

Happy Halloween! Today is Halloween day and also Reformation Sunday. I love dressing up for the day and getting extra candies. Yes, I know there is a fair bit of ambivalence over Halloween in the Christian church. Some Christians see it as a harmless bit of costume and candy fun. Others believe it trivializes or, worse, celebrates a satanic holiday. But All Hallows' Eve, October 31st, which later also became Reformation Day in 1517, is a moment to celebrate and point to the Light that shines in the darkness of the world (John 1:4).

When Halloween Day comes around, getting into the costumes of our choice, we can completely become someone else like Darth Vader, Stormtrooper, Han Solo, Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia, Boba Fett, and so on. Yes, you may already notice, I am a Star Wars fan. Anyway, it's easier to put on a mask and pretend.

"Pretending to be someone else" is the basic idea of the "Game of Thrones" story in the Bible we are starting today. There were 42 kings and a queen, Queen Athaliah (2 Kings 11:1-3), who ruled the "Thrones of Israel." Saul was the first king, and he ruled over the 12 tribes of Israel for 40 years. From 1 Samuel, Chapter 8, through the end of Chapter 15, we can see the progression of King Saul's life that emphasizes the importance of obeying the voice of God by contrasting the phrase of "Obey the voice of the Lord" with "Obey the voice of the people."

Let me provide the context of the story. Israel knew the importance of having a good leader. So far, in 1 Samuel, we've seen God's people suffer under the corrupt leadership of Eli and his sons (1 Samuel 2). The people want a leader who will save them from the Philistines (1 Samuel 4-6). Samuel emerges as a godly and effective leader (1 Samuel 1, 3, 7). But Samuel is now old. His sons are corrupt. So, Israel is worried about the succession plan (1 Samuel 8:5).

We pick up the story from there toward the end of Samuel's life. People were getting nervous and wondering by saying, "Who will protect us when Samuel is gone?" (1 Samuel 8:5). In their worries, they ignored the fact that God Himself had always come through for them. In their fears, they demanded a king to fight their battles for them.

Samuel reminded them that God was their king and that they were to trust Him. But they refused. They wanted a king "like all the other nations" (1 Samuel 8:20). So, God said to Samuel, "Obey the voice of the people" (1 Samuel 8:7). So, people got the king they wanted—King Saul (1 Samuel 10:24).

It is worth noticing that Saul is wealthy, handsome, and tall (1 Samuel 9:1-2). He has all the external qualities the world is looking for in a leader. Yet, it is not those qualities that make great leaders. Leaders become great when they "obey the voice of God."

Here comes the leadership test for Saul. Samuel, representing God's voice, told Saul to go to Gilgal and prepare to fight against the Philistines (1 Samuel 13). Saul was instructed to wait seven days for Samuel to arrive, but he did not wait.

So, here is the real leadership test. It is not the fight against the enemy, Philistines, but the real fight is against himself—Will Saul obey the voice of the Lord or not? As a leader, are we willing to be led by the Word of God, even when we have to wait? Even when it looks like things are falling apart and people are abandoning us? Even when everyone else is doing business another way? When those things happen, whose voice do we obey? This is a constant challenge.

Some of us might say that I am not a leader. I am not a pastor. I am not a church council chairperson. I am not a lay leader. So, I am not a leader. But the truth is that all of us are leaders. All of us have at least a person journeying together in the life God has given us. A spouse is following you if you are married. A child is following you if you are a parent. A grandchild is following you if you are a grandparent. A friend is following you if you have a friend. A position in the organization is not the only way we define who is a leader or not. God has made us all be a leader. What kind of leaders do we want to be? Leaders "obeying the voice of the Lord" or "the voice of the people?"

At the first test, King Saul did not obey the voice of the Lord, and he pretended that he could be a priest offering God a sacrifice. He failed the first test. However, God did not give up on him. God gave King Saul another test (1 Samuel 15). Once again, Samuel, representing God's voice, offers Saul specific instructions to destroy the Amalekites—"...listen now to the message from the LORD...Go to war, destroy all that the Amalekites have...and don't bring anything back..." (1 Samuel 15:1-3).

What did Saul do? He spared King Agag and the best of the livestock alive (1 Samuel 15:9). It was greed, not mercy, that caused him to spare them. Not only that, but Saul also set up a monument to himself (1 Samuel 15:12).

And so, Samuel confronted King Saul by asking, "Why didn't you obey the voice of the Lord?" (1 Samuel 15:19). To this, instead of repenting or being apologetic, King Saul responded by saying, "I have obeyed the voice of the Lord...but the people did not..." (1 Samuel 15:21). As Samuel continued to point out what King Saul did, finally, he admitted that he violated the Lord's command and disobeyed God. His excuse was that he was afraid of the people (1 Samuel 15:24). So, he listened to the voice of the people, not the voice of God. King Saul lost his second chance. The final verdict has been made—Saul was rejected as king.

When talking about obedience, we are talking about the issue of our hearts. To obey is a matter of our heart, motivation, and the things we value most highly. As we see King Saul, he did many religious things. But it was from selfish motive as he said, "Perhaps if I pray and offer a sacrifice, then God will bless the army." God had already promised to use the army to deliver Israel! Saul did not need to compel God to do so through a religious ceremony!

God is after our hearts, not after our performance. We obey not to receive God's favor. We obey because we already have God's favor—Jesus Christ, God's only begotten Son, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; the third day He rose from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. Do we hear the voice of God? This Jesus is God's favor we have. He is the Messiah, our Lord, and our Savior. So, let us not pretend to be a 'Messiah' to the world, but be who we are and whose we are by trusting and obeying the Lord today. Amen.