

## **“Listen with Readiness”**

Reading: 1 Samuel 3:1-14, 15:12-23

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We live in a world that loves putting check marks in all the right boxes. You know what I mean: you call customer support for a problem with your computer or some other appliance, and they cannot do anything for you until you've answered their insulting questions, "Is it plugged in? Is it turned on?" They have to follow their script; they have to check their boxes. Or you get a phone call from someone wanting you to take a survey, and you have to choose one of the answers they provide for you, or you can't take their survey. This is always my problem with surveys; I want to give them answers that they don't have boxes for. Or you find yourself caught in some soul-sucking layer of bureaucracy, and you've got to fill out this form which refers back to that form which requires that you fill out appendix 'a' as well; all the boxes need to be checked just so.

As I'm sure most of you know, Pastor Carey and I serve as co-pastors of this church, and probably not many of you have had co-pastors before. It's not uncommon for a husband and wife to serve in ministry together, but serving as co-pastors, in which we're on equal footing with equal authority and equally responsible for the church, is quite rare. There are only a handful of true co-pastor arrangements in the Wesleyan Church that we're aware of. And though of course there are many great things about being co-pastors, one of the frustrating things is that we rarely fit neatly in anyone's box of what a pastor should be. When we were interviewing different churches before we came here, each time we had to brace ourselves for that moment when the person interviewing us realized that they didn't really know what to do with co-pastors; we didn't fit their preconceptions of what a pastor should look like. Or there have been times when people have tried to put our information in their database, but their database isn't set up for co-pastors, so they can't check all their little boxes for us.

We live in a world that loves checking all the right boxes. That's the nature of institutions: they're designed to maintain themselves, so they strive for efficiency and order, and efficiency and order cannot be as easily maintained if you don't have neat little categories for keeping track of everything. Just check the boxes, and don't insist on making new boxes to fit you. And so I think we are trained by our increasingly institution-ordered world to just put check marks in boxes. Fit in one of the categories we've outlined. Just fill out your tax forms; the government sure doesn't care if you *like* it. It doesn't matter if the bureaucracy makes sense, just do it. Your boss doesn't care if you *want* to fill out your TPS report; it's very important that it be filled out and put into a filing cabinet somewhere, or the entire system might come crashing down.

And let's face it: it's easier to check the boxes than it is to deal honestly with the mess and complication of life. We feel like we have some control when we can fill out some forms and shuffle some papers around and call it a day. Look at how much I got done today, my stack of papers is much smaller! But honest, genuine life defies those neat little boxes all in a row on a government form. And when we consider our lives with God, that deeper life cannot be accounted for by checking the boxes.

I think that, in a sense, this was the problem with Saul as king over Israel. He had some pretty major character flaws as well, to be sure, but as we look at the mistakes he made and kept making, we realize that this was a man who was trying above all else to be the king and to remain as king. He

wanted to check all the 'king' boxes, so when there was a crisis of his authority, he did whatever he thought was right to get that box checked again. And that's what brought him down in the end, because serving as king over God's people meant serving as a regent *under* God, and God doesn't care about your little boxes. He cares about something much, much more important.

We've reached the point in *The Story* where God has done the hard work of carving out a land and a people who are redeemed and set apart for Himself, so that God can slowly redeem the whole of the creation that He loves. God has established His people in their promised land, and now they're wanting to be a little more respectable as a nation, so they ask God for a king. But God's intent was that He rule over them directly as their king, so their request is a rejection of God's intent for them. They want to be like other nations, but God never intended them to be like other nations; they were supposed to be set apart. Their leader in this period was a man named Samuel, who apparently functioned kind of like one of the Judges we read about a couple of weeks ago. God leads Samuel to choose Saul as Israel's first king, and though Saul is impressive in some ways at first, it soon becomes clear that he has trouble listening to God's commands. At one point he is specifically told to wait for Samuel to arrive before continuing with the sacrifices before a battle, but when Samuel is late, Saul jumps the gun. At another point God tells him to take all of the plunder from battle and devote it to the Lord, but Saul keeps some of it and claims that he was just planning on sacrificing it, or he blames it on his men — *not* an example of how a good leader stands up for their followers.

It's sadly comical to overhear Saul try to justify himself before Samuel. When Samuel arrives, Saul gives him a cheery, "The Lord bless you! I have carried out the Lord's instructions!" I assume he knew full well that he was in trouble, like a child who has smashed a family heirloom and greets their parents with over-the-top sweetness when they get home from work. Saul is trying to bluff his way through this one. Samuel says something very powerful in response, something that strikes at the very heart of the entire story of God's work with humanity: "To obey is better than sacrifice."

Saul thought he could get away with just checking the boxes, going through the motions, doing the basic actions he thought were required to keep this God person happy. Apparently the Lord is the sort of deity that likes sacrifices, so let's give Him a sacrifice to make Him happy. The details surely aren't that important. Surely the Lord is too busy to worry about us keeping a *few* items of plunder for ourselves; doing ninety percent of what He wants is surely good enough. But no, obedience is better than sacrifice. Checking the boxes is not what interests God. Going through the religious motions is not what God expects of us or calls us to.

The problem is that a lot of people today make the same basic assumption that Saul does, that checking the boxes is all God really cares about. If I show up at church from time to time and even listen to a bit of the sermon, if I give the church some money or a gift of some sort, if I live a generally good life and raise a good family, well, that's all God really cares about, isn't it? That's pretty much Christianity in a nutshell, right? We like to check the boxes, keep things in categories we can manage, feel that sense of accomplishment and productivity when we get to put a little 'x' in each churchy box.

"To obey is better than sacrifice." To obey is better than doing religious, churchy things that you think will appease God. The word "obey" calls us back to the beginning of the book of Samuel, when Samuel was just a boy serving in the sanctuary with God's priests. God spoke to Samuel even at such a young age, but Samuel didn't realize at first that it was God speaking to him. Eventually, with

the guidance of Eli the priest, when God speaks to him Samuel replies with, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” Our translations don’t make it clear, but the word “listening” in 1 Samuel 3 is the same verb in Hebrew as the word “obey” in 1 Samuel 15. It’s the verb *shema*, which is the same word used in Deuteronomy 6 when Moses makes that great announcement, “Hear (*shema*), O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one.” “Speak, Lord, for your servant is *shema*-ing.” “To *shema* is better than sacrifice.”

The word is translated differently in the two places because it does have a slightly different application, but even so, there is certainly an overlap. The word carries with it a sense of heeding: not just hearing God speak or even listening intently to Him, but heeding His words, taking them to heart, listening with readiness to obey. When Samuel was a boy, what set him apart was not just that he heard God speak, but that he listened with readiness. When Saul failed, it’s not because he didn’t hear God’s message to him, it was because he didn’t listen with readiness to obey.

This is the heart of what God wants from us. Don’t just check the boxes on your religion, listen to God with a readiness to put His words into action. Another prophet put it this way: The Lord says, “I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me. Even though you bring me burnt offerings...I will not accept them...But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” Another prophet said, “What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” These are statements of *being* and *relationship*, and of course from them come *doing*, but you can’t easily check the boxes when you’re done with them. Jesus was constantly confronting the people in His world who focused on checking the religious boxes, following the letter of the law to the extreme, but failed to heed the voice of God. Paul, as he preached to the first generation of Christians, constantly called them to stop worrying about whether everyone in the church had all the right religious boxes checked and instead listen to what God was doing in their midst.

To obey is better than sacrifice. Listening to God with a readiness to put His words into action is better than doing churchy things in the vain hope that making those sacrifices will make God happy with you. Samuel put himself in that position of receptivity to God’s message and readiness to obey with those simple words, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” Saul heard God’s message but didn’t really listen with readiness; he thought he knew what God wanted, but he was wrong.

The beautiful truth of this is that God’s main concern is not just that we do as we’re told. He’s not looking for good little robots; the intent is not that we would satisfy God’s lust for power and control. That’s one of the problems that tends to crop up when humans start talking about obedience: we insist on obedience because we want to control one another. But as the early church father Irenaeus said, “The glory of God is the human person fully alive; and life consists in beholding God.” God does not get His kicks by controlling us, He enjoys giving us the life we were made for, life that can only come in proximity to Him. We listen for God’s voice, ready to do His will, and God uses our obedience to bring life to us. He doesn’t want us to follow His rules, He wants *us*.

How often do we stop and say, in effect, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening, and I’m ready to do your will”? That doesn’t mean we sit there and do the first thing that the voices in our heads tell us to do, but it does mean that we take to heart the lesson of Saul’s failures and take the time to genuinely listen for God’s leading. How often do we set aside the churchy things we do just

because they're churchy and instead listen for what God wants of us? To obey is better than sacrifice. Listen with readiness.



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