



"If you will not worship God seven days a week, you do not worship Him one day a week."

—A.W. Tozer

23-Sep-16

Rebellion as Witchcraft

About four centuries before the time of King Saul, the Amalekites had "ambushed [Israel] on the way when he came up from Egypt" ([I Samuel 15:2](#); see [Exodus 17:8-13](#)), and with God's help, the Israelites prevailed in the ensuing battle. In response to this cowardly and odious act, [God](#) Himself says in [Exodus 17:14](#), "I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven." Years later, He gave to Saul the task of punishing the Amalekites, telling him to "utterly destroy all that they have, and do not spare them" ([I Samuel 15:3](#)).

At first, Saul did as God commanded him: "Saul attacked the Amalekites, from Havilah all the way to Shur, which is east of Egypt" (verse 7). Yet, for some reason—perhaps it was a personal or political aversion to slaying a fellow king—"Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were unwilling to utterly destroy them" (verse 9). For this act of disobedience, God rejected Saul as king over Israel (verses 11, 23, 26), and in the process of time, gave the throne to David.

There is a bit of irony in the fact that, when questioned about sparing Agag and the livestock, Saul frames his disobedience as a way to honor God: "[The people] have brought them from the Amalekites; for the people spared the best of the sheep and the oxen, to sacrifice to the LORD your God; and the rest we have utterly destroyed" (verse 15). The prophet Samuel, justifiably, tells him to shut up.

After some back and forth, in which Saul doubles down on his excuse, Samuel explains why the king's disobedience was such a great [sin](#) in the eyes of God:

Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. For [rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft](#) [or *divination*], and stubbornness [or *defiance*] is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He also has rejected you from being king. ([I Samuel 15:22-23](#))

Saul had convinced himself that God would accept an extravagant offering of animal flesh, bestowing on Him great honor and glory for their victory over the Amalekites, in place of his simply doing what He said. Put another way, the king had prioritized a pious demonstration of worship (read, appeasing gift) over obedience. Samuel's inspired response is essentially, "Sorry, Saul, but you got it completely backward!"

As the prophet says, "To obey is better than sacrifice" (see [Mark 12:33](#)). God looks more favorably on a person who takes His Word at face value and single-mindedly follows its direction than on someone who blithely excuses his failures and reframes them as "opportunities" to bring God glory. This latter attitude is perilously close to the apostle Paul's rhetorical question, "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" ([Romans 6:1](#)).

The explanation for Samuel's declaration of God's priorities appears in [I Samuel 15:23](#): "For rebellion is as the sin of [witchcraft](#), and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry." Not doing as God says is not merely disobedience but rebellion: "open opposition toward a person or group in authority," as the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines it. In other words, it is a manifestation

of an individual's active, anti-God nature. Disobedience to God's commands puts a person on the wrong side of the battle line dividing right from wrong. Such a one may as well have taken up arms against God!

His comparison of rebellion to witchcraft can seem strange at first, since insurrection and sorcery appear to have little in common. However, the comparison is not focused on the kinds of sin they represent but on their magnitude: Rebellion is *just as bad as* witchcraft. Disregarding God's clear commands is just as spiritually dangerous as getting involved in demonism. In fact, rebellion is one of the demons' great sins. Both rebellion and divination lead a person away from God, and without [repentance](#), open a place for him in the camp of the demons. This is why God rejected Saul as king over His people. He would not have a declared enemy ruling over Israel.

A few clues in the chapter show that this singular act of rebellion over the punishment of the Amalekites was not the first, though it may have been the worst. For one, Saul speaks to Samuel of "the LORD *your* God" three times ([I Samuel 15:15](#), 21, 30), suggesting that the Lord was not truly his God but Samuel's. By this time, he seems to have begun to go through the motions of serving God; he had no personal devotion to Him.

For another, despite being the undisputed leader of the nation, he blames the people for failing to do as God commanded ([I Samuel 15:15](#), 21, 24). His shifting of blame is just an evasion, since he could have ordered the animals and other plunder destroyed at any time. He probably did not want Agag and the spoils of war destroyed because he had other plans for them—most likely to enrich himself and to reward his soldiers to keep their loyalty.

In this light, his seeking of pardon for his sin and his worship of God are a sham ([I Samuel 15:24-25](#), 30). He is merely saying the right words, but they are not from his heart. There is no contrition for his grievous sin. In fact, in the second instance, after Samuel tears the kingdom from Saul, the king does not even bother to ask for forgiveness. Instead, he requests that the prophet join him as he worships God—a cynical act of political theater.

Undoubtedly God knew Saul's heart had been trending away from Him for a long while, and his willingness to compromise in the Amalekite matter was simply the last straw. The man had declared himself a rebel and would not

return to Him. So Samuel proclaims, "The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today, and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you. And also the Strength of Israel will not lie nor relent. For He is not a man, that He should relent" ([1 Samuel 15:28-29](#)). God's decision was final because Saul's rebellion had hardened into permanent character. He was as apostate as a witch.

This vignette has dire ramifications for those nominal [Christians](#) who believe that it is no longer necessary to obey God's commandments, many of whom do not keep even those from [Jesus](#) Himself! While God desires that we worship Him, and wants us to be sincere in doing it, He wants us even more to take His commands seriously and make obeying them an integral part of our lives.

It is so vital that Jesus tells the rich, young ruler, "If you want to enter into [eternal] life, keep the commandments" ([Matthew 19:17](#)). Reason tells us that refusing to keep them will deny us eternal life. Later, Jesus commands His disciples in [John 14:15](#), "If you [love](#) Me, keep My commandments." If we strive to do this in [faith](#) and without compromise, He will provide the grace we need and lead us to salvation.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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by John W. Ritenbaugh

Paul had impressive credentials and pedigree, which he considered rubbish compared to his conversion and God's dramatic intervention in his life. Paul's writings, because of their complexity, have become the target of unscrupulous, antinomian twisting and equivocating by the carnal mind with its natural anti-law bias. By denigrating God's law, the unconverted presumptuously set their own standards. God's holy and righteous law was never designed to justify but only to identify sin and align one with the right standards—guiding one along the path to God's righteous purpose. Everyone

who is saved will be a keeper of God's law. Paul used his life to illustrate our indebtedness to God and to caution about the law's limitation (or misapplied function) to justify, a function met only by Christ's sacrifice.

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by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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