

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for October 5: Carry out God-given instructions

September 22, 2008

There are some words which might carry either a positive or negative connotation, depending upon the context in which they are used. A great example is the word “rebel.” Many of our heroes were rebels: The men who signed the Declaration of Independence were rebels, as were Davy Crockett, Jim Bowie and William Travis (not to mention Robert E. Lee and Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson).

The corporate world values the spirit of leaders who have a rebellious streak against the “same old same old” ways of doing things and who are able to think creatively and outside the proverbial box. Innovators, by definition, are rebels.

But being a rebel can be a very bad and even dangerous thing, especially when one is rebellious simply for the sake of being rebellious—a rebel without a cause, to borrow a famous line—or who simply is incapable or unwilling to submit to authority. This especially is true when one acts in rebellion against the will and authority of God.

Very early in Saul’s reign as the first king of Israel, by his actions he defined himself as that latter sort of rebel who displayed an utter disregard for God’s will, even when he was thoroughly briefed beforehand on what that divine will was. Our study passages in 1 Samuel describe two blatant acts of disobedience toward God which doomed Saul’s ability to function effectively as Israel’s leader, almost before that reign started.

The first of those occasions is described in chapter 13. One of Saul’s first

acts as Israel's king was to assemble an army of 3,000 men, one-third of whom were placed under the command of Saul's son, Jonathan. Jonathan took his contingent of 1,000 warriors and attacked a Philistine outpost at the town of Geba.

That assault elicited a dramatic response by the Philistines, who amassed an army of thousands of charioteers and "soldiers as numerous as the sand on the seashore" (13:2-5) to do battle against Saul. The Israelites panicked at the size of the opposing force; many of them deserted, and those who remained hid themselves and trembled in fear (13:6-7).

Samuel had instructed Saul to wait seven days once he arrived in Gilgal so that Samuel could come and offer sacrifices and burnt offerings to God on Saul's behalf (10:8), but when Samuel had not arrived by the seventh day, Saul thought he was not coming. In order to stem the tide of desertions from his army, Saul impetuously and presumptuously took it on himself to offer the sacrifices (13:8-9).

He thought that the burnt offerings would be an encouragement to his fearful troops that would rally them and prepare them for battle, or perhaps he viewed the sacrifices as a magic talisman which would ensure Israelite victory on the battlefield. Whatever Saul's motivations were, he disrespected the sacrifices, which were a holy act of worship; and he disrespected God by his deliberate disobedience.

We already have taken note of Saul's spiritual ignorance in last week's lesson, and we might be tempted to cut Saul some slack on the basis that he might not have been aware of God's laws concerning sacrifices. However, there can be no getting around the clear instructions given in chapter 10.

The episode revealed what would be a fatal flaw in Saul's capacity to lead Israel: He had a basic inability (or unwillingness) to follow God's direction.

God declared that he desired a man after his own heart to lead Israel, and one component of that God-desired character was a personal humility which listened for and followed God's direction—a quality woefully absent in Saul (13:13-14).

Following close on the heels of that event is a second which paints the biblical picture of Saul's rebellious nature in even deeper colors. In chapter 15, we read that Samuel once again communicated a message from God to Saul.

In that message, Samuel commanded Saul to attack their ancient enemies the Amalekites, sparing no one, and to destroy all that belonged to them. But once more Saul substituted his own plan for God's, and spared the life of the Amalekite king. Moreover, under Saul's direction, the Israelites destroyed only those livestock which were weak or injured, while keeping the rest of the sheep and cattle alive (15:1-9). The king's stated reason for doing this was so that they could be offered as a sacrifice to God (v. 15), and we must give Saul the benefit of the doubt on this point; but even so this would be a sacrifice offered upon an altar of disobedience.

What is most astounding—and most revealing of Saul's character—in this episode is that the king claimed to have done what God told him to do (15:13, 17-20), when it was beyond dispute he had not. Saul justified his actions on the basis that the outcome was one which he thought God would approve (sacrifices and burnt offerings), but what he actually had done was to lower the bar on what constituted obedience to God. In insolent pride, Saul thought he knew what God wanted better than God himself did, and so he arrogantly redefined obedience.

Samuel gave the king a much-needed lesson in the theology of worship: The sacrifice which pleases God the most is for his will to be obeyed (15:22-23).

Here is something that ought to give us pause for personal reflection,

because we all encounter situations in which we are tempted to let our actions be guided what we think God wants, rather than what God plainly has revealed in the Bible that he expects of us.

As I write these lines, I am thinking about something that happened to me only yesterday. My wife and I had gone to a local fast-food restaurant for lunch following Sunday morning worship (a quick lunch means a longer Sunday afternoon nap). I was standing at the counter waiting for my order, and next to me was a man who, along with the other members of his family, all were dressed in a manner which implied they too had come directly from church.

This man was verbally blistering the teenage girl working at the counter, for mistakes in his food order. In a voice loud enough to be heard throughout the restaurant he said, "I don't know why we keep coming here, every time we do you manage to screw up our order!" I felt my ears turning red, and I told the man he needed to be a better representative of Christ and of his own church. (I think my precise words were, "You really ought to go back to church, because it didn't do you much good the first time.")

He offered no apology to the poor girl he was verbally attacking, but instead attempted to justify his bullying behavior by quoting scriptural commands to be "strong and courageous." How sad that a man could leave his place of worship of God, and then violate what Jesus called the second-greatest commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself (I cannot imagine that man wanting to be treated in such a fashion himself)—and then basically to say, "But I was obeying God!"

In Luke 12:47-48, we read a mini-parable in which Jesus told about a man with two servants. One of those servants does not know his master's will and thus does not do it; the second is aware of his master's will but deliberately disobeys. Jesus stated both servants would be punished, but the one who is guilty of intentional disobedience will be punished more

severely.

The hand of judgement falls heaviest on those who know what God's expectations are, but ignore them; and it does not matter if obedience is inconvenient or difficult or doesn't appear to make sense at the time. Nor is any allowance given for how good a person's reasons for his disobedience might seem to himself.