

The Books of 1 and 2 Samuel, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 8: Saul Rejected for Disobedience

1 Samuel 15:1-35

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

The aim of this lesson is to handle, honestly and pastorally, the central warning of Saul's fall. This is not a side story; it is the hinge on which Saul's reign breaks. Help the class see the anatomy of his failure clearly: a clear command, partial obedience, self-justification, blame-shifting, and a confession that comes too late and aims more at saving face than at brokenness. Saul is not a monster; he is a religious man cutting corners, which is exactly why he is dangerous to imitate and instructive to study. Let the class feel the weight of "to obey is better than sacrifice," and let them hear God say that rebellion and stubbornness are as serious as witchcraft and idolatry, not lighter sins because they wear a respectable face.

Be careful to hold God's justice and His patience together. Saul's rejection is not the act of a harsh or arbitrary God; it is the just consequence of a heart that repeatedly set aside the Lord's plain word, even after earlier warning (13:13-14). At the same time, God is not eager to destroy; Samuel mourns, and the Lord Himself grieves over Saul. Make sure the class understands that this is a covenant rejection from kingship, a matter of office and trust, taught as a warning to us (Romans 15:4), not a cold proof text for fatalism. The heaviest weight (Question 9) belongs on the meaning of "to obey is better than sacrifice" and the deadly seriousness of rejecting God's word, balanced by God's justice and patience.

Finally, drive the lesson home where it must land: in our own self-deception. Every person in the room is tempted to call partial obedience full obedience, to spin disobedience as devotion, and to fear people more than God. Teach honestly that one who began with promise can end in ruin, so that the warning produces humility and watchfulness, not despair. The good news woven through is that God still desires a broken and contrite heart (Psalm 51:17), and that in Christ we can move from Saul's hollow "I have performed" to glad, whole-hearted obedience.

Question 1

Student Question:

What does God's command and Saul's partial obedience in sparing Agag and the best of the spoil (1 Samuel 15:3, 9) reveal about how seriously God regards full obedience to His word?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The chapter opens with a solemn commission. Samuel reminds Saul that the Lord anointed him king, then delivers a clear and total command regarding Amalek: "go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not" (15:3). This was an act of long-deferred

divine justice on a people who had attacked Israel without mercy (Exodus 17; Deuteronomy 25:17–19). The command was unambiguous; nothing was left to Saul's discretion.

Saul wins the battle but keeps what he wants. He spares Agag the king and "the best of the sheep, and of the oxen, and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was good" (15:9). The narrator is pointed: they were unwilling to destroy what was good and kept only the vile and refuse. This is obedience minus the costly part, obedience that keeps the prize and discards only what no one wanted anyway.

Here is the heart of the matter. God does not grade on a curve where keeping most of the command counts as keeping it. Partial obedience, in the things we choose to keep back, is still disobedience. Saul has not modified the command; he has broken it, while telling himself he has fulfilled it. The bleating sheep are exhibit one against him.

We must feel how reasonable Saul's choice would have looked to him. Why waste good animals? Why not spare a defeated king? The logic of self-interest always sounds sensible. But the question was never whether Saul's plan was sensible; it was whether he would do what God said. Full obedience honors God as God; partial obedience quietly sets us up as editors of His word.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's command was clear and total; nothing was left to Saul's discretion (15:3).
- Saul kept the best and destroyed only the worthless, obedience minus its cost (15:9).
- Partial obedience, in the parts we choose to keep, is still disobedience.
- Self-interest can make disobedience look entirely reasonable.
- Full obedience honors God as God; editing His word usurps His place.

Discussion Prompts

- Read 15:3 and 15:9 side by side; ask the class to name exactly what Saul kept and what God said.
- Discuss why the narrator stresses that they spared what was "good" and destroyed only the refuse.
- Ask how we, too, can keep the "best" of a sin we were told to surrender entirely.

Question 2

Student Question:

When have you obeyed God in the large, visible things while quietly keeping back one small thing He told you to give up? What did that reveal about your heart?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the searchlight inward. Saul's pattern, big visible obedience plus one quietly spared exception, is uncomfortably familiar. We tithe our time and money in public and keep back a private resentment, a habit, a relationship, a corner of our finances or thoughts we have decided is ours to keep.

The danger is precisely that the large obedience can blind us to the small disobedience. Saul really did march, really did fight, really did win. He had so much obedience to point to that the one spared Agag seemed negligible. We do the same when we let our visible faithfulness quiet the conscience about a hidden compromise.

Invite specific, honest reflection. What is the one thing? Often we know exactly what it is and have simply learned not to look at it directly. Bringing it into the light, naming it as the disobedience it is, is the first step out of Saul's trap.

Press gently but truthfully: the small spared thing reveals the heart more than the large public obedience does. Anyone can obey where it is easy and visible. The kept-back Agag shows where our will has not actually surrendered to God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Large, visible obedience can mask one quietly spared disobedience.
- The exception we keep back often reveals the heart more than the obedience we display.
- Self-examination requires naming the specific thing, not generalizing it away.
- Bringing the hidden compromise into the light is the first step of repentance (1 John 1:7).

Discussion Prompts

- Ask each person to silently identify their one spared "Agag."
- Discuss why visible obedience can deceive us about a hidden compromise.
- Encourage one concrete act of surrender of that kept-back thing this week.

Question 3

Student Question:

How does Saul's self-justification and blame-shifting, "the people spared the best... to sacrifice unto the Lord thy God" (1 Samuel 15:15, 21), expose the way the human heart defends its disobedience?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Confronted, Saul does not crumble in repentance; he defends himself. First he claims full obedience (15:13), then, when the evidence bleats too loudly, he shifts the blame: "the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen" (15:15). It was not his fault; it was theirs. And he gilds it with piety: it was all "to sacrifice unto the Lord thy God."

Watch the machinery of self-justification, because it is the same machinery that runs in us. Step one: deny there is a problem. Step two: when denial fails, redistribute the blame. Step three: attach a noble motive to the disobedience so it looks like virtue. By the end, Saul has reframed rebellion as worship.

Notice the subtle distancing in “the Lord thy God” (15:15). Even his language betrays a heart pulling back from full ownership of God. The disobedient heart rarely says, “I sinned, and I have no excuse.” It says, “Here is why what I did was understandable, and really, was it even wrong?”

The lesson exposes our own defenses. We blame circumstances, other people, our upbringing, our pressures. We baptize our compromises in spiritual language. God is not deceived by any of it. He hears the sheep. The first mark of a heart God can heal is the willingness to stop defending and simply say, with David, “I have sinned.”

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Saul denied, then blamed the people, then claimed a pious motive (15:13–15, 21).
- Self-justification follows a pattern: deny, deflect, then dress disobedience as devotion.
- Even Saul’s phrase “the Lord thy God” hints at a heart distancing itself from God.
- The disobedient heart explains its sin; the repentant heart confesses it.
- God is not deceived by spiritual language draped over disobedience (Galatians 6:7).

Discussion Prompts

- Trace the three stages of Saul’s self-defense through verses 13, 15, and 21.
- Ask the class to name modern ways we “sacrifice unto the Lord” to cover a compromise.
- Contrast Saul’s excuses with David’s plain confession in Psalm 51:3–4.

Question 4

Student Question:

Where are you tempted to dress up disobedience in spiritual language, telling yourself you kept something back for a good or even godly reason?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses Saul’s “to sacrifice unto the Lord” into our own habits of speech. We rarely admit, even to ourselves, that we are disobeying. We narrate it instead. We were being wise, being kind, being realistic, keeping the peace, stewarding our resources. The vocabulary of virtue becomes a hiding place for disobedience.

Saul’s spin is especially seductive because it is religious. He did not say he kept the spoil out of greed; he said he kept the best to worship God. That is the most dangerous kind of self-deception, the kind that lets us feel devout while disobeying. Religious people are uniquely tempted to it.

Encourage the class to listen to their own internal narration. When you sidestep a clear command of Christ, what story do you tell yourself? Forgiveness becoming “I am just protecting myself.” Generosity becoming “I am being responsible.” Honesty becoming “I am sparing their feelings.” Name the spin and the obedience underneath it usually becomes clear.

The remedy is brutal honesty before God, who sees through every disguise. It is far better to call disobedience by its name and repent than to keep it comfortably wrapped in spiritual language until, like Saul, we have lost something we can never get back.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- We tend to narrate disobedience as wisdom, kindness, or responsibility.
- Religious language is the most seductive cover because it lets us feel devout while disobeying.
- Naming the internal “spin” usually exposes the obedience we are avoiding.
- Honesty before the all-seeing God is the path out of self-deception (Hebrews 4:13).

Discussion Prompts

- Ask volunteers to name the “spiritual” story they tell when avoiding a hard command.
- Discuss how to test a motive: would I say it plainly to Christ’s face?
- Encourage trading one piece of spin for one plain confession this week.

Question 5

Student Question:

What does Samuel’s statement that Saul, “little in thine own sight,” became proud (1 Samuel 15:17) teach us about how a humble beginning can drift into a hardened heart?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Samuel’s diagnosis is piercing: “When thou wast little in thine own sight, wast thou not made the head of the tribes of Israel?” (15:17). Saul had once been so humble he hid among the baggage at his own coronation (10:22). Now he builds a monument to himself (15:12) and stands proud. Something has quietly curdled in him.

Pride rarely arrives in a single dramatic moment. It grows like rust, through small unchallenged thoughts: I have earned this, the ordinary rules need not bind me, my judgment can improve on the command. Saul’s humility did not survive his success. The very throne God gave him became the platform from which he began to look down.

This is a sober warning about the spiritual danger of blessing and position. A humble beginning is no guarantee of a humble end. The heart must be guarded continually, because yesterday’s lowliness can harden into today’s entitlement if we stop watching.

Help the class see that this drift is gradual and self-flattering. Saul never decided, “Now I will be proud.” He simply stopped seeing himself as small before God. The antidote is to keep returning to the truth of who we are before God, recipients of pure grace, and who He is, the One whose word is not ours to edit.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Saul began “little in his own sight” and drifted into pride (15:17; 10:22).
- Pride grows gradually through small, unchallenged thoughts of entitlement.
- A humble beginning does not guarantee a humble end; the heart must be guarded.
- Position and blessing can become the very platform for pride.
- Returning regularly to our smallness before God guards against the drift (1 Corinthians 4:7).

Discussion Prompts

- Contrast Saul hiding among the baggage (10:22) with Saul building a monument (15:12).
- Ask how success and blessing can quietly erode humility over time.
- Discuss specific practices that keep us “little in our own sight” before God.

Question 6

Student Question:

In what area has God’s past blessing on your life quietly tempted you toward pride or a sense that the rules bend for you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question applies Saul’s pride personally. God’s blessings, answered prayers, leadership entrusted, talents, a good reputation, can subtly tilt us toward entitlement. We begin to feel the standards that apply to others bend a little for us, given all we have done or all God has done through us.

Saul’s trajectory shows how this works. The more God did through him, the larger he loomed in his own eyes, until he felt free to adjust God’s command. Blessing meant to make him grateful instead made him proud. The same temptation tracks every blessing in our lives.

Invite honest self-examination. Where has God been good to you in a way that has quietly become a source of self-importance rather than gratitude? A ministry that has become “mine.” A maturity that has become a license to coast. A track record that whispers the rules are for newer believers.

The cure is gratitude that remembers the Giver. Everything we have is received (1 Corinthians 4:7). When we hold our blessings as gifts rather than achievements, pride loses its foothold, and we stay teachable, obedient, and small before God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's blessings can subtly tilt the heart from gratitude toward entitlement.
- Saul's growing influence enlarged him in his own eyes until he edited God's word.
- We must watch where blessing has become a source of self-importance.
- Remembering that all is received keeps pride from taking root (1 Corinthians 4:7).

Discussion Prompts

- Ask each person to name one blessing that could become a source of pride.
- Discuss the difference between gratitude for a gift and pride in an achievement.
- Encourage a deliberate act of thanksgiving that re-centers the Giver this week.

Question 7

Student Question:

How does Saul's fear of the people, "I feared the people, and obeyed their voice" (1 Samuel 15:24), warn us about whose approval we live for?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

When Saul finally edges toward confession, he reveals the real engine of his disobedience: "I have sinned... because I feared the people, and obeyed their voice" (15:24). There it is. He disobeyed God because he was afraid of what people would think. The fear of man, not malice, drove the king of Israel to break the command of God.

This is profoundly relatable. Most of our compromises are not bold rebellions; they are quiet capitulations to the fear of disapproval. We trim our convictions to fit the room. We stay silent when we should speak. We go along to avoid the cost of standing out. Saul obeyed the people's voice because he wanted their approval more than God's.

Scripture names this snare plainly: "The fear of man bringeth a snare: but whoso putteth his trust in the Lord shall be safe" (Proverbs 29:25). Saul's tragedy is a warning that living for the crowd's approval will eventually cost us our obedience to God, and sometimes far more.

Press the class to ask whose voice they are actually obeying. The crowd will not stand with us before God. Only one approval finally matters, and the path to it runs straight through the willingness to displease people in order to please the Lord. This is freedom, not bondage: when God's opinion settles the matter, the crowd loses its grip.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Saul disobeyed God because he feared the people's disapproval (15:24).
- Most compromises are quiet capitulations to the fear of man, not bold rebellion.
- The fear of man is a snare; trust in the Lord is safety (Proverbs 29:25).

- Living for the crowd's approval eventually costs our obedience to God.
- Settling that God's approval is what matters breaks the crowd's grip (Galatians 1:10).

Discussion Prompts

- Discuss how fear of people, more than open rebellion, drives most of our compromises.
- Read Proverbs 29:25 and ask how trust in the Lord dissolves that fear.
- Ask the class to name one place they are tempted to obey the crowd over God.

Question 8

Student Question:

Whose opinion do you fear most right now, and how is that fear shaping your obedience to God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question makes the fear of man personal. Each of us has an audience whose approval we crave: a parent, a spouse, a boss, a friend group, an online crowd, a circle at church. That audience quietly shapes what we say, what we hide, and what we are willing to obey.

Saul's audience was his army. Yours may be smaller and subtler, but the dynamic is identical. When we sense their disapproval coming, we adjust, sometimes adjusting away our obedience to God. The first step of freedom is simply to identify whose face appears in our minds at the moment of compromise.

Encourage specific naming. It is hard to renounce an idol we will not name. Once we see clearly that we have been living for so-and-so's approval, we can consciously hand that approval over to God and choose to fear Him instead.

Remind the class that this is not about becoming careless of others; it is about reordering our fears so that reverence for God governs everything else. When we genuinely fear the Lord, we are finally free to love people without being enslaved to their opinion.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Everyone has an audience whose approval subtly governs their choices.
- Identifying whose face we picture at the moment of compromise begins our freedom.
- We cannot renounce an idol of approval we are unwilling to name.
- Reordering our fears under reverence for God frees us to love people rightly.

Discussion Prompts

- Ask each person to name the audience whose approval most shapes them.
- Discuss how the fear of the Lord reorders all our lesser fears.
- Encourage one specific choice this week to please God even at the cost of disapproval.

Question 9

Student Question:

What does “to obey is better than sacrifice... rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft... thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, and he hath also rejected thee from being king” (1 Samuel 15:22–23) teach us about the deadly seriousness of rejecting God’s word, and how does it square with God’s justice and patience?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Here is the towering center of the chapter, and the heaviest weight of the lesson: “Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry” (15:22–23). God here refuses every attempt to substitute religious activity for actual obedience. We cannot buy off disobedience with worship.

Consider how startling the comparisons are. God likens rebellion to witchcraft and stubbornness to idolatry, the gravest sins in Israel’s law. Why so severe? Because at root, refusing to obey God’s word and insisting on our own way is a bid to dethrone Him and enthrone ourselves. It is functional idolatry, worshiping our own judgment. Saul’s respectable, religious disobedience is, in God’s eyes, deadly serious.

Then the verdict falls: “Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, he hath also rejected thee from being king” (15:23). Notice the order. Saul rejected God’s word first; the rejection of Saul follows as the just consequence. This is not the cruelty of an arbitrary God, nor a Calvinistic decree fixed before Saul drew breath; it is the righteous response to a heart that repeatedly set aside the plain command of the Lord, even after earlier warning. We must hold this together with God’s patience and grief: the Lord did not delight to do it, Samuel mourned, and God Himself is grieved. Judgment is real, yet it is reluctant.

For us, the warning could not be plainer. We are not bound by Israel’s old covenant ceremonies, but the principle stands and is sharpened by Christ: “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15). No amount of churchgoing, giving, or singing can substitute for a surrendered, obedient heart. And the New Testament echoes the danger that one who began well can fall away: “Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief” (Hebrews 3:12). Saul shows us that the road from promise to ruin is paved with cherished disobedience, while God, in justice and patience, calls us back before it is too late.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Obedience cannot be replaced by sacrifice or any amount of religious activity (15:22).
- God likens rebellion to witchcraft and stubbornness to idolatry because they enthrone self over God.

- Saul rejected God's word first; his rejection from kingship was the just consequence (15:23).
- This is not arbitrary or Calvinistic decree but righteous judgment after repeated, warned disobedience.
- God's justice and patience stand together; He judged truly yet grieved over Saul.
- One who begins with promise can end in ruin through cherished disobedience (Hebrews 3:12).
- Under Christ the principle is sharpened: love proves itself by keeping His commandments (John 14:15).

Discussion Prompts

- Ask why God compares rebellion and stubbornness to witchcraft and idolatry.
- Discuss how the order of 15:23 (Saul rejected the word first) guards God's justice.
- Connect "to obey is better than sacrifice" to Christ's "keep my commandments" (John 14:15).

Question 10

Student Question:

Name one specific area where the Lord Jesus is calling you, through this passage, to move from partial obedience to glad, complete obedience to His word.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone moves from sober warning to hopeful surrender. The whole chapter has held a mirror to us: partial obedience, self-justification, creeping pride, fear of people, and the deadly substitution of religion for surrender. The aim now is not despair but glad, complete obedience to the Lord Jesus.

Look back honestly and let the Spirit show you your spared Agag, your kept-back corner, the place where your obedience is mostly but not wholly His. Christ is not looking to crush you with this chapter; He is looking to free you from the slow ruin that cherished disobedience brings.

Make it concrete. Name one specific command of Christ you have been keeping partially, and resolve, with His help, to obey it fully and gladly. Perhaps it is forgiving someone completely, surrendering a habit entirely, speaking a truth you have feared to speak, or giving in an area you have held back. Whole-hearted obedience always lands somewhere specific.

Take heart in the gospel that surrounds this hard chapter. God still desires not the fat of rams but a broken and contrite heart (Psalm 51:17), and that He will not despise. The Lord Jesus, the true and obedient King who never spared an Agag of His own will, lives to form His glad obedience in you. Bring Him your one held-back thing, and let Him have all of you.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The chapter calls us not to despair but to glad, complete obedience in Christ.
- Christ uses this warning to free us from the slow ruin of cherished disobedience.
- Whole-hearted obedience must land on one specific, named command.
- God still receives the broken and contrite heart (Psalm 51:17), and Christ forms His obedience in us.

Discussion Prompts

- Ask each person to name one command of Christ to move from partial to full obedience.
- Have the class complete: "This week, by God's grace, I will fully obey Him in ..."
- Close in prayer offering the held-back "Agag" to the Lord and asking for a contrite heart.