

“Fickle Followers & the Steadfast Sovereign”
1 Samuel 10:17-27
March 17, 2019
Faith Presbyterian Church – Evening Service
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We return to First Samuel again this evening – the second half of chapter ten. We’ll be reading verses seventeen through twenty-seven. In the last passage, the Lord, through Samuel, secretly anointed Saul as the prince of Israel. In our passage tonight, we will see him publically called by God to be the king.

Please listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this evening:

^{10:17} Now Samuel called the people together to Yahweh at Mizpah. ¹⁸ And he said to the people of Israel, “Thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel, ‘I brought up Israel out of Egypt, and I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all the kingdoms that were oppressing you.’ ¹⁹ But today you have rejected your God, who saves you from all your calamities and your distresses, and you have said to him, ‘Set a king over us.’ Now therefore present yourselves before Yahweh by your tribes and by your thousands.”

²⁰ Then Samuel brought all the tribes of Israel near, and the tribe of Benjamin was taken by lot. ²¹ He brought the tribe of Benjamin near by its clans, and the clan of the Matrites was taken by lot; and Saul the son of Kish was taken by lot. But when they sought him, he could not be found. ²² So they inquired again of Yahweh, “Is there a man still to come?” and Yahweh said, “Behold, he has hidden himself among the baggage.” ²³ Then they ran and took him from there. And when he stood among the people, he was taller than any of the people from his shoulders upward. ²⁴ And Samuel said to all the people, “Do you see him whom Yahweh has chosen? There is none like him among all the people.” And all the people shouted, “Long live the king!”

²⁵ Then Samuel told the people the rights and duties of the kingship, and he wrote them in a book and laid it up before Yahweh. Then Samuel sent all the people away, each one to his home. ²⁶ Saul also went to his home at Gibeah, and with him went men of valor whose hearts God had touched. ²⁷ But some worthless fellows said, “How can this man save us?” And they despised him and brought him no present. But he held his peace.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Let’s pray ...

Lord, like the psalmist, our souls cling to the dust,
give us life according to your word!
Teach us your ways,
help us understand your precepts,
make us to meditate on your works.
When our souls melt for sorrow,
strengthen us according to your word.
Help us now to cling to your testimonies;
by your Spirit, enlarge our hearts,
so that we may run in your ways.
We ask this in Jesus name, Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:25-32]

We saw Saul secretly anointed last week. Now we come to the big day – to the public selection and coronation of Saul as king.

And here we might expect a polished and overwhelmingly positive ceremony – carefully crafted and universal in its positivity. Something designed to boost Israelite morale. That’s often the goal today of political ceremonies.

But that’s not what we get.

Instead, rather than highlighting how good everything is in Israel, we keep getting messages that contradict that.

Our text has three different movements, and what is striking is that each one seems to highlight a similar pattern.

In each paragraph the story seems to highlight, in different ways, both that God’s people are fickle in their commitments to him, and that he is persistent and steadfast in his purpose for his people.

We are fickle in our commitments to God, but God remains persistent and steadfast in his sovereign purpose for us, his people.

It happens in three different ways, and from three different angles in this passage, and we will look at each in turn.

What we will see is that:

- 1) Though we are fickle in our *reliance* on God, he is persistent in his care for us.
- 2) Though we are fickle in our *response* to God’s *calling*, he is persistent in pursuing us for our callings.
- 3) Though we are fickle in our *contentment* with God’s provision, he is persistent in providing for us.

So: We are fickle in our reliance, response, and contentment, but God remains steadfast in his care, pursuit, and provision.

Let’s consider together each of those.

First: Though we are fickle in our reliance on God, he is persistent in his care for us.

As described back in chapter eight, Israel’s request for a king is a rejection of Yahweh their God. Yahweh has rescued them from their enemies, again and again. Yahweh has provided for them. Yahweh has been a faithful and merciful God to them. He has cared for them lovingly and diligently. He has been the source of their safety and deliverance.

And now they’d like someone else instead.

They’d prefer a human king. And not a king like Yahweh, but a king like the other nations.

Yahweh has given them every reason to trust him. And still, they are fickle in their reliance on him. In chapter seven they trust him. In chapter eight ... not as much. Up and down their trust goes. Faithful today, looking for an alternative tomorrow.

And we read this, and we can shake our heads at Israel ... but if we are even mildly self-aware, then we know we do the same thing.

We know that one day we are able to take our future and our fears and our lives, and place them in God's hands, knowing that he is sovereign, and he loves us. And then the next we frantically grasp at all sorts of other things to give us control over our lives – whether money, power, achievement, or something else. As we said two weeks ago, we reach for idols, for replacements for Yahweh, just as Israel does.

We are fickle in our reliance on God no matter how many reasons he gives us to trust him.

And how does he respond? Well, we can answer that by seeing how he responds in verses seventeen through nineteen.

After gathering Israel, God speaks to his people through Samuel. And what does he say? “Thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel, ‘I brought up Israel out of Egypt, and I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all the kingdoms that were oppressing you.’ But today you have rejected your God, who saves you from all your calamities and your distresses, and you have said to him, ‘Set a king over us.’ Now therefore ...”

“Now therefore” ... what?

“Now therefore ... I will bring judgment upon you for your lack of faith” ... right? No ... that's not what he says, though that's sort of what we might expect.

Or at least something like: “Now therefore ... I'm done with you. You're on your own. Enough is enough!”

That's what Israel deserves! They've asked for an alternative to Yahweh, so why shouldn't Yahweh abandon them?

Well ... because though his people are fickle in their faith, he is not.

And so instead he says, “Now therefore present yourselves before Yahweh by your tribes and by your thousands.”

A few things are happening here. First, though Israel has essentially asked Yahweh to leave them alone ... he's not going to. Far from that, he actually calls them to gather before him. He has not abandoned them, that's first. But second, he is gathering them in order to give them what they asked for. And that should strike us as odd. And third, Yahweh is insisting that *he* will select Israel's king.

So, what is going on here?

Well, Israel has asked for an acceptable thing – we talked about that a couple weeks ago, back in chapter eight – they asked for an acceptable thing, but in their hearts, they asked for it for an unacceptable reason.

Israel could ask for a king, but they were supposed to desire a king as an extension of Yahweh's rule over them – not as an alternative to it. They asked for a good thing ... but they asked for it for a bad reason. *It's not their external actions that are the main problem, but their heart.*

And what's interesting in this chapter is that rather than leaving Israel until they change their behavior, and rather than bringing judgment to Israel until they change their behavior, the Lord here aims for their heart. Rather than aiming at immediate conformity, he is playing the long game for their hearts. *He is persistent in his care for them because his focus is their hearts.*

He's not going to truly abandon them, because that would not bring them to faithfulness from the heart. He's not going to bring judgment right on them because that won't get at their hearts in this moment either. But he also won't overlook their heart-level unfaithfulness. He's not just going to pass over it. By naming it as he does so openly, he kind of throws an awkward moment into the whole ceremony. Right? But he says it because it needs to be said.

Now, sometimes God does bring immediate discipline to his people. Some outward actions he comes down on. Other times such discipline *is* the way to effectively get to his people's hearts. But in this particular case God knows where his people are at, and he takes a longer view.

He will select a king for them. It will not be a king who desolates them. But it also won't be a king like Yahweh. And in the end, as Saul's kingship unfolds and unravels over years, God's people will come to long for a king who *is* a man after Yahweh's own heart. That is what Yahweh is working towards. He is playing the long-game to get at their hearts.

In a way Yahweh is acting like a good and faithful parent. Of course, there are times when parents need to intervene immediately, where they need to stop a particular action, or bring immediate consequences. But wise parents also realize that sometimes they have to play the long game for their children's hearts. They have to let them make certain kinds of mistakes – to warn them, to stay close and not abandon them, but to allow them to make certain kinds of mistakes so that they can learn, and then embrace the wisdom of their parents from the heart.

This is how the Lord is shepherding his people Israel here. Though his people are fickle in their trust, he remains persistent in his care for them.

And he has done the same for each of us.

If you have been a Christian for any length of time, you can look back at seasons of your life and see where you in some way have strayed from your reliance on the Lord. And you can see how the Lord allowed you to stray in that way ... but still never left your side. He was persistent in his care for you even as he let you make those mistakes. And through it all he proved himself faithful once again, he drew you close again, and he gave you yet one more reason to trust him today.

Though we are fickle in our reliance on God, he is persistent in his care for us.

Of course, as we see his persistent care for us, we should redouble our efforts to battle against the fickleness of our faith. We should see the absurdity of our doubts more and more clearly. We should pray more earnestly for consistent faith. We should marvel all the more at the Lord's faithfulness.

But that is the first thing we see here: Though we are fickle in our reliance on God, he is persistent in his care for us.

Second, we see that though we are fickle in our response to God's calling, he is persistent in pursuing us for our callings.

This is in verses twenty through twenty-four, and here the focus shifts from Israel to Saul.

Lots are drawn, and God sovereignly directs the selection to the tribe of Benjamin, then the clan of the Matrites, and then all the way down to Saul, the son of Kish. And then, after all that, they can't find him. They look and look and get to the point in verse twenty-two where they ask the Lord if maybe he's going to send someone else instead.

They can't find Saul because Saul is hiding among the military gear – translated in verse twenty-two as “the baggage” [Firth, 130].

Why is Saul hiding? His motives are unclear. Some attribute it to humility, others to timidity. [Davis, 109, n.6] And again, the ambiguity allows us to think about how we respond when the Lord calls us to something difficult and scary – something that feels weighty to us.

What that calling is can vary. For Saul it was the kingship. For you it will be something else. It could be new responsibilities at home or work or church, it could be marriage on the horizon, or becoming a new parent. It could be new pressure at work or school. It could be new responsibilities in the care of elderly parents. It's that thing that the Lord calls you to do ... and then somewhere along the line, whether before you agree to it, or as you're just about to agree to it, or right after you agree to it, the weight of the calling sinks in and you think “I don't know if I can do this.” And you are tempted to try to get out of it. And you are tempted to become fickle towards God's calling on you at that moment in your life.

One of my favorite examples of this is Gregory the Great, who was elected bishop of Rome in 590.

Upon the death of Pelagius II Gregory was elected to be his successor and seeing the magnitude of the responsibility of that role, he tried desperately to get out of it. Accounts vary on exactly what he did to try to avoid the office. One thing that is clear is that he sought to decline it from those who had elected him ... but he was unsuccessful. He then insisted on waiting for the emperor's confirmation of his election before assuming the office. Then, according to one source, he wrote to the emperor begging him not to confirm his election, but the prefect of the city suppressed Gregory's letter. Rumors reached some that Gregory had prepared hide-outs and intended to flee if his election was confirmed. When his election finally was confirmed, according to some stories he fled and was found, according to others he was seized before he could flee, while according to still other accounts he accepted the role but was “so stricken with sorrow that he could hardly speak.” [Davis, 3-4; Markus, 13-14; Huddleston]

Whatever actions he took, after exhibiting such resistance to the office, Gregory had to explain himself. And so, he thought a great deal about the relationship between the calling of God and the inclination of the one called.

He then wrote a work titled *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, often titled *Pastoral Care* in English, the first section of which was an apology for his desire to escape the calling of a bishop [Davis, 4]

In part one of *The Pastoral Rule* he addresses the question of calling.

I've read part one of *The Pastoral Rule* many times. Years ago, when I was struggling with the question of whether to enroll in seminary and pursue pastoral ministry, at a time when I was shrinking back from the idea, part one of *The Pastoral Rule* played a significant role in my decision to enroll. And again, and again, when I have struggled with the question of calling I have come back to it.

Gregory confronts the reality that many pursue callings of great responsibility without weighing the cost to themselves and the risk of the damage they could do to others. He actively dissuades those who have not considered those risks from pursuing ministry. He focuses on the demands and requirements and weightiness of such calling. In fact, Gregory's emphasis in this part of the book is on all the wrong reasons for which men pursue the responsibility of ministry and why, if that is their motivation, they should *not* pursue the office of pastoral care.

But Gregory knows himself and he knows human nature and Scripture enough to know that though some seek the office of pastor for bad reasons, others seek it for good reasons, and while some avoid the office of pastor for good reasons, others avoid it for bad reasons.

And so, Gregory gives two bad reasons why someone might avoid the call to a role of responsibility – and while his focus is on the responsibility of pastoral ministry, his reasons transfer to all sorts of other areas of life too.

The first group who avoids such responsibilities, he says, are those who could bless others if they were to accept such a call, but they avoid it for the sake of their own comfort. They simply don't want the work, stress, and difficulties that come with such responsibilities.

Gregory has a few things to say about this. The first is that those who are gifted in a certain area but avoid responsibilities in it for the sake of their own peace and comfort misunderstand the whole purpose of their gifting. Our gifts are given in order to serve others. And for God's people, how we use our gifts says something about the disposition of our hearts towards God. He reminds us that when the Lord asked Peter if he loved him, and Peter said yes, then Jesus answered three times that he should feed and tend his sheep. In other words, Jesus told Peter that if Peter loved him, then Peter would use the gifts he had given Peter to care for his people.

For this group, for those who avoid responsibility for their own comfort, Gregory concludes "If they are judged strictly on their conduct, they are certainly guilty in proportion to the public service which they were able to afford. Indeed, what disposition of mind is revealed in him, who could perform conspicuous public benefit on coming to his task, but prefers his own privacy to the benefit of others, seeing that the Only-Begotten of the Supreme Father came forth from the bosom of His Father into our midst, that He might benefit many?" [Gregory, I.5, p.29-31]

That's the first group.

The second group, according to Gregory, are those who decline responsibility because they genuinely believe there are others who are better suited than they are. Gregory says that this feeling can grow out of real humility ... but he adds that if this person continues to refuse such responsibilities even when others urge them to take them up, then it may not be true humility. “For,” Gregory writes, “he is not genuinely humble who understands that the decision of the Supreme Will is for him to take leadership, and yet refuses that leadership. But when the supreme rule is imposed on him, and provided that he is already endowed with those gifts whereby he can benefit others, he ought, in submission to God’s disposition and removed from the vice of obstinacy, to flee from it in his heart and obey, though to obey is contrary to his inclination.” [Gregory, I.6, p.32]

In other words, it may be good for one to see their weaknesses clearly and doubt their fitness for a role of responsibility. But if others who know you, and if maybe even God through his people, are testifying that you are fit for certain responsibilities, it is not humility to insist that you know better than everyone else!

So, we have those who avoid responsibility for their own comfort. We have those who refuse responsibility because they obstinately believe they know better than everyone else whether they are fit for it.

We might add a third category, from Richard Winter in his book *Perfecting Ourselves to Death*. That third category would be the person who is so afraid of failure and what others will think of them if they fail, that they prefer not trying something difficult to trying and failing. In this category, we fear what others think about us so much, that we would rather avoid taking any risks, avoid stepping into any role where we might fail and people might think badly of us – and so to protect our public image, we’d rather not try than try and fail.

So, there are those who could bless others, but avoid responsibilities: because they prefer comfort, because they disbelieve the assessment of others, or because they fear failure.

Which do you tend towards? What motivation causes you to step back in areas where you should step forward? Which one leads you, when you know you are gifted in an area, to still avoid serving in a role of responsibility?

I don’t know what led Saul to hide. We’re not told. But he had been told that he was to be king. And so, it’s easy to wonder if it was one of these things that led him to try to hide from the responsibility.

Now, our text highlights those who avoid roles of responsibility. There are of course also those who push themselves forward into roles they are not qualified for, or who pursue such positions out of wrong motivations – that is the other side of things, and as I said, Gregory focuses on that too.

But that’s not the half we see in our text tonight. And both sides are important. Too often the problem is *both* that the wrong people promote themselves for a role of responsibility, while the right people refuse to step forward.

Where is that at work in your life? Where are you gifted in one way or another, to bless your family, your friends, your church, your community, your employer, someone, but you don’t step

forward because you over-value your comfort, you refuse to listen to others' assessments of your gifts, or you fear failure?

We have a culture where many are grasping for power and responsibility, that's true. But we also have a culture in which many are checking out and refusing to take on responsibility. Out of desire for comfort, out of arrogant insistence on their low assessment of their own abilities, or out of fear of failure, they have checked out of responsibility and pursued increasingly self-centered lives.

We're not immune from such cultural trends. Where is it at work in you? Where has God called you out ... but you've preferred to hide, alone, among the baggage?

Saul's avoidance is not that unique. It's all too common. We are fickle in responding to God's callings in our lives.

But remarkably, our text reminds us that God often pursues us anyway. Saul might have thought he was all set. No one could find him. They were ready to start drawing lots again to look for someone else. And then God, by special revelation, told them where to look. He would not give up in pursuing Saul for the role he had called him to.

It doesn't always work that way, but in general, our God is a relentless pursuer of his people. He is persistent in seeking us for his callings, even when we are fickle in responding. He did it to Saul. He did it to Gregory. He has done it to many others.

Where has he done that in your life? Where has he called you to a position you were seeking to avoid? Where has he been persistent when you were fickle?

So, we see first that though we are often fickle in our *reliance* on God, he is persistent in his care for us. We see second that though we are fickle in our *response* to God's *callings*, he is often persistent in pursuing us for our callings.

Third, and finally, we see that though we are often fickle in our *contentment* with God's provision, he is persistent in providing for us.

We see that in verses twenty-five through twenty-seven.

The Lord has given them what they asked for. He has given them a king. He didn't have to give them a king, but in his mercy, he did. And Samuel reminds them of the rights and duties of the kingship, and he sends them home. And some go with Saul and support their new king.

"But," we read in verse twenty-seven, "some worthless fellows said, 'How can this man save us?' And they despised him and brought him no present."

God has given them exactly what they asked for, and they are discontent with his provision.

And it's not that they have repented of asking for a king for the wrong reasons and now they just want Yahweh as their king – no, this is not a reversal of their lack of trust in Yahweh, but an extension of it. They are sure that Yahweh's provision is not good enough.

God has given blessing upon blessing. And all they can do is complain ...

You might be familiar with the concept of “first world problems.” These are problems people post in various places online that express frustrations that people in our culture have ... but which by their very nature also show how privileged the one complaining is, and how ridiculous the complaint is. They are complaints that grow out of discontentedness with the blessings that accompany some of the comforts of modern life.

In other words, they are little snapshots into our culture about just how ridiculous we can be in our discontentedness.

They’re things like this:

“I have nothing to drink at home ... except a virtually unlimited supply of clean fresh drinking water.”

“I have no food in my house ... that can be made in less than two minutes”

“One pillow is too low ... but two pillows are too high.”

“I want food from the back of my fridge ... but it’s blocked by all the fresh food in the front of my fridge.”

“I have to wake up at 4 AM ... because I’m going on vacation.”

“I got hired for the job I wanted ... but now I have to start waking up early in the morning.”

And one of my favorites:

“I want to get a meaningful tattoo ... but I have lived a comfortable, sheltered life.”

Now, these are goofy examples, but they give us a window into ourselves. It is amazing how quickly we can become discontent – how fickle we can be in being content with God’s blessings and provision.

We can talk about “first world problems” or how technology makes us feel entitled, but it’s even better to focus on how fickle we are with being content with the most significant things God has given us – things we may have asked him for, prayed for, and pleaded for.

Think of your spouse, for example, if you’re married. Of how you prayed for God to give you a spouse. Of that period when you were single and wanted to be married. Of your prayers about whatever hurdles lay in your way to becoming married.

And now stop and think of how often you take your spouse for granted. How often you criticize them in your mind. How impatient you can be with them. How similar you can be to those worthless fellows in verse 27.

Those of you who are single think you’ll never take your spouse for granted one day when you have one ... but you will. We all thought the same thing when we were single. And it *usually* has little to do with the person you marry, and almost everything to do with the discontented streak in your heart.

We do the same thing with our jobs or our career.

We do the same thing with our homes, with our blessings in this world, with creation, even with our salvation.

In so many areas, God blesses us ... and we step back and begin critiquing his blessing.

It's so common that it's something of an engrained habit – and a habit we often leave unchallenged. Instead of intentionally being people characterized by thanksgiving, we often unthinkingly cultivate habits of critical discontentedness.

That's what we do. And that's what these “worthless fellows” in verse twenty-seven did.

But remarkably, God still provided. Though he knew that some would respond like this, he still gave them a king. Though he knew some would be critical, he still touched the hearts of others so that Saul would get the support he needed. Though he heard their criticisms and knew of the sinful hearts it sprang from, he still helped Saul to hold his peace – to not strike back against them.

And in the same way with us, the one thing that may be more shocking than how easily we become discontent with God's blessings is the fact that even when we do, God still provides.

Though we are fickle in our contentment with God's provision, he is persistent in providing for us.

So, we see in our text:

First, that though we are often fickle in our *reliance* on God, he is persistent in his *care* for us.
Second, that though we are fickle in our response to God's *calling*, he is often persistent in *pursuing* us for our callings.
And third, that though we are often fickle in our *contentment* with God's provision, he is persistent in *providing* for us.

In three different ways we get three snapshots of the same theme: That we are fickle in our commitments to God, but God remains persistent and steadfast in his sovereign purpose for us, his people.

As we see that ... what should we do?

Well, two things.

First, we should marvel at the patience and grace of our God. We are all far more difficult to put up with than we realize. And yet God continues to bless us. He continues to care for us, to call us, to provide for us.

These are each reminders of the character of our God. He is the God who saves sinners in Christ, not because they deserve it, but out of his mercy. *And in this life, we never graduate from his mercy.* Don't for a minute think that you have gone from depending on the gospel to earning your own keep with the Lord. Again, and again we avoid relying on him, we shirk from his

callings, we complain about his blessings. You walk every step of the Christian life by grace – do not forget it.

That is the first thing our text reminds us. Stop and marvel at the patience and grace of our God, who in spite of all the ways you fail in your responses to him, still loves you.

That's the first thing.

The second thing is that we need to remember the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 2:4 that the kindness, and patience, and forbearance of the Lord are meant to lead us to repentance.

When we see ourselves in Israel, and Saul, and the worthless men in this passage, and we see God's patience and kindness, that is not supposed to lull us into complacency but call us to action. Because we should not want to be like them.

We have talked about being fickle tonight. But fickleness can harden. It will in the life of Saul. The Lord's kindness is not a permission slip for sin. It is a call to repentance.

And so, in full reliance on the grace of Christ we should repent. We should ask God to help us trust and rely on him more. We should ask for the love and courage it takes to step into the difficult roles he may be calling us to, and we should practice thankfulness in place of critical discontentedness.

And what drives all of that is not some sort of foolish moral self-reliance. What fuels that is, as Paul says, the kindness of the Lord. Hold his kindness before you – his trustworthiness, his pursuit of you, his provision – all the ways you have experienced his grace.

Hold his kindness before you, that you might grow more steadfast towards him, just as he has been steadfast towards you.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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