people with AIDS. I don't know how, God, but I am going to move forward and I am not going to run back into my shell."

But Saul was unwilling to follow the Lord blind. You know, just as a note here. Very often, at the front end, we have no ability to perceive the consequence for any particular choice that the Lord has for us.

You say, "Well, what was the big deal if Saul killed all of the Amalekites or not. In fact, it seems to me rather cruel and I sure don't understand why the Lord made such a big deal of this with Saul. Seems like Saul was actually being more merciful than God. And the Lord was reprimanding him for being kind."

We have no idea what the consequences are for disobeying the Lord. Only the Lord can see down line. It doesn't seem like a big deal to us if we open ourselves up a little bit in the sexual area. Then we fall into an affair and people ask how did this happen? Well, it didn't happen over night. Oak trees don't come down without years of internal rot. God sees the internal rot in our lives. He alone understands the incredibly awful consequences of letting some small sin remain unchecked. Some of you here have personally seen what I am talking about.

Do you know that about 500 years later, one of the descendants of Agag, this King that Saul didn't want to put to death, one of the descendants came to a position of dangerous power. He was a man named Haman. And Haman, this descendent of the Amalekites and Agag in particular, threatened, like Hitler, to destroy all the Jewish people. You can read about Haman in the book of Esther.

But my point is that from the perspective of Saul, he had no ability whatever to look 500 years down line and see the consequences that would be brought upon untold thousands of Jewish people from his single act of disobedience. And I want to tell you that you have no ability whatever to predict the consequences of any one of your sins. You can choose to throw the rock into the lake, but how big the ripples are, how much your sin touches, that is out of your control and is now given into the hands of God.

When you choose to separate from your spouse, when you choose to lie, when you fail an obedience test, the consequences are out of your hands. Obedience is a big deal to the Lord because only he can see the consequences.

Well, I want to show you real quickly the devolution, that is the descent, the decline of a man who is walking now away from the Lord. The Christian leader with all the trappings, with all the charisma, with all the popularity, with all the blessing of God on his life, let's watch his decline.

Verse 12 says:

"Early in the morning Samuel got up and went to meet Saul, but he was told, 'Saul has gone to Carmel. There he has set up a monument in his own honor and has turned and gone on down to Gilgal.'"

One of the marks of a leader in decline is that he will become more and more self-aggrandizing. It will become increasingly important for that leader to get the credit for any particular success and when you hear the leader speak about the church, it will always be "my church." Ministry will be referred to as "my ministry." People in a group will be referred to as "my people." The leader's gifts will be referred to as "my gifts, my calling." And it is increasingly important to the leader that we fulfill "my vision." A leader in decline will always be absorbed with themselves.

"How am I doing?"

"How am I being perceived?"

"How is this looking at the moment?"

Saul went up and set up a monument for himself. And the second thing that you see regarding a leader in decline is that a leader in decline will become increasingly insensitive to his disobedience. Verse 13:

"When Samuel reached him, Saul said, 'The Lord bless you! I have carried out the Lord's instructions.'"

And two times Saul protested when he says, *"I did obey the Lord [verse 20]."*
"But I did obey the Lord."

Now, I have no idea whether Saul was pretending or whether he had become so dull to the voice of God that he really didn't know if he was obeying the Lord or

disobeying the Lord. It is possible for leaders to get so far out that they think that the Lord is pleased with their disobedience.

“I’m doing it all for you God. All this abuse, all this manipulation, all this political finagling, all these acts of deception, it’s all for you.”

And I think to myself how offensive this must be to the ears of God to hear a Christian leader say, “I did obey. I have carried out your instructions” all in the name of religion when there is such profound disobedience.

“Look at this big church. Look at this great ministry. Look at the number of people we reach. We must be doing something right – all for you, God. The Lord must be pleased with us because the thing is getting bigger and bigger and bigger.” And yet there is profound abuse going on. People are getting wounded. Folks are getting hurt. All for you, Lord.

A leader in decline, though, becomes insensitive to their disobedience. In fact, Paul uses the metaphor of a callused or seared conscience. That the more we disobey, the more our conscience becomes callused and dull to the voice of God.

And so we have this incredibly sarcastic remark, cutting remark, from Samuel as he tries to pierce the callus of Saul’s conscience. And so he says, “Well, if obeyed, what then is the bleating of the sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of the cattle that I hear?”

It’s really very humorous. After being instructed by the Lord to kill all of the animals. Saul announces, *“All that the Lord told me to do, I have fully obeyed.”* All the animals are dead, in other words. And in the background you hear the “moo-oooo” and “baa-aaaa”—all the sheep and all the animals are doing the whole barnyard routine.

And you know, there is always something that is crying out against the disobedient person even while they protest their innocence. There is always something crying out against them.

Let me ask you a question. Is there anything that is crying out against you? Even while you protest your innocence and you say, “I have obeyed the Lord.” Is there anything or anyone who would be protesting against you?

The apostle James writes regarding the wealthy, “that your silver and your gold cry out against you.” The wages that you have withheld from your workmen, it all is evident against you. You see, what James is saying and what Samuel is saying is that you may protest your innocence all day long, but we found the bloody glove. And the blood on the glove cries out against you.

Let me ask you again, is there anything that calls out to you and says, “You’re guilty.” It could be a bank account that you have been hoarding. That the Lord says, “I have given you wealth not to hoard. I didn’t want you to be a lake

stopped up, I want you to be river. I gave you wealth so that you could sow it and give it away.”

Maybe there is something in your house that ought not to be in your house and right now it is crying out against you “guilty.” Maybe there is a person you hurt and their wounding is crying out against you because you have not apologized. You have not gone and reconciled yourself to them. A child’s hurt may be crying out against you. Your spouse’s pain may be crying out against you.

Perhaps it is a person who is neglected in your family. Maybe it is an elderly person in a nursing home whose loneliness cries out against you. Perhaps it is a storeowner or an employer who you stole from and you need to confess and repay. Maybe its your parents who you have failed to call; a boyfriend or girlfriend you insensitively dumped.

“What then is the bleating of the sheep,” the Lord says “in my ears?”

Of course, like all people in decline, Saul cannot own his disobedience, but instead attempts to pass the buck. Verse 15:

“Saul answered, ‘Oh, the soldiers brought them from the Amalekites. They spared the best of the sheep and cattle to sacrifice to the Lord.’”

And then in verse 20, *“I did obey the Lord. I went on the mission the Lord assigned me. I completely destroyed the Amalekites, but the soldiers...”*

Right from the Garden of Eden, when we are caught, what do we do?

“Oh, its the person above me who made me do this. I didn’t want to. It’s the boss. It’s Eric. It’s the system.”

We pass it upstream to our boss. We pass it downstream to our employees.

“Oh, those stupid employees of mine.”

“Oh, its my wife.”

“Its my husband.”

“The reason why I am like this is because of my mother.”

“It is because of my father.”

“It is because of my sister.”

“It is because of society.”

Well, the last step in this leader’s decline, the negative example, is phony repentance with which he is caught. Verses 22-27:

“But Samuel replied: ‘Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination,

and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has rejected you as king.'

Then Saul said to Samuel, 'I have sinned. I violated the Lord's command and your instructions. I was afraid of the people and so I gave in to them. Now I beg you, forgive my sin and come back with me, so that I may worship the Lord.'

But Samuel said to him, 'I will not go back with you. You have rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you as king over Israel.' As Samuel turned to leave, Saul caught hold of the edge of his robe, and it tore."

Do you know what phony repentance is? Phony repentance is repentance that is only concerned about the consequences of being caught.

"okay, you've got me" Saul was saying. "You've got me. I sinned, all right. Now, let's deal with the consequences and make sure that the consequences won't be severe and I will still be able to hold onto the kingdom."

"I don't like the consequences. You say you are going to leave me, wife, so I am going to shed crocodile tears and tell you how sorry I am for this terrible thing that you are upset about. I am so sorry for screaming at you. I am so sorry for this last time I abused you. I am so sorry for running around on you. It will never happen again. Don't expose me."

See, phony repentance is always concerned about the consequences that will be meted out for disobedience. You know a leader is involved in phony repentance when their focus is on "how can I preserve my place and my ministry?"

They have been caught in the act of immorality. They have been caught in a lie. They have been tagged correctly as an abuser.. And their only question is, "When can I get my ministry back."

Phony repentance. That is when a leader has hit the bottom.

True repentance says that what I deeply care about is a restored relationship, first with God. I sinned. My first concern is not how can I minimize the consequences. That is up the Lord. My first concern is how can I get right with God again and how can my relationship with you be restored when I have hurt you so deeply.

See, a leader is not asked to be perfect. A leader is asked to be a follower. To obey the voice of God. And when they don't obey the voice of God, then to repent with a true repentance that simply wants restored relationship with God before it wants anything else.

"I want to build on being right, Lord, not looking right."

Well, we see that ultimately a person can become unusable to the Lord. You can't continue on empty forever. You can't say to the Lord, "No, no, no forever."

Samuel tells Saul, "I will not go back with you. You have rejected the word of the Lord and the Lord has rejected you as king over Israel."

Do you know there comes a time when the Lord will put somebody on the shelf because of repeated acts of abuse, disobedience or immorality? When the Lord will say, "You are disqualified."

Leaders, potential leaders, your doctrine of grace must include the notion of the Lord's freedom to say to you after repeated acts of disobedience, "You have disqualified yourself from leadership." I don't believe that a person can be disqualified from a relationship with God, but I do believe that the Lord reserves the right to put a person on the shelf and to say, "You have made yourself unusable."

I see that in 1 Corinthians 9 when Paul says, "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize. Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the game goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last. But we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore, I do not run like a man running aimlessly. I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I, myself, will not be disqualified for the prize."

I think Paul was talking about disqualification from the great privilege of being able to carry the gospel to others—the privilege of Christian preaching; the privilege of Christian leadership. What a tragedy to disqualify yourself.

You know, in this regard, one of the saddest verses in the Bible of a man who disqualified himself for a period of many years from ministry, back in the book of Judges we are told the story of Samson. And Samson was a man like Saul who had all of the outward trappings of leadership on him. The great anointing from God. The great empowering from God to do ministry. Tremendous impact as a result of the work of God in his life. Samson had the physical attributes of leadership. He had the calling of the Lord. But as a result of unchecked passion, repeated immorality, he disqualified himself.

And in the story of Samson in the book of Judges, I think there is one of the saddest verses in the Bible. Samson is being tied up by Delilah, his newest sexual conquest. And he continually breaks the bands, whatever she ties him up with, he is able to break the bands. And then finally she finds out the secret of strength is in his hair and she cuts his hair. He is tied up again by her. And it says in Judges 16 that "Samson awoke from his sleep and thought, 'I will go out as before and shake myself free' [and here is what I consider one of the saddest verses in the Bible], *but he did not know that the Lord had left him.*"

There comes a point in a person's ministry, where after continuing on empty for so long, being rendered insensitive to the voice of God for so long, that the person may not realize it, but the Lord leaves. And he shakes himself like Samson and does all the things just like before. Only there is no affect any more. The anointing is gone. And all you have now is the show.

See, I think the Lord works this way. He chooses to put an anointing on a person. He tests, then, the person's integrity. He checks the man's obedience. If the person is disobedient, the gifting will continue for a time. And this becomes deceptive to the man because he says, "My goodness, I still have the same impact even though I am doing my own thing. The Lord will probably continue with me forever like this."

But at a certain point, the Lord says, "You have now disqualified yourself. The kingdom is being ripped away from you."

And one day the man wakes up, shakes himself like Samson, and discovers that the Lord is not there any more. And so the man can continue to do the razzle-dazzle, continue to pretend that things are happening, but it is over. There is no more real healing. There is no more real prophecy. There is a change in their teaching effectiveness. God is gone.

And the Lord says, "You are now on the shelf. I have gone on to look for a man after my own heart."

Nobody is indispensable and nobody has a continual right to lead. The power is shut off.

Let me give you two take-away points:

1. Leaders, through stories, conversation and modeling, you must stress character training for your groups and in multiplying other leaders over skills-based training. Its great if a leader can teach and get words and is a great guitar player. Its even better if you teach your groups and those you are raising up to be scrupulously honest, to be kind, to not gossip, and to be a servant.
2. And leaders, what have you been looking for in yourself? Gifting? Charisma? Natural personality traits? That's not enough. Aim for character.