

Homiletics Analysis: 1 Samuel 15

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

First Samuel 15 narrates the second and final divine rejection of Saul as king over Israel. The LORD commands Saul through Samuel to execute *herem* — total destruction — against the Amalekites, the ancient enemy who had ambushed Israel after the Exodus (Exodus 17:8–16; Deuteronomy 25:17–19). The command is total: people, livestock, everything. Saul mounts an impressive campaign, achieves military victory, but preserves Agag the Amalekite king alive and spares the best of the livestock, ostensibly for sacrifice. When Samuel arrives, Saul's greeting — "I have carried out the LORD's command" — is immediately contradicted by the sound of sheep and cattle. Samuel presses. Saul deflects, qualifies, and finally blames the people. Samuel delivers the devastating verdict: because Saul has rejected the word of the LORD, the LORD has rejected Saul as king. The confrontation culminates in two of the most theologically concentrated verses in the Old Testament (vv. 22–23): obedience exceeds sacrifice, and rebellion is as divination. Saul then makes a partial confession — he feared the people and obeyed their voice — before requesting that Samuel honor him before the elders. Samuel turns to leave; Saul clutches his robe; the robe tears; Samuel declares the kingdom torn from Saul and given to a neighbor better than he. Samuel executes Agag. Samuel and Saul part for the last time. The chapter closes with Samuel grieving for Saul and the LORD regretting that He had made Saul king.

This Text — Intent:

God intends through this chapter to press an unrelenting question upon the reader: *Who governs your obedience — God's word or human calculation?* The passage is not primarily about Saul's failure as a biographical tragedy. It is a theological prosecution, structured to expose the internal logic of partial obedience: Saul does not refuse to obey; he redefines obedience to retain control over its terms. The chapter's intent is to confront the reader with the same internal movement — to show that the man who modifies God's command while retaining its vocabulary ("I have carried out the LORD's command") is not merely disobedient but self-deceived, and that this is the most dangerous spiritual posture of all. God is seeking to produce in the reader a radical submission of judgment to divine command, stripped of the rationalization that makes partial compliance feel virtuous.

Subject Sentence: Saul's partial obedience is exposed as total rejection of God's kingship.

Primary Claim: God will not accept obedience that reserves to itself the right to modify His commands — and He brings down every kingdom, including our own inner kingdoms of self-rule, that attempts it.

Interpretive Evaluation

The nature of the *herem* command and divine violence: The most significant interpretive challenge in 1 Samuel 15 is not intra-evangelical disagreement but the passage's ethical surface: how can a God of love command the extermination of a people including women and children? This must be addressed because it frequently becomes a preaching evasion — the expositor gets lost in the ethics of *herem* and never reaches the text's actual claim. The Reformed reading locates *herem* within the theology of divine judgment: Amalek's destruction is not ethnic cleansing but covenantal justice, the enactment of a sentence deferred from Exodus 17 and Deuteronomy 25. The wars of Canaan are acts of divine judgment administered through a human agent — Israel as instrument of a holy God against nations whose iniquity has reached its fullness (Genesis 15:16). This does not make the command comfortable, but it prevents the ethical surface from obscuring the chapter's actual theological concern, which is Saul's response to the command, not the command itself.

Saul's "repentance" in verses 24–25: Wesleyan and Arminian readings sometimes treat Saul's confession in verses 24–25 as genuine repentance that God refuses — raising questions about the nature of God's rejection and whether it is irresistible. This reading should be *qualified* rather than refuted: Saul's words carry the form of confession but reveal their own hollowness in verse 30, where he reverts immediately to the same concern — "honor me before the elders of my people." A man who repents of fearing the people and immediately asks to be honored before those same people has not repented of the root. The Reformed reading does not hold that God refused genuine repentance but that no genuine repentance occurred. The distinction matters enormously for exposition: this is not a passage about God's sovereignty overriding a penitent sinner but about the difference between genuine repentance and the performance of its vocabulary.

"God regretted" (v. 11, 35) — divine impassibility and repentance: Verses 11 and 35 state that the LORD "regretted" (*niham*) making Saul king, while verse 29 equally states that "the Glory of Israel does not lie or change His mind, for He is not a man that He should change His mind." Open Theism uses the *niham* statements to argue that God genuinely changes his plans in response to human action — that the rejection of Saul was not predetermined but a divine response to actual events. This reading should be *refuted*. The juxtaposition of *niham* in verses 11 and 35 with the explicit denial of divine changeability in verse 29 is not a contradiction to be resolved by privileging one side — it is a canonical affirmation that the *niham* language is phenomenological rather than ontological. God's grief over Saul is real and is described in terms that the reader can understand; it is not a description of a change in God's eternal plan or knowledge. The Reformed reading affirms

the genuine emotional weight of divine grief while insisting that this grief operates within and not against God's sovereign purposes. Samuel's grief (v. 35) and God's grief (v. 11) are placed in parallel, suggesting that *niham* in this passage expresses something closer to anguished sorrow than revised intention.

The “obedience over sacrifice” principle (vv. 22–23) and its scope: Some Baptist and Evangelical interpretations treat verses 22–23 primarily as a corrective to ritual religion — against empty ceremony, in favor of heartfelt worship. This reading *acknowledges* a genuine insight (the passage does oppose formalism) but significantly underreads the text. The issue in verse 22 is not ritual versus sincerity but *the structural subordination of all human initiative to divine command*. Saul was not proposing empty ritual — he was proposing genuine worship, with genuinely good animals, as a substitute for obedience. The verse does not say “external sacrifice without internal devotion is worthless” — it says “sacrifice, even sincere sacrifice, cannot be substituted for obedience to the word.” The Reformed reading presses this further: the passage is about the authority of God's word to command human action, and no amount of religious activity — however sincere — can replace or compensate for submission to that authority.

Key Canonical Support

- **Exodus 17:8–16; Deuteronomy 25:17–19** — The original Amalek mandate; establishes that the *herem* command in 1 Samuel 15 is not arbitrary but the execution of a deferred covenantal sentence, grounding Saul's disobedience against its full divine-historical backdrop.
- **1 Samuel 13:8–14** — Saul's first rejection, where he offered sacrifice rather than wait for Samuel; establishes the pattern of which chapter 15 is the culmination — Saul habitually substitutes his own religious initiative for obedience to God's explicit command.
- **Psalms 51:16–17** — “You do not delight in sacrifice... The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit” — grounds Samuel's principle in verse 22 within the Psalter's own theology of worship, showing that the “obedience over sacrifice” principle is not an isolated prophetic rebuke but a canonical constant.
- **Isaiah 1:11–17** — The LORD's rejection of Israel's sacrifices because they are uncoupled from covenant obedience; the same structural logic as 1 Samuel 15:22 at the prophetic scale, confirming that Saul's error anticipates the national error the prophets will prosecute for centuries.
- **Romans 5:19 / Philippians 2:8** — Christ as the obedient one, in explicit contrast to the pattern of human disobedience from Adam onward; the “obedience” that Samuel demands and Saul cannot produce is ultimately fulfilled only by the one who became “obedient to the point of death.”

Aim: To press the reader toward honest self-examination of whether their obedience to God’s word is genuine submission or controlled compliance — and to show that only the gospel of Christ’s perfect obedience can produce the real thing.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–3	Samuel rehearses Saul’s divine commission and delivers the <i>herem</i> command against Amalek — total destruction, nothing spared	Command is explicit, total, and theologically grounded in Amalek’s ancient offense against Israel
4–7	Saul musters Israel’s forces (200,000 + 10,000 Judah), warns the Kenites to depart, and executes the campaign successfully	The Kenite exemption shows Saul can distinguish — his later sparing of Agag is choice, not confusion
8–9	Saul captures Agag alive and spares the best livestock; “everything despised and worthless” they destroyed	The text’s framing is pointed: “everything despised and worthless” they destroyed — the inverse of obedience
10–11	The LORD speaks to Samuel: “I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me and has not carried out My commands”	Divine grief is real; Samuel’s all-night cry establishes the gravity before the confrontation
12–13	Samuel finds Saul at Carmel, where Saul has set up a monument to himself; Saul greets Samuel: “I have carried out the LORD’s command”	The monument is devastating detail — victory interpreted as personal achievement; the greeting is immediate self-deception
14	Samuel: “Then what is this bleating of sheep and lowing of cattle that I hear?”	The animals testify against Saul; the question cannot be deflected
15	Saul’s first deflection: “The people spared the best to	Three evasions in one sentence: “the people”

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	sacrifice to the LORD your God”	(blame-shift), “the best” (reframing), “to sacrifice” (religious justification)
16–19	Samuel silences Saul and delivers the covenant indictment: small in your own eyes then, but now you have swooped on the spoil — why did you not obey?	“Small in your own eyes” — the contrast with the monument at Carmel (v. 12) is precise
20–21	Saul’s second deflection, more elaborate: “I did obey the LORD” — he spared Agag but destroyed the Amalekites; the people took the animals for sacrifice	Saul still will not say “I” — the people remain the grammatical subject; he claims obedience while describing disobedience
22–23	Samuel’s verdict: obedience exceeds sacrifice; rebellion is as divination; stubbornness as idolatry; because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He has rejected you as king	The theological core; verses 22–23 are not incidental wisdom but the judicial sentence explaining the rejection
24–25	Saul’s partial confession: “I have sinned; I feared the people and listened to their voice” — then immediately requests honor before the elders	The confession names the sin but the request in v. 25 reveals the unchanged heart
26–29	Samuel refuses to return with Saul; Saul seizes Samuel’s robe; the robe tears; Samuel declares the kingdom torn and given to a neighbor better than Saul; God does not change His mind	The torn robe is enacted prophecy; verse 29 — “the Glory of Israel does not lie or change His mind” — is the theological anchor
30	Saul repeats: “I have sinned” — but the content of his request is identical: “honor me before the elders of my people and before	The repetition of verse 25’s request demolishes any reading of genuine repentance

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
31	Israel” Samuel returns with Saul; Saul worships the LORD	Samuel’s pastoral accommodation does not soften the judicial verdict
32–33	Samuel calls for Agag; Agag comes confidently; Samuel executes him — “as your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women”	Samuel does what Saul would not; the execution is judicial, not vindictive — covenant sentence carried out
34–35	Samuel departs to Ramah; they do not see each other again; Samuel grieves for Saul; the LORD regrets making Saul king	The double grief — Samuel’s and the LORD’s — closes the chapter in sorrow, not triumph

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–9	The Command Given and the Disobedience Committed
2	10–19	The Confrontation Initiated and the Evasions Deployed
3	20–23	The Verdict Delivered: Obedience Over Sacrifice
4	24–31	The Confession That Reveals an Unchanged Heart
5	32–35	The Sentence Executed and the Grief That Follows

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Saul’s partial obedience is exposed as total rejection of God’s kingship.

Primary Claim: God will not accept obedience that reserves to itself the right to modify His commands — and He brings down every kingdom, including our own inner kingdoms of self-rule, that attempts it.

Applications (Five)

1. Examine whether your obedience to God is genuine submission or controlled compliance. (*Mind/belief*) Saul did not refuse to go to war. He did not ignore the command.

He simply retained editorial authority over which parts of it he would honor — and then described that editorial authority as obedience. The reader who wants to know whether they are in Saul’s position needs to ask not “am I doing what God commanded?” but “am I doing all of what God commanded, or only the parts I have already agreed with?” The spiritually dangerous person is not the one who openly defies God but the one who obeys the parts of God’s word that cost nothing and quietly renegotiates the rest while maintaining the vocabulary of obedience.

2. Stop explaining your disobedience with religious language. (*Will/behavior*) Saul’s livestock were genuinely going to be sacrificed — or so he claimed. He did not frame his partial obedience as rebellion; he framed it as worship. Every time a person says “I’ll get to that later, but right now I need to focus on X ministry commitment” while leaving a clear command of God unattended, or “I felt led to do Y instead” while doing what they already wanted to do — the structure is identical to Saul’s. Religious justification for disobedience is not a mitigation; according to verses 22–23, it is an aggravation. The presence of sincere worship language does not sanctify the disobedience it is being deployed to cover.

3. Let the grief of this chapter recalibrate your feeling about sin. (*Affections/worship*) The chapter ends in grief — Samuel’s all-night crying (v. 11), Samuel’s refusal to return to Saul (v. 35), and the LORD’s own *niham* over Saul. The text is not triumphalist. God does not gloat over Saul’s rejection. There is a solemnity here that should be felt: what Saul lost was real, what God’s grief communicates is real, and what Samuel’s persistent sorrow reveals is that obedience is not a cold legal category but the condition of a relationship. If you have become casual about partial obedience — treating it as a minor calibration issue rather than a relational rupture — let this chapter restore the grief.

4. Identify the “Agag” in your own life — the thing you are keeping alive that God has commanded to be put to death. (*Will/behavior*) Saul’s specific failure was preserving Agag. There was one thing God named explicitly, one thing Saul chose to retain, and that one retained thing became the hinge of his rejection. The question the passage presses is not general (“are you obedient?”) but specific: what is the named thing in your life that you know God has commanded you to deal with, that you have been preserving for reasons that feel reasonable to you? The “Agag” may be a relationship, a habit, a financial pattern, a persistent attitude toward a particular person — whatever it is, the passage warns that the rationale for keeping it will always feel more plausible to you than it does to God.

5. Rest in Christ’s perfect obedience precisely because you cannot produce your own. (*Affections/worship*) The chapter ends without a solution. Saul cannot be fixed. The standard Samuel articulates in verses 22–23 is one no human king has ever or could ever meet on his own terms. The Reformed reading of this passage does not end with “be more obedient” — it ends at the place where the failure of human obedience creates the need for a king who is not like Saul, a king who obeys to the point of death, whose obedience is credited to those who cannot produce it. The right emotional response to 1 Samuel 15 is not merely self-examination but flight to Christ — whose obedience is the only answer to the standard this passage sets.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: First Samuel 15 is one of Scripture's most precise explorations of the relationship between divine authority and human compliance. At its center is the affirmation that God's word does not exist to be ratified by human approval — it exists to be obeyed. The famous couplet of verses 22–23 establishes a hierarchy within the covenant life of Israel (and by extension, the life of every covenant community): the word of the LORD stands above every religious institution, including sacrifice. This is not anti-ritual teaching but a teaching about the ordering of authorities — God's explicit command cannot be overridden or compensated for by religious activity, however sincere. The passage also contributes to the Old Testament's developing theology of the human heart: Saul's fear of the people (v. 24) is identified as the root beneath the surface disobedience, revealing that the ultimate competitor with God's authority is not rival deities but the opinion of other people — a form of idol-dependence that mimics the social mechanism of the surrounding nations.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: First Samuel 15 functions within the Reformed canon as a major exhibit of total depravity's subtlety — the text does not show a man in open rebellion against God but a man who has convinced himself he is obedient while structurally refusing to be. This is the characteristic mode of sinful self-deception: not defiance but redefinition. The Reformed doctrine of the sovereignty of God's word over human initiative — *sola scriptura* at its most fundamental level — is dramatized here: Saul's failure is precisely the failure to treat God's revealed word as the unqualified authority it is, and his replacement is promised to one who will honor it (*a man after God's own heart*, 1 Samuel 13:14). The passage also grounds the imputed righteousness that is central to Reformed soteriology: the standard articulated in verses 22–23 cannot be met by fallen humanity, and the reader who has honestly faced the chapter's indictment is prepared to receive Christ not merely as Savior from guilt but as the obedient one whose active righteousness is credited to those who cannot produce their own.

Main Takeaway

Saul did not refuse God — he edited God, and then called the edited version obedience. This is the chapter's warning and its mirror. The question it leaves you with is not “do you believe in God?” but “do you obey God's word completely, or only the parts that do not cost you the things you have already decided to keep?” There is only one person who has ever met the standard Samuel articulates in this chapter — and the gospel is that His obedience is available to those who have finally stopped pretending theirs is sufficient.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Making the sermon primarily about Saul rather than primarily about the reader.** Saul is interesting as a case study, but the text is not primarily biography — it is a theological prosecution with the reader in the defendant’s chair. Preachers who spend the majority of the exposition tracing Saul’s psychology produce an interesting historical lecture and an unchallenged congregation. The structure of the confrontation (command → partial compliance → exposure → deflection → verdict) is meant to be applied to the listener’s own interior life, not merely observed from a safe historical distance.
- **Treating “obedience over sacrifice” (v. 22) as a corrective to ritualism rather than a statement about the sovereignty of God’s word.** This is the most common misreading of the passage’s center. Verses 22–23 are not about empty ceremony versus sincere worship — Saul’s sacrifice was apparently sincere. The verses establish that even sincere religious activity cannot substitute for obedience to a specific divine command. Reducing it to “God wants your heart, not your rituals” produces a warm application that misses the passage’s actual claim and lets the listener off the hook.
- **Preaching the “find your Agag” application without grounding it in the gospel.** The specific-sin-identification application is valid and important, but if it is the sermon’s conclusion, the exposition has produced Law without gospel. The chapter ends in irresolvable tragedy — Saul cannot fix himself, and Samuel cannot fix him. That unresolved ending is intentional: it creates a need that the book of Samuel is already moving toward filling in David, and that the whole canon fills in Christ. Moralism says “kill your Agag.” The gospel says “the one who killed your Agag is the one who obeyed in your place.”
- **Avoiding the *herem* command entirely rather than addressing it honestly.** The total-destruction command makes modern readers uncomfortable, and preachers sometimes skip past it, treating it as context rather than content. But the command’s total, unqualified character is load-bearing for the text’s meaning: Saul’s modification of a total command illustrates precisely the problem of partial obedience. If the preacher softens the command’s totality, the force of Saul’s failure is correspondingly softened. The *herem* is not a problem to be explained away before the real sermon begins — it is the sharp edge on which the exposition cuts.
- **Mishandling the “God regretted” language (vv. 11, 35) in either direction.** Some preachers skip verse 11’s *niham* entirely because it seems theologically awkward; others land on it as evidence of an open, reactive God. Neither approach serves the text. The passage itself provides the corrective in verse 29 (“He is not a man that He

should change His mind”), and the exposition should hold both in tension: God’s grief over Saul is genuine and is meant to be felt by the reader; it does not, however, describe a change in God’s eternal purposes or a genuinely contingent divine response. The tension is exegetically honest and pastorally rich — God genuinely grieves what human sin produces, even when His sovereign purposes are not altered by it.

- **Reading Saul’s confessions in verses 24 and 30 as genuine repentance.** This generates either theological confusion (did God reject genuine repentance?) or a wrong application (confess your sin and God will restore what you have lost). The text marks both confessions as inadequate not by editorial comment but by the repetition of the same self-honoring request that follows each one (vv. 25, 30). Genuine repentance does not ask to be honored before the people immediately after confessing the sin of fearing those same people. Preachers should be careful not to extend to Saul’s confessions a charity the text itself withholds.