



For one glorious day in Middle School in 1989, I was the most popular kid on campus. I owed my new found fame to a single pair of brand new shoes—Reebok Pumps! Since we were poor, I can't remember how I got them, but somehow I did. And at lunch time that day, my shoes were the talk of the school! Reebok Pumps were the first shoe to have an internal inflation system that uniquely tightened the shoe around your ankle. They were incredible! I remember watching NBA star Dominique Wilkins on a television commercial introducing the Reebok Pump and I had to have a pair. A few years later in February of 1991, I watched Dee Brown inflate his Reebok Pumps in front of a national audience before scoring a title-winning dunk during the NBA Slam Dunk Contest. These landmark shoes ushered in a new era of expensive basketball shoes. If you are a "shoe head" today, you can thank Reebok Pumps.

What Middle School kid doesn't want to fit in with the crowds? Companies spend hundreds of millions of dollars making you feel that you don't fit in any longer and need the latest and greatest shoes, jeans, perfume, car and phone. The human need to fit in and be like the culture around us is what makes parents of children extremely nervous as our kids grow up. Parents want our kids to have friends that make good choices because we know that who you hang around with is who you'll start to become. Our Heavenly Father knows us as well, better than we know ourselves. He understands our tendency to imitate what we see and he is concerned that we follow his example, not the world's. The reality is, we all are tempted, every single day, to follow the poor examples of our culture instead of following the Lord.

Coming out of a period of anarchy and chaos, Israel found themselves facing intense cultural pressures as well. Like the surrounding nations, Israel wanted a king to lead them:

**"So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. They said to him, "You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have" (1 Samuel 8:4-5).**

### **Israel Wants a King to Lead Them**

The elders of Israel gather together and say, "Samuel, you have been a great leader, but let's face it, you are past your prime and your sons are losers. So we want you to give us a king just like all the other nations. We want to be just like everyone else." The surrounding nations had kings. Israel had priests. Kings were

mighty. Priests seemed weak. Kings wore royal robes and jewels. Priests didn't. Kings gave orders. Priests prayed. Kings went to battle. Priests offered sacrifices.

I want you to notice that wanting a king was not the problem. In fact, the Lord, in his sovereignty, had been planning to give Israel a king, only when he thought they were ready for one. In *The Story*, if you look back all the way to Genesis, God tells Abraham, who was to be the father of many nations, that "***kings will come from you***" (Genesis 17:6). The problem had to do with the timing and motive of this request.

Now you have to understand that this request was a big deal because it goes against everything God created his people to be. God had said, "***you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation***" (Exodus 19:6). God told them that they would be a holy nation, one that is set apart and different from other nations. God said, I want you to live and act much differently than the surrounding nations. The Law was given to lay out exactly how they were to live. God said, I will be your king, I will lead, guide, protect and fight for you. Now Israel is saying, no thank you, we want a real king who will fight for us and we want him now. This request was an all-out rejection of God and of the identity of who God created Israel to be. And Samuel knew it and was so distraught he cried out to the Lord and God replied:

**And the Lord told him: "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights" (verses 7-9).**

God tells Samuel, they haven't rejected you, they have rejected me. They want a king because apparently I am not a good enough king for them. They don't trust me to take care of them. As you read, you can almost feel God's heart breaking. He has given his people everything, but it wasn't enough. We don't want you anymore, they said, we want a king so that we can be just like everyone else.

God has Samuel warn them of what a king will do. Sure, everyone else had their kings, but those kings were barbaric and worshipped idols. A king will force you to fight and work. He will tax you and oppress you. Life will become miserable for you. But,

God said, because I love you, I will give you what you want and you'll have to face the consequences of that decision. Sometimes God will give you what you want, even if it's not exactly what he wants for you. In other words, be careful what you ask for because you just might get it! Even with that stern warning we are told,

**“But the people refused to listen to Samuel. “No!” they said. “We want a king over us. 20 Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles” (verses 19-20).**

God relents and gives them the exactly the kind of king they want.

Do you want to be holy or do you want to be just like everybody else? When God calls his people to follow him and to be his people, he calls them to be holy. But in our culture we are bombarded with images about who we should be and what we should do. We are constantly being told to be like this, look like this, think like this and act like this. Being a holy and loving God on the Peninsula is not easy. Just this week I wrestled with this issue. Levi, my oldest son, was asked to be on a competitive traveling baseball team that would play essentially year round. Initially I was excited about the opportunity and proud of my son. But, as I looked at the schedule I saw practices and games on Sundays. This would interfere with church. Then I considered the costs. I did the math and we are talking hundreds of dollars. I then asked myself a hard question, Is this the **wise** thing to do? My wife and I didn't have a peace about it. Even though several of his friends were on the team and the baseball community says this is the way forward if you want your kids to succeed in baseball, we felt it wasn't wise for our family.

So, I talked about it with my son who simply replied, “I don't want to do it anyway, I'd rather play basketball for my school's team.” Wow, ok, I said, and that was that! By the way, I am not saying it is wrong or sinful to join a traveling sports team. My point is, that for my family in this instance, I felt incredible pressure to be like everyone else in the world of youth baseball and to make a decision based on that.

And so the question for us all is, Do we want to be holy or do we want to be like everyone else? You will spend yourselves doing one of those two things. You will either spend your life pursuing the ideal materialistic image that we are presented with ruthlessly every day on the Peninsula, or you will pursue holiness. Pursuing holiness often means saying no to good things (like baseball) so you can say yes to God things. Pursuing holiness often means making people unhappy. Pursuing holiness sometimes requires making hard choices. Pursuing holiness confuses some people who don't understand your decisions. How are you doing in this area? Are you pursuing holiness or worldliness? God wanted his people to be set apart and distinct from the surrounding nations. But Israel caved into the pressure to have a

king and decided to pursue being like everyone else. We'll see how that works out for them.

## **Samuel Appoints Saul as King of Israel**

God leads Samuel to a guy named Saul and says this is the guy. Make him king over the people. Saul seems to be the ideal person. He comes from a great family, he is young and handsome. He looks presidential, like an athlete in his prime. So Samuel anoints him with oil, which is how you designated people for special offices, and says, you are now the king of Israel. You are the king of all of it. But right from the start, Saul seems shy and reluctant to take the throne. Early on we begin to see through a series of events the true condition of his heart. For example, when all of Israel is brought together by Samuel to meet their new king, Saul is found hiding among the supplies! This is what the story says:

**They ran and brought him out, and as he stood among the people he was a head taller than any of the others. Samuel said to all the people, “Do you see the man the Lord has chosen? There is no one like him among all the people.” Then the people shouted, “Long live the king!” (1 Samuel 10:23-24).**

They bring him out and we are told that he is bigger and stronger than anyone else in Israel and everybody shouts, long live the king. Samuel says, ok, here is your king, good luck. I hope it works out. And everybody goes back home.

Now right after this we are told that the town of Jabesh Gilead is surrounded by the Ammonites who are attempting to capture it. The Israelites living in that town try to make a treaty with them and even agree to be subject to the Ammonites. The Israelites are told that in order to do that they have to gouge out all of their right eyes. War was brutal in the ancient world.

Saul hears about this and says no way, you don't do that to my people. So he assembles an army, marches up to Jabesh Gilead, and slaughters the Ammonites. And when this happens it is a rallying point for the Israelites. They look at their new king and think, yeah that's what I'm talking about! This guy is legit. Look at how he just handled business. We finally have a mighty king, just like everyone else!

So the people all go to the town of Gilead and reaffirm Saul as their king and this time there is a big celebration. Everyone is excited and stoked. And this early victory has been a unifying thing for the fractured twelve tribes of Israel. It has brought these tribes together under one strong national leadership and forged a unified nation, a kingdom under one central leadership. Israel is headed in a new direction. And it seems to be going well.

But Samuel gives them one more warning, something like a farewell speech. He says, I know this all seems great now. But this king-thing still isn't a good idea. You have put yourselves in a dangerous spot. You have rejected God as your leader and

subjected yourself to a king. And that is dangerous and if you and your king aren't careful, this could be really bad.

After this warning Saul tries his best to be a good king, but he just always seems to be a little bit behind. He is insecure, jealous, impatient, and at some key points he makes really poor decisions. Let me highlight two major events leading up to Saul's eventual rejection as king.

## **Two Major Events Lead Up to Saul's Rejection as King**

In the first instance Saul leads his troops out to fight the Philistines, and Samuel tells him that he will meet him in seven days and he will administer the proper sacrifices that were to be given to God before the battle. Seven days later, Samuel hasn't shown up. He isn't late yet, because sacrifices were made in the morning and at night, so he could have still gotten there to offer the sacrifice at night and still been on time. But, troops begin to leave, Saul panics and gets tired of waiting. He moves ahead and presents a burnt offering to God, and just as he is finishing Samuel shows up and says, what in the world are you doing? It wasn't Saul's job to offer sacrifices, it was Samuel's. Samuel had told Saul what God wanted him to do, but Saul got impatient and disobeyed the word of the Lord. He's a man of fear, not faith.

Incredibly, Saul makes excuses and blames his men, the Philistines, and even Samuel. He says that he just wanted the Lord's favor before fighting the Philistines. It's kind of ironic that Saul tried to earn God's favor through an act of disobedience. But Samuel tells him he messed up. If you would have followed God he would have established your kingdom over Israel forever, but not anymore. Your kingdom will come to end. There will be no dynasty for you, Saul. In fact, Samuel says, God is already searching for a man after his own heart to lead his people, because you won't follow the Lord. Your heart is not fully surrendered to the Lord.

You would think this mistake might make Saul step it up a bit, repent, and trust the Lord, but it doesn't. In fact he continues to spiral downward. In the second major mistake of Saul's career, we are told that he leads his troops out to fight the Amalekites next. And before he goes Samuel gives him these clear instructions:

**"Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy all 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 15:3).**

God tells him when you attack them destroy everything. Wipe it all out. The Amalekites were a tribe of people who for centuries had attacked the Israelites. God has had enough and it was time for them to pay for their sins and savagery. Saul wins the battle but here's what they do:

**"Then Saul attacked the Amalekites all the way from Havilah to Shur, near the eastern border of Egypt. He took Agag king of the Amalekites alive, and all his people he totally destroyed with the 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" (1 Samuel 15:7-9).**

Did you notice that Saul didn't destroy everything? Why? Saul couldn't help himself. Capturing King Agag was good for his reputation. King Agag was a big trophy hanging on the mantel! Keeping the choice plunder was also good for Saul's bank account and his appetite. His problem really was an issue of his heart. An issue of pride. I hear what God wants me to do, but I know better. It's not a big deal. I know God says that this is bad, but I can find something good in it. It will all work out in the end. No big deal.

Let's be honest, we do that a lot, don't we? We are experts at finding the good in the bad. I know I disobeyed you God, but it turned out ok. God warns us in his Word, but we try to find ways to justify our behavior. We say things like, it's a different time now. Things have changed. People have changed. The world is different. The Bible is old and irrelevant. And like Saul, we come up with a million excuses to partially obey God. But partial obedience is not obedience at all. You can't partially obey God. It's one of those things, either you do it or you don't. And Saul didn't. So God says:

**"Then the word of the Lord came to Samuel: "I regret that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions." Samuel was angry, and he cried out to the Lord all that night" (1 Samuel 15:10-11).**

God says, I regret that I have made Saul king. He isn't following me. He has turned away from me. He won't obey me. He won't submit to me. He won't surrender to me. Here's why this was a big deal to God. God's people, from the very beginning of The Story, are called to be different, to stand out among the other nations by reflecting God's character and nature. By plundering the prized possessions of the Amalekites, Saul is being just like the other kings. Saul's big mistake was distorting and misrepresenting God as cruel and greedy rather than showing he is just and holy. The other nations are left to say, "There is nothing special about this new nation after all."

We, too, are representatives of God in this world. When we disobey God we distort God to the world. Most people around us will get their take on God from us. We may be the only Bible our friends and family will ever "read." What does our interactions

with people and lifestyle say to others about the Lord? Are we representing him well? Or are we being like Saul?

### **God's Leaders Lead God's Way**

It doesn't matter if you are in middle school with a pair of Reebok Pumps or coveting a new sports car just like the one your neighbor drives. It is so much easier trying to be like everyone else. But God wants us to be different. Not weird or eccentric, but different. The Story is all about God's relentless pursuit of people and the community he is creating that he wants us to be a part of for eternity. By being "salt" and "light," by living unlike everyone else, we often catch a sneak peak of what life in this community will be like. God doesn't want us to just be like everyone else, he wants us to be known by our love. He wants us to look like Jesus.

More than anything, the life of Saul reminds us about a powerful leadership principle—God's leaders lead God's way. Unlike Saul, God's leaders put God first. They listen obediently to the Word of the Lord. They are empowered by the Holy Spirit. They

are not easily moved by circumstances. They own up to their mistakes. They seek God's approval and not man's. A leader's personality and charisma are not as important as humble obedience. But ultimately, God's leaders will fail. They are imperfect and they should ultimately point us to the greatest leader who ever lived, Jesus.

C.S. Lewis once said, each of us will either bend our knee in submission and say "Thy will be done, Lord," or we will hear God say to us on the day of judgment, "Thy will be done." The story of king Saul illustrates this fundamental choice. It points us to the need for an even greater king, King Jesus. Jesus clearly put God the Father first. He was empowered by the Spirit. He was not moved by circumstances. He never made a mistake. King Jesus was solely focused on obeying the Father and that led to a brutal death on the cross. God's leaders lead God's way. God's leaders lead like King Jesus.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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