

INTRO: It's been said that authority is like a bar of soap—the more you use it, the less of it you have. That truth shapes part of the conundrum of leadership. Authority should never be authoritarian in nature. That is doubly true of distinctively Christian leadership. And yet, because every leader is a sinner, Christian or not, the seduction of leadership is to use authority for sinful and self-advancing ends. This is why the news is always full of leadership scandals, and why we are continually disappointed with the leaders that we ourselves choose. But this problem is not just outside us. It's in our own hearts. When we're honest with ourselves, we see it and even feel it. We don't even lead our own thoughts or appetites very well, much less do we lead other people in ways that are good for them. Abuse, exploitation, neglect, mismanagement, embezzlement. If we're not careful, we can become jaded about any authority at all, whether in the home, the church, the community, or the nation. We begin to fear that no one really has our best interests at heart. No one is looking out for us, caring, understanding. No one is being wise or righteous or trustworthy on our behalf. No one leads in ways that strengthen and stabilize us, that energize and mobilize us for goals and tasks that are worth pursuing. And sadly, we see this playing out just as much among God's people as it does in the world.

We see it played out this morning in Saul's foolish oath. If you'll turn with me to 1Sam 14:24, page 236 in your pew Bible, we'll discover together this morning that **God's people need a Leader to strengthen and mobilize them without depriving or exploiting them.** This is what God wants for his people. Yet the leader they themselves choose—one to make them like all the other nations—is one who deprives them of sustenance, even as he's trying to exploit them for his own purposes. And why does Saul do that? Because what matters to Saul is not God's word, but his own. We begin reading in 1Sam 14:24.

“And the men of Israel had been hard pressed that day, so [for]¹ Saul had laid an oath on the people, saying, ‘Cursed be the man who eats food until it is evening and I am avenged on my enemies.’ So none of the people had tasted food.” That note is probably a flashback to v.20.² There, when Saul realized the Philistine army is scattering and vulnerable, he quit seeking God's counsel and he rallied the troops. Here, we discover that Saul rallied them, not with the carrot, but with the stick. He threatens them with a really dumb curse.³ If anyone eats before sundown or before the job is done, I will cut you. He doesn't lay the oath on them because they're hard pressed. It's the opposite. They're hard-pressed because Saul has put them under a forced fast. And for what? *“until I am avenged on my enemies.”* That's Saul's motive—personal vendetta. This battle is not about God's glory, not in Saul's mind. For Saul, it's about his own glory. This is personal. Saul wants vengeance for himself. And in the context of Samuel having just told Saul that God had rejected him as king, Saul may well be looking for redemption. He wants to keep his crown no matter what anyone else has to suffer. You start to see Saul's true colors shining through here.

Of course, Jonathan had already crept over to the other side of the ravine on his secret mission with his war buddy, which of course meant that Jonathan hadn't heard Saul's curse. Ignorance was bliss for Jonathan. So Jonathan is back with the army, they're traipsing through the forest, everybody is famished, and watch what happens. **1S 14:25-30** *“Now when all the people came to the forest, behold, there was honey on the ground. And when the people entered the forest, behold, the honey was dropping, but no one put his hand to his mouth, for the people feared the oath. But Jonathan had not heard his father charge*

¹ A causal translation of the second *waw* in v.24 makes far better sense of the context than ESV's opaque “so”, which is likely why many other translations opt for it: NAS, NIV “because”, KJV, NET, CSB, ASV; though LXX does not indicate a causal force and seems to follow a different manuscript, Kai. Saoul hvgno,hsen a;gnoian mega,lhn evn th/| h'me,ra| evkei,nh| kai avra/tai tw/| law/| le,gwn, lit. “Saul acted ignorantly with great ignorance that day and put the people under a curse saying...”.

² Tsumura, *NICOT* 369.

³ See LXX, n.1.

the people with the oath, so he put out the tip of the staff that was in his hand and dipped it in the honeycomb and put his hand to his mouth, and his eyes became bright. Then one of the people said, 'Your father strictly charged the people with an oath, saying, 'Curse be the man who eats food this day.' And the people were faint. Then Jonathan said, 'My father has troubled the land. See how my eyes have become bright because I tasted a little of this honey. How much better if the people had eaten freely today of the spoil of their enemies that they found. For now the defeat among the Philistines has not been great.'

It's not yet evening. The job isn't yet finished. The oath is still in effect, yet everybody is starving. And as they're marching through the forest, honey is dripping from the honeycombs onto the ground. They can see it. They can almost hear it oozing down. Maybe they're smelling it. It's mouth-watering; but no one dares dip a finger, for fear of Saul and his stupid oath. Jonathan, though, doesn't know anything about that. All Jonathan knows is that he's just climbed a few stories of rock face to take down 20 Philistines with his buddy. Now he's returned to the army, and his stomach is growling. Jonathan sees that honey, shimmering in the sunlight, and he thinks to himself "There's my MRE right there. Don't mind if I do. I'll have the honey-encrusted honey drizzled with the honey glaze—on the comb." And like clockwork, that carb load gets his body-battery running at 100 again. But no sooner does he wipe his mouth than one of the other soldiers tells him about his dad's oath. Yet Jonathan's conscience doesn't appear to be bothered. In fact, he lays the blame at his dad's feet. "*My father has troubled the land.*" That's the language Joshua used to describe Achan's theft in Josh 7:25 "Why did you bring trouble on us?" (6:18). Saul is an Achan in the camp, but worse, because he's king. Just as Achan's theft ruined the victory at Jericho, Saul's oath ruined the victory at Michmash. Not only was the victory not decisive. The oath led the Israelite soldiers straight into sin. Let's keep reading in v.31.

1S 14:31-35 *"They struck down the Philistines that day from Michmash to Aijalon. And the people were very faint. The people pounced on the spoil and took sheep and oxen and calves and slaughtered them on the ground. And the people ate them with the blood. Then they told Saul, 'Behold, the people are sinning against the Lord by eating with the blood.' And he said, 'You have dealt treacherously; roll a great stone to me here.' And Saul said, 'Disperse yourselves among the people and say to them, "let every man bring his ox or his sheep and slaughter them here and eat, and do not sin against the Lord by eating with the blood."'" So every one of the people brought his ox with him that night and they slaughtered them there. And Saul built an altar to the Lord; it was the first altar that he built to the Lord.*

Everybody is exhausted...and because of the oath, they're famished. So as soon as the battle's over and evening comes, they can't even wait for oven to pre-heat. Eating with the blood was wrong. It was wrong in Israel because the blood was always reserved for God. Blood represented life. And blood was atoning. So in Lev 3:17 and Dt 12:15 it was saved for God. So this was a religious law in Old Covenant Israel. But it was also more than that. It went all the way back to God's covenant with creation in Gen 9:4. Nobody was supposed to eat like this, whether you were an Israelite or not. "*You shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood.*" Humans eat humanely. You don't eat like an animal. But here, that's what Saul's oath drives them to do. Instead of eating the honey that was on the ground, they slaughtered the animals on the ground, and ate the meat right there, blood and all. Savage would probably be a good word for this. Honey on the ground would be fine—maybe a little unsanitary by modern standards, but fine. But pouncing and eating meat with the blood—not just rare stake but eating like an animal—that's de-

humanizing and inhumane no matter who you are.⁴ Look at how Saul's stupid strictness induces people to sin. Merciless. This is not leadership.

Even so, when they tell Saul what people are doing, Saul blames them. “*You have dealt treacherously.*” Well, that's rich. He faults the people for dealing treacherously, when he's the one starving his own troops to carry out his personal vendetta. Who's betraying who? Of course, now Saul tries to play the sacrificial hero again like he did in chapter 13 when he thought Samuel was running late. That's all Saul really knows to do—make a formal public sacrifice. Make an altar. Make the right sacrifice the right way, and everything will be ok. Of course, Saul is ok proceeding with his own plans without God's word or even against it. But as soon as anyone around him slips up in formalities, Saul is on the spot to correct it.

1S 14:36-42 “*Then Saul said, ‘let us go down after the Philistines by night and plunder them until the morning light; let us not leave a man of them.’ And they said, ‘Do whatever seems good to you.’ But the priest said, ‘Let us draw near to God here.’ And Saul inquired of God, ‘Shall I go down after the Philistines? Will you give them into the hand of Israel?’ But he did not answer him that day. And Saul said, ‘Come here, all you leaders of the people, and know and see how this sin has arisen today. For as the Lord lives who saves Israel, though it be in Jonathan my son, he shall surely die.’ But there was not a man among all the people who answered him. Then he said to all Israel, ‘You shall be on the one side, and I and Jonathan my son will be on the other side.’ And the people said to Saul, ‘Do what seems good to you.’ Therefore Saul said, ‘O Lord God of Israel, why have you not answered your servant this day? If this guilt is in me or in Jonathan my son, O Lord, God of Israel, give Urim. But if this guilt is in your people Israel, give Thummim.’ And Jonathan and Saul were taken, but the people escaped. Then Saul said, ‘Cast the lot between me and my son Jonathan.’ And Jonathan was taken.”*

Saul could almost be mistaken for a bold leader in v.36, except that he's only suggesting the raid on the Philistines because his son Jonathan had already scattered them. He only “leads” after someone else has already made it seem safe and certain of success (compare 36-37 with v.6, 10-12). Saul is too timid to be a real leader. And the only guys he gathers around him seem like yes men. “Do whatever seems good to you,” which sounds strangely like “do whatever is right in your own eyes.” Not much progress since the days of the judges; but at least the priests can stand up to him. They intervene to get God's counsel on whether they should make the raid Saul is suggesting. Yet when they consult God, God doesn't answer; and when God doesn't answer, no news is bad news. God has already rejected Saul, and Saul already knows that from Samuel's own mouth in chapter 13. Yet when God doesn't answer for Saul here, what does Saul assume? It's someone else's fault. “What did YOU guys do this time? Whose fault is it that God is not answering my prayers?” And how telling—Saul disobeys when God does speak, and Saul speaks when God does not speak. Saul is a self-led, merciless, blame-shifting leader.

And to make matters worse, he doubles down on his oath, and now commits his own son to it, which vaults Saul into a tie with Jephthah for stupidest vow in history. True colors. Saul's not just a hapless tall goofball, or a victim of God's so-called arbitrary judgment. Saul is a trouble-making fool because he's full of himself—personal vendettas, selfish ambition, timid but merciless leadership. He ignores God's word to pursue his own plan. He exhausts and exploits God's people for his own purposes, and all excused, of course, under a thin veneer of religious formalism. So with all the piety he can muster, he asks

⁴ David VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order: A Biblical Theology of Natural Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), p. 115 “I take it that the covenant intends not to require cooking steaks well done but to prohibit human beings from pouncing on an animal and eating it alive, as animals do other animals. Humans should act like humans; they are to treat animals *humanely*” (emph. orig.).

in v.41, “*O Lord God of Israel, why have you not answered your servant this day?*” And as readers, we should be like, “Umm, it’s probably because He rejected you as king a chapter ago for ignoring his commands and leading by fear rather than faith. And who are you calling God’s servant?” Saul is not just self-guided. He’s self-deceived. This is the guy leading God’s people...but they asked for it.

And in another scene reminiscent of Achan, they cast lots again to figure out who’s at fault. Surprisingly, it’s Jonathan who’s taken, not Saul. Now why is that? If the lot is down to Saul and Jonathan to determine guilt, we know who we think is guilty—Saul of course! So why does God expose Jonathan? The best and I think only answer to that question is that Jonathan is taken only to be ransomed by exposing the righteousness of his character for all to see. That is what ends up happening in vv.43-46.

1Sam 14:43-46 “*Then Saul said to Jonathan, ‘Tell me what you have done.’ And Jonathan told him, ‘I tasted a little honey with the tip of the staff that was in my hand. Here I am; I will die.’ And Saul said, ‘God do so to me and more also; you shall surely die, Jonathan.’ Then the people said to Saul, ‘Shall Jonathan die, who has worked this great salvation in Israel? Far from it! As the Lord lives, there shall not one hair of his head fall to the ground, for he has worked with God this day.’ So the people ransomed Jonathan, so that he did not die. Then Saul went up from pursuing the Philistines, and the Philistines went to their own place.”*

Jonathan’s “admission of guilt” is dripping with sarcasm. “What have I done? I’ll tell you what I did. I ate a little honey. Guilty as charged, dad. Off with my head.” And Saul, instead of relenting, doubles down again. He began by putting the people under a curse. Then he put his son under a curse. Now he puts himself under a curse. “*God do so to me more and also, you shall surely die, Jonathan.*” Saul is not really much of a blessing as a leader is he? He’s a walking curse. He can’t even win well. In fact, he’s ready to crown victory with tragedy. And look at his hypocrisy. Saul did hear God’s word, disobeyed it, and expects mercy. Jonathan did not hear Saul’s word, disobeyed it, and Saul insists on vengeance against his own son. (Parable of unmerciful servant). Saul is happy to defy God’s word, but he cannot go without avenging his own word. You begin to wonder, what is Saul trying to prove here? Maybe that God shouldn’t reject him as king because he’s so serious and earnest about being religious, and making sacrifices, and keeping his oaths. But Saul is so self-righteous, so self-guided, so self-deceived in his religiosity and formalism, that he is unfollowable, even for his own people. They won’t let it happen. “*Shall Jonathan die, who has worked this great salvation in Israel?*”

And now, the congregation trumps Saul’s oath with an oath of their own. “*As the Lord lives, not a hair of his head will fall to the ground, for he has worked with God this day.*” So they ransomed Jonathan. They reverse Saul’s judgment and so they reverse Jonathan’s fate. He lives. And yet because of this whole fiasco, the text hints in v.46 that Saul leaves the conquest unfinished. “*Saul went up from pursuing the Philistines, and the Philistines went to their own place.*” That is not how a conquest narrative is supposed to end. Jonathan was right. Now the defeat among the Philistines has not been great, all because Saul has troubled the land.

Jesus is everything Saul is not. Saul shifted the blame for his own sin. Jesus took the blame for our sin. *He who knew no sin became sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.* And when Jesus won the victory for us in his death and resurrection, he wasn’t stingy like Saul; he shared all the spoils of the victory with us. When he ascended on high, he led captives captive and he gave gifts to men. He shares his eternal inheritance and even his royal throne with us. Saul is an arrogant authoritarian who disregards God’s word to enforces his own. Jesus only does what he sees his father doing, only speaks as his father commands, and He is a servant leader who *came not to be served but to serve and to*

give his life a ransom for many. Saul exhausts God's people. Jesus invites us, "*Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my harness on you and learn from me, for I am gently and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*" Saul starves God's people while he's exploiting them for his own purposes. Jesus feeds God's people to strengthen and mobilize them for God's purposes. He makes us lie down in green pastures. He leads us beside still waters. He restores our souls. He prepares a table for us in the presence of our enemies. He makes our cup overflow (Ps 23). Saul wants personal revenge. Jesus was reviled without threatening in return, and he kept entrusting himself to the one who judges faithfully (1P 2:23). Saul led people into sin in ways that even unbelievers were expected to avoid. Jesus leads people into righteousness and holiness that unbelievers find curious. Jesus is the kind of king God's people need. Jesus said all authority in heaven and on earth is given to me. And how does he use that authority? He uses it to strengthen and feed us so we're mobilized for his mission to call all people everywhere to turn from their sins and trust in His death and resurrection to save them from the power and penalty of their sins.

The church belongs to Jesus for his mission, not to us for ours. Saul started taking God's battles too personally. He forbids people to eat, in v.24, "*until I am avenged on my enemies.*" Saul is commandeering God's army for his own vengeance and reputation. That is unhealthy ownership of ministry. The church is not the fiefdom of type A personalities who crave attention and credit. Friend if you're thinking about getting into pastoral ministry for the attention, or credit, or praise, or power, you will get no further than Saul. You might have a long ministry, and it may even appear outwardly successful, but it will be busyness without blessedness, just like Saul's forty years in the saddle. A NT example of a Saul in the church is Diotrophes in **3J 9-10**. John says of him "*I have written something to the church, but Diotrophes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church.*" Ignoring God's word through God's chosen messengers, like Saul, to consolidate his own power and confirm his own word. Church leaders are not allowed to commandeer congregations as if churches exist as stepping stones for their own career advancement.

Friends, selfish ambition, turfy-ness in ministry, the demand to be recognized, appreciated, rewarded, obeyed, vindicated, avenged—do you see how all that bears bad fruit in churches? Self-serving, self-glorifying, demanding, authoritarian leadership has no place in Christ's church. Yes, normally, it's good for churches to follow the counsel of their elders. Good authority is good for us. But elders in turn should not always be insisting that the congregation's only responsibility is to bow down to them no matter what they say or do, whether it's biblical or not. Friend, until you're done thinking that leadership is about you, you are not ready to lead. Saul's leadership was selfish at root. Make sure that's not you, either in your home or in your church.

Christ-like leaders feed and mobilize God's people for God's purposes without exhausting or exploiting them. When Jesus commissioned Peter, he said Do you love me? Feed my sheep. The proof of a pastor's love for Jesus is feeding Jesus' sheep on God's word. God promised us those kinds of leaders when he said in **Jer 3:15** "*I will give you shepherds after my own heart who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.*" A pastor who expects you to serve while he feeds you only sparsely and begrudgingly on Christ's word is not a pastor worthy of the name. That's not shepherding the sheep; it's fleecing them. It's exploitation for the sake of personal careerism. Churches become evangelistic when they are fed consistently on the evangel. Churches become like Christ as they behold Christ in Scripture together week in and week out through the evangelistic, Christ-centered exposition of Scripture.

Christian leaders can only bind Christian consciences by Christian Scripture (24, 28).⁵ When Christian leaders encourage Christians to make commitments, like signing a statement of faith or a church covenant, those commitments should be demonstrably biblical. And it's the same with how we worship together corporately. When we worship together, we are leading you to think of that as part of your obedience to Jesus, which then puts an obligation on your conscience. But we cannot obligate your conscience any further than Scripture does. So if we try to lead you to do something in corporate worship that Scripture does not command, then we are infringing on the freedom of your conscience. Saul coerced an oath out of God's people that God did not command. And that bore really bad fruit. So if you're looking for a church now or in the future, look for one that is careful to only require from you commitments that the Bible requires of you, either by explicit command or by good and necessary inference of what Scripture says and means. The authority of Christian leaders is never inherent in their own personality or even giftedness. It's always derivative from their own submission to God's word. Only authority rooted in Scripture can have authority in the churches and in the Christian life.

Christ-like leaders are easy to entreat.⁶ Saul made a really foolish vow, yet when he's confronted, he doesn't relent, he doubles down on his foolishness, and it takes a congregational meeting for him to stand down. Contrast this with how David responds to Abigail 11 chapters later. David protects Nabal's shepherds and his sheep. Nabal refused to help David in return. David swears to avenge himself on Nabal. Abigail, Nabal's unfortunate wife, begs David to relent. And David does relent, even with gratitude when he says to Abigail "Blessed be your discretion, and blessed be you, who have kept me this day from bloodguilt and from working salvation with my own hand!" He even says "Go up in peace to your house. See, I have obeyed your voice, and I have granted your petition" (1S 25:33, 35). David is a king who can be corrected. Saul, on the other hand, is an uncorrectable king. Brother, if you want to lead well in your home or in the church, then you do need to be convictional. You must stand for something. But that something must be the right thing, not just your thing. So yes, you must be convictional, by all means; but you must also be correctable. You need to know when a commitment you've made is not rooted in a conviction worth holding. David was corrected by a woman who was married to a foolish man. Brother, if your own wife finds you uncorrectable, you are not being convictional or complementarian. You're being stubborn and arrogant. Don't be a Saul in your own home, or in the church, sticking to foolish commitments that you only made for your own pride. Know when to listen to correction. Know when to admit that a commitment you've made was not rooted in Christian conviction but selfish ambition. Learn from Saul's bad example—a self-led ministry is a self-destructive ministry.

Christ-like leaders encourage God's people in holiness. Saul's forced fast bore bitter fruit. There was plenty of honey to tide them over till evening. Instead, they have to fight while they're fasting, and by days end they're so famished they're eating in a way that fails to respect life or even human decency. The way pastors and elders and church leaders go about leading should not aggravate our indwelling sin. It should promote and facilitate congregational holiness. That means we don't want to lead the congregation into unnecessary disagreement with itself. We want to model holy speech, conduct, work, and entertainments. Jesus forgave the woman caught in sin, and then he told her go and sin no more. Growth

⁵ Joshua puts a curse on anyone rebuilding Jericho, but that's in agreement with God's will for its destruction, not a personal vendetta.

⁶ Tsumura, NICOT 381, put me on this line of thought. "David did not keep his oath to kill Nabal and his men when Abigail pointed out the wrong of it, and so at least it was considered that an oath to sin could be broken. The people here obviously think that God spoke much more clearly in the victory than in the lots."

in personal and congregational holiness should be one effect of faithful, godly, Christian leadership, both in the home and in the church.

If we refuse to listen to God's word in Scripture, he will refuse to listen to ours in prayer. That's the tragic reality of Saul. Saul rejected God's word, so God rejected him. Saul refused to listen to God's word, so God refused to answer to his prayers. God insists on setting the terms of your engagement with Him. Why? Because he knows that you don't know Him for who he is until you know Him from his own self-revelation in Scripture and in His Son Christ Jesus, His word made flesh.

Friend I wonder if you relate to God and others just like Saul. Maybe you are the one who is ignoring God's word while enforcing your own. Maybe you're the formalist—assuming that as long as you come to church and write a check God should be at your beck and call. Maybe your whole perspective on life is self-serving, self-guided, and self-deceived. Maybe you have the form of godliness, but deny its power. Maybe you're assuming you're wise when in fact you've been foolish all along. If that's you, you need a better king for your soul.

Praise God that we have a better king in Christ Jesus. The day Jesus was crucified, the Israelites actually had the opportunity to ransom Him just as they ransomed Jonathan. Pilate offered to release to them one prisoner a year, and that could have been Jesus. But instead of ransoming Jesus Christ, they released Barabbas, a known felon. And so as God had planned all along, Jesus death on the cross ransomed the sinful souls of all who will ever repent of their own rebellion and trust in Jesus as the substitute penalty for our sins. And because Jesus was sinless, God released Him from the grave and raised him up bodily to give him the throne of God's kingdom. As Jonathan was taken as guilty only to be proven innocent, so Jesus, though innocent, was taken for the guilty, only to see God reverse His verdict and vindicate his righteousness. Sinner, this is why Jesus deserves your ultimate loyalty, obedience, and repentance. This is why he deserves to be King of your soul.