

Saul's Intentions

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Intentions. They are a person's goals, purposes, or aims. *To intend* means to stretch toward. We could use alternative words like motivations or desires. Intentions are close to the heart of who we truly are in our spirits, and yet, the average person is often unaware of what their intentions are.

When Jesus called out the Pharisees for looking clean on the outside but dirty on the inside, He calls us out on that also. We are called to take a look at what's really inside. The outside of the cup is where we find our actions and our words. The inside of the cup is where we find our intentions—that's where we discover what we really care about and love. The problem is that it can be hard at first to tell what our intentions are. You see, we often confuse our excuses and rationalizations for our intentions. And this is where we get into the story of Saul and the Amalekites.

At the beginning of our story from 1 Samuel, the Lord commands Saul to “utterly destroy” the Amalekites. He refers to a time when the Israelites were walking in the wilderness, and the slower people would walk at the back. Well, the Amalekites would attack the back of the company where the older, slower, and weaker people were walking. It is now Saul's duty to wipe them out.

So, Saul does it; he goes on the mission. And afterwards, when Samuel comes to him, Saul seems pretty confident that he has done what the Lord asked of him. Samuel, however, quickly points out that he failed in his mission.

God doesn't just ask us—He *commands* us to get rid of bad habits and utterly destroy them. In actual fact, the Lord is the one who wins battles and changes our hearts, but we have to really want the Lord to do that for us. If we want to hold onto certain habits, the Lord will not take them away. The Amalekites are a picture of false ideas that lead us to do evil. Basically, when we justify the suffering that we cause another person, we are creating a lie in order to permit our evil. It's sneaky, and it looks like truth and maybe even good intentions on our part.

So, what's going on with Saul in our story here? What were *his* motivations? This is important because it's a similar thing that we tend to do with our intentions. Let's take a look.

When Saul first sees Samuel after the mission, he basically greets him with “It's great to see you, Samuel! I did it!” ... This is interesting here: does Saul actually believe he did it, or is he trying to pull one over on Samuel? The answers start to come out as the story continues.

This is where *we* are. We are indeed a jumbled mess of intentions, and our intentions essentially come from two main sources: heaven or hell. And the thing is that a single action or a single word we say can be made up of many layers of intentions. We may consciously experience or believe we have a certain intention, but as we start to peel away layers and dig deeper, we find other intentions down deeper. And the deeper you go, the more you discover your true self. The story continues, and Samuel starts to dig.

Samuel calls Saul out on all the livestock and spoil that the Israelites took from their raid, and Saul explains that they only saved the best ones to offer to the Lord. ... What a noble and God-fearing thing to do, right? God said utterly destroy everything, and he did ... I mean, except for the ones that they are offering to the Lord.

This is where excuses and rationalizations can be confused for our true intentions. We invent a plausible and spiritually good scenario that masks what is going on beneath. The sneakiness and cleverness of this whole thing

is that we actually believe it, or we tell ourselves that we actually believe it, and we will continue to defend it. We learn to do this from a young age, and we do it throughout our lives. We do something wrong, and instead of taking proper responsibility for it, we create a seemingly valid excuse for it. “She started it” or “He deserved it” or “I wasn’t trying to hurt him but ...”.

Well, Samuel won’t have any excuses from Saul. He says, “Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, As in obeying the voice of the Lord?” And Saul then comes out with the truth in the end: “I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice.” There it is—he obeyed the voice of the people instead of the voice of the Lord. He was more worried about what people thought of him, and thus his status in this world than in what was truly right. And it wasn’t just the livestock that the *Israelites* saved ... Saul saved alive the Amalekite king.

An aspect of this story that is important to notice is that Saul basically-mostly got rid of the Amalekites, but that he ultimately didn’t finish the job. If we return to our dirty cup analogy, it would be like partly or mostly cleaning filth out of a cup, and then saying it’s good enough to drink out of. In the human analogy, it’s like mostly quitting a bad habit, but not willing to let go of it entirely. Those who attend various self-help groups know that when you are trying to quit a bad habit, you can remove all temptations from your personal space, but if you continue to spend time with people who enjoy the same bad habit, your “quitting” won’t last long. There’s no such thing as “kind of quitting.”

Let’s take for example an individual who struggles with gossiping. They know that it is hurtful, and they have heard the verse in Leviticus 19 that says, “You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people”, and they also know they do it because it gives them a sense of higher status when they know information that someone else doesn’t know yet. So, they decided to give up gossiping, and instead, they have decided that they’ll just share gossip—I mean news—with friends so that people can get help they need. Isn’t that so thoughtful?

There is another individual who struggles with anger and spiritual murder, and so they practice reciting peaceful quotes from the Word at society meetings to control their feelings about what is going on in the community. And later that night they go on social media with choice but *honest* words about the direction of the society ... and it’s not anger, it’s zeal because they just care about the society.

And another individual we will consider struggles with lust. Of course there’s the commandment against adultery, and Jesus says looking at someone lustfully is tantamount to committing adultery. But it’ll be ok to watch movies with licentious scenes in them, or that treat adulterous relationships lightly because, if they didn’t watch any of *those* movies, then they practically wouldn’t be able to watch anything at all. And it’s just a movie anyway, they aren’t real people.

A final individual is a public speaker whose job it is to teach others how to live by offering examples of real problems people have, but is none too perfect himself.

Whatever the appearance of goodness is on the outside, the Lord knows if we are truly obeying His voice. We can deceive others, and we can even deceive ourselves, but our intentions are what they are, and the Lord knows them. As the *Israelites* saved the best animals in this story, we like to hold on to the good feelings we get from our evils. And we say they are for the Lord and for good purposes, but, we are only fooling ourselves. When we hold onto those good feelings, we also hold onto the king and the power it has over us. If you ever want to change, you are going to have to start by being honest with yourself.

Some final thoughts about intentions.

Intentions are something for us to judge about ourselves, not about someone else. As was stated in our reading from the book *Conjugal Love*, the same action done by multiple people may have as many intentions behind them. We cannot judge someone else's intentions because that becomes a spiritual judgment, and one we cannot make. When we declare that it's ok to judge another person's actions but not their spiritual character, we ought to be very careful that this really is our intention.

Bear in mind that someone else might not even know their own intentions. Remember those layers we talked about? An outer layer might be "I'm just being zealous for what's right", and an unknown layer underneath might be, "I'm angry because they aren't doing what I want", and an even deeper unknown layer under that might be, "I'm sad and lonely, and I just wish someone would care for me."

If knowing our own intentions is as messy as it sounds, then where do we start? Here are some of Jeff's thoughts. Number one: start with the Lord's Word and some prayer. I've heard it's a good habit to read and pray every day. Number two: be aware of your feelings in different situations. How do you feel when things don't go your way? How do you feel when someone you don't like has good luck? Are you generally happy, upset, bitter, or sarcastic? And number three, here's an invitation: try engaging in a spiritual growth group. Here we are in a religious community. We are here for each other and God is our center. Yes, your spiritual life is as private as you want it to be, but, as we heard from *Heaven and Hell* in our readings, our love and faith, which are on the inside, are not complete until they are also on the outside, and spiritual growth groups and Bible studies can be a useful way to bring our internal spiritual life out into our natural life as well.

The Lord is not asking us for perfect intentions. He knows us, and He loves us infinitely. What He does ask of us is to be aware of what's really going on inside, to not make excuses and allowances for the bad spiritual habits that we find, and to be humble enough to ask for His help.

"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit. A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise."

Amen.

Readings

1Sam 15:1-26 Samuel also said to Saul, "The Lord sent me to anoint you king over His people, over Israel. Now therefore, heed the voice of the words of the Lord. 2 Thus says the Lord of hosts: 'I will punish Amalek for what he did to Israel, how he ambushed him on the way when he came up from Egypt. 3 Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and do not spare them.'"

4 So Saul gathered the people together and numbered them in Telaim, two hundred thousand foot soldiers and ten thousand men of Judah.

7 And Saul attacked the Amalekites. 8 He also took Agag king of the Amalekites alive, and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. 9 But 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. But everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed.

10 Now the word of the Lord came to Samuel, saying, 11 "I greatly regret that I have set up Saul as king, for he has turned back from following Me, and has not performed My commandments." 13 Then Samuel went to Saul, and Saul said to him, "Blessed are you of the Lord! I have performed the commandment of the Lord."

14 But Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?"

15 And Saul said, "They 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."

16 Then Samuel said to Saul, "Did not the Lord anoint you king over Israel? 18 Now the Lord sent you on a mission, and said, 'Go, and utterly destroy the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are consumed.' 19 Why then did you not obey the voice of the Lord? Why did you swoop down on the spoil, and do evil in the sight of the Lord?"

20 And Saul said to Samuel, "But I have obeyed the voice of the Lord, and gone on the mission on which the Lord sent me, and brought back Agag king of Amalek; I have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. 21 But the people took of the plunder, sheep and oxen, the best of the things which should have been utterly destroyed, to sacrifice to the Lord your God in Gilgal."

22 So Samuel said: "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.

24 Then Saul said to Samuel, "I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice."

26 But Samuel said to Saul, "The Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel."

Lk 11:39-41 And the Lord said to the Pharisee, "Now you Pharisees make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but your inside is filled with extortion and wickedness. Senseless ones! Did not He who made that which is outside make that which is inside also? Nevertheless, give the things that are within for alms, and behold, all things are clean to you.

Divine Providence 104 [2] When listening to what others say, many people think in this way: "Are their private thoughts the same as the thoughts they are expressing? Should I believe them or not? What are their intentions?" Everyone knows that flatterers and hypocrites have two levels of thought. They can control themselves and prevent their inner thinking from being seen, hiding it deeper and deeper within and virtually locking the doors to keep it hidden. We can also see quite clearly that we have inner and outer levels of thinking from the fact that we can see our own outer thought from the vantage point of our inner thought. We can reflect on it as well, and decide whether it is evil or not.

HH 475. It ought to be known that in deeds or works the whole person is exhibited, and that his will and thought or his love and faith, which are the interiors of a person, are not complete until they exist in deeds or works, which are the exteriors of a person, for these are the ultimates in which the will and thought terminate,

CL 527 A number of people may do and say the same things, and yet be acting and speaking differently, one doing so from a corrupt will and thought, another from an upright will and thought.