

The Danger of Substitutes

by Warren Wiersbe

The sermon emphasizes the danger of substituting God's will with our own will, leading to disobedience and rejection by God.

Duration: 36:51

Scripture: 1 Samuel 15:13-22, Philippians 2:8, 1 John 1:6-10

Topics: "Authentic Faith", "Obedience To God"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the danger of substituting words and actions in our relationship with God. He highlights the importance of not just saying we have fellowship with God, but actually walking in the light and acknowledging our sins. The preacher warns against substituting reputation for character, as it can lead to moral deterioration. He also cautions against making excuses instead of confessing our sins and sacrificing instead of obeying God's will. The overall message is to live authentically and not rely on substitutes, but to truly follow and obey God.

Transcript

God's word to 1 Samuel chapter 15. I'm reading a long narrative portion from verse 13 to verse 31. Samuel had sent Saul to defeat the enemy, and we discover that the enemy defeated Saul.

1 Samuel 15 verse 13. Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said unto him, Blessed be thou of the Lord, I have performed the commandment of the Lord. Samuel said, What meaneth then this bleating of the sheep in mine ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear? 2 And Saul said, They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen, to sacrifice unto the Lord thy God, and the rest we have utterly destroyed.

3 Then Samuel said unto Saul, Stay, and I will tell thee what the Lord hath said to me this night. And he said unto him, Stay on. 4 And Samuel said, When thou wast little in thine own sight, wast thou not made the head of the tribes of Israel? 5 And the Lord anointed thee king over Israel? 6 And the Lord sent thee on a journey, and said, Go, and utterly destroy the Amalekites, and fight against them until they be consumed.

7 Why then didst thou not obey the voice of the Lord, but didst fly upon the spoil, and didst evil in the sight of the Lord? 8 And Saul said unto Samuel, Yea, I have obeyed the voice of the Lord, and have gone the way which the Lord sent me, and have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and have utterly destroyed the

Amalekites. 9 But the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the chief of the things which should have been utterly destroyed, to sacrifice unto the Lord thy God in Gilgal. 10 And Samuel said, Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? 11 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. 12 Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, he hath also rejected thee from being king. 13 And Saul said unto Samuel, I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord and thy words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice.

14 Now therefore I pray thee, pardon my sin, and turn again with me, that I may worship the Lord. 15 And Samuel said unto Saul, I will not return with thee, for thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord hath rejected thee from being king over Israel. 16 And as Samuel turned about to go away, he laid hold upon the skirt of his mantle, and it tore.

17 And Samuel said unto him, The Lord hath torn the kingdom of Israel from thee this day, and hath given it to a neighbor of thine who is better than thou. 18 And also the strength of Israel will not lie nor repent, for he is not a man that he should repent. 19 Then he said, I have sinned, yet honor me now, I pray thee, before the elders of my people and before Israel, and turn again with me, that I may worship the Lord thy God.

20 So Samuel turned again after Saul, and Saul worshiped the Lord. The tragedy of a great failure, because a man disobeyed God. If any man had a reason to become a success, that man was Saul, who was appointed the first king of Israel.

Everything was in his favor. He had physical strength, he stood head and shoulders above the other men. He had a divine call from God, and with this call came a divine empowering from God.

There went with Saul a band of men whose hearts God had touched, and it is always good for a leader to have around him men who will encourage him. But added to this Saul had a praying friend, and Samuel, the prophet and the judge, was Saul's friend, and Samuel knew how to pray. And so everything was in Saul's favor, and Saul should have succeeded, but he failed, and he failed miserably.

Saul has gone down in history as one of Israel's greatest failures. He lost God's blessing, he lost God's presence, he lost his crown, he lost his kingdom, he lost his friend, and ultimately he lost his life. And Saul is looked upon today as a great example of a failure.

He led a nation into defeat, and he himself ended up a suicide on the battlefield. Now, how do you explain this? He had physical strength, he had wisdom, he had friends, he had divine help, he had a praying associate. How do we explain the fact that a great man like this, called at a great hour in history, goes down in failure and defeat? And may I remind you that the word of God says, let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.

Someone here says that can never happen to me, it can happen to you, it can happen to me, it can happen to any of us. Now, Israel wasn't to blame for Saul's failure, and Samuel wasn't to blame for Saul's failure. God wasn't to blame for Saul's failure, Saul was to blame for his failure.

I recall the first time I heard Bishop Culbertson pray a prayer that he often prayed, Lord, help us to end well. And I said to myself, what does he mean by that? Surely we're going to get to heaven. Then as I

thought, I said, aha, I know what he means.

It's possible to have a great beginning and a tragic ending. It's possible to begin with your name in lights and end up with your name in the gutter. It's possible to begin glorifying God and end life bringing disgrace to God.

And that's what Saul did. Now, if you want to know why Saul failed, you just examine 1 Samuel chapter 15 and you discover why he failed. He failed because he began to live on substitutes.

Saul failed because he began to live on substitutes. And there are in this passage five substitutes that ruined Saul's life. And these same substitutes can ruin your life or my life.

You know the story. The Amalekites were the enemies of Israel. They had been since the Exodus.

And God sent Saul and his armies to wipe out the Amalekites. The measure of their sin had come to the full. God's patience now was ending and the Amalekites were going to be eradicated.

But Saul did not obey God. He saved the king alive. He kept the best of the spoil.

The rest of it he destroyed. Samuel knew about this and Samuel came to meet Saul. And we have the section that we read in our scripture reading today.

1 Samuel 15 verses 13 through 31. Now, what were the substitutes that ruined Saul's life? First of all, Saul substituted saying for doing. He substituted words for deeds.

Would you notice in verse 13, Samuel comes to Saul and Saul sees him coming and Saul comes up and does what every great orthodox believer does. He greets him. Blessed be thou of the Lord.

I have performed the commandment of the Lord. But he hadn't. He's just saying it.

I have performed the commandment of the Lord. He is substituting saying for doing. Now, God had commanded him utterly to destroy the enemy.

Verse 3. But in verses 8 and 9, I read that Saul and the people of Israel did not utterly destroy the enemy. And so Saul was telling a lie. Blessed be thou of the Lord.

If you're going to tell a lie, it's always good to preface it with a beatitude. If you want one of the saints of God really to believe the lie you're going to tell, start off with some blessing. Quote a Bible verse.

You see, we evangelical Christians or fundamentalists or whatever word you want to use, have a tendency to substitute words for deeds. We can talk a big talk, but we can't walk a big walk. And we think that because we've talked about witnessing, we've witnessed or we've talked about praying, we've prayed.

Now, God knew that Saul was lying back in verse 10. Then came the word of the Lord unto Samuel saying, it repenteth me that I have set up Saul to be king for he has turned back from following me and he hath not performed my commandments. So God knew that Saul had not obeyed and Samuel knew that God had not obeyed and the people knew that God had not obeyed and Saul knew that he had not obeyed.

The animals even knew that Saul had not obeyed. Saul comes out and says, I have obeyed the commandment of the Lord. And just then the sheep begin to make their bagging and the cattle begin their

lowing.

And Samuel says, that's interesting. What meaneth then the bleeding of the sheep and the lowing of the cattle? There comes a point in life when our sins find us out. He substituted saying for doing.

That's easy to do. How easy it is for me to come to a worship service and to sing. Gracious spirit dwell with me.

Truthful spirit dwell with me. And yet know all along there's some lie in my life and God cannot answer. We substitute shouting for obeying.

I recall preaching in a Bible conference some years ago and right on the front row was a huge man. Now I mean he was huge. There's some people who cannot help their size for glandular reasons or other reasons.

He was just plain uncouth and yet he could shout hallelujah like everybody else and amen. I thought to myself, dear brother, you ought to be spending some time working on your temple. It's so easy for us to sing the songs and say the words and pray the prayers and quote the verses and think that because we've done so we've obeyed the voice of God.

He substituted saying for doing. John talks about this in his first letter. Remember that? If we say that we have no sin, we lie.

If we say that we have fellowship with him, we walk in darkness, we lie. If we say that we have not sinned, if we say, if we say six times in chapters one and two of first John, if we say, if we say, if we say, and the conclusion is if we say we ought to do the first step towards moral deterioration, the first step toward evangelical erosion, the first step toward falling apart spiritually is substituting saying for doing. Now the next step, he substituted excuses for confessions.

Oh, he said I had sinned twice. He said it. He didn't mean it.

Samuel knew he didn't mean it. There are a number of people in the Bible who said I have sinned and they didn't mean it. Pharaoh said, I have sinned.

He didn't mean it. Saul said, oh, I have sinned. He didn't mean it.

He substituted excuses for confessions. Billy Sunday used to say that an excuse is the skin of a reason stuffed with a lie. That's a good definition.

Have you noticed that people who are good at excuses are rarely good at anything else? I once worked with a man who had more excuses than he had jobs. He never accomplished very much, but he always had an excuse. People who give excuses refuse to accept responsibility.

And if God's going to build character into our lives, we have to accept responsibility. And Saul substituted excuses for confessions. Oh, he says the people, well, we're going to do this.

We saved it for the Lord. My Bible says he that covereth his sin shall not prosper. And of course, one excuse leads to another, which leads to more sin, which leads to more deterioration.

All Saul had to say was I have disobeyed God. I'll go back and finish the job. Pray for me.

But he didn't. He had excuses. There are some people when you talk to them about their responsibilities, they aren't listening to you.

Their mind is going a million miles an hour thinking up excuses. The person who is faithful to God, who obeys the Word of God doesn't have to think up excuses. If he's made a mistake, he confesses his mistake and tries to make it right.

If he's sinned, he confesses his sins. If he's failed, he tries to do better. The person who depends on excuses is eroding his own character.

He substituted excuses for confessions. I used to work in the counseling tent at Winona Lake. And people would come forward at the various meetings and they'd come into the counseling tent and we'd greet them and sit and try to help them with the Word of God.

Oh, I could write a book about people I've talked to in the counseling tent at Winona Lake. I'm sure you who work in Pacific Garden Mission and other such places as that where there is a witness going on have the same experience. And here come Christians who are out of fellowship with God.

And it's always their mother's fault or their father's fault or their employer or the church or the pastor. Instead of getting down and saying, oh, dear God, I have sinned, they come out with excuses. And if I'm talking to someone right now whose only success depends upon excuses, my friend, you aren't a success, you're a failure.

Because one of these days the sheep are going to start and the cattle are going to start and the voice of your own sin is going to find you out. There's a third substitute in Saul's life. Verses 20 through 23, he substituted sacrifice for obedience.

Oh, how many times we've heard this. God's called me to the mission field, says this Christian, but I didn't go to the mission field. I thought I could stay and get a better job and support somebody else.

And Samuel says, God doesn't want your paycheck. God wants you. And here's somebody that says God's called me into Christian service, but I really can't afford to go into Christian service.

So what I'll do is keep my job and help somebody else do it. And God says, sorry, you'll be miserable and nobody can take your place. Saul was substituting sacrifice for obedience.

Now God wants obedience. God says to Saul, I want you to go out and fight a battle and wipe out the enemy. And Saul said, I know more about this than God does.

And so he didn't obey. Either he is Lord or he's not Lord. Either we obey him or we don't obey him.

We don't ask, is it popular? We obey. We don't ask, is it safe? We obey. The person who makes decisions on the basis of, is it popular or is it safe, is not obedient.

You can page right through the Old Testament and find over and over again where God says, look, I don't want your sacrifices. I want your heart. I want your obedience.

David said, thou desirest not sacrifice, else I would bring it. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart. Oh God, thou wilt not despise.

David could have brought 10,000 sheep and offered them and God would have said, David, you burned up a lot of mutton. I didn't want your mutton. I wanted your heart.

As you go through the prophets, Isaiah says it, and Jeremiah says it, and Hosea says it, and Micah says it, and Jesus quotes them. And you and I say, well, I tithe, therefore I have purchased the dispensation to disobey. God says, I don't want your tithes.

I want your obedience. But I have served so long and hard on committees. Therefore God says, I don't, I'm interested in your sacrifice.

I want your obedience. Suppose our Lord Jesus had not been obedient unto death, even the death of the cross, where would we be? Saul substituted saying for doing. Saul substituted excuses for confession.

Saul substituted sacrifice for obedience. We smile at what he has to say here. Oh, we have spared the best of the flocks and herds to give it to God.

And God says, do you think that these fine sheep and cattle and goats can ever substitute for your heart? I don't want things. I want you. I want the obedience of your will, Saul.

There is no substitute for obedience. Now there's a fourth substitute in Saul's life. Verses 24 and 25, he substituted reputation for character.

He was only concerned about what do the people think? Look at it. I have sinned because I feared the people and obeyed their voice. Now, therefore, I pray thee pardon my sin and turn again with me that I may worship the Lord.

And Saul hears Samuel say, no, I won't return. You've rejected the word of the Lord. You see, all that Saul was concerned about was what the people thought.

Abraham Lincoln used to say character is the tree. Reputation is only the shadow cast by the tree. Mr. Moody used to say reputation is what people think I am.

Character is what God knows I am. Character, said Mr. Moody, is what a man is in the dark. And there are multitudes of evangelical people who are only concerned about what do the people think? Not what does God say? And we have today all kinds of evangelical bandwagons onto which people jump to be approved of men.

He was afraid of the people. Verse 24, I feared the people. May I ask you a simple question? Why be afraid of people? People can hurt your body.

They can't condemn your soul. Jesus said, fear not them which can destroy the body, but fear him, God, who is able to destroy both body and soul in hell. I'm not going to face people at the judgment seat of Christ.

I'm going to face God. A thousand years from now, whether or not someone like me or my ministry won't make a great deal of difference, but whether or not God was pleased will make a great deal of difference. When you fear God, you don't have to fear the people.

The fear of man brings a snare. It traps Saul, and Saul lost his crown because of the fear of men. We don't need the honor of people.

We don't need people for approval. We just need God's approval. And Saul comes very piously and says, I have performed the commandment of the Lord.

No, he hadn't. He performed the commandment of the people, and he substituted reputation for character. This was the sin of the Pharisees.

You know why the Pharisees prayed? To be seen and heard of men. You know why they gave? To be seen and approved of men. They would blow trumpets that they were now going to come and give.

They did what they did for the approval of people. That's why they crucified Jesus. Jesus did what he did for the approval of God.

I do always those things that please him. I came down from heaven not to do my own will, but the will of him that sent me. When you start substituting reputation for character, something very insidious happens.

The outside of the vessel looks very clean and polished and beautiful, and the inside gets full of dirt and filth and scum and sewage. And one day, the whole thing falls apart. Man looks on the outward appearance.

God looks on the heart. Don't substitute reputation for character. The important thing in life is not popularity.

The important thing in life is doing the will of God. There was a fifth substitute in his life, and this led to his ruin. He substituted saying for doing and fooled himself into thinking that because he talked about it, he did it.

He substituted excuses for confession. He thought he could blame somebody else. He substituted sacrifice for obedience.

He wanted to buy his way out. He substituted reputation for character, more concerned about what people think than what God knows. And finally, he substituted his will for God's will.

For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Idolatry and witchcraft. Now actually, he did end up with a witch.

You know that. In that last great battle that came to Saul's life, and Saul cried out to God for wisdom, and God didn't answer. So Saul went down to a witch's cave.

The scripture says he disguised himself. He was not disguising himself. He was revealing himself.

He'd been that way all along. Idolatry and witchcraft. Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, he hath also rejected thee from being king.

Verse 26. And Samuel said unto Saul, I will not return with thee, for thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord hath rejected thee from being king over Israel. How big does a sin have to be? We don't read that Saul was guilty of immorality.

He simply disobeyed the word of God. He substituted his will for God's will. What Samuel is saying is this to Saul.

He says, you know Saul, everything we have comes from the word of God. You're king because God's word said so. And you went on this trip because God told you to.

And God would have given you complete victory if you'd obeyed him. Everything we have comes through the word of God. I'm saved today because of the word of God.

He that heareth my word and believeth on him that sent me hath everlasting life. I know I'm saved because of the word of God. Day by day, I discover the will of God through the word of God.

I get encouragement through the word of God. I know if I should die, I'm going to heaven because of the word of God. I know that when I share the word in ministry, it's not going to be wasted because God's word says his word will never return void.

All of my encouragement, all of my wisdom, all of my strength comes from the word of God. Now, what right do I have to disobey the word of God and substitute my will for God's will? Now, when you reject God's word, you're rejecting God's love. Why did God command Saul? Because he loved him.

The word of God is the expression of the love of God. The word of God is the expression of the mind of God. So when I reject God's word, I reject his love.

I love myself more. When I reject his word, I reject his mind. I'm smarter than he is.

When I reject his word, I reject his power. He speaks and there's power. And the thing that cost Saul his crown was rebellion.

Saul was a rebel and God is not going to tolerate rebels. A rebel is one who says, Lord, I know what you want me to do, but I'm not going to do it. I've got a better way.

I know where you want me to go, but I'm not going to go. I know you want me to break this thing off. I'm not going to break it off because I know better than you do.

It's a rebellion. How many times have you gone through the supermarket, pushing your little cart, only to turn the corner and see some little brat on the floor, kicking his heels and screaming, wanting something off the shelf. And mother is saying, now you can't have it, junior.

Get up. If I had done, if they had had supermarkets back when I was a little kid and I had done that to my mother, I wouldn't have been on that floor very long. I would have been over her knee and she wouldn't have been the least bit embarrassed to spank me right there in that store because my parents would not tolerate rebellion and God doesn't tolerate rebellion.

Saul substituted his will for God's will. So God said, all right, you want it that way. You can have it.

You've rejected me. I'll reject you. You don't want my crown.

Fine. I'll take it back. You don't want my throne.

Great. I'll put somebody else there. Saul made his own choice.

Saul was judge and jury and executioner when he substituted his will for God's will. And so Samuel left Saul. And the only time that Samuel saw Saul again was when they met in that witch's cave.

That witch thought she was going to conjure up some demon. But God took over in that meeting and Samuel showed up and the witch was so frightened she hit the deck. And Samuel said, Saul, you're going to be where I am tomorrow about this time.

And the death bells began to toll for Saul. Whenever I read this chapter, I think of another Saul who came from the tribe of Benjamin. We don't know him as Saul.

We know him as Paul, but his first name was Saul, Saul of Tarsus. And God called Saul of Tarsus to be an apostle. And he was a success.

Oh, he lost his life, but not as a suicide. He lost his life as a martyr. He didn't substitute saying for doing.

He did. He said, these things I'm writing to you, I have experienced myself. He didn't substitute excuses for confession.

Saul had Saul of Tarsus had no excuses. He was confessing Christ. And I'm sure when he sinned, he confessed his sin.

Saul of Tarsus, Paul, the apostle, didn't substitute sacrifice for obedience. His obedience led to sacrifice. He didn't substitute reputation for character.

He was known as the scum of the earth. Had he compromised with the right people at the right time, he could have been a very important, influential man in the Jewish Commonwealth, but he didn't do it. You know what they called Paul? Troublemaker, a pest, a nuisance.

This man who's turned the world upside down. Paul didn't care about reputation. He had character.

Paul didn't substitute his will for God's will. You know what Paul said? None of these things move me. Neither count I my life gear unto myself that I may finish my course and finish the ministry that God's given to me.

And some of his closest friends wept over him and said, oh, are you sure you're doing the right thing? And Paul said, stop your crying. I'm doing the right thing. My friend, your character is your most priceless possession next to your salvation.

God didn't save us just to rescue us from hell. He saved us that today, tomorrow he might build character into our lives, honesty and integrity, a clean conscience, a life of discipline and devotion and denial. That's what he saved us for.

And in this day of shallow Christianity, in this day when it's so easy to sing the right songs, use the right cliches. If we aren't careful, folks, we're going to find ourselves on the same slide that took Saul down to death. May I repeat these for you and then we'll close.

Don't substitute saying for doing. If you want to have revival in your life, just make sure everything you say is true. Whatever you sing is true.

Whatever you pray is true. Don't substitute excuses for confession. If today some one of us needs to confess sin, let's do it.

Don't substitute sacrifice for obedience. You can't buy your way out of the will of God. Don't sacrifice reputation for character.

If there's something in our lives that others don't know, give it time, they'll know it. Don't substitute our will for God's will. Don't live on substitutes.

Live on the real thing. I think of my Lord Jesus Christ, that great King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Perfect integrity, perfect character.

Sacrifice, obedience, devotion. He was able to come to the end of his life and look up to his Father and say, Father, I finished the work you gave me to do. I've done the job you wanted me to do here on earth.

I hope that's going to be true of our lives. What a tragedy it would be for us to get to the end of our lives and discover we've been living on substitutes and it's all gone. There is no substitute for Jesus Christ.

If you've never trusted him, you come and trust him today. There is no substitute for Christian living. Religion is no substitute.

If we're not living for him, let's today determine to live for him and not be found losing our crown and losing our lives on substitutes. Gracious Father in heaven, we have read this chapter and studied it and our hearts are warned. Oh Lord, there is in our hearts a great desire to be real, to be building on that which is real.

And I pray that you'll help us today to do what you want us to do, that we might be what you want us to be. Help those who need to be saved to come to Christ. Help backslidden Christians to be restored to fellowship.

Lord, where there is something that needs to be dealt with, help us courageously to deal with it for your glory. And may we move forward in obedience to your word for Jesus' sake. Amen.

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