

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 6, 2020

Pastor Lew Upchurch
1 Sam. 15:1-3; 9-21; 16:14

“Trust and Obey”

Trust and obey. When I hear those words, the first thing that comes to my mind is the chorus of that old hymn I remember singing in church as a kid.

***“Trust and obey, For there’s no other way
To be happy in Jesus, But to trust and obey.”***

Now, you can’t find this hymn in most of our Lutheran hymnals, but if you grew up in one of the many Reformed denominations, you probably remember singing this one too. It’s a catchy tune, no doubt, but the words sure put a lot on the person to do something in order to get right with the Lord.

Take verse four for example: **“But we never can prove The delights of His love Until all on the altar we lay; For the favor He shows and the joy He bestows Are for *them* who will trust and obey.”**

As a young person trying my best to understand the Lord in the most basic sense, this hymn didn’t help at all. I was to trust the Lord and follow his commands. And if I did, at least according to the hymn, He would show me favor? He would even award me with joy. All I had to do was trust and obey.

But it never really happened—at least the joy part. In fact, I can honestly say that this whole thing about there being no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey almost drove me away from the faith. Because the more I tried to trust and obey, the more I realized that I couldn’t. And as I got older, this constant battle became even more frustrating. I mean, if God commands us to follow what he says, then it must mean that he has given us the potential to do it, right? So, for example, when he says, “You shall have no other Gods,” which means that we should love him and trust him above all things, then it makes sense that we should have the ability to do that. But when we look at our lives, what we see is that we are constantly looking for happiness, identity, security, and meaning in life in everything but where God tells us to look—which is in Him! And that’s just

the first commandment. Take the remaining 9 and the story is the same. God says do this and we fail. God says *don't* do this and we do it anyway. How is this anything close to what the old hymn tells us to do, which is trust and obey?

So what happens is that we just give up and convince ourselves that the commandments must be more like God's "suggestions" that we either choose to follow or not, **or even worse** think we have the liberty to rewrite them in order to fit our version of life, because "hey Jesus died for our sins, right?"

But they're God's commandments, which means they're good because he speaks them. And in case you've forgotten, God is good. But we aren't! So it's not the command that deceives us in any way, but the sin that dwells in all of us. That's what deceives us. That's what inspires us to imagine that we can do and not do what God commands. Sin stirs us up to believe we can be good and holy. Even worse, sin sells us on the lie that we have the freedom to choose whether we obey God's commands or not.

That sure was the case for King Saul in our OT reading from 1 Samuel today. Now this is a multilayered and complicated account that we modern day readers generally find uncomfortable, and even wonder what in the world it has to do with us today. But remember, as Paul writes; "All Scripture is breathed out by God and useful for teaching and correcting." So here we go.

The Lord said to Saul through the prophet Samuel (*to paraphrase*), "Listen, I'm about to get even with those Amalekites for ambushing Israel when they came up out of Egypt. So here's what you are to do: Go to war against them. Put everything connected with them under my holy ban. And no exceptions! This is to be total destruction—men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys—everything!"

Now I know this sounds troubling. But we have to put this in context of the time. Israel was both church and state in one. They had the authority to use the sword. Modern day Christianity is just church, with no authority to wage war. Saul was commanded very sternly by God to destroy the Amalekites. They had been given many years to repent of their evil. But they didn't. They were stubborn and resisted. So this was God's

judgement on them. And the weapon he would use was King Saul and the army of Israel.

So Saul attacked and utterly wrecked the A-ma-le-kites. But he spared the life of their king and the lives of the best animals. When the prophet Samuel confronted Saul over his disobedience, the King did what we all do at times. He tried to cover up his sin. First he said to Samuel, "I have performed the commandment of the Lord." Now this ought to sound familiar. I mean, how often have we heard people put up an innocent front like this, including ourselves. "Oh, everything's fine in my life when it comes to God." Meanwhile we might be living in habitual, unrepentant sin. But, hey, what people don't know, can't hurt them. Right?

But the thing about Saul is that Samuel did know because he could hear the bleating of the sheep and the sounds of the other animals that were supposed to be dead! **But** Saul didn't give up trying to hide his sin. Next he did what many of us do, which is blame someone else! "These animals? Oh, I told the soldiers to destroy them, but they told me they were holding them back for sacrifice." But God never said anything about sacrifice. He said to destroy them all. Samuel finally asked why? Why did you not obey the voice of the Lord? Why did you do evil in his sight?

But Saul insisted and lied, "I have obeyed the Lord." I destroyed the Amalekites... well, except for their king and those animals. So, the bottom line is this whole thing is this: Saul ignored and ultimately rejected the Word of the Lord to fit what he wanted.

We, my friends, also sin like that. We conveniently ignore the Word of the Lord when it suits us. And by doing so, we deceive ourselves. Our disobedience might not seem as severe as Saul's...he willfully rejected the Word of the Lord, and then tried to make excuses, rather than admit his guilt. And this ultimately led to his demise as "*the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul.*" He was adrift and ultimately sank.

What about you and me? We too are adrift aren't we? Sometimes we don't realize it, but most of the time, we do. And when we twist and manipulate our stories, trying to escape God's judgment, instead of owning up to our sin, we're going in the wrong direction. So we must accept God's Word of Law as it is, even when it condemns us. And trust me, it will. Don't lie. Don't covet. Don't steal. Don't commit adultery. And it's not just the 10

that condemn. Love your neighbor. Pray for those who persecute you. Repent and believe. We fail at them all, don't we?

But here's the thing. Whatever it is that God commands, it seems impossible for us to do, right? I mean, we might not be as blatant about it as Saul, but still, even on our best days, we fail. But that's really the point. No, I'm not talking about God not caring if we break his laws. Nor am I saying that he wants us just to try our best. What I'm talking about is when God reveals to us that we have nothing to offer him... and we actually get to the point that we believe that—when we are finally convinced that there's nothing we can do to meet his expectation of perfection, because of our constant, and sometimes intentional sinfulness. Only then...when his law makes us feel like we're going to sink.... are we ready to receive Christ. Because if we imagine we can obey God's commands, or trust him, while offering him up our version of **his** rules, then Christ's perfect obedience and faith, which fulfilled all of God's demands, was for nothing. We might as well follow Saul's lead and just fool ourselves right out of the faith.

But the real King, King Jesus, never faltered in his obedience. He was perfect in every way, and yet he accepted the blame for all our sins. He did this for you. With his blood, he has covered up your sins. This isn't a dishonest coverup, like when Saul, or you or me, try to make excuses or lie about our sins. No, Christ's blood straight up covered every sin of your life and mine as he hung on the cross.

Be honest with God about your sin. Don't try to cover it up, or act like how you live your life doesn't matter, because it does. God knows you. And he wants you to understand that you are in need of something outside of anything you are capable of offering that will make your relationship with him right. In walks the crucified and risen Savior. He says, "I got this.... I give you my promise of forgiveness." Through your faith in me, you can with certainty, "trust and obey...for there's no other way." I guess the old hymn was right after all. **Amen.**