

THE UNDIVIDED HEART

1 Samuel 12

Dr. George O. Wood

The text today is taken from 1 Samuel 12. The setting for this particular Scripture is given to us at the end of chapter 11. It is a reconfirmation of Saul's kingship in its very earliest stages at a place called Gilgal.

“Samuel said to all Israel, ‘I have listened to everything you said to me and have set a king over you. Now you have a king as your leader. As for me, I am old and gray, and my sons are here with you. I have been your leader from my youth until this day. Here I stand. Testify against me in the presence of the LORD and his anointed. Whose ox have I taken? Whose donkey have I taken? Whom have I cheated? Whom have I oppressed? From whose hand have I accepted a bribe to make me shut my eyes? If I have done any of these, I will make it right.’

‘You have not cheated or oppressed us,’ they replied. ‘You have not taken anything from anyone's hand.’

Samuel said to them, ‘The LORD is witness against you, and also his anointed is witness this day, that you have not found anything in my hand.’

‘He is witness,’ they said.

Then Samuel said to the people, ‘It is the LORD who appointed Moses and Aaron and brought your forefathers up out of Egypt. Now then, stand here, because I am going to confront you with evidence before the LORD as to all the righteous acts performed by the LORD for you and your fathers.’

After Jacob entered Egypt, they cried to the LORD for help, and the LORD sent Moses and Aaron, who brought your forefathers out of Egypt and settled them in this place.

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But they forgot the LORD their God; so he sold them into the hand of Sisera, the commander of the army of Hazor, and into the hands of the Philistines and the king of Moab, who fought against them. They cried out to the LORD and said, “We have sinned; we have forsaken the LORD and served the Baals and the Ashtoreths. But now deliver us from the hands of our enemies, and we will serve you.” Then the LORD sent Jerub-Baal, Barak, Jephthah and Samuel, and he delivered you from the hands of your enemies on every side, so that you lived securely.

But when you saw that Nahash king of the Ammonites was moving against you, you said to me, “No, we want a king to rule over us”—even though the LORD your God was your king.” Now here is the king you have chosen, the one you asked for; see, the LORD has set a king over you. If you fear the LORD and serve and obey him and do not rebel against his commands, and if both you and the king who reigns over you follow the LORD your God—good! But if you do not obey the LORD, and if you rebel against his commands, his hand will be against you, as it was against your fathers.

Now then, stand still and see this great thing the LORD is about to do before your eyes! Is it not wheat harvest now? I will call upon the LORD to send thunder and rain. And you will realize what an evil thing you did in the eyes of the LORD when you asked for a king.’

Then Samuel called upon the LORD, and that same day the LORD sent thunder and rain. So all the people stood in awe of the LORD and of Samuel.

The people all said to Samuel, ‘Pray to the LORD your God for your servants so that we will not die, for we have added to all our other sins the evil of asking for a king.’

‘Do not be afraid,’ Samuel replied. ‘You have done all this evil; yet do not turn away from the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart. Do not turn away after useless idols. They can do you no good, nor can they rescue you, because they are useless. For the sake of his great name

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the LORD will not reject his people, because the LORD was pleased to make you his own. As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by failing to pray for you. And I will teach you the way that is good and right. But be sure to fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things he has done for you. Yet if you persist in doing evil, both you and your king will be swept away” (1 Samuel 12:1-25, NIV).

This message speaks to us on the theme, “The Undivided Heart.” The setting for Samuel’s address is at a place called Gilgal. The setting of this story is more significant if we understand what Gilgal is and where it was. The name Gilgal itself is Hebrew. It means “to roll away.” It was the first location Israel camped at after entering the Promised Land under Joshua. The Israelites had come from east of the Jordan River. They had marched through the Jordan on dry ground—the Lord miraculously separated the waters. They came to Gilgal, just to the east of Jericho out in the Jordan Valley.

At Gilgal, the place of beginning in the Promised Land, five very significant things happened. First, it was where the twelve stones or boulders from the bed of the Jordan River had been brought. These stones were a testimony to the fact that God had miraculously led His people into the Promised Land. These stones of memorial were located at Gilgal. Gilgal was also the place where the generation of men who had grown up in the wilderness for forty years were circumcised. This was part of the mark of the covenant God had made with His people. It was also at Gilgal where the first Passover in the Promised Land was observed by God’s people. It was at Gilgal where the manna, which had sustained them for forty years, ceased. And it was at Gilgal where Joshua built the base encampment from which he would launch the military expeditions to take control of the land. Gilgal was the place of beginnings.

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Samuel, who was a prophet, had this marvelous sense of destiny and history. He was choosing to reaffirm Saul's young kingship there at Gilgal. It was a time to, once again, roll away the reproach of the past. It was a time to begin anew. It was a time to forget the defeat of yesteryear. Therefore, I think Gilgal always has universal meaning for people of all times. Samuel seeks to bring these people back to the pristine spiritual commitment of a people fresh out of the wilderness. Gilgal was that place of beginning again. It represents getting back to first love, to first commitment, and to an undivided heart. If any of us have collected things in our life which have brought us away from the freshness of the experience in which we started out following the Lord, then this chapter is for us. We can meet at Gilgal—a place where the past is rolled away and a new beginning is made.

Samuel, in this chapter, shows us what it is to have an undivided heart toward God—to have a freshness of spiritual commitment. Samuel always kept that freshness. The people hadn't, but he always did. I admire people who stay in places a long time. I know they only stay there to keep their hearts fresh before God. Samuel did that. He kept an undivided heart before the Lord. This chapter will show us some things about Samuel that give us the secret of an undivided heart—a way of keeping a perpetual Gilgal in our lives.

I. First, Samuel kept an undivided heart because he did not let life's disappointments derail him.

Samuel had disappointments. That's clear. In fact, in verses 1 and 2 of our text today, we immediately see three disappointments—in three poignant phrases. "I have listened. I am old and gray. My sons are here with you." Those three phrases reveal a world of disappointment for Samuel.

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The phrase “I have listened” communicates a disappointment because he had not wanted to listen to Israel. Their request was for a king. He knew that God had a higher and a better way of administering and leading them, and it was not through the institution of a human monarchy. But there came a point—just like there often does in our lives—where Samuel realized he could not control all the elements. Our decisions are limited by other people’s decisions. Even when those decisions are sometimes bad—decisions made out of the will of God or out of His highest will. We find we have to listen—even if we don’t want to and even if it doesn’t seem right. We find we are limited by the choices other people make. Samuel says, “I’ve listened,” and he says, “I’m old and gray.” None of us want to make that statement. That speaks of the element of time which we cannot control. No one wants to grow old. It is such a shame that youth is wasted on the young. We don’t have control of other people’s decisions. We don’t have control of time. Sometimes, we don’t have control of our family. Listen to Samuel’s poignant phrase “My sons are here with you.” Those sons had perverted justice and taken bribes. They are with him. They represent a family he could not control.

Samuel had enough on his plate if he wanted to excuse himself from his responsibilities. He could have said, “People don’t listen to me. I’m old and deserve to retire. My kids are a reproach. I might as well check out of this business of active service to God.” But instead he says this powerful phrase, “I have been your leader from my youth until this day” (1 Samuel 12:2). These last three words are dynamite! “Until this day,” meaning, “My service to the Lord and to you has been uninterrupted. There has been no hiatus, no break in my service in spite of disappointments. I have continued.”

I find, as pastor, that one of the single greatest causes for people dropping out of ministry—lay ministry, like singing and teaching—is because they do not feel appreciated. They share

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statements like, “I was not thanked. When I did it, I was criticized.” Those devastating verbal wounds derail our commitment.

I appreciate Samuel. As a leader, he did not let those things tick him off from meaningful service to God and to His body. You’ve found, I’m sure, that every single commitment we make in life is easier to start than it is to finish. Marriage is that way. Raising children is that way. Becoming a responsible member of the body of Christ is that way. Making a missionary faith promise is that way. It’s true across the board—it’s easier to make the commitment than to finish it. Samuel is a person who finishes. The Scripture in the New Testament points us to the fact that we are not on our own resources to finish, but He who began a good work in us will complete it. Stay until God is done with you.

II. Secondly, with an undivided heart, Samuel stood ready to have his conduct thoroughly evaluated.

He gives a strong defense of his integrity. If a person is going to serve in a leadership role, they must have integrity. We have seen a tremendous breakdown in America with regard to integrity—politically, religiously, and economically. Today, people seem to be requiring more of leaders. As a result, leaders are finding it harder to live up to expectations. We’re expecting more of people in responsible places. Samuel knew that truth long ago.

We know from an earlier reference in 1 Samuel 9:7 that it was the practice of the day for people to bring an honorarium if they were to get advice from a prophet. Saul’s servants dug around for something to give the man of God. Evidently, Samuel had not chosen to allow that practice. He says, “Whose ox have I taken? Whose donkey have I taken? Who have I cheated? Who have I oppressed? From whose hand have I accepted a bribe?” He says (1 Samuel 12:3). “Financially, I’m credible. In doing justice, I’m credible.”

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As I read the text, I thought—what a unique position Samuel had in life. I see very few people who have a similar chance to make a farewell statement. Samuel has this beautiful moment to look the people square in the eye and say to them, “Is my conduct acceptable to you? Am I responsible for any hurt or injury in your life? Have I, in any way, diminished you or defrauded you? I want to know it, so I can make it right.” Very few people get that kind of a chance. We need to take a special look at and inventory of our relationships in life. We need to ask, “Do we have Samuel’s integrity with our family and friends?”

As I listen to people as a pastor, I often hear of trouble spots in relationships—where a person in a relationship has caused a lot of problems. The words I hear against them are, “You are so negative. You are grumpy and grouchy. I never feel safe with your moods. You are overbearing and inconsiderate. You are angry, and your explosive temper has made havoc in our family. You are cutting and sarcastic. You’ve gunny-sacked your anger and wounded us. You have defrauded me sexually. You show no interest in anyone other than yourself. You escape responsibility by blaming me.” Those are hard words to hear, let alone speak. I wonder what the result would be if we said to the other significant person in our life, “Have I wronged you?” And then they replied, “Yes, you have.” So often, instead of taking a moment of introspection to ask ourselves whether or not what they’re saying is true, we immediately start a campaign to defend ourselves and to explain our actions. However, the undivided heart is open to evaluation and to change.

Samuel opens himself up and says, “If I need to change, if you’ve seen anything in my life that needs to change, tell me. I’ll try to do something about it.” That is Gilgal. When you get to that point, you’re willing to start anew and make dramatic changes in your life. And the results will not take long to see. When a person gets authentic in searching for change and is finally willing to admit responsibility, there will be dramatic—almost overnight—healing and reconciliation.

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Samuel is wise enough to know that you cannot change another person without first seriously looking at yourself. That's why he doesn't begin with Israel. He begins with himself. Once he has done self-evaluation and can say that he did not make a profit out of being a prophet, he then can talk about the change that other people need to make.

This brings us to the third characteristic of an undivided heart. The first is, Samuel did not let life's diversities derail him. Secondly, he was willing to hear a fair and impartial evaluation of his life, and he was willing to do something about it.

III. Thirdly, with an undivided heart, Samuel completely relied upon the Lord, even when it was extremely difficult.

Samuel authentically relied upon the Lord to provide leadership for the nation of Israel. His problem with the people was they had difficulty doing that. To them, God was someone you couldn't see, and His ways were hard to figure out. The whole idea that God would raise up a leader without an institutionalized monarchy to deal with their problems as they faced threat from a foreign power—that scared them, just as it would scare us. We're not in the same covenantal relationship as the nation of Israel was with God. But God asked that of them. He said, "Trust Me." And that's hard to do.

Samuel is talking the people through a four-fold process. The prophets always go through it to explain the conduct of God's people as it relates to their response to the Lord. The fourfold process is this: deliverance from oppression, followed by sin, followed by punishment, followed by confession with a prayer for deliverance. Then it starts again—deliverance, followed by sin, followed by punishment, followed by confession and petition. It's a cycle—repeatable time after time. The sin here is defined as "forgetting the Lord." That's what sin is—not taking the Lord into account when we reach decisions.

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Norman Vincent Peale tells a humorous story about when he was a boy. He found a big black cigar, slipped into an alley, and lit up. He said that it didn't taste very good, but it did make him feel very grown up. It made him feel grown up, until he saw his father coming toward him.

Quickly, he put the cigar behind his back and tried to hide it from his dad. Desperate to divert his father's attention, Norman pointed towards the sign that was on the billboard advertising a circus coming to town. He said, "There's a circus coming to town. Can we go to the circus?" His dad looked down at him and his reply taught Norman a lesson he would never forget. In a very quiet but firm voice, he said, "Son, never make a petition while, at the same time, trying to hold a smoldering disobedience." I think that fits in our relationship with God. Don't try to petition God while holding a smoldering disobedience. Samuel's indictment against his people deals with a smoldering disobedience.

The fourth step in the process involves confession and petition for deliverance. However, this time, Israel had changed the terms. They were no longer willing to radically depend upon God for His provision. Instead, they asked for deliverance through human instruments—through a monarchy, through something they could see.

Faith is a most difficult thing—to simply rely totally on the Lord for the future without proposing a human solution. That's tough. When I'm in a jam, I'm not only praying, but I'm working like mad to come up with a solution. Samuel is calling for this radical commitment to God—to trust Him in an area where His will was clearly known. Unlike Samuel, we do not always know God's clear will. Here, however, His will was known, and it was not in God's highest will for the nation to have a king. But God was going to allow it. He was going to continue to love them, to work with them, and to use it for good. But still, it was not in His highest will.

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I think, in this decision to have a king, the people represent a kind of halfway commitment to God. They were believers, but they were not believers who were radically sold out to God and to His cause. They show us, by contrast, the true meaning of commitment. It's not a halfway covenant. It's something that is radical and complete.

We live in an age of light beer, light fruit, light yogurt, and light syrup. It's no wonder we have light commitments and light vows. I came across this statement somewhere on a church marquee, "The light church—24 percent fewer commitments. Home of the 7.5 percent tithe, 5-minute sermons, and 15-minute worship services. We have only 8 commandments—your choice. We use just 3 spiritual laws, and we have an 800-year millennium. Everything you've always wanted in a church—and less." Light commitment.

For Israel, the kingship represented light commitment. For us, the kingship translates into whatever we substitute for God's highest will in our life. Like, refusing to follow God to a mission field because of the cost and self-denial it would take. Or marrying an unbeliever—we know it's not God's will to be unequally yoked, but we're in love so we go ahead. God doesn't kick us out of the family. He relates to us as He related to Israel who chose a king. But it was not His highest will. Your kingship may be staying in a job where you know the work you do is totally inconsistent with your Christian faith, but you need the security. Or checking out of a marriage without having biblical justification for it. "But Lord, I can't trust You that radically. I've got to have my own solution." Or the quest for self-satisfaction, fulfillment, and pleasure— independent of a commitment to serving God and other people. That also can be a "king"—a light commitment.

To Samuel, the people were saying. "This relying totally on God—it is just too difficult. We want to serve God, but." Whenever we add that three letter word "but" behind a sentence, it

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means we've qualified it. Samuel had an undivided heart, willing to make complete commitment to God and not willing to take God's second best in his life. If we take God's second best, does that mean we're out of the flock of God? Not at all. God loves His people. It just means that we miss God's highest will for our lives.

IV. Lastly, with an undivided heart, Samuel kept on praying for people who let both God and him down.

Verse 23, "Far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by failing to pray for you." I think that took some grace to do that. The people had been a keen disappointment to him and to God. But he said, "I'll never quit praying for you." The upward call of Jesus Christ is a call to rise above the objections of life. It is a call to love those who've disappointed us, even those who are enemies. It is a call to love them by doing good, by forgiving, by going the extra mile, and by praying for them. In this, we conquer evil with good.

Is there anyone you've quit praying for? A person you might feel you're justified to quit praying for because they got out of God's will? Here were people who got out of God's will, and yet Samuel said, "Far be it from me that I should not pray for you." Prayer is a way of not letting go. It's a way of not turning a person over to their own fate without God. It's holding on and prevailing. There are many Christians today who have quit interceding for their family, for their friends, or for their enemies. We must not stop what God has not stopped. As verse 22 says so eloquently, "For the sake of his great name the LORD will not reject his people, because the LORD was pleased to make you his own."

If you're a long way from Gilgal spiritually, the Lord has not rejected you, because the Lord was pleased to make you his own. It is time to get back to first commitments and to Gilgal. This message raises questions for us to ponder and take action in our lives. Is it possible that you have

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let the negatives of life derail you? If so, what will you do about that? Secondly, are you ready to have your conduct thoroughly evaluated? If the evaluation is one that calls for changes in your life, will you commit yourself to make those changes? Thirdly, are you completely relying on the Lord, or are you substituting less than His perfect will? Lastly, do you keep on praying for people who have failed God and failed you? Your answer and my answer to these questions will determine the degree of an undivided heart we have to God.

Closing Prayer

Our Lord, we come to You at this moment of consecration, having listened to Your Word today and suddenly finding that the issues of three thousand years ago are the issues we face today. Reliance upon You, complete trust in You, full obedience to You, accountability to who we are, and accountability to You. Lord, if this word today finds us away from purity of commitment, if it finds us having a divided heart—on the one hand, we want to do Your will, and on the other hand, we are trying to do our own in opposition to Your will—bring the separated parts of our personality together. Give us the strength to make the kind of commitment You ask. We know we do not have the strength in ourselves to do this. But we can make ourselves available to You—for Your power, Your keeping, and Your care. Keep our own spiritual lives fresh and pure, as the nation of Israel was at the place of rolling away. You've rolled away our sins when we came to You, and we always want to keep that purity and innocence of the wonder of the new life You bring. Help us to go on forgiving, loving, and serving. We ask in Christ's name. Amen.