The Sound of Self-Deception
1 Samuel 15:10-15
Bellevue Baptist Church
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Open your Bible with me to 1 Samuel 15, as we continue our series, *The Search for a King.* Last week, we learned that Israel's first king, Saul, found himself sideways with God when he took matters into his own hands. He got ahead of God and did something he wasn't told to do. It's a lesson we all must learn: we cannot "a la carte" the Word of God. We can't select the pieces we want to follow, and take a pass on those that seem difficult.

God is looking for people who will do what He tells them to do. Do you remember these words from Jesus?

If you love me, you will keep my commands. –Jesus (John 14:15)

Obedience is what God is after–we see it in the Old Testament; we see it in the New Testament. And today, this point comes driving home again through Saul's negative example.

Let me set the context. In the passage I'm about to read, God commands Saul to lead Israel into battle against the Amalekites. The instructions are clear. Saul is told to defeat the Amalekites, to execute judgment on their king, and to keep none of the spoils of war, but Saul decides to pick-and-choose which parts of the assignment he takes seriously. He gathers his army. He goes into battle. He defeats the enemy, but then spares the life of the king, taking him captive. Not only that, but Saul also allows his soldiers to keep the best sheep and cattle for themselves.

Here's the thing: God had not told Saul to do *most* of what He had commanded. He told him to do *all* of it. Because of his partial obedience, the prophet Samuel is on his way to challenge him. V.12…

12 Early in the morning Samuel got up to confront Saul, but it was reported to Samuel, "Saul went to Carmel where he set up a monument for himself. Then he turned around and went down to Gilgal." 13 When Samuel came to him, Saul said, "May the Lord bless you. I have carried out the Lord's instructions."
14 Samuel replied, "Then what is this sound of sheep, goats, and cattle I hear?" 1 Sa 15:12-14

Don't miss the comedy contained in this passage. What's happening is serious, but the situation is absurd. Get this. God is completely disappointed with Saul, while Saul is completely impressed with himself! So, let's go ahead and make that our first point.

Beware…

1. You can be a disappointment to God while being impressed with yourself.

If you ever find yourself driving one town over to build a monument to you, I'd turn the car around. This is what Samuel is told: Saul has gone to Carmel, for a short stint of self-aggrandizement. He has no idea that he's in trouble with God.

Imagine being the CEO of a company. You're on your way to an employee's office to deliver this man a D-minus on his annual performance review. You arrive at his door, and his assistant says, "Oh, he's not here today. He's out of town celebrating the incredible year he's had. He decided to throw himself a party!"

God is giving Saul an F on his performance review, and Saul is throwing himself a victory party! You don't get an A for doing half your homework.

I made a mistake like this once. Right after we were married, I was the director of a freshman boys' dormitory at a small college. At the end of the semester, my boss told me to conduct room inspections before the students went home for Christmas. Simple assignment. Start on the third floor, work my way down, make sure every room was in good shape.

Well, I started on the third floor, got halfway done and had other things to do. I decided I'd finish the rest later, but I never did. Boy, was I surprised when my boss called later that week and said, "The president has decided to walk through the dorms over Christmas break to inspect the condition of the building. You did those room checks, right?"

I said, "Yes, sir." Which wasn't totally a lie. I had done "some." And as soon as I hung up the phone, I went back to finish the job. And that's when I opened a door I'll never forget.

When I forced open the very last room, iIt looked like a tornado had ripped through a Taco Bell. It was so bad, even the cockroaches had gone home for Christmas break.The entire floor was buried under about six inches of garbage. There were half-eaten chicken wings with meat still hanging off the bones, food wrappers, and flies. I simply could not believe it. And because I had waited, the students were gone and it was my job to clean it. I had cut corners and called it obedience.

And that's exactly what Saul did. He looked at the parts of the assignment he'd completed and congratulated himself. But God was looking at the parts he'd deliberately ignored.

And when Samuel finally tracks him down, look at how Saul greets him, V. 13…: "May the LORD bless you! I have carried out the LORD's instructions."

And just as soon as those words come from Saul's mouth, "I have carried out the LORD's instructions," a sound suddenly plays in the background.

Point #2:

Beware…

2. You can declare your obedience while the evidence betrays you.

Just as soon as Saul announces, "I have carried out the LORD's instructions," Samuel says: "Wait a minute, Saul. You said you carried out the instructions. I thought God told you not to keep any of the livestock?

And then he nails him in v.14. Let's go King James here:

What *meaneth* then this bleating of the sheep in mine ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear? 1 Samuel 15:14 KJV

What does this meaneth, Saul? Let me tell you what it meaneth–you're lying to yourself. You say you're all-in, but your life says otherwise.

It reminds me of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus and asked, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus pointed him to the commandments. I imagine Jesus walking over to a long scroll, rolling it out for his legalistic friend–you want to make it to heaven by "doing," do you? Start with this.

And Jesus says, "All right, you've mastered the law, eh? Let me give you one more: go sell everything you have, give it to the poor, and come follow Me."

And suddenly, the young man's confidence evaporated. The Bible says he walked away sorrowful because he had great wealth. He thought he was completely surrendered to God, until God put His finger on the one thing he wasn't willing to surrender.

And that's the danger of self-deception. Saul could point to all the things he'd done right. The rich young ruler could point to all the commandments he'd kept. But both men had the same problem.

They were measuring their obedience by what they had done, rather than what they were still refusing to do.

Are you doing that?

Before we look down on Saul or the rich young ruler, we should see in ourselves the same capacity to deceive ourselves. How do we do that today? I searched the Scriptures and I found three places in the New Testament where we are specifically warned about telling lies to ourselves. The first lie is this:

The Lies We Tell Ourselves

1. "I know the Bible, so I must be obeying it."

But be doers of the word and not hearers only, <u>deceiving yourselves</u>. James 1:22

Have you ever stepped on the scale and didn't like what you see? What's your first thought–scale must be broken. So you slide it over six inches to see if the floor is uneven, but it reads

the same. So you slide off your shoes–maybe those have gained 8 lbs. But it reads the same. So you hop online and order a new scale. You're not looking for accuracy. You're looking for a second opinion!

James tells us that we do this with the Bible all the time. We try to negotiate with the clear meaning of Scripture because we don't like what it says.

The Bible says the marriage bed should remain pure, which means it's wrong for people to move in together before marriage. Crystal clear. But the couple says: "It's too expensive to live separately." If you say that, I have to warn you that losing God's blessing over your life is far more expensive than an extra rent payment.

How about another one? The Bible says its right for citizens to pay taxes to the government. Jesus was once asked whether God's people should pay taxes to Caesar, and He said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

Last year, I switched accountants–got a new tax guy. The new guy looked at last year's return and said, "I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I caught an error in my review of your return. You didn't pay all the taxes you owe last year. You thought you did, but you didn't."

And he said: "Tell me what you want to do about it. I can still amend the return and you can pay what you owe, or you can run the risk of the government catching it."

I wrote him back immediately, "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's. What do I owe?" My integrity is more important than saving some money. I responded quickly before my inner Ebenezer Scrooge took time to talk it over with me. If I want God's blessing, I can't rationalize robbing the government.

So that's the first lie you might tell yourself: "I know the Bible, so I must be obeying it." Not true. Those are two different things.

2. "I'm doing better than most, so I must be doing fine."

For if anyone considers himself to be something when he is nothing, <u>he deceives himself</u>. Galatians 6:3

What's the context of this passage? Paul is writing to the Galatians about the importance of humility. He warns us about thinking too highly of ourselves. We are always tempted to look at the lives of other people and say, "Well, I may not be perfect, but I'm a lot better than him, and him, and her, and her…"

Be careful when you look at other Christians and imagine yourself as a higher-ranking officer in God's army. Be careful when you look at people and see many made of copper, while you are made of gold. As if there are ordinary Christians, and elite Christians, and somehow, you worked your way to the top!

For if anyone considers himself to be something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Galatians 6:3

Are you on the church staff? Does that mean you're one of God's "*chosen" chosen*? That you've somehow earned VIP status in the kingdom of God? Are you a Life Group leader? Does that mean you're worth a thousand points to God, while the people sitting in your class are only worth five hundred? Is that how it works? The higher you climb in church leadership, the more valuable you become to God? Of course not. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 3, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth."

And then goes on: *"So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth."*

This principle applies for me as pastor, as well. The fastest way to get fired is to pray at the end of this service, as the Pharisee in Luke 18: "God, I thank you that I'm not like other people." If said that, I'd be deceiving myself.

Recently I read a little book by Francis Schaeffer. He writes:

People in the world naturally want to boss others around. Imagine a boy beginning work with a firm. He has a lowly place and is ordered around by everyone. Do this! Do that! Every dirty job is his. He is the last man on the totem pole…"

Most of us can relate. We've all been at the bottom of the ladder sometime.

But listen to how Schaeffer continues:

So one day the boss is out, he enters the boss's office, looks around carefully to see that no one is there, and then sits down in the boss's big chair. "Someday," he says, "I'll say run and they'll run."

This is man. And let us say, with tears, that a person does not abandon this mentality when he becomes a Christian. –Francis Schaeffer

He's right. We don't develop a servant's heart overnight. It takes time to die to self. Jesus said that unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it produces much fruit. What has to die? The lie that lives inside, that we are better than others.

So, beware of that one also: "I'm doing better than most, so I must be doing fine."

3. "My sin isn't that serious, so I don't need to deal with it."

If we say, 'We have no sin,' we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 1 John 1:8

John refers to our remarkable ability to overlook the sins we still struggle with. We throw shame at others for the sins they struggle with.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned us about sizing ourselves up next to others: "For with the judgment you use, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." In other words, judgment is a boomerang–you throw it at someone else and it comes right back at you.

Isn't it amazing how quickly we form judgments about people? Not long ago, a woman told me about a time she overheard a pastor of a nearby church having a disagreement with his wife at a restaurant. Apparently, the conversation was getting a little spicy.

This woman said to me, “That pastor and his wife do not have a good marriage.” And I wanted to say, “Or maybe they have a perfectly normal marriage, and like the rest of us, they don’t always see eye-to-eye and have to work it out.!” She overheard a few minutes of conversation at a restaurant and drew a conclusion about their entire marriage!

And we do this all the time. We judge the whole story when we've only read a paragraph.

There's a fascinating example in Acts 2. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit fills the believers, and they begin proclaiming the mighty works of God in languages they've never learned. It's a miracle, but do you remember what some of the people standing around concluded? They said, "These people are drunk!" They witness an extraordinary work of the Holy Spirit, and write it off as intoxication.

Peter stands up and says, in effect, "No, they aren’t drunk. It's only nine o'clock in the morning!" This is not happy hour. Something is happening here that you don’t understand. You don’t have all the facts. Don’t rush to a conclusion.

This is why the Bible calls us to look at ourselves, at our own sin, rather than stare at those of others. "If we say, 'We have no sin,' –other people have a sin problem–we deceive ourselves.

Saul had a problem–self-deception–and it would all come crashing down on him before long. We’ll get there in the coming weeks.

With my time remaining, how about a few questions:

A Senior Adult Asks:
You mentioned the danger of thinking we are something when we are nothing. Can years of faithful service make us feel entitled to special privileges?

Absolutely, Saul had begun to believe that because God had given him a special position, he deserved special privileges. He could pick and choose which commands to obey. Somehow, the rules no longer applied to him.

The spirit of Saul can come upon any of us. We can become entitled. What is that?

Entitlement is when we start believing that what we've done for God or others means they owe us something in return.

Jesus confronted this attitude among the Jews of His day in John 8. The religious leaders believed that because they were special descendants of Abraham, God was required to bless them, but Jesus warned them that bloodline is no substitute for obedience.

The prophet Jeremiah confronted something similar. The people of Judah had convinced themselves that because they possessed the temple of the Lord, they were safe from judgment. In chapter 7:4, Jeremiah said, "You keep saying, 'The temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!'" Stop saying that! He said. Just because God built this in the past does not mean He's on the hook to bless you in the future. Obey!

And all of us must be on guard against this. We can all fall into the same trap. Now, how might this entitlement show up in the life of a longtime church member?

Someone might say, "We're the ones who pay most of the bills around here, so there ought to be more programs for us." Or, "We're the ones who built this building, so we ought to get first priority in using it." Or, "We've been here for forty years. These younger people ought to learn to like the things we like!"

Do you hear what's happening? Years of faithful service have slowly become a reason to expect special treatment. And that's not the spirit of Jesus Christ. Faithfulness should make us more humble, not more entitled.

The longer we walk with Jesus, the more we ought to resemble Jesus. And what did Jesus do? He took a towel, knelt down, and washed His disciples' feet (John 13:3–15). He told us that when we're invited to a banquet, we should take the lowest seat, not the highest one (Luke 14:7–11). Paul tells us to do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility to consider others as more important than ourselves (Philippians 2:3–5).

The longer you've walked with Jesus, the more comfortable you ought to be taking the last seat at the table.

An Astute Person Asks:
If God expects complete obedience, doesn't that mean every Christian is constantly disappointing Him?

Listen to this. Jesus said, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). Well, that's a pretty high standard! And if the only way to please God were to live a perfectly obedient life, then I'm out.

My imperfection is precisely why I need Jesus Christ. The gospel is not that God lowered His standards so we could enter the kingdom of heaven. The gospel is that Jesus met the standard we could never meet, and through faith in His work, we are forgiven and accepted by God. Romans 8:1 says, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus."

Think about that. No condemnation! Not because we've never failed, but because Christ has taken the punishment for our failures. Now, does that mean God doesn't care whether we obey Him? Of course not!

God can be displeased with something His child does without withdrawing His love from that child.

Those of us that are parents understand this.

One time we discovered that our son Max was getting a very poor grade in band. We called him in. We said, “What’s up with this? Why are you failing band?” And he proceeded to tell us that he skipped the concert. Just didn’t want to go. Didn’t bother to tell us.

Was I displeased? Absolutely. Did I disown him? Absolutely not. Do you think I’ve never skipped something I didn’t want to do? Room checks. Taco Bell tornado.

As a dad, the reason I’m so disappointed is because I love my child and I want them to learn to do what is right so they will do well in life.

A solid Christian isn't someone who never sins. A solid Christian is someone who refuses to ignore their sin. 1 John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

And we all have to do that–even me.

Do I have days when I get down on myself because I fail to live up the standard of Scripture? All the time. Recently, I was reminded of something a person had done that offended me. And as I thought about it, I realized that I was still carrying a grudge.

Now, I know what the Bible says about forgiveness! I preach those verses to you people all the time! I like telling you to forgive. I enjoy challenging you to forgive people who hurt you, to show the same mercy to others that God has shown to you.

But just the other day, I was walking with Lynley and we were praying together, I finally just said it out loud. "Lord, I forgive this person. I'm not going to hold this against him anymore. I'm not going to let this offense come between us."

When I’m not being complete in obedience, the Spirit lets me know, and it’s my job to deal with it. God has given us the gift of repentance. We should use it. All the time. So don't confuse the Christian life with a life of perfect performance. It's a life of growing obedience, continual repentance, and daily dependence on the grace of God.

A Teenager Asks:
If I know something is wrong, but I keep doing it anyway, does that mean I'm not really a Christian?

When I was in college, I remember staying up until the wee hours of the morning studying for an exam. I had worked hard, put in the hours, and done what I could to score a high grade. Well, in the middle of the exam, I looked over and noticed a Christian brother cheating. He had written answers on the bottom of his shoe, and while the professor was out of the room, he was copying them onto his test. I was furious.

When the exam was over, I confronted him in the hallway. I said, "Man, I stayed up half the night studying for that test! How is it fair that you might get a better grade than me when you cheated?" I didn't see him do it again but suppose he did. What if he stopped cheating in that class because he knew I was onto him, but he kept cheating in other classes. Could he still be a Christian even though he continued to cheat?

1 John 3:9 says: "No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God." What does that mean? It means a person who has been born of God cannot make peace with a lifestyle of sin. The Holy Spirit lives inside him, and the Spirit will not allow him to become comfortable in his rebellion.

You can be a Christian and continue to sin, but you cannot continue to sin and expect to enjoy fellowship with God.

In fact, I believe some of the most miserable people in the world are Christians who are living in deliberate disobedience. There's a heaviness over their lives. They've lost their joy. They've lost their peace. They know what God wants them to do, but they aren't doing it.

There's an old saying: "A clean conscience is the softest pillow." And there's a lot of truth in that. If you're truly a child of God, one of your greatest joys in life is knowing that you're walking closely with Him. There's nothing quite like going to bed at night knowing that things are right between you and the Lord.

And when you choose to live in disobedience, you sacrifice that joy. You might get away with your sin in the eyes of other people, but you cannot escape the conviction of the Holy Spirit.

You can hide your sin from your professor, your parents, and your pastor. But you cannot hide it from God. And if you belong to Him, He loves you too much to leave you alone in it.