

LIVING WITH A GOOD CONSCIENCE

1 Samuel 15

Dr. George O. Wood

I'm going to read selected verses out of 1 Samuel 15.

“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 out of 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”’” (1 Samuel 15:1–3, NIV).

Saul set out to do that exact thing. He attacked them, took the king alive, and totally destroyed all the people with a 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’” (1 Samuel 15:9–11, NIV).

Then ensues a meeting between Samuel and Saul. Saul asserts that he didn't do anything wrong, and he tries to get out of the problem by lying. But, in a classic response, Samuel says, “What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear?” (verse 14, NIV). That activity contradicted the denial Saul was making. Then Samuel, in one of the really great verses of all the Old Testament, says to Saul in verse 22, “Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than

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sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams” (NIV). Samuel announces that the kingdom is taken from Saul. Saul then pleads for Samuel to remain. Saul grabs at Samuel’s robe, but it tears. And Samuel says, “So will your kingdom be torn from you.” Yet to save Saul’s face, Samuel offers up sacrifice and stays with him. He then departs, never to go to Saul again.

This chapter raises some very heavy issues. Issues like just war, holy war, the slaughter of innocents, and capital punishment. I am not going to ignore those issues. I will deal with them, but not in the detail I would like. Time does not allow. But, while dealing with these issues, we will see the bottom line of this Scripture. We must always attach Scripture into our practical need. Thus, the focus of my message deals with the theme “Living with a Good Conscience.” Saul is person who is in violation of his conscience. We see the steps God took to arouse his conscience and bring him to repentance.

Our lives can be compared to a cargo ship at sea. Properly loaded, the ship cruises at its water line—loaded too heavily, the ship sinks beneath the water line. In our human experience, guilt overloads us—whether that guilt is true guilt or false guilt. False guilt is when we convince ourselves of a bunch of “I should haves.” They aren’t necessarily rooted in any objective criteria or standard in God’s Word. Whether it’s real guilt or false guilt, it can very much sink our lives personally, emotionally, and existentially. In the Scripture, guilt is established by an objective standard rather than a subjective standard. Thus a person may say, “I don’t feel guilty at all,” and yet they are because they violated God’s law—whether they felt it or not. On the other hand, a person may say, “I feel so guilty,” and yet that person may not be guilty at all because what they feel guilty over is not condemned in Scripture. Defining guilt and defining conscience is a most difficult thing. We all have a conscience, but it seems each conscience differs from one another.

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Conscience is meant to approve or reprove our behavior. The maturing Christian understands the conscience is to be shaped by the objective standards in God's Word.

I grew up not understanding the difference between subjective and objective standards of guilt and conscience. There were some things I thought were wrong that weren't wrong. My conscience told me that pool and bowling were wrong. That conscience was shaped by tradition, rather than by the written standard of Scripture. So as I matured, I sought out the objective standard of Scripture rather than tradition. I'm not saying it's always ok to throw out tradition. Sometimes there are traditions with good reasons. We need guilt and conscience to be shaped by God's Word.

As we approach today's Scripture, we see five areas where the conscience is dealt with. There's first a testing of the conscience, verses 1–9. Then secondly, there is the awakening of the conscience, verse 10–16. Then there is the probing of the conscience, verses 17–23. Then the cleansing of the conscience, verses 24–31. Then the fallout of a violated conscience, verses 32–35.

I. First, the test of conscience.

Saul is given an objective standard to adhere to. He is told in verses 1–3 to go out and destroy the Amalekites—every last one of them and every last thing they had. That's a troublesome text for us living in these times. It's troublesome from the vantage point of the cross. We might well ask, "Did not the Lord tell us to forgive rather than to destroy our enemies? Therefore, what's a text like this doing in Scripture?" That's a natural response we have when we first begin to read it. However, if we think for just a moment, we realize that even within the New Testament teaching of the cross and Christ, God—in that cross—does not do away with His judgments. Second Corinthians 5:10 tells us that someday we will all appear before the judgment seat of Christ and

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answer for what we've done with the cross—the deeds we've done in the flesh. Second Corinthians 5:11 tells us that since we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. In other words, there is an aspect of God to motivate us to fear because of the prospect of an awesome judgment. One day, the Lord is going to judge the world. Texts like the one we have today illustrate that God is deadly serious about His judgments.

Saul is going to be tested on a very objective standard. He had a clear word from the Lord. We must know that His clear word is not a similar word that is spoken to all of us. We'll never be told to do what Saul is told to do because we're not the head of state. We're not a president or prime minister or king. We're individual citizens. Saul was being told to take action as head of state. He was told to lead a just war—a holy war. We ask from our modern perspective, "What kind of a God would give orders for a holy war? What difference is there between 1 Samuel 1–3 and the kind of activity we see today?" When the existence of innocent people is at stake, God sanctions the activity of a government to protect those people. That's both an Old Testament and New Testament principle. The governor, Paul says in Romans 13, does not bear the sword in vain. In other words, God has given to government—which He has divinely established—the responsibility to punish the wrongdoer. The wrongdoer may be an internal domestic enemy, and a police force and judges are required. Or the enemy may be an external enemy, such as a foreign foe or an alien. The Scripture, in the New Testament as well as the Old, gives government the power to protect its people and to promote justice. If, therefore, we see Agag in 1 Samuel 15 as though God were talking about Hitler or Mussolini, we then get the picture in its proper perspective. That's the kind of person we're dealing with. Agag led his people on a savage and ruthless attack against Israel. That enmity between the nations began years before the present Agag. Agag is not a proper name. It's a title, like Pharaoh.

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In the decades earlier, when Israel had just come out of the bondage of Egypt, they were walking defenseless through the Sinai. There, they were encountered by a group of people called the Amalekites. Amalek was the grandson of Esau, the brother of Jacob. Therefore, the Amalekites are distant cousins to the people of Israel. The Amalekites, in the wilderness, did a very traitorous thing to Israel. Deuteronomy 25:17–18 tells us about what they did. It says, “Remember what the Amalekites did to you along the way when you came up out of Egypt. When you were weary and worn out, they met you on your journey and cut off all who were lagging behind.” Who is it that lags behind? It’s not the strong men. It’s not the army. It’s not the people of strength. The people who lag behind are the people on crutches, wheelchairs, the old folk, the sick, the pregnant, the nursing mothers, and the small children. The Amalekites—rather than meeting Israel in a war head on and confronting their army—chose to attack them cowardly, from the rear, and do violence to their innocent. The Amalekites had a track record over the years of doing that same thing against Israel. So long as one Amalekite remained, there was no safety for any Israeli living in Israel.

We may look at that and say, “I thought Jesus taught pacifism.” If you look carefully at the subject of pacifism in the New Testament, you could be persuaded to come to the conclusion that Jesus forbade us to be so. He forbade us to take personal retaliation—one-to-one retaliation. But He did not at all take away the prerogative from the government to protect its people from internal and external danger. The power to bear the sword is given to the state, as shown in Romans 13. It is reprehensible for any individual, including Saul in Old Testament times, to take individual action to destroy someone else—to just go off on a hunt for another human being. But Saul was not acting as an individual. He was acting as a head of state.

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It's a hard choice declaring war. The destruction of the innocent, which is also commanded of Saul, is seen similarly in contemporary history with the decision Truman made. When he was president, he had to make the decision of choosing whether the killing of the innocent was necessary to stop an even greater carnage of destruction. Men, women, infants, and children along with cattle and sheep were all destroyed. It was awful. We pray it will never happen again. It is a well established principle within war that the innocent suffer. The innocent of the Amalekites suffered because their armies and kings brought the innocent of God's people into danger. In America, we have the phrase "Remember the Alamo." This phrase is used as a call to patriotism and duty. In ancient Israel, the phrase was "Remember the Amalekites!" Unless Israel could secure its borders and protect its people, there would be no nation to produce kings, priests, prophets, and ultimately the Messiah.

The test for Saul, therefore, as the head of state was whether or not he would obey this clear word of God, which sent him out to not bear the sword in vain. If we want to spiritualize this text for just a moment, we can also do that. On the spiritual level, the Amalekites represent the flesh—that side of our human nature that is in rebellion against God. The flesh takes rear guard action against our spiritual self. The destruction of the Amalekites ordered by God is a lesson to us. If we are to dwell in spiritual safety, we cannot let even one bit of the flesh live. We must crucify the flesh with its desires. We must put to death the old nature.

Saul's test was simply, "Will you obey God's clear word to you?" That is a question put before us. The nature of our test may be different, but the question is the same. Will you obey God's clear word in your life? Saul did not. You might say, "If I were Saul, even if I were head of state, I wouldn't have obeyed either. I'd have said, 'God, I'll fight the war but I will limit my military action to my enemies in uniform. I'll spare the civilian population to the best of my ability. I will

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extract judgment only on the most guilty. I'll not blindly follow orders I believe to be a violation of the moral order. I'll not kill babies.'" Note, however, what Saul does. He doesn't make a statement like that. Instead, he kills the most innocent and spares the most guilty. Verse 9 tells us that everything that was despised and weak they destroyed—the people on crutches, the people in wheelchairs, the babies, the young, the weak, and the sickly. They destroyed those. But the strong, the fat, and the king he protected. That is morally equivalent to the idea that after World War II, the allied forces would be justified in annihilating all of Germany but sparing Hitler. It's the same principle. Saul shows a corruption in character. His concern is not the preservation of the innocent, but the preservation of the guilty. After World War II, the Nuremberg trials established the principle that a person is responsible for his own actions—that no officer shall be allowed to plead a defense of blind obedience to an order that is morally invalid.

Had Saul saved the women, the children, and the infants, he would have still been disobedient.

But I have a feeling that if he'd based his actions on moral grounds, God might have let him take the position as intercessor. We learn from Abraham's dealings with God over the destruction of Sodom, God is willing to bargain over the terms of an assignment. And He may even reduce His demands. But Saul had absolutely no moral intention. His actions are immoral and heinous—destroy the civilian population and spare the worst perpetrator of all. Saul was tested, "Would he be obedient?" Saul failed the test. Could I ask you? In what areas is your obedience to God being tested? All of us, I'm sure, can identify those. This leads us past the testing of conscience.

II. We now observe Saul's awakening of conscience.

See verses 10–16. What we do is known to God. There is nothing about us that's hidden from Him. Saul's actions were known to God. God then makes them known to Samuel. Not always does God make our private actions known to someone else. In Saul's case He did, but sometimes

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with us He doesn't. The New Testament says that some men's sins precede them to judgment—others follow after. It's a simple way of saying that sometimes when you do what's wrong, it is found out now. But sometimes, it isn't found out until you stand before God.

Saul not only disobeyed the Lord, he also constructed a monument to his victory. Therefore, he was taking credit for the win and was falling into pride. Saul had a deep need for approval. He grew up in the shadow of a super-dominant father. He was struck with a deep inferiority complex, as people do who have lived under the dominance of someone else. They generally have inferiority complexes and desperately want approval. Saul wants approval. He so wants approval that he creates a monument so people will think he's somebody. Then he doesn't have the guts to tell the people to stop saving all the fat animals. He also wants the approval that will accrue to him when he can show off his captive king—his rival. He can lead the king of the Amalekites around like a dog on a chain and show that as his trophy of war.

We make a lot of bad choices in life because we are desperate for approval. We launch out in a decision we think will gain us the approval we seek. If we're not willing to find out if that decision is in violation to God's will—there will be problems. Yet, the text of Scripture so wonderfully states that God loves Saul. I see His love for Saul in the phrase in verse 11, "I am grieved" (NIV). The very fact that God has emotional feelings towards Saul shows that He loves him. You only grieve for someone you care about. If you don't care about them, you just shrug your shoulders and walk away. But God cared about this man, and He cares for you and me.

Samuel is sent to awaken the conscience of Saul. Even as we have violated God's tests, He finds ways of wanting to awaken us. It's interesting to watch Saul's response. It's the typical pattern of denial of wrong. First of all, he's spiritually glib. Saul comes to Samuel and says, "The Lord bless you" (verse 13, NIV). It's a greeting you'd expect given at church among charismatic

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friends—a good, holy hug. All's well. You can never tell by the veneer and gloss that anything is wrong. We use it today. Then Saul follows that spiritual glibness with big lie number one. He tells four lies in the course of his conscience being awakened. Big lie number one, "I have carried out the LORD's instructions" (NIV). End of sentence—no qualifications. "I've done it!" Samuel responds with a classic line. He hears the animals lowing and bleating. Samuel says, "What is this lowing and bleating of sheep if you've carried out these instructions?" So Saul tells big lie number two. In verse 15, Saul says, "We saved them to sacrifice to the Lord." Instant lie—made up on the spot. We cover our tracks, and we try to justify ourselves. His conscience is getting awakened, but that's not the end of it. A third thing is going to happen in regard to his conscience. It's been tested, and it's now being awakened.

III. Thirdly, Saul's conscience will be probed.

Samuel's going to get into Saul's conscience. Have you ever been in for an examination after an incision and the doctor puts an instrument in the open wound? That's what Samuel is about to do to Saul's conscience. He's going to put the steel utensil of God's unchanging Word into the wound of his life. Samuel is going to do some probing, and it's going to hurt. In verses 17–23, Samuel charges Saul with three things. The first—ingratitude towards God. In verse 17, Samuel basically says, "God made you king, and yet you were ungrateful." Someone once said, "The good ones God uses, and the bad ones use God." Saul was one of the bad ones. God couldn't use him. He was going to use God. Samuel also charges him with disobedience and irresponsibility in verses 18 and 19. Saul responds with big lie number three, "But I did obey the LORD" (verse 20, NIV). Followed by his only admission. "I've spared Agag [the Hitler, the criminal]." This was followed by big lie number four in verse 21, "We saved these things to sacrifice them to God."

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When we have done wrong, it's a natural tendency to cover our tracks. That's human. Saul is maybe thinking something like this, "I think I've passed that test. I got more than 70 percent right. You told me to do about five things, and I did three and a half of them. That's got to be passing." Samuel is saying back to Saul, "With God, passing is 100 percent." Verses 22 and 23 are some of the most powerful words of obedience in all the Bible. "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" (NIV). What Samuel is saying here is that worship must not be divorced from personal and social responsibility. You can offer all the sacrifices you want, sing all the charismatic choruses you want, make all the financial contributions you want, or attend all the meetings you want—yet, if your personal life, social life, and social responsibility to the needy are in violation to God's Word, then your worship is meaningless. That's a hard word. We live in a feel-good age. We would much rather feel good than be called to duty. That's why it's so difficult for pastors in today's culture to even venture into subjects like this. We feel we have the responsibility to send you on your way with encouragement. Prophets probed the conscience. That's what Samuel does with Saul.

IV. Fortunately, we get to see Saul's cleansed conscience.

See verses 24–31. Saul owns up to responsibility. "I have sinned." Those words are hard to say. "But Lord, it is somebody else's fault. I went into it unwillingly. It was all their fault. I was dropped on my head when I was a kid. It's not fair." It's hard to say the words, "I have sinned." With Saul, there's still a bit of escapism. He's still blaming others. He was afraid of the people. "I had a reason for sinning." But at least Saul admits that he sinned. That's when you can begin the cleansing process. Saul's admission is followed by censure. Samuel says to him, "You're going to be rejected as king over Israel." I love the way God rejects people, by the way. If I

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reject somebody—from employment or from office—it’s all over. Take leave in a day, in thirty days, two weeks pay, whatever. They don’t have the office anymore. You know how long Saul stays in office after God rejects him as king? He stays the rest of his life. Decades go by, and we get a feeling for what it meant to be rejected as king. In review, his dynasty and successors were rejected. Even though God rejected him from office, His grace allowed him to remain in the office. Not only that, but God never rejected the man on a personal level. Saul bears a responsibility and pays a price for his disobedience. But that price did not include estrangement from God. Benjamin Franklin said it well, “He who cannot obey cannot command.” Saul’s kingdom is to be torn from him.

V. The last part of the text shows us the sad fallout to a violated conscience.

See verses 32-35. We may get forgiveness and cleansing from God, but there are always social consequences to our sins. God’s forgiveness does not wipe out those consequences that occur in our lives. We will see those consequences for Saul.

Note that Samuel finishes the job that Saul was called out to do. He brings Agag before him—the Pharaoh of the Amalekites. The King James puts it rather eloquently and graphically in verse 33, “And Samuel hewed Agag in pieces before the LORD.” Violent text—Samuel-Rambo! But was he really? Was he not carrying out a judicial execution? He was not acting out of personal vengeance. It was not a matter of personal murder. He was acting on behalf of the government—on behalf of the state. He was executing a criminal who had made women childless, whose crimes had been vicious, and who merited the punishment of death. It was an execution.

This chapter has touched on three tremendous issues today. Does a nation have a right to defend itself militarily—or to have a police force internally? Is it ever justified to go to war? And can a government exercise the responsibility of capital punishment? The Old Testament verdict is

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clear. Yes, on all counts. I think when Romans 13 is viewed in light of the sword being given to the government, it's clear that government has that right in New Testament times too. Although, I respect the fact that not all Christians agree on this point.

Saul, however, has some personal consequences. There are consequences to the violation of his conscience. Saul has sad fallout, even though he seeks forgiveness and repents. He had to live with consequence number one—there was a rupture of relationship between him and the significant people in his life. Samuel will not go to Saul again. Later in 1 Samuel, we find that Saul one time goes to Samuel. But Samuel does not go again to Saul. Their relationship has been severely impacted and affected. The second consequence was the ruined opportunity for Saul to be all that God would have him to be. Decades before Saul, the prophet Balaam had prophesied of Israel, “Their king will be greater than Agag. Their kingdom will be exalted” (Numbers 24:7, NIV). Saul was meant to be greater than Agag. But he wasn't. Therefore, Samuel mourned, and the Lord grieved. It was a ruined opportunity. He messed up his life. Someone has said, “What you are is God's gift to you, but what you make of yourself is your gift to God.” What you make of yourself is your gift to God.

The third sad consequence is the real, unforeseen circumstance that happens to Saul as a result of his sparing the Amalekites—ruptured relationship, ruined opportunity, and real, unforeseen circumstance. What we sow in life, we reap. And it has a boomerang effect on us. You'll find 2 Samuel 1 describing the last moments of Saul's life. He's on a military expedition, once more, as head of state. He is against the Philistines, to the north of Mount Gilboa. And the battle goes against him. In desperation, he leans upon his sword. But he's a careless self-executioner, and the wound is not mortal. He is writhing in agony, and a man passing by sees him. Saul calls out to him, “Finish the job.” And the man thrusts through Saul and kills him. That same man then,

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knowing that David will be king, rushes to bring him—what he thinks will be—good news. Saul is dead. David looks at him when he hears the word. He says, “Who are you?” He says, “I’m an Amalekite.” What Saul failed to kill, killed him. That’s the point of the text. What we do not deal with that’s wrong in our lives, will be our undoing. We must deal with it.

How different is the story of the New Testament Saul—Paul of Tarsus! He was able, at the conclusion of his life, to look straight at the Sanhedrin and say, “My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day” (Acts 23:1, NIV). Days later he says to a Roman governor, “So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man” (Acts 24:16, NIV). He urges his young son, Timothy, to fight the good fight of faith, holding on to faith and a good conscience—for some have rejected these and have shipwrecked their faith.

Live with a good conscience. Obey God’s clear word to you, readily and voluntarily confess sin when you have violated conscience, and walk in God’s truth and in His love. Hebrews 13:18, “We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honorably in every way.”

Closing Prayer

Our Lord, we pray those words for ourselves today. We also desire to live honorably in every way and to live with a clear conscience. Forgive us when we have failed You and failed others. Help us to keep the clear look in our eyes, whereby we can face You or any person. We want to be covered by the blood of Christ and washed by His innocence and His peace. We realize that we do not have the capacity to forgive ourselves nor justify ourselves when we have done wrong. The stains remain. It is only You who can separate our sins from us. It is only You who can justify and make righteous. We leave the entire weight of our person upon You. Pleading for Your forgiveness and Your help. Wash us, and we shall be clean. Purge us, and we shall be white as snow. For those who come to this service looking at areas in their own life where they have

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faced tests related to conscience and real guilt—we ask, Lord, that the ministry of Your Holy Spirit would be such today to cause us to come again to the foot of the cross, admit our need, confess our wrong, and be healed and restored by You. Also, we pray that You would give us strength for every test—that we might be found in You. That we would not be ashamed. We ask these things, Lord Jesus, in Your name. Amen.